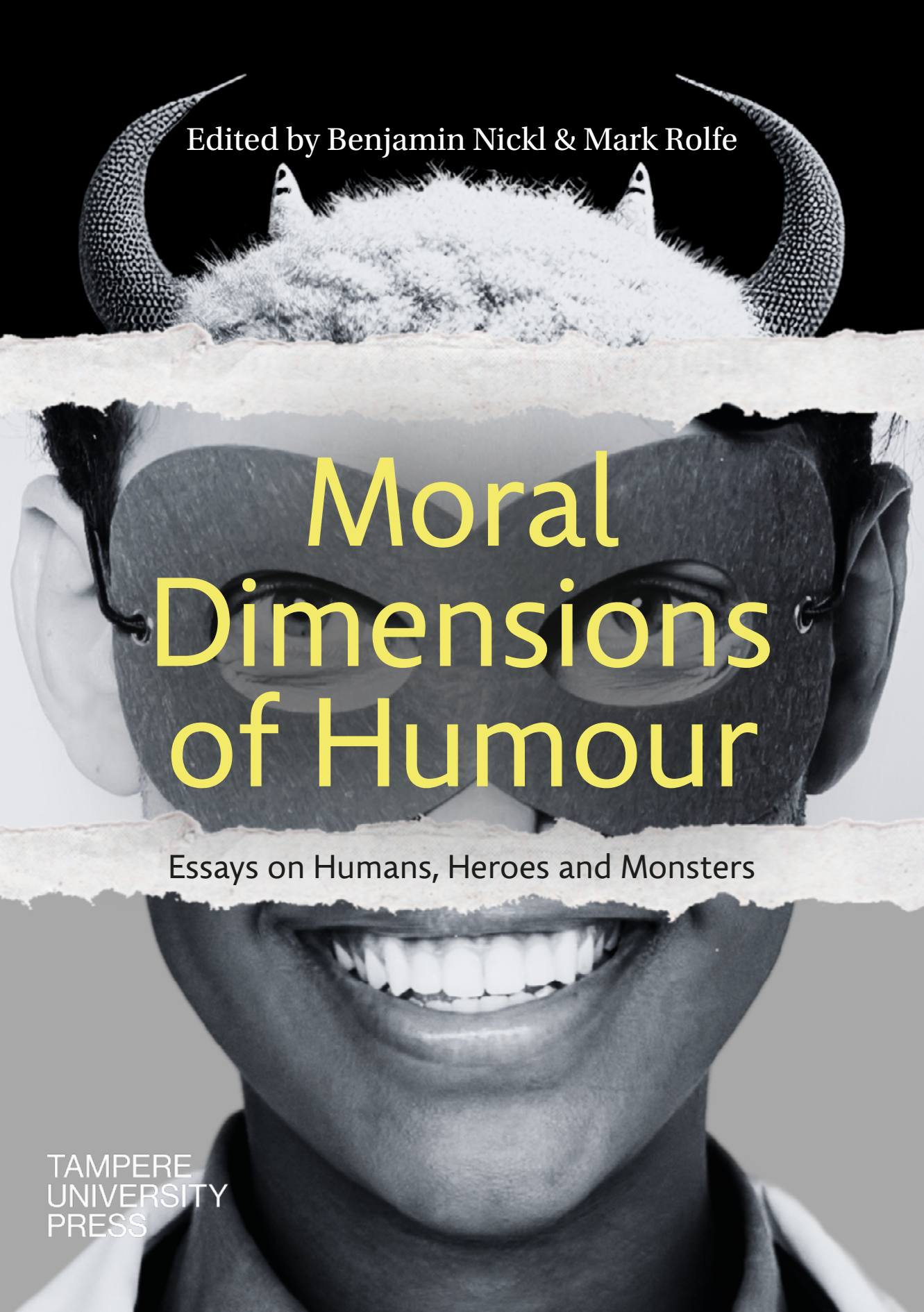
Edited by Benjamin Nickl & Mark Rolfe
Moral Dimensions of Humour
Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters
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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all the contributors who have shown unwavering dedication to this volume. This book focuses on the moral dimensions of humour and the ethical values in our everyday lives and how they help us navigate the world around us. The question of whether humour can guide us through the messiness of human existence and how exactly it can do so is both relevant and significant, as it has practical applications and opens new avenues for exploration—particularly when societies are hit with rapid social changes and the rise and fall of institutions, old and new, which causes them to search for novel answers to the same old question: How do we cope with such an ever-changing world? And how do we cope with…us?

Throughout history, humanity found answers to this conundrum in humans, heroes, and monsters, archetypal concepts that have been prevalent in mythology, literature, and cultural narratives throughout history. They represent fundamental aspects of the human experience and often serve as symbolic reflections of our values, fears, and aspirations. We have crafted our moral compass using a diverse tapestry of revered heroes, godlike figures, and even monstrous embodiments, each deeply woven into our collective consciousness. It is here, in the grand landscape of life, that humour and our ability to enact, recognise, and interact through it with each other emerges as a powerful thread. It adeptly shapes our perspectives on the perpetual struggle between what some may describe as the good and evil in us, giving us a sense of guidance in a seemingly chaotic world. This playful force assumes a pivotal role in defining how we perceive and engage with the complexities of existence. It serves as a significant institution of moral direction within society. Confronted with the task of coping with the world, humour becomes our ally, drawing out the nuances of human nature, heroic aspirations, and the monstrous aspects of our shared reality.

The elusive nature of humour presents a challenge that is common to academic study these days. The concept has a history of shifting meanings over the centuries that reveals its status as a discursive construct and umbrella term. Nevertheless, it serves like many concepts as a navigational tool amongst the moral complexities that assail our lives.

The editors thank The University of Sydney for making editorial review assistance available, which came from Alexander Auyeung, then a Master's student at Columbia

University, New York. Above all, the editors thank Jessica Milner Davis for her tireless support and pioneering role in Humour Studies that inspired large parts of this book, and the 2020 annual Australasian Humour Studies conference with a panel on 'Humour: Gods and Monsters' that formed the impulse for this project.

Contents

List of figures

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 6

Chapter 8

Humour in a World of Humans, Heroes and Monsters

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Craft an image portraying a diverse world where humans, heroes, and monsters coexist across varied landscapes, seamlessly blending ordinary life with epic struggles. Capture the essence of this dynamic interplay in a visually engaging depiction that sparks the imagination’.

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Introduction to *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*

Benjamin Nickl & Mark Rolfe

Throughout recorded history, humans have grappled with the profound challenge of finding meaning in our existence beyond merely satisfying material and psychic needs. This quest for meaning has often been reflected in tales of heroes and monsters, serving as poignant narratives that exemplify the broad spectrum of human behaviour and ranging from the virtuous to the malevolent. These stories, diverse and rich in complexity, effectively capture the nuances of the human condition and hold to some extent a universal appeal.

Amidst these complexities, humour with its moral dimensions emerges as a recurring coping mechanism. As a lens through which to encounter human morality, it acts as a tool to navigate the challenges and intricacies inherent in our daily interactions with the world. The incorporation of humour into the narratives of monsters and heroes transforms them into dramatic and stimulating forms, offering a unique perspective through which we can interpret and make sense of the multifaceted aspects of our existence. In this way, humour becomes an essential means by which individuals deal with the profound questions and uncertainties that accompany the human experience, creating a dynamic interplay between storytelling, morality, and the intricacies of everyday life.

Within the constraints of a specified historical timeframe from the 16th century to the present day, the essays we offer here therefore comprise an interdisciplinary investigation of diverse cultural, geographical, and temporal contexts. They aim to consider the profound ways in which humour shapes our moral landscapes, offering solace and insight into the complex journey of navigating a world of monsters and heroes through comedy, laughter, wit, the funny, the absurd, the ridiculous, the silly,

Nickl, B. & Rolfe, M. 2024. Introduction to Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 13–21.
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and the delightfully bizarre. In this view, humour is not some sugar coating to make the medicine of ethical complexity easier to digest, Mary Poppins-style. Rather, on these but not all occasions, humour is intrinsic to the ethical claims and contests, a lively means to thrash out arguments over morality.

The origin of this book was a panel discussion on humour, gods, and monsters at the 2020 Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN) conference in Brisbane, Australia. The panel included scholars from various disciplines such as literature, drama, art history, sociology, politics, linguistics, and media studies who analysed the role of humour in our understanding of morality. Their lively deliberations inspired this volume, where they could delve deeper into the subject and include but look beyond conventional interpretations of humour as social commentary.

Humour can serve as a powerful platform for challenging societal norms and boundaries, questioning established beliefs, and provoking critical reflection, thus revealing the absurdities and inconsistencies of daily life. Humour can thereby help individuals see the world from different perspectives, break away from daily routines, and broaden their point of view. Such dynamics are evident in Chapter II. Robert Phiddian and Ron Stewart examine the role of mass-mediated satire in print-press publications that critique societal norms and inconsistencies with visual mockeries of political players and state leaders of note, exposing and criticising people's alleged stupidity or vices in the context of contemporary politics and other topical issues. In doing so, the duo reveals the power of satire as a tool for social commentary and change.

However, as Jessica Milner Davis details in Chapter I, there is no one-size-fits-all approach when it comes to humour. Every context requires a contextualised appraisal. Davis's essay delves into the nuances of humour, examining how it varies across different cultures, communities, and contexts. She explores how humour can both challenge and reinforce societal norms, and how it can serve as a form of resistance or a tool for perpetuating stereotypes. Davis also investigates the role of humour in identity formation and group dynamics, discussing how humour can create a sense of belonging or exclusion. Her analysis underscores the importance of understanding the environment in which humour is used and the potential implications it can have on individuals and society. In just these two chapters, we quickly discover that no satirical creation or comedic stereotype ever manifests the same kind of 'funny' in exactly the same way.

The capacities of humour to either reinforce or denigrate different moral stances are evident in Chapter VIII. M.W Shores elaborates on this within the context of Japanese culture and history folk tales that often endow monstrous evils and fauna deities with a unique ability to express humour and cunning wit. This serves as a form of social control, punishing deviant behaviour and rewarding conformity. Jokes can either mock certain behaviours or attitudes, which can discourage individuals from exhibiting them, or they can applaud certain values, which can encourage people to adopt them.

The morality of humour becomes a subject of debate in and of itself, raising contentious questions about who benefits from it and whom it derides, or where the boundary lies between what is morally good and bad. What makes a joke morally acceptable or unacceptable? Is it the intention of the person telling the joke, the reaction of the audience, or the content of the joke itself? Do we require spooks and spectres to teach us about the right way of scaring, or of teaching, humans with a joke so they do right by each other and by nature, and its animate and inanimate objects? These are complex questions that defy simple answers. They compel us to consider a multitude of factors, including the context in which a humorous agenda is applied, the power dynamics between the person making fun and the audience, and the potential damage that the intention to amuse might cause.

Our contributors are very aware that humour is a complex phenomenon that can be involved in the moral choices that we daily make and can include contradictions, complexities, and some very contentious claims. For instance, Mark Rolfe in Chapter III explores how humour as a hotbed for political counteractions and indeed rebellious social uprisings has been used to critique and challenge political figures, and how this has evolved in the age of television broadcast and online mass media. He discusses the role of American late-night comedy talk shows such as Steven Colbert's Late Night Show and popular online memes in shaping political discourse, and the ethical implications of their involvement in the grand tradition of American presidential politics.

Many humourists loathe Donald Trump as a monster, but there are also humourists on the right who cast him as a hero who is taking on the evils caused by the left. While we do not have to agree with these fans who absurdly cast this man as another Churchill, Superman or Rambo, or indeed God's own creation, we do need to note how humour is involved in advancing conflicting ethical and political positions that can be the means for many people to navigate our moral universe. That means we must consider the role of the audience in interpreting and responding to humour. Some authors in this book acknowledge for that reason that the impact of humour is not solely determined by the intentions of those producing, creating, or performing it, but also by the interpretations and reactions of individual or group consumers who might interpret the same joke in different ways and reach different ethical conclusions.

Of particular concern are therefore cyberspace and consumer and user-technology interactions, the rise of artificial intelligence, the emergence of alt-right and niche media, and the formation of micro-publics in echo-chambered filter bubbles of the internet. In Chapter IV, to illustrate what we mean by this, Lucien Leon explores the role of humour in the digital age, examining how it is shaped by and shapes these new technological and social contexts. He sifts through the world of internet memes and viral content, discussing how they serve as platforms for social commentary and critique. Leon also discusses the ethical implications of online humour, particularly concerning issues of privacy, consent, and the potential for harm.

The point here is that the chapters in this book encourage readers to reflect on the ethical implications of humorous statements rather than simply enjoying or rejecting them. This contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of humour in our society and the responsibilities of both consumers as well as creators in understanding what is right and what is wrong and what separates the two sides.

In Chapter VII, Anna-Sophie Jürgens, Anastasiya Fiadotava, and David C. Tscharke investigate further the intricate depths of these complexities. The trio embarks on a detailed examination of the cartoon character of the Joker, a notorious animation and entertainment figure whose chaotic humour and moral ambiguity have made him an iconic presence in popular culture. They approach the Joker through the lens of the discursive repertoire associated with an infectious disease, drawing a compelling parallel between the spread of humour and the transmission of contagious disease and thus offering an innovative perspective on the moral dimensions of viral humour. The authors demonstrate how the contagious nature of humour can have either positive effects that foster social bonds, promote psychological well-being, and facilitate social critique, or negative effects that typecast and ostracise certain groups, and exacerbate social tensions.

It is a question that is not restricted solely to matters of the organic. In Chapter VI, Ben Nickl examines the rise of synthetic laughter with the invention of the "laugh box". He explores how humour and laughter, with the latter being a highly valued and commercialised form of the physical expression of humour, are being replicated and programmed into mediation technologies. The use of canned laughter to create artificial emotions raises ethical questions, especially regarding the creation of mass entertainment content such as sitcoms and comedy shows for billions of viewers and extending today to generative AI interfaces. The dynamics of humour production and consumption have changed since the introduction of canned laughter in the United States in the 1950s. Nickl discusses these changes in detail, focusing on the moral implications of synthetic laughter then and today.

As we move further into the third decade of the 21st century, saturated with virtual apps and online spaces, the role of humour in shaping and engaging moral perceptions becomes even more critical. From newspaper cartoonists and paid political pundits on terrestrial broadcast television to popular creators of viral memes and online streaming channels featuring late-night comedy talk show hosts, the mediators and knowledge vectors of humour are changing. This makes it even more imperative to critically assess the moral implications of humour. The crucial point is that the transition from traditional institutions and forms of media consumption has dramatically altered our interactions with humour. We now see a more diverse range of comedic content that is marked as "funny" with laugh tracks, TV hosts or other cues, as Nickl and Rolfe make clear, that guide us on when to laugh, whom to laugh at, and what to laugh about. The moral dimensions of such cues are not always obvious to us, but they are often there. This shift means we must encourage a wider spectrum

of critical thinking about humour that reflects the myriad of voices and perspectives existing in our society.

Essentially, this book argues for a wide rather than narrow scope for understanding humour. At its intellectual core, it highlights the significance of contexts of time, culture, and society as well as intention and interpretation in determining the moral dimensions of humour. It encompasses an expansive range of issues such as the moral and social impact of technological progress, digital media, cultural conflicts, and environmental concerns. This collection is thus not confined to a single era or culture. It spans centuries and continents, cultures, languages, and communities and thereby reflects the widespread appeal and significance of a social phenomenon that we now call humour. But this collection also recognises that global issues are interconnected and can have a significant impact on individuals, communities, and other species.

We do not wish to institute here the notion of a monolithic form of discourse when talking about humour and morality. In fact, the very composition of this book's chapters aims to counter reductive essentialism by placing visual and at times adult-themed satire from Southeast Asia in dialogue with the Golden Age of Hollywood's stars of comedy performance in North America. In Chapter V, Will Visconti details how a celebrated actress of the theatre stage and the big screen, Mae West, sex-bombed her way through the gendered glass ceilings of her time by refusing to be constrained by the corset of male rules that governed female propriety at that time. Visconti's chapter emphasises the myriad ways that humour and morality interact and that ethical judgements can change with time and context. Once upon a time, the lead protagonists of West's plays were considered sexual and gender monsters, but they nevertheless drew fascinated, if hypocritical crowds. Now in the twenty-first century, those same characters can be viewed as heroic figures ahead of their time.

Accordingly, the terms heroes and monsters in the book's sub-title serve as the central metaphors in our exploration of human ethics that are navigated through humour. They underscore the complexity and diversity of our moral experiences, presenting a vivid portrayal of the dichotomous moral forces that shape our societies and cultures. Each term holds a unique meaning to every author that we worked with, reflecting a point on the moral continuum that is as diverse as our human experiences. We are all capable of moral judgment and reasoning while navigating the complexities of right and wrong, good and evil. Yet our interpretations of ethical norms can vary greatly.

'Heroes' in this context signify the aspirational aspects of our moral selves. They embody the ideals of benevolence, justice, and the greater good that we strive to achieve. These are the highest standards of moral behaviour, reflecting virtues such as empathy, altruism, fairness, and integrity and suggesting a level of moral excellence that transcends ordinary human capabilities. Yet, this is not merely a portrayal of an idealised moral state but also of the challenges we face when aspiring to these lofty ideals. That can include the social structures that facilitate or hinder our moral growth. Exploring the heroic human through humour is an affirmation of our potential

to strive for goodness, and seek it out against all odds, even in a world fraught with ethical ambiguities. The term encourages us to reflect on the nature of these ethical aspirations: What does it mean to excel morally? How can individuals and societies cultivate what they deem heroic virtues? And how can we reconcile our aspirational moral selves with the realities of our flawed human nature? Should we really admire all those people who are declared heroes? No, say those who revile Donald Trump or some of the grand statues that dot our public landscapes.

Placed at the other end of the spectrum, the 'Monster' represents the darker, more ominous side of human nature. It signifies the actions and behaviours that societies consider reprehensible, unacceptable, or even abhorrent. This can encompass a broad range of actions from violence, discrimination, and deception to the betrayal of trust and the abuse of power. The monster is a metaphor that allows us to think about the complicated questions of moral failings and what drives individuals to act in ways that are denounced as morally repugnant. It also allows the intellectual pursuit of the motivations, the contextual factors, and the societal implications that accompany such alleged transgressions. We should consider the social and cultural factors that contribute to these moral shortcomings and that could be resolved to foster a more just and ethical society. But we should also sometimes treat allegations of monsters with scepticism, as Rolfe and Visconti make clear. Should we necessarily believe that some people are as monstrous as others claim?

Viewed together, the metaphors of heroes and monsters in this book present a comprehensive, although not all-encompassing, view of the moral spectrum. They serve as pungent but also ambiguous and contested reminders of the vast range and complexity of our ethical settings in relation to humour. This point, too, is reflected in existing academic research. Mehrdad Bidgoli argues that effective comedy and humour are rooted in an ethical sensibility, particularly the concept of "hospitality" as a precursor to experiences of something as funny[1]. This view suggests that humour, at its best, is an act of welcoming, of creating a space where laughter can foster connection and understanding.

Robert C. Roberts further explores the ethical dimensions of humour, identifying incongruity, perspectivity, dissociation, enjoyment, and freshness as key elements. He suggests that ethical amusement requires a sense of humour that is aligned with virtues such as compassion and hope[2]. This aligns with our exploration of humorous morality or moral humour, which examines humour's capacity to both bring together and separate, to shed light on truths and yet to sometimes also veil them. Meanwhile, Philip Percival delves into the concept of "comic moralism", which posits that certain moral properties can detract from the humour of a joke or comedic item[3]. This viewpoint underscores the ethical intricacies of humour, mirroring our exploration's emphasis on the ethical ambiguity and moral uncertainty that define our modern world. Berys

[1] Bidgoli, *Comedy and Humour*, 82–84.

[2] Roberts, *Humour and the Virtues*, 127–129.

[3] Percival, *Comic Normativity*, 100–102.

Nigel Gaut has also discussed the ethics and aesthetics of humour, emphasising the role of humour in interpersonal relationships and its connection to the art of comedy[4].

Among scholars of humour studies, there has been a tendency to treat humour as comprised of incontrovertibly good things and the strongest academic expression of this has appeared in Benign Violation Theory (BVT).[5] Additionally, a "sunny-side-up psychology" has morphed into self-help books and management tomes that tout the benefits of positive humour[6] but have difficulty comprehending the pleasures of humour that are neither benign nor positive. That is most evident with some philosophers of humour such as Simon Critchley. He avoids the complexity of morality in humour with his view that "true humour does not wound a specific victim and always contains self-mockery". Real humour for him does not attack any one person with "sheer malice" but instead lashes "vices which are general and not personal".[7] Thus, Critchley avoids any need to contemplate the ethics of justice and desert entailed in satirically targeting a person for some reprehensible folly. By his reasoning, no humorous barbs should have been levelled at Richard Nixon for Watergate or Donald Trump for his attempt on 6 January 2021 to overturn election results. In other words, it eliminates much that we call satire.

Yet humour is not without its darker side. Michael Billig put this succinctly when he wrote that humour "lies at the core of social life" because it "ensures that members of society routinely comply with the customs and habits of their social milieu". Billig was aware of the complexity of humour but was particularly focused on the role of corrective humour in social life as a contrast to those who insist on a 'sunny side up' approach and to those who depict humour as necessarily rebellious. In fact, rebellious humour is dependent on the setting of social rules and the castigation of their contraventions. That is, humour can and may on occasion have a "disciplinary function"[8], reinforcing social values and punishing those who are judged to have transgressed boundaries.

This is humour in the form of ridicule without which social behaviour could be "impossibly rigid" as Henri Bergson so vividly described in the mechanics of laughter.[9] He argued that humour contains an element of cruelty, suggesting that laughter can often arise from the discomfort or misfortune of others[10]. Sigmund Freud then proposed that we sometimes deceive ourselves about the true nature of our laughter, using humour as a form of psychological defence to cope with uncomfortable truths[11].

To conclude this short introduction surrounded by all these varied perspectives and possible approaches to humour, *Moral Dimensions of Humour* uses the topic of

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4 Gaut, *Just Joking*, 51–52.

5 Derrin, "Comic Character and Counter-Violation", 146–147.

6 Billig. *Laughter and Ridicule*, 39 and chapter 2.

7 Critchley, *On Humour*, 14–15.

8 Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, 7 and chapter 9.

9 Bergson, *Le Rire*.

10 Bergson, *Laughter*, see chapter 1 "The Comic in General".

11 Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. See Chapter VI, "The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and to the Unconscious", and see Chapter VII, "Jokes and the Species of the Comic".

humour as a conceptual tool and an underexplored academic arena to illuminate the ethical complexities of society. The book features the role of humour in challenging societal norms, denigrating the wicked, and praising the noble. Humour can be a transformative force, a fount of knowledge, and a means to clearly communicate complex moral issues. It has the power to foster empathy, spark dialogue, and denounce injustice. But humour can also be used for regulation and control, to maintain social order, as well as to deceive, insult, and lead astray. In short, humour is involved in a range of ethical claims that should not be taken at face value but should be treated as suasive claims on our moral sensibilities.

At the end of this book, the authors present their findings in an audio recording produced, mixed, and edited after the completion of the manuscript's written components. This conversational revisiting of their thoughts provides additional insights into the topics discussed in various case studies. We hope this further enhances the reader's understanding by offering alternative channels of communication, not only for keen eyes but also eager ears. Our intention is to engage not only academics but also a broader audience interested in the intersection of humour, morality, and societal transformation.

However, to stress once more the limits that apply to this collection, our book does not purport to provide a universal definition of humour or morality. The paradigms used in the essays and in this brief introductory summary are not exhaustive and are rooted in specific discursive traditions. The specifics that apply to each chapter reflect the inherent complexity of the concepts and the perspectives of the contributors. We acknowledge that humour and morality are multifaceted phenomena that can be interpreted and experienced in many ways. Therefore, we invite you, the reader of this book or the listener of the recorded conclusion, to join us on this ongoing odyssey of morality and humour: to engage with the ideas presented, to question your own assumptions, and to contribute to the ongoing dialogue about humour and morality in a modern world that engages each and every one of us on each and every day.

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Target Practice

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Abstract

Chapter 1
Re-evaluating Comic Stereotypes – Dirty but Essential?

Comic stereotypes concern the deep connection between humour and simplified or stereotypical characters. This chapter explores how a tool long considered essential by cartoonists and comedians has in recent times become controversial, examining several case histories in which comedians have been attacked for using stereotypes. The advantages and disadvantages of stereotypes are considered along with relevant humour theories. While much humour depends on compression and focus, visual and performative forms like caricature and farce have a particularly close nexus with stereotyped characterisation. Comic techniques often dehumanise their characters so that audience involvement becomes strategic rather than empathetic, although more complex and sympathetic humorous stereotypes also exist. In the context of modern psychology and ethics, stereotypes and stereotyping have acquired a pejorative connotation. Relevant psychological research is reviewed, noting current limitations in demonstrating behavioural impacts of exposure to and enjoyment of comic stereotypes and suggestions are made about future research. Stereotypes continue to be innate to humour and comedy, and indeed more broadly to human efforts to organise understanding: they deserve more careful consideration of their nature and effects before being dismissed as unsuitable to modern taste in humour.

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Re-evaluating Comic Stereotypes – Dirty but Essential?

Jessica Milner Davis

Stereotyping in humour theory and practice

The connection between simplified or stereotypical characters and comedy has been evident since the time of Classical Greek theatre.[1] A tool not just for dramatists but comic writers of all kinds, this treatment of character combined in the early modern era with the then still accepted medical theory of the humours[2] to produce a style of drama known as the 'comedy of humours' and exemplified by the work of Molière (1622–1673) in France and Ben Jonson (1572–1637) in England. Such comedy set out to laugh at a character whose ridiculous behaviour betrayed the fact that their physical body was dominated by one of the four bodily humours whose imbalance produces markedly unsociable traits. Thus, excessive melancholy (depressing the sufferer's companions) was seen as resulting from the predominance of black bile, as in the case of Shakespeare's Jacques in *As You Like It*.[3] While this link with medical theory did

[1] Of the many studies dedicated to this hallowed tradition, one will suffice: Schironi. "The Trickster on Stage". I am deeply indebted to Robert Phiddian and Ronald Stewart for insightful comments on and suggestions about this chapter.

[2] For an account of the theory and how it worked, see Arikha, "Passions and Tempers". I am indebted to Peter Kirkpatrick for pointing to this stage of the development of the modern stereotype.

[3] Like most of Shakespeare's work, it is difficult to date this play, but it was registered (formally licenced) on 4 August 1600; its earliest known text is the First Folio of 1623.

Milner Davis, J. 2024. Re-evaluating Comic Stereotypes – Dirty but Essential? In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 22–42. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

not survive into later centuries, the concept of dominant behavioural traits certainly did and eventually made its way into experimental psychology following the work of Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) and Gordon Allport (1897–1967) whose approach will be discussed below.

The operation of dominant traits and stereotypes in comedy was probably best theorised by Henri Bergson in his well-known account of laughter being induced by something mechanical interrupting the free-flow of normal life.[4] Bergson pointed out that in comedy, characterisation is shaped by mechanical rigidity just as much as plots and verbal exchanges are. Fascinated by the psychology of caricature, he defined a *type* as a dramatic character who lacks flexibility and is dominated by a rigid mental set.[5] This inelasticity prevents type-characters from adapting to changes in their surrounding circumstances as they would in real-life. Their leading characteristics are exaggerated, rendering them somewhat improbable, but their mental fixations produce a kind of internal logic, so that a comic type will behave consistently within his or her own improbable world. Types are doomed to repetitiveness both in behaviour and mental processes and they are also capable of being repeated (i.e. being duplicated). Bergson's observations help explain why like and unlike pairs of characters are so typical of comedy, both Eastern and Western,[6] whether scripted or stand-up, and especially in clowning and farce which supplied Bergson with many of his examples. In the French tradition, from Molière to Feydeau, pairs and quads of lovers, combinations and oppositions of men and women, the old and the young, twins and doubles, populate the stage. The arranged artificiality signals both a distancing of the characters from the audience and a lessening of their humanity: to the audience, they resemble the products of a cookie-cutter, lacking the flexibility and the individuality of life. They are basically stereotypes.

Type-characters must nevertheless appear plausible enough to be interesting – or audiences would not sit through their performances – but still unconscious of their own limitations. Driven by their rigidity, they act and react blindly. Although they may congratulate themselves on their cleverness or good fortune, any self-consciousness or interiority about how their success came about is lacking.[7] The audience, whether in a live performance or in watching an animated cartoon, occupies a position of privileged insight that allows it to foretell an inevitable comic downfall that is concealed from the type-character him or herself. Bergson succinctly observed that the two necessary conditions for this kind of humour are "unsociability in the comic figure, and a lack of sensibility on the part of the spectator".[8] The audience's involvement with such characters is essentially more strategic than empathetic.

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4 Bergson, *Le Rire*.

5 Bergson, *Le Rire*, 151–152.

6 See for example matched pairs of clowns in Balinese shadow drama in Mrázek, "Javanese Wayang Kulit in the Times of Comedy", part 1.

7 This is not merely true of a Western approach to comic characterisation and stereotypes, for the Japanese analogue, see below and see also footnote 13.

8 The French original reads *insociabilité du personage, insensibilité du spectateur*; Bergson, *Le Rire*, 149.

This fact does not rule out the existence of more sympathetic stereotypes nor a sympathetic response by the audience to them in more complex forms of humour. Bergson was writing about the brilliant farces of Eugène Labiche and Georges Feydeau that dominated the Parisian stage from the end of the 19th century, which have justly been called laughter machines.[9] But more nuanced humour can also employ stereotypes, for example Charles Dickens' famous creations, Oliver Twist in the eponymous 1838 novel, and Peggotty, David's heart-of-gold nurse in *David Copperfield* (1850).[10] While both these characters conform to a typology (naïve little lost boy, indefatigably patient nurse), they are sympathetic types and have some ability to learn from and adapt to their environments. The warm-heartedness of their stereotype appeals to the readers' sympathy at the same time as they laugh at their whimsical ways. These are based on what Bergson described as a fixed mental set that drives recurring and repetitive behaviour that the reader can predict and laugh at with satisfaction when it occurs.[11] Ridicule is combined with empathy. As I have written elsewhere, Bergson goes on to argue that laughing at this behaviour (i.e. at the stereotype) is "essentially a redemptive act: protesting against rigidities and absurdities, it can help restore a free-living self to those trapped in a mechanised life. This redemptive aspect applies not only to the laugher – and potentially their targets if they could but see the comic in their own situations – but above all to those who can laugh at themselves".[12]

Comically empathetic stereotypes are not merely a Western phenomenon (nor specifically English as French culture likes to assert).[13] When Japanese *manga* まんが moved from predominately humorous comic strips in the pre-war period to embrace more elaborate narratives and anime stories during the post-war period, complex but stylised characters that were both funny and sympathetic and funny and frightening began to feature in elaborate comic books such as we know today.[14] As with Western comic strips, humorous manga characters are often named after their specific identifying character flaw such as the eponymous hero of "Dennis the Menace", a popular strip (later animated TV series) by American cartoonist Hank Ketcham (1920–2001).[15] Lacking self-consciousness (or interiority), these have little or no ability to reflect on and adapt to their flaws. Despite more complex characterisation, however, the later manga characters retain these limitations of type-characterisation, including

[9] Rey-Flaud, *La Farce, ou la machine à rire*.

[10] Mahlberg and Weigand, "Charles Dickens".

[11] Bergson's succinct phraseology has often resulted in over-simplistic interpretation. His so-called theory of the comic does much more than stress the mechanical element in comedy. Quite arguably, he is a precursor of Bakhtin, putting forward a theory of laughter as liberation and an assertion of the power of the free human spirit (see Milner Davis, "Bergson and the Theory of the Comic").

[12] Milner Davis, "Bergson's Theory of the Comic", 113–114.

[13] Noonan, "Reflecting Back".

[14] Hirohito and Lamarre, "How Characters Stand Out", 84–91. I am indebted to Ronald Stewart for this comparison with the evolution of Japanese manga, and for much else concerning the history of world cartooning.

[15] Kitazume, "Themes".

those giving occasional rise to ridicule and laughter, while at the same time engaging the reader's emotions. Sympathetic heroes and heroines flit across manga pages along with terrifying ogre-like stereotypes: all draw in the reader emotionally.

Regardless of whether humour is broad and basic (low comedy) or more stylistically complex (high comedy), the basic premise on which scripts and narratives are offered as humorous entertainment is that the audience will enjoy watching an essentially comic struggle, either between different characters, or between all of them and their circumstances, or both. This entails a certain amount of detachment, as Bergson pointed out. What is required for success, even in the broadest comedy, is a balance between detachment and engagement. If no interest is felt in these chattering puppets on stage, page, internet or screen, the jokes will fail. Beyond such basic involvement, broad comedy and practical joking may move to become more complex humour precisely to the extent that the stereotypically comic victims develop self-awareness, and the audience responds emotionally to their plight. The stereotype, as comic masters like Dickens and Molière taught us, remains even when it is almost fully and believably human.

Compression and compaction

In terms of narrative structure, one of the ways in which type-characters are barred from exploring their own consciousness is quite simply that the plot allows them no time to do so. They are caught up in a pattern that moves forward to complete its symmetry; and the speed and impetus of events limit the characters to helpless gesticulation, in contrast to the decisive exercise of volition that is permitted a fully dramatic figure. Eric Bentley remarked that this deliberate speeding up of movement "signifies that in farce, as in dreams, one is permitted the outrage but spared the consequence".[16]

In cartooning, the comic types caught in an awkward or hazardous situation are subjected to a parallel artificially constraining effect that is brought about by a combination of stasis and limited space. Many cartoons are single-frame only, lacking narrative sequence or development. Others may be strip-sequences or animations, but the essence of the art form is compaction, not elaboration.[17] In addition, it is bounded by a cartoon border (whether seen or implied). These aspects restrict the reactions of both characters and viewers by compressing – usually freezing into one snapshot – the timeline of action, reaction and consequences found in longer art forms.

Visually, individual characters, animals and objects in cartooning are represented by stressing a limited number of characteristic traits which lend themselves to exaggeration in the same way as type-characters do. This reinforces the simplifying

[16] Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", xiii.

[17] Herhuth, "Overloading, Incongruity, Animation".

and condensing effect. In humour more generally, caricature and stereotyping are vital tools in both visual or verbal portrayals of targets, and the more condensed the form (e.g. canned jokes, sketch-comedy), the more essential they are. In his masterly tabulation of forty-five different comic techniques, Berger lists caricature at number eight and exaggeration at number 11.[18]

Caricature versus Stereotype

The Tate website of the Tate Museum in London defines caricature as "a painting, or more usually drawing, of a person or thing in which the features and form have been distorted and exaggerated in order to mock or satirise the subject".[19] It points to the Italian origins of the term (*caricatura*) and the sketch work of Annibale Carracci (fl. 1600) as the first known practitioner. In England, from the pioneering paintings and prints of William Hogarth mid-18th century,[20] caricature developed into a way of commenting on contemporary politics with the work of James Gillray (1756–1815), who is often termed the father of the political cartoon.[21] It took hold in magazines and newspapers as print technology evolved, becoming a staple in everyday political commentary. Caricature still hangs on in that satirical form today, while morphing into new media and formats.[22] It depicts exaggerated ugliness and venality but does not necessarily exclude beauty, particularly in its highly detailed or elegantly stylised versions.

The humour of caricature ranges widely: it may be bitterly black and depressing, as in Hogarthian scenes of suffering and cruel poverty, but it may also be joyfully ludicrous, even fey, as with Max Beerbohm's sketches of well-known figures around town (1872–1956).[23] Caricature combines an artist's immediately recognisable style of human representation with an intense focus on the individual: we would never mistake Searle's Nigel Molesworth for his Fotherington-Thomas, for example, although both are boys at St Custard's School;[24] nor Scarfe's caricature of actor Derek Fowldes playing Bernard, the PM's chief-of-staff, for that of Nigel Hawthorne playing the bureaucrat

18 Berger, *Blind Men and Elephants*, 54.

19 Tate, "Caricature".

20 For example, Hogarth, *O the Roast Beef of Old England* ('The Gate of Calais'), 1748, painted after Hogarth's return from Calais where he had been arrested as a spy, held at the Tate Museum, London. See also, Annibale Carracci, *Sheet of caricatures*, c. 1595, held in the British Museum, London.

21 Donald, *The Age of Caricature* and Taylor, *The Politics of Parody*.

22 Leon, "The Evolution of Political Cartooning".

23 For example, see the exaggerated heads, spindly bodies and relative disproportions of the collection of artists and critics in Max Beerbohm's *The New English Art Club*, 1907, held at the Tate Gallery, London.

24 See the illustrations to Willans and Searle, *The Compleet Molesworth*, 1984. One boy is the not-so-bright hero of the eponymous novels; the other the excessively sensitive, academic boy. The school's name parodies that of many posh UK boarding schools named for saints. Custard is a boring staple of institutional diets as well as a playground term for coward (e.g. the teasing rhyme, "cowardy cowardy custard").

Sir Humphrey in the British TV series, *Yes, Minister*, although both men dress alike and have beak-like noses.[25] For those who knew him, New Zealand's wartime Prime Minister, Peter Fraser, is instantly recognizable simply from his economically drawn head by Australian caricaturist and artist Noel Counihan (1913–1986).[26] Despite a twisted nose and bulbous skull, the personal warmth for which the Labour politician was famous shines through.

While each caricature belongs to a stereotypical group – ambitious politician, school-boy, dyed-in-the-wool bureaucrat – it is also a distinct individual, marked out by emphasis on distinguishing marks such as hair, shape of nose, stance etc. This combination of group-identity with the personal exists under the umbrella of an aesthetic style that at first glance proclaims its distance from reality while paradoxically insisting on a precise nexus with an actual person. This is the same effect achieved by writers such as Molière and Dickens whose lovingly-crafted individual fictional characters belong to a group but transcend that to become its permanent representative. We speak of Harpagon as the essence of the miser, of Oliver Twist as the archetypal orphan-made-good, and of Nigel from St Custard's as the stereotypical lazy, ungrateful brat.

In commenting on what is human, caricature often resorts to stereotypes of animal imagery. The connection has deep roots: 16th-century physiognomy saw certain groups of people as sharing similarities with certain animals. One historian of caricature has noted that as the concept of temperament or a person's habitual and innate disposition emerged some two centuries later, it was thought that people shared temperaments with animals they resembled.[27] The art historian Ernst Gombrich believes that the ability to make caricatural fusions in cartoons of humans with animals is one of the most effective weapons in any cartoonist's armoury. Taking the animal as a metaphor, by condensation of meaning the combination of traits and characteristics associated with the beast is transferred to the human under examination.[28] Again, such a tradition is deep-rooted: consider the classical tradition of animal fables such as those of the legendary Aesop, the moral teachings found both East and West in illustrated bestiaries and the masked figures of Carnival and the mediaeval Feast of Fools which often adopted animal shapes.[29]

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[25] For examples, see Scarfe, "Yes Minister".

[26] Counihan was active in Australia, New Zealand and Europe during the 1930s and 40s, working as a staff artist for the *Melbourne Guardian* and for the World Trade Union Movement in London. His caricature, "The Hon. Peter Fraser", is collected in Counihan, *Noel Counihan Caricatures*.

[27] Lucie-Smith, *The Art of Caricature*, 16–17.

[28] Gombrich, "The Cartoonist's Armoury", see sections II, Condensation and Comparison; III. Portrait Caricature; and IV, The Political Bestiary.

[29] For a Japanese cartoonist employing bestial imagery, witness the last great ukiyoe (wood-block) artist Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋暁斎 (1831–1889), whose extraordinary 4m x 17m theatre curtain (supposedly painted over four hours when the artist was intoxicated) was exhibited in 2019 at the British Museum. His humorous, often satirical works use animals and demons (yokai) to make their critical comments.

When the human image combines with the non-human or animal, caricature passes easily from the realm of realism to that of iconographic fantasy where hybrid monsters and demigods live. Here, the moral dimension is conveyed through stereotypical images of good and bad, whether animal or non-human: the devil and his mischievous apes and monkeys; the wily serpent; the dumb but faithful donkey; the many guises of man's best friend, the dog, but also mythical creatures. In many cultures, and particularly the British version of the European tradition from which both Australian and American political cartooning spring, these animals have clear and widely understood meanings that can transfer partially or not at all to other cultures, which in turn possess their own iconography of animals and supra-human beings. Within a mutually understood context, an offense can be conveyed with controlled precision; but without such a shared context, offense may be given unintentionally.

The uses of stereotypes and caricature

There are many good reasons for stereotypes being so central to humour and to cartooning in particular. Being simplified, their identity and signification are easier for a viewer to grasp than more complex portrayals. They communicate these essential messages rapidly and clearly, and, because they tap into pre-existing knowledge, hopes and fears held by their audiences, they take a shortcut around complexity. Comic stereotypes draw on well-known images of famous people and iconic figures from folk-wisdom and social belief-systems. Most comic stereotypes belong to a family group that stretches back to antiquity, and they are instantly recognisable: the miserly old curmudgeon, the panting but penniless young lover, the wily servant, the over-educated lawyer/doctor/philosopher, the cheeky maid, the drunkard, the country bumpkin, the corrupt politician, the unethical priest, the simpleton, the braggart soldier who is really a coward and so on. These all convey a quick message when pressed into service with a modern and familiar face. In terms of emotional and judgmental messaging, stereotypes offer the same satisfaction as polar opposites: this figure is likely to be either good or bad, hysterical or plain, all-powerful or pathetic. For any creator of humour, then, stereotypes form a handy kit. In fact, as Lippmann noted, within our highly differentiated societies, they are a necessary way of creating order out of "the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality".[30]

By the same token, each of these qualities has its disadvantages. Stereotyping simplifies, ignoring what is complex. In that sense, it may very well be unfair to its target and misleading to its audience. On the one hand, its simplification of form and meaning can conduce to a high emotional volume, polarising reactions into black and white, love it or loathe it. Such polarisation is fuelled by the power of preconception to shape interpretation whenever traditional and stock imagery is deployed and also by

[30] Lippmann, *Public opinion*, 96.

the general tendency of simplification to limit the range of likely emotional reactions. When a topic is not given complex treatment, the audience will likely divide into those who agree with the conjunction of stereotype and topic and those who reject it. Nevertheless, stereotyping is also capable of evoking complex and multi-layered responses in the viewer – simple does not equate to easy. Much will depend on the artist deploying the stereotype, how that is done and especially the situation in which it is being communicated: that is, whether the audience concerned has a pre-existing significant emotional investment in the topic and imagery.

It follows that a more extended form of comic comment and a gentler, more nuanced style of humour might well lead to a more balanced evaluation of the point being made by the humourist. But it may also lack the power of a stereotype to seize and hold the audience's attention. The long-standing tradition of using stereotypes is not because comic artists are simple-minded and unable to produce complex comedy. It is because, for an entertainer, time is money and getting the message across is important. While stereotypes often persist beyond their real cultural currency and may linger on long past their actual use-by dates – business leaders are fat men smoking cigars only in cartoons today, for example – such images persist because they are incredibly useful, based on what is still instantly recognizable even if out of date. As well as being economical, they retain an element of perceived truth.

How did stereotype become a dirty word?

A recent definitional article on stereotypes begins with the bald statement, "stereotypes involve several distinct moral bads",[31] and goes on to make only grudging acknowledgement of any redeeming features. Its stance is mirrored by that of many other scholarly studies that investigate the negative impacts, especially on underprivileged groups and individuals, of stereotyping. Modern sensibilities, in Western societies at least, are felt to have developed to a level at which playing on such conventional shorthand should be eschewed. As adults, supposedly, we should all know better. The criticisms of stereotypes include: that stereotypes are less than fully human (true in most cases); that they are conducive to simplistic thinking and reduce an individual to a thing (mostly true for the duration of the comic image or narrative); and that they always and inevitably imply that the real-life subject of the stereotype is no more than that type (not true for most audience members who understand the nature of comic framing although some may already be predisposed to think that way). Thus, stereotypes and stereotyping have effectively become dirty words.

In part, this derogatory association derives from the etymology of the term. The OED identifies both the verb and noun form of stereotype as stemming from the French *stéréotyper, stereotype*, an 18th–century invention for accurate and fixed reproduction

[31] Blum, "Stereotyping and Stereotypes", 9.

of images. Thus, by the late 19th century, the noun came to mean figuratively, "Something continued or constantly repeated without change; a stereotyped phrase, formula, etc.; stereotyped diction or usage" (OED sv stereotype, *n*.). Early in the twentieth century, however, the term acquired a less objective connotation given by the OED as: "A preconceived and oversimplified idea of the characteristics which typify a person, situation, etc.; an attitude based on such a preconception. Also, a person who appears to conform closely to the idea of a type". The allied pejorative use of the verb means to unfairly fix or perpetuate someone or something in an unchanging form.

From the point of view of humour studies, it is significant that this second meaning was picked up by Gordon Allport, the psychologist who pioneered the development of psychological profiling at Harvard in the 1930s. He included a good sense of humour in his questionnaires as a requisite for personal maturity. In 1935, contributing to a handbook of social psychology, he wrote: "Attitudes which result in gross oversimplifications of experience and in prejudgement. . . are commonly called biases, prejudices, or stereotypes".[32] Allport's approach has since proliferated into a wide range of current psychological tests relating to humour use, appreciation, and aversion, although these do not essentially concern themselves with moral judgements about the styles of personal preference. Their primary concern is with correlations with mental and (to a lesser degree) physical health. The distinction most closely resembling that made by Allport is the recent development by Ruch and colleagues of a test that opposes benevolent to corrective humour in individual humour preferences. However, both so-called styles of humour[33] can be viewed as virtuous since corrective humour aims (like satire) to bring about socially useful reform of some aspect or another in human behaviour by others.

Despite Lippmann's positive statement about stereotypes referred to above, he himself had a second and more critical view: the stereotype is something that contrasts with "individual understanding"[34] and needs to be set aside in favour of granting full respect to every individual we encounter either in fact or fiction. Contemporary values seeking to raise consciousness against our less-enlightened past insist on this view. While the aim is noble, as many have pointed out, it led Lippmann to propose an almost Orwellian system of thought and impulse control that runs counter to individual liberty. Nevertheless, the negative critique of stereotypes and their possible effects is now well and truly entrenched in sociological thought and has been extended by some sociological scholars of humour to comic stereotypes. These are seen as reinforcing and perpetuating existing stereotypes in a particularly nasty way, because "what is represented acquires a different value – that of being a warranted

[32] Allport, "Attitudes", 809.

[33] In literary studies, styles of humour and comedy points to the distinction between various genres or types of humour such as satire, farce, absurdism etc. However, in recent years, psychological studies of humour have adopted the terms "style of humour" and "comic styles" to identify differences in how individuals prefer and use humour in daily life.

[34] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 59.

object of amusement and hilarity in and of itself".[35] It follows that any audience with a proper sense of things should react to comic stereotypes with a regal Victorian "We are not amused", expressing both personal and social disapproval.

Cases of reaction and attempted suppression

Is some form of retaliation (such as a Lippmanian system of thought suppression) or even formal censorship and an appeal to law appropriate for an audience and the target? This was certainly the case when recently in Australia, senior management of the affiliate of British Petroleum in Perth, Western Australia, sacked a worker and appealed against his ordered reinstatement and compensation.[36] On this occasion, an employee made a home video that he shared with co-workers portraying their top managers as the stereotypical Hitler[37] and his generals in a scene taken from the often-memed movie *Downfall* (2004, director Oliver Hirschbiegel).[38] Interestingly, this particular legal objection to comic stereotyping came from exactly those powerful people whom satirists in Australia have normally assumed to be fair game, rather than from any underdog. This was a kicking-up piece of stereotyping, which was responded to with legal kicking down. Eventually, the worker's appeal was upheld, and the courts found against the company.[39]

The underlying assumption of this censoriousness seems to be that there is a direct link between being "amused at" something and "disrespecting" or hating it. Only superiority humour, it seems, can be applied to stereotypes, and the other two broad categories of the relief and incongruity functions are treated as irrelevant.[40] There are of course anecdotal accounts of people welcoming a comically stereotyped persona as a convenient correlate to real-life bias: it is said that the racist bigot Alf Garnett of the 1960s British TV series Till Death us do Part became "a role model for racists"[41], despite his being clearly framed as a comic butt in the series. Indeed, in the debate about whether Nazis and Nazism should be presented as satirical entertainment at all, given the heinousness of what they stand for, it has certainly been argued that while one might think one was only making fun of fascism and xenophobia by adopting it pro tem, for the time being, and in irony, the real thing can easily creep up and take you over.[42] This "adoption effect" or transfer into real-life behaviour has

35 Pickering, "Stereotypes", 737.

36 Bonyhady, "Scott was fired over a Hitler meme".

37 Nickl, "How Hitler memes made their way around the world".

38 *Downfall* was originally released in 2004 as *Der Untergang*. It has given rise to a multitude of comic memes and applications, a fact welcomed by its director, Oliver Hirschbiegel.

39 BBC News, "Downfall".

40 For an account of these three so-called classical theories of humour, see Morreal, "Philosophy of Humor".

41 Pickering, "Stereotypes", 740.

42 Scott, "When We Laugh at Nazis".

echoes in a Japanese stereotype that is widely used both domestically and abroad which presents all Japanese people as having the "samurai spirit" (equivalent to the concept of bushido 武士道, literally the way of the warrior, or the code of honour and morals developed by the Japanese samurai). Despite the relatively recent invention of this fictional concept, dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it has a powerful hold on belief.[43] Japanese people do tend to revel in the image at sporting events for example, comparing themselves favourably to other cultures, and the stereotype is also one which right-wing nationalists and nativists love to deploy. It is a seductive stereotype in its relationship with reality but not one to which many either in or outside Japan take exception.

Perhaps a more clear-cut case of the misuse of stereotypes is that of the truly powerless such as famous children who are too young to have sought their media-star status but who nevertheless fall foul of comedians who are irked by the endless hype associated with them. In 2016 in Québec, for example, stand-up comedian Mike Ward was fined 35,000USD in moral and punitive damages by a human rights tribunal over ridicule that he dished out to Jérémy Gabriel, a young emerging singer, who was disabled from birth. The ruling sparked much debate over the issues of freedom of speech, victim impact and consequences for the profession of comedian. Eventually, in 2021, a long-awaited appeal on the grounds of freedom of speech was narrowly upheld by Canada's Supreme Court. The ruling sought to strike a balance between "a person's right to live in dignity and the right to free speech in the context of a comedian's act".[44]

More recently, the American HBO cartoon series on the British royal family, *The Prince* (2021, director Gary Janetti), which features not only the older generations but also harsh cartoon versions of eight-year-old Prince George and his younger siblings, has proved contentious.[45] George is caricatured as an entitled child worried about his weight and resenting his siblings. The same arguments have been advanced in both cases: that comic stereotyping imposes actual or possible risk of playground mockery and bullying when other children take the stereotype at face value. This was argued in court in Ward's case: "[T]he joke attacked Gabriel's human dignity . . . Ward's comedy routine was widely available online [and]. . . accessible to Gabriel's peers at school. He was mocked and intimidated".[46] The young man certainly paid a high price for his fame as a singer who overcame cruel disability to sing before the Pope: it is not only satirists, but other children too who can be cruel.

[43] It was promulgated by the writings of Inazo Nitobe (Niitobe Inazō, 1862–1933), especially his 1899 work, published in 1905 in English translation as *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*.

[44] Zimonjic, "Comedian Who Mocked Disabled Child Singer".

[45] Hassan, "Brits Outraged by U.S. Animated Series".

[46] Dib, "Comedian Mike Ward's Case before Supreme Court".

Impact of humorous stereotypes

It remains moot, however, whether auditors and viewers enjoying the joke do mistake the stereotype for the reality. It is also unclear which conditions if any are conducive to the incorporation of the stereotype into our belief systems and daily lives. The impact of satire in general on its audience (both immediate and long-term) is a hotly debated topic, the subject of ongoing research in the field of psychology as well as that of political studies. All this suggests caution in drawing any quick conclusions about laughing at stereotypes. To date, published studies looking at the effects of exposure to and enjoyment of comic stereotypes have focussed mainly on sexist, racist and anti-gay jokes, testing attitudes before and after exposure in lab conditions to a pre-selected range of texts. As far as I am aware, none have looked at the duration of effect for any impact that was found on subjects' reported views and tolerance for racism, sexism etc. Usually, no timeframe for post-testing is stated but Ford's 2000 study makes it clear that impact measurements in that case were only taken "in the immediate context" of the experiment, i.e. immediately after exposure to the stimulus-stereotyped material.[47] Duration was not tested for, therefore nor could subsequent behaviour in real life be monitored.

To the scholar of comic stereotypes, it seems entirely plausible that any increase in immediate self-reported antipathy to the subjects of a tested comic stereotype might well be transient, resulting from state-like effects, rather than more permanent trait-like effects which dictate stably held attitudes. Even in a lab, exposure to jokes takes place within a playframe in which we suspend belief, indulge in humour, and permit a temporary Bergsonian anaesthesia of the heart.[48] Changes in attitude might well be related to a range of such factors: playfulness, compliance with the instructions of the tester, general group behaviour during the experiment and so on. And outside the playframe, any shift in norms for the subject being tested might well evaporate. The issue is important and hopefully one that will attract attention from future research students.[49]

As so often in humour research, many interesting questions remain to be asked and answered. Turning to the impact of experimental exposure to comic stereotypes on actual real-life behaviour, some studies have looked at the social effects of disparagement humour and also at the impact on voter behaviour of political satire.[50] Satire and disparagement both by definition involve intentional personal animus for a specific topic, which is not always true for comic stereotypes. In addition,

47 Ford, "Effects of Sexist Humor on Tolerance of Sexist Events", 686.

48 On playframes for humour, see Handelman, "Framing"; and Chafe, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest*.

49 I gratefully acknowledge expert assistance in forming this conclusion from humour psychologists Willibald Ruch and Sonja Heintz (Ruch, personal communication, 8 December 2023; Heintz, personal communication, 10 December 2023).

50 Ford et al., "More Than Just a Joke: The Prejudice-releasing Function of Sexist Humor"; Ford et al., "Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory"; Ford et al., "Effects of Exposure to Sexist Humor on Perceptions of Normative Tolerance of Sexism".

methodological challenges are rife and it remains exceedingly difficult to prove any universal link between humour and actual subsequent behaviour.[51] Perhaps research in advertising comes closest, showing the impacts of humour on buying decisions as well as attitudes toward brands.[52] For comic stereotypes, the topic seems ripe for exploration combined with suitable trait and state measures as well as attitudinal and personality ones. It would be important to consider environmental effects such as entry into (and exit from) a play-frame as well as duration and impact on actual future behaviour. Controlling for both cultural differences and humour preferences might also be important since studies such as those of Kuipers and Friedman have clearly demonstrated that even within a single culture such as those of the Netherlands and the USA, there are marked differences between highbrow, lowbrow and perhaps middle brow taste in humour[53]. Since comic stereotypes can be more or less sympathetic to their human subjects, humour taste in them may vary.

O'Connor's research demonstrated that in evaluating a political candidate, the effects of viewing satire about that person did not differ substantially from the effects of exposure to even negative news about them. This illustrates how difficult it is to pin down what humour is doing. In fact, under some conditions, disparaging jokes and satiric coverage even improved the evaluation of the candidate in comparison to results from a control group that viewed more benign humorous material about the same candidate. For stereotypes as for satire, the safest summary may well be that of Robert Phiddian dealing with political satire. He concludes that "[it] doesn't often cause political change . . . but it can certainly reflect and accentuate that change when it occurs".[54] The Canadian Supreme Court ruling on Ward's jokes found that they "did not seek to incite others to mock Gabriel and [that] he cannot be blamed for the actions of Gabriel's classmates and others who parroted the jokes".[55]

A somewhat parallel Australian case occurred in 2009 as part of a nationally popular satirical TV program by the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) called *The Chaser*.[56] The offending program was a sketch called "The Make a Realistic Wish Foundation" in which child actors impersonated children in a cancer ward being visited by well-intentioned representatives of the aforesaid foundation offering them gifts as a distraction from their terminal illnesses. The target parodied a well-known real-life charity called The Starlight Foundation, known for its ubiquitous solicitation

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[51] On methodological challenges, see O'Connor, 2017; Ford and Olah, "Disparagement Humor and Prejudice: Advances in Theory and Research".

[52] Marc G. Weinberger, Charles S. Gulas and Charles R. Taylor. *Humor in Advertising: Classic Perspectives and New Insights*.

[53] Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste*; Friedman, *Comedy and Distinction*. Unsurprisingly, individual differences are an important qualifier of results in the use of humour in advertising also, see G. Gregory and H. Crawford, "Cross Cultural Responses to Humorous Advertising: An Individual Difference Perspective".

[54] Phiddian, "Have they no shame?", 259.

[55] Zimonjic, "Comedian Who Mocked Disabled Child Singer".

[56] The Chaser team at that time comprised Julian Morrow, Craig Reucassel, Chris Taylor, Andrew Hansen and Chas May; it was typically a group of like-minded young male university graduates who prided themselves on dissecting contemporary politics and mores and were no strangers to controversy.

of funds to grant dying children their dearest wish regardless of expense (e.g. flying them from Sydney, Australia, to Disneyland, Florida).[57] The gifts offered in the sketch were derisory such as a lead pencil and the children suitably deadpan and bemused.

The backlash to this perceived pillorying of sick children was such that the following day (4 June 2009), the team as well as the ABC recorded an on-air apology. Reparation was made to the Starlight Foundation as well, although they can scarcely have suffered from the unexpected publicity. Rusted-on fans were outraged, and many comments can still be found online (e.g. at the YouTube hosting sites for the remaining versions of the video-clip). However, a more reflective (if self-interested) response came in the shape of a letter to the Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* from a practising cancer specialist at the John Hunter Hospital in Newcastle, NSW, who wrote, "I can tell you all a sick child really wants is firstly to go home and secondly to get better. . . Making the donation may make an adult feel better but the money would be better spent on medical research".[58] No doubt the young satirists had exactly such a focus in mind, the conspicuous compassion involved in those who run and those who support such fund-raising. However, they spectacularly failed to allow for the emotional charge innate in images of head-bandaged and wan little children laying listlessly in hospital beds. The stereotype carries such force of persuasive sympathy that it deflected the attack from its true target and, in the heat of the moment, convinced viewers that their beloved young radicals had gone too far this time.

Jokes using stereotypes or individuals reduced to cardboard simplifications may risk producing side effects but, in this case, as in the Canadian one discussed above, the actual comic target was the recurring, often mawkish fuss that is made about famous and/or pitiable people; and, the self-satisfaction of those who contribute to it. The foundational work of the late Christie Davies, an expert analyst of joke-lore bodies around the world, demonstrated the connection between excessive and melodramatic presentation of people and events on television and social media and the subsequent rise of joking about the topic.[59] This link remains as true in the tragic case of the death of Princess Diana as it did in the sinking of The Titanic so long ago.[60] Overreach invites reaction and inflation invites deflation using succinct humour, surgically delivered by the satirist or cartoonist.

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57 Rowlph77, "The Chaser's Parody".

58 Letter to the Editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 2009.

59 See Davies, "Jokes on the Death of Diana"; Davies, "Jokes That Follow Mass-Mediated Disasters in a Global Electronic Age".

60 Chovanec, "Early Titanic Jokes".

Comic stereotypes' essence

Comic stereotypes combine the incongruities of humour with the observable social and personal dissonances of their time, whether those be egocentrism and hypocrisy, callousness and mawkishness, greed, abuse of power or simply unfairness of all kinds. They may not be entirely fair to the human beings portrayed, who are in real life undoubtedly more complex than the caricatures that represent them. However, they are a powerful shorthand that works for a wide audience because they are economical, readily communicated and grasped, and based on truths perceived as recognisable, even if they are neither completely accurate nor up-to-date and not necessarily endorsed by the audience. Cartoonists and humourists using such shorthand for their critical commentary are the slaves crouching behind the leaders and celebrities of today, whispering "Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal". Their targets will indeed suffer – sometimes unfairly – from being presented with such a *memento mori*, particularly if they have not personally sought out the limelight accorded them by the media. But equally often, it is the slave who gets it in the neck. There is a social benefit to permitting such simplification. To quote Phiddian again, with the use of comic stereotypes as with satire more generally, public culture needs to allow for "there being a play space for intemperate views, since pushing them underground cannot actually suppress them, as authoritarian regimes of all stripes have in the past discovered to their cost".[61] The medicine may be harsh or gentle, but both its corrective and entertaining functions deserve their licence.

[61] Phiddian, "Have They No Shame?", 261.

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The God-zillas of Modern Politics

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Compose a surreal depiction with towering, multi-layered buildings interspersed with monstrous bodies, evoking a dreamlike atmosphere and intricate visual complexity for a human viewer on street level’.

Abstract

Chapter 2
Can Australian Cartoonists Monster the Gods of Asian Politics?

Through satirical visual depictions, key political figures from the Asia-Pacific region, including Indonesia's President Suharto and Malaysia's President Mahathir, became subjects of humorous mockery in the Australian media. In the ensuing controversy, questions arose about cross-cultural sensitivity, the boundaries of a free press, and the influence of race and colonial history on the actions of Australian cartoonists. Grounded in a keen understanding of humour theory and the role of stereotyping, the analysis raises a fundamental question: Can comic stereotyping navigate the complexities of the present day amidst the evolving landscapes of political correctness and the ongoing debate around cancel culture? It invites readers to contemplate the intersection of humour, power, and societal dynamics, while societies grapple with the evolving landscapes of political correctness and the ongoing debate around cancel culture. All of this means delving deeper into the intricate dance between satire and sensitivity, urging readers to consider how comic stereotyping can both illuminate and obscure the nuances of political discourse. Exploring the tension between the power of humour to challenge authority and the imperative to foster inclusive dialogue, studies like this encourage a nuanced examination of the delicate balance between the freedom of expression and the responsibility to cultivate a culturally aware public sphere.

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Can Australian Cartoonists Monster the Gods of Asian Politics?

Robert Phiddian & Ron Stewart

Cartooning Politics Down Under

Australian political cartoonists face a clear ethical conflict when it comes to depicting international leaders, particularly those from neighbouring Asian countries. On one hand, there is the satirical commitment to a robust caricature of foreign leaders, which is broadly good, and certainly licit, in the context of a freeish press. On the other hand, there lies the inherited stereotypical representations of Asia and Asians, which are broadly bad by any moral compass, and one of the many ill consequences of the abolished but not forgotten White Australia policy. Australia's Europe-derived caricature tradition turns its own political gods into monsters, in an attack on the powerful colloquially described as 'kicking up' and in more sophisticated terms as *parrhesia* by Mark Rolfe, following Foucault.[1] This robust tradition of open critique clashes with the more deferential public cultures of our neighbours (and massively important trading partners) in East and South-East Asia, with their more indirect political cartooning traditions.[2] Political cartoons gain their power from the intense

[1] Rolfe, "The Populist Elements"; Foucault, "The Word Parrhesia".

[2] John A Lent and Xu Ying, "Chinese Cartoons and Humour"; Stewart, "Post 3–11 Japanese Political Cartooning".

Phiddian, R. & Stewart, R. 2024. Can Australian Cartoonists Monster the Gods of Asian Politics?. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 43–76. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

way they concentrate image, word, and message, and thus also increase the risk that they may offend.[3]

This chapter will describe how these tensions have been worked through in several instances since Australia "turned to Asia" in the 1990s, up until the present frictions in the relationship with the People's Republic of China (hereafter PRC). The cartooning provides a bumpy story with several missteps, but that seems appropriate given the general bumpiness of the nation's attempts to recalibrate its cultural and economic place in a new century where Europe and the Americas seem increasingly distant politically and economically. The legacy of being a British settler colony in postcolonial Asia has been a complicated one for cartoonists to negotiate. Since the official demise of the White Australia policy and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, there has been a gradual disappearance of old orientalist stereotypes. No longer does one see Japanese people as bespectacled and buck-toothed characters (not too far from wartime propaganda but more comical than evil) wearing suits, kimonos, or cameras; or slant-eyed, pig-tailed Chinese people in pre-modern Mandarin clothing or communist boiler suits. In the new millennium, sensitivity to any whiff of racist caricature has become extremely high. Often this seems to have encouraged Australian cartoonists to avoid international topics, to focus instead on scouring domestic leaders and events for their satire and comic commentary.

The Australian situation is almost the reverse of that for Japanese cartoonists who, overall, are comparatively restrained and cautious with domestic politicians and events. However, they feel much freer to lay the boot in satirically with foreign politicians. Attacks on former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the *China Daily*[4] as well as the work of cartoonist Fonda Lapod (discussed below) suggest something similar in the cases of China and Indonesia. The postcolonial cringe operates differently in "white" and "Asian" cultures for intelligible reasons. Despite the post-1960s increase in the size of the Asian demographic in Australia (over 12% by 2020), comparatively few are involved in domestic politics. Consequently, Australian cartoonists have had limited opportunity to figure out how to caricature people of Asian descent. Lack of opportunity/practice at doing this is probably a complementary reason for excessive caution, going along with the sense of historical guilt.

Moreover, when Australian cartoonists have dipped into regional foreign affairs, there has been trouble, as we will see in a pair of controversies about the depiction of Indonesian leaders. At the time of the G20 Leaders' Summit in Brisbane in 2014, the standard response from Australian cartoonists was to depict visiting Asian leaders such as Xi Jinping of the PRC and Narendra Modi of India with the sort of respect that may have pleased them. Both men were relatively fresh on the world stage in 2014. As their reputations have tarnished somewhat in subsequent years, representations of them changed accordingly. The increasingly authoritarian turn in the PRC encouraged greater critical rigour in representations of President Xi, both in East Asian countries

[3] El Refaie, "Multiliteracies"; Chu, "On the Hypoiconic Structure of Cartoons".

[4] Flanagan, "Chinese Newspaper Runs Cartoon Mocking Australia".

like Japan and then in Anglophone Australia, led (we argue) by the spectacular work of Shanghai-born but Australia-based Badiucao (巴丢草, his penname). Even in the day of the internet, cartoons in the mass media are a stable dissenting tradition and retain a predominantly domestic focus. Furthermore, this study argues that cartoons are finally getting better at the hostile but non-racist depiction of one of the most consequential world leaders of the early twenty-first century.

This story can only be told as a cultural narrative, not demonstrated quantitatively – even if resources were available to code the thousands of cartoons one would need to consider to be exhaustive. A single truly controversial image, such as Peter Nicholson's representation of President Suharto (discussed below) can have a far greater impact on many levels than a dozen bland representations of leaders in exotic shirts at ASEAN, so numbers often give a false impression. Consequently, we will build on Milner Davis' chapter, which conceptualizes stereotype as a pervasive and potentially benign humour technique. Following her lead, we argue that it is necessary to avoid the assumption that stereotyping is necessarily bad. Indeed, we question whether it is avoidable at all, even in appropriately virtuous satirical caricatures. The present study examines and contextualises two instances in which Australian cartoonists depicted Indonesian politicians through culturally insensitive animal imagery. The effect of this imagery is that the cartoonists enraged and alienated Indonesian audiences, even while the politicians in question were otherwise legitimate targets for critique.

We will then show how cartoonists seemed unwilling to submit Asian leaders who came to the G20 Conference in Brisbane in 2014 to the same level of monstering they lavished on other international leaders, especially those of Anglophone countries. It is as if cartoonists were so conscious of the legacy of White Australia that they accepted (or, at least, did not attack) the god-among-men images that Xi and Modi were happy to project. Likely adding to this caution is the difficulty for any cartoonist to settle on how to draw a new political actor, particularly one of a different ethnic or cultural group. This issue was especially apparent in US cartoonists' early attempts to caricature Obama.[5] The study then focuses on the treatment of Xi, first in Japan, and then in Australia. Japanese caricature provides a valuable counterpoint to the Australian style, though it does not appear to have been directly influential in Australia. The direct path of influence, we argue, comes from Badiucao, who has in the second decade of the new century, and from outside traditional print media, become one of the sternest caricature critics of Xi's increasingly authoritarian rule. Whether or not established Australian cartoonists were consciously influenced by Badiucao (something of a mystery figure and *cause célèbre*, given control of political expression in the PRC), in recent years, the cartoon depiction of Xi in Australia has become increasingly monstrous without relying on old-fashioned orientalist tropes.

[5] Washington, "Cartoonists Tread Lightly When Drawing Obama".

Caricature and Stereotype

Cartoons operate through caricature and often deploy stereotypes. Caricature and stereotype are distinct conceptual and cartooning techniques, but they often overlap. Caricaturing a human individual by exaggerating individual features to make them instantly recognizable does not necessarily invoke a stereotype. Stereotyping involves attaching someone to a type or group and may make use of caricature to do so. The key issue relevant to the present study is the use of an image that invokes not only the individual portrayed but a group or type which is instantly recognizable for the audience, and which usually possesses derogatory connotations. Thus, stereotypes used in cartooning will be forms of caricature, but the reverse is not always true.

Milner Davis' account of stereotype has noted how frequently in commenting on the human, caricature resorts to animal imagery and stereotype. This is especially the case when remote figures of leaders and notables are to be dealt with and cultural divisions simply add to the likely reach for rapid summaries and equations that ignore nuance and qualification. Drawing on a deeply rooted tradition in caricature that claims affinity (even temperamental alignment) between certain groups of people and specific animals, is one of the most effective weapons in the cartoonist's armoury.[6] The fusion allows the condensation of meaning utilizing metaphor and the transfer or combination of traits/characteristics.[7]

It is important to note that, as Milner Davis concludes in the first essay of the collection this essay also forms part of, stereotypes "may not be entirely fair to the human beings portrayed, who are undoubtedly more complex than the caricatures that represent them. However, they are nevertheless a powerful shorthand that works for a wide audience because they are based on perceived truths that are recognisable and economical". Since many such "perceived truths" are outdated or have accrued excess pejorative baggage over time, it follows that they need to be used with caution. The topic of comment, the imagery selected, and the identity of the stereotyped subject may all evoke high emotional investment by the audience in the image published. Furthermore, its significance will vary, depending on different points of view or opinions. A national audience may be eager consumers of a stereotypical image, while international ones may miss or misconstrue what was a valid critical point in the context being made by the cartoonist. Cartoon stereotypes can easily divide audiences, as our study will show through several examples.

[6] Lucie-Smith, *The Art of Caricature*,16–17.

[7] Gombrich, "The Cartoonist's Armoury".

Animals and orientalism: the distorted lens of Australian cartoonists depicting Indonesian leaders

We turn now to a critical assessment of the use of stereotyping in some controversial Australian cartoons depicting individual Asian leaders. Although we have argued that the cartoons' use of stereotypes cannot on its own be a valid criticism, it is also true that their uses of stereotypes are just as open to criticism as any other contribution to public debate. Satirical license does not make every instance of satire convincing, even if at some basic level it is licit.

The "New Order" regime in Indonesia was established by then President Suharto on his violent accession to power in 1967 and survived his resignation in 1998, but only by a little more than a year.[8] The regime oversaw a period of enormous economic growth for the country that is Australia's closest neighbour, but it also exhibited elements of authoritarian rule and corruption. It began collapsing in the wake of 1997's Asian financial crisis, and Suharto's political plight after three decades of dominance was certainly newsworthy in Australian media.[9] In this context, there can be no question that cartoonist Peter Nicholson in *The Australian* might legitimately depict Suharto in a critical manner. Whether he chose the most culturally sensitive of stereotypes to underpin his point is another matter.

Figure 1: Peter Nicholson, "Corrupt Economics", The Australian, October 20, 1997. © All rights reserved

The cartoon (Figure 1) drawn in a painterly manner depicts an orangutan-bodied caricature of Suharto swinging by a vine as a fire, corrupt politics, rages through the

[8] Lindsey, "Soeharto".

[9] Johnson, Ahluwalia, and McCarthy, "Australia's Ambivalent Re-Imagining of Asia".

forest below. Moderately well-informed Australians at the time knew from reading the newspaper that the Suharto government was collapsing after decades of rule. They also knew that Indonesian rainforests were routinely being burned to clear the land for intensive agriculture, leading to seasonal smog blankets over much of the region. Lastly, they knew that orangutans were particularly threatened in this process. Nicholson put all this together in a pungent cartoon metaphor. However, his stereotype of Suharto also carries the racist legacy of depicting non-Europeans as monkeys. Nicholson explains that he himself was unaware of his cartoon's implications:

> The story of this cartoon shows you the type of random accident that can determine the content of a newspaper, however reputable! I had quite a prolific day and sent up a few ideas to our Sydney office – I work in Melbourne! The orangutan idea was among them. At their editorial meeting in Sydney, our Chief-of-Staff, who had spent a lot of time in Indonesia, made the comment that we shouldn't use the orangutan idea as it would be deeply offensive to many Indonesians because the Dutch used to call the Javanese "monkeys". The word obviously had strong racist overtones to the Javanese. The editorial meeting suggested I use one of the other ideas, which I did, but no one relayed to me the comment about the racist overtones. I was blissfully unaware of this – I draw politicians as monkeys all the time, and in the context of drawing Suharto, the possible racist overtone simply didn't occur to me. Anyway, some days later I revisited the topic and thought I would use the idea. On that day the Editor went overseas, and the Editor-in-Chief came back from overseas. He hadn't been at the original meeting. He saw my "rough" on his desk and approved it. I went ahead and drew it up, and in the paper it went.[10]

While it is true that Australian cartoonists draw their politicians as monkeys quite often, to deploy that stereotype as a white Australian against an Indonesian leader was enough to give Mr Wiryono (then Indonesian Ambassador to Australia) valid cause to wax outraged without needing to address any of the political critique attempted, as his letter to the Editor of *The Australian* shows:

> LETTERS – Culturally insensitive.
>
> I WAS shocked and amazed by the caricature of President Suharto in yesterday's edition of The Australian, which I perceive as in bad taste, highly irresponsible and therefore unacceptable.
>
> In a world globalised through rapid advances in communication technology, critically scrutinising other societies has become a part of life and to be

[10] Letter dated April 8, 1999, quoted in Ostrom, "Risky Business".

> critical is normal, but to insult Indonesia's head of State in such a gleeful manner only shows insensitivity to the culture and values of a neighbouring country.
>
> The depiction ignores the feelings of a people of a different culture and therefore is in violation of the most elementary of decent behaviour and clearly unethical.
>
> I am aware that some Australian journalists have little affection for Indonesia, nevertheless the caricature, I believe, is not only regrettable but degrading to The Australian's own standard of fairness.
>
> S. WIRYONO Ambassador of Indonesia.[11]

Nicholson's attempt to monster President Suharto misfired in pragmatic as well as ethical terms if it gave the Ambassador cause for valid dudgeon to distract from more apposite criticism of his master. An Australian cartoonist cannot (or should not) draw Asian leaders (or other Asian subjects) insensitive to a long and shameful history of racist caricature. It held continuous sway in Australia, broadly between the efforts to exclude Chinese immigrants during the 1850s Gold Rush and the post-Vietnam War era; it had at its heart the official legislated existence of the infamous White Australia policy between Federation in 1901 and the 1960s. To depict President Suharto as corrupt – and likely to escape the consequences of that – seven months before his actual demise is surely a fair comment in a robust media. To depict him as less than fully human is to choose a stereotype whose offence-giving distracts from the point at issue. It invokes a history of racist representation that has nothing to do with the satirical point and provides a valid occasion for outrage that can also be used tactically to distract from the more valid element of the critique.

A more reciprocal provocation concerning President Yudhoyono

In March 2006, the Australian government was engaged in a public disagreement with the Indonesian government over self-determination for the province of West Papua. Fonda Lapod attacked Prime Minister John Howard and his Foreign Minister Alexander Downer as humanoid dingoes (Australian native dogs) in the following cartoon (Figure 2). Excited over the prospect of taking Papua, Howard asks Downer to play as he attempts to mount him from behind. A small Australian flag hanging on his tail makes their identities clear:

[11] Sastrohandoyo, "LETTER TO THE EDITOR".

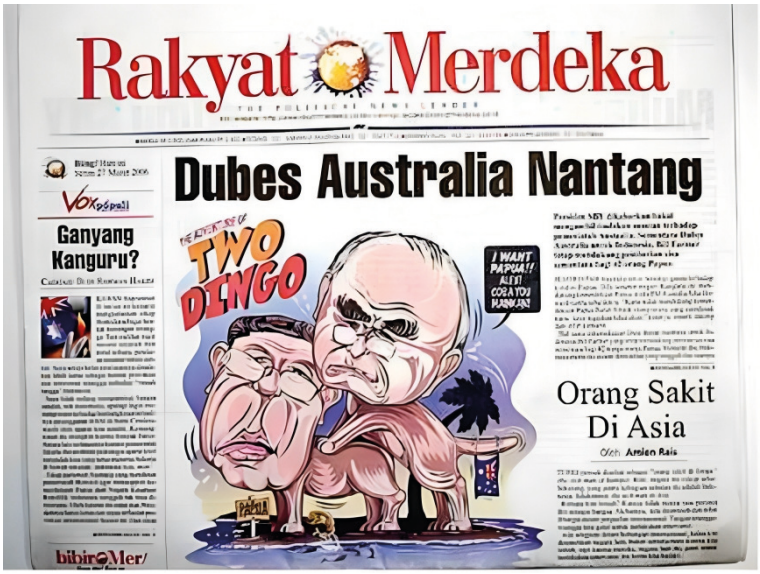


Figure 2: Fonda Lapod, "The Adventure of Two Dingo", Rakyat Merdeka, October 2, 2016. © All rights reserved

This cartoon appears to be a deliberate provocation of Indonesian rage towards Australian leaders.[12] It was published on the front page, making it widely visible on newsstands. *Anjing* (dog) is a swearword in Indonesian which carries more pejorative weight than "dog" in English. Furthermore, the subject of sexuality is contentious, with sodomy particularly frowned upon by the conservative Muslim majority.[13] Neither Howard nor Downer took the bait of complaining about the original cartoon. Howard played the straighter bat by simply saying he was not offended, while Downer reacted more feyly: "I think a lot of Australians would regard these kinds of publications as very offensive, but they are free to be offensive in a magazine in Indonesia if they wish to be".[14] This invoked the Australian standard of robust free speech, which holds that public figures should be comfortable on the receiving end of a joke.

Cartoonist Bill Leak picked up the thread here. As a cartoonist, he loudly proclaimed his commitment to the much-celebrated larrikin tradition in Australian public life up to his untimely death in 2017.[15] He wrote shortly before his death:

> As a cartoonist, I run the risk of "offending" someone, somewhere, every day. For example, a cartoon I drew in response to the Charlie Hebdo massacre in January, 2015, that featured an image of Mohammed, so ''offended'' the delicate sensitivities of certain terrorists fighting for Islamic State in Syria

12 Seven years later, Lapod came out of retirement to offend again, depicting then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, in shorts and Australian flag underpaints, masturbating. Hale and Bachelard, "Abbott Cartoonist Recalled to Ridicule PM".

13 Platt, Graham Davies and Rae Bennett, "Contestations of Gender".

14 ABC News Online, "Dingo Cartoon Fails to Faze Howard".

15 Leak, *Trigger Warning.*

> that they issued a fatwa against me, calling on "fellow mujahideen" in Australia to hunt me down and kill me. As a result, I had to move house and start getting used to living within the constraints of extreme security in order to ensure the safety of not only myself but also my family.[16]

Either in defence of the national honour or out of a desire to return serve and thereby throw petrol on an existing fire, Leak penned the following cartoon (Figure 3) which visually echoes Lapod's two dogs cartoon to comment on Indonesia's denial of self-determination for comparatively underdeveloped West Papua. It happened to be published on April 1, 2006, raising the possibility that Leak offered it as an April Fool's joke focused scabrously on then-Indonesian President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono:

Figure 3: Bill Leak, "No Offence Intended", The Australian, April 1, 2006. © All rights reserved

Where does one start with the racially sourced (and homophobic) stereotyping in this relentless but funny cartoon? Is Yudhoyono's excitedly erect tail wag the worst element? Or the exaggeratedly clichéd bone through the West Papuan's nose? Or the impossibility of defining for either hybrid figure where the canine ends and the human starts? Or is it the schoolyard disclaimer in the caption box, "No offence intended?". The cartoon fights fire with petrol.

To his credit, President Yudhoyono remained as unprovoked as the Australian Prime Minister by Leak's retaliation. There was some controversy in Indonesian media, but nothing like the full-throated repudiation of the Suharto cartoon, perhaps in part because an Indonesian artist had clearly started the dispute. According to Leak's biographer, "Yudhoyono thought it was funny. 'Now there's a statesman for you,' Bill said".[17] It also seems possible that his sense of his own status was never as god-like as Suharto's. Instead of a controversy about the persistence of white Australian

[16] Leak, "Bill Leak on ISIS".

[17] Pawle, *Die Laughing*, 255.

stereotypes in twenty-first century cartoons, there was little reaction in Australia beyond Nicholson's wry cartoon comment (Figure 4) in the same paper three days later, which gave credit to the Indonesian leader for his forbearance:

Figure 4: Peter Nicholson, "A Bucket of Cold Water". © All rights reserved

Here, the obvious offensiveness of the copulating canines as a stereotype is depicted in a more straightforwardly realistic manner and the cartoon implies that all parties treat it not as monstrously offensive but as legitimate *parrhesia* in international affairs. The distinctive songkok cap is retained to signify South-East Asia, but otherwise Yudhoyono is represented as a powerful man in a suit, with no undue focus on racial features. In fact, apart from the exceptions just canvassed, this is largely how Australian cartooning of the early twenty-first century depicted the gods of Asian politics on the rare occasions when their prominence in the news cycle made drawing them unavoidable. It is a reasonable ethical response, considering the historical burden of "yellow peril" caricature in the cartooning tradition. But it did lead to some relatively pious imagery, as some examples from cartoons drawn for Australian papers during the Group of Twenty (G20, the international cooperation forum for the world's major economies) 2014 conference in Brisbane will show.

Cartoonists as civil hosts at the G20

As the new century wore on, Australian cartoonists usually preferred to let sleeping dogs lie when it came to caricatures of Indonesian and other Asian leaders. Public sensitivity to racist language and iconography rose to its present fever pitch, so they tended to avoid caricaturing Asian leaders harshly, or even much at all.[18] This is hardly unreasonable as it remains their core business to draw domestic politics and figures. Besides, as we have noted above, the substantial increase in immigration from Asian countries has not yet been enough to fill the political and business roles that are typically the subjects of cartoons. When international figures entered the frame for cartoons, they were far more often presidents and prime ministers of the US and the UK than of China or Japan. Some of this may have been just a kind of mental and linguistic inertia in the Anglosphere, the last vestiges of an Australian cultural fealty to British and American empires and failure to internalise the major economic and regional realignment of the nation's interests. All this seems to be reflected in a paradoxical bi-valent treatment, as the following cartoons will illustrate.

In November 2014, Australia hosted an unusually large assembly of world leaders. The presence of leaders from large and influential nations made foreign affairs caricature inevitable, especially as India's Narendra Modi and China's Xi Jinping travelled to Brisbane via Canberra, where each addressed the Federal Parliament on consecutive days. David Pope cartooned them politely while surrounding them with harshly stereotyped local politicians. In the following examples, Modi and Xi are presented more as gods than as monsters, while the Australians are rendered grotesque. Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten become koalas and culturally insensitive flatterers with an eye on the main (money) game in the first cartoon (Figure 5). Both cling to the Chinese leader as he has photos taken to commemorate his visit. Prominent members of the Cabinet then posture around the Indian PM in the second (Figure 6), on their yoga mats, performing contortions that expose domestic policy obsessions and display a sort of reverse orientalism that leaves Modi looking much the more dignified one:

[18] The authors monitored cartoons on these subjects through the period and conducted focussed searches in the preparation of this study. The risks of arguing from the absence of evidence should nevertheless be noted.

Figure 5: David Pope, "Cuddling the Koalas", The Canberra Times, November 18, 2014. © All rights reserved

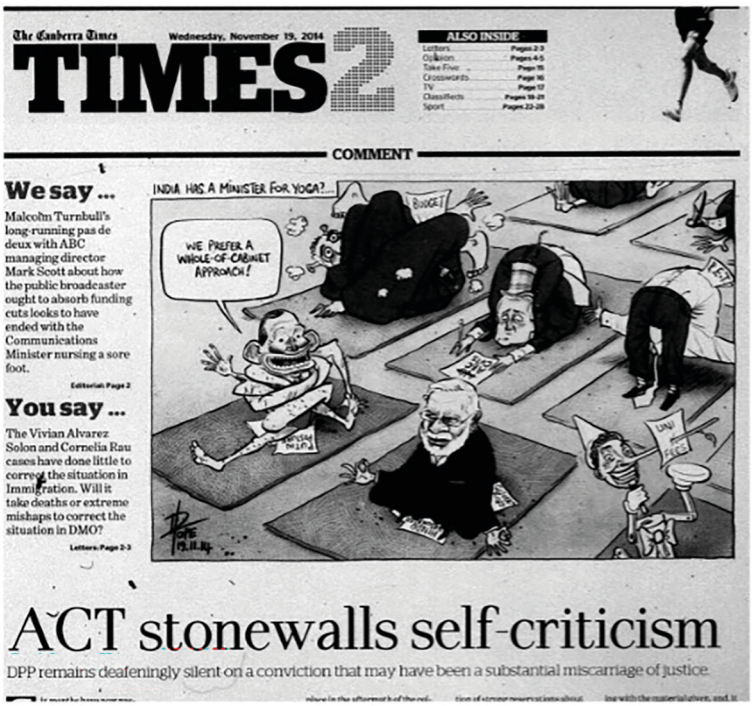
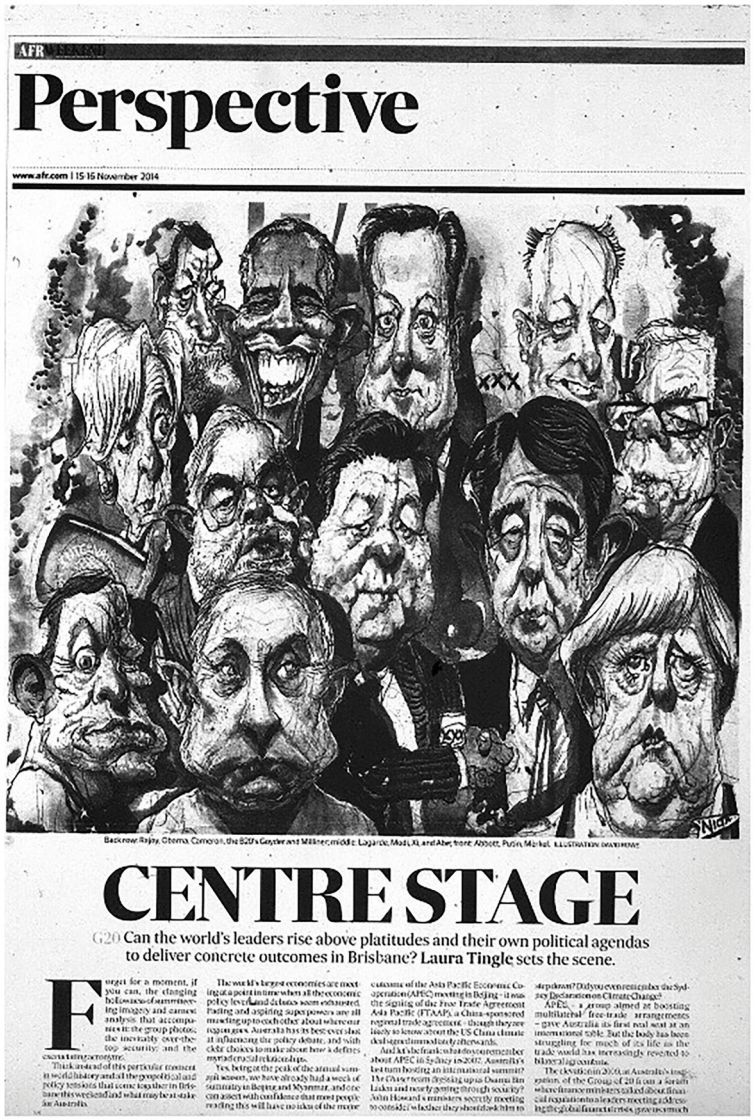


Figure 6: David Pope, "ACT Stonewalls Self-Criticism", The Canberra Times, November 19, 2014. © All rights reserved

Once the G20 train reached its host city of Brisbane, with twenty-six world leaders in attendance, the most harshly stereotyped leaders in cartoons were from Europe and North America, as shown in the following tableau (Figure 7) from the current master of grotesque caricature in Australia, David Rowe:


AFR WEEKEND

Perspective

www.afr.com | 15-16 November 2014

Backrow: Rajoy, Obama, Cameron, the B20's Goyder and Milliner; middle: Lagarde, Modi, Xi, and Abe; front: Abbott, Putin, Merkel. ILLUSTRATION: DAVID ROWE

CENTRE STAGE

G20 Can the world's leaders rise above platitudes and their own political agendas to deliver concrete outcomes in Brisbane? **Laura Tingle** sets the scene.

Figure 7: David Rowe, "G20", Australian Financial Review, November 15/16, 2014. © All rights reserved

There are ten world leaders here: Rajoy of Spain, Obama of the US, Cameron of the UK, Lagarde of the IMF, Modi of India, Xi of the PRC, Abe of Japan, Abbott of Australia, Putin of Russia, and Merkel of Germany; and two Australian business leaders of the accompanying B20 (Business 20) meeting, Goyder and Milliner. None of the African, Middle Eastern, or Latin American leaders in attendance have made the final cut.

While no one gets out of a Rowe caricature with their dignity fully intact, Xi and Abe are relatively unscathed, the most dignified figures of all shown. President Modi, while he appears somewhat dishevelled and dark-eyed, is less distorted in the direction of any obvious stereotype than are Obama, the only other figure of colour, and the Europeans, let alone the wholly monstrous Australian Abbott. Modi is caricatured, but not stereotyped in a clearly pejorative sense.

It appears that both Pope and Rowe were inclined to be polite hosts for the leaders from Asian nations, and certainly did not stress any of the "yellow peril" stereotypes that were so common in Australia for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Politically, the country was coming to recognise the significance of the rising economic powers of eastern and central Asia, and Pope and Rowe pulled their punches accordingly. Significantly, however, the resistance to stereotype shown here also risks being a resistance to criticizing possible negatives about leaders of authoritarian regimes. While this was true in 2014 when both Modi and Xi had fairly recently appeared on the international stage, it has begun recently to change, reflecting world caution about developments in Asia, the impact of COVID-19, we suggest another important consideration. This is the significant influence of cartooning "from within by cultural insiders" and the growing controversy about the suppression of dissenting voices in the Sinosphere particularly. In the next two sections, we will outline a source for the monsterisation of Xi not explored by cartoonists in the Japanese tradition, and then we will argue for the positive influence of the work of the Shanghai-born and Australian-based artist and caricaturist, Badiucao.

Who may stereotype whom in a twenty-first century cartoon?

Following Milner Davis's account in her chapter in this volume, we suggest that a major complication for the practice of stereotyping in Western cultures during the first decades of the twenty-first century has been the dispute over the right to represent the other, especially the racial other. Internationally, this struggle was reflected in the Danish cartoons of Mohammed and the murderous response to their reproduction in *Charlie Hebdo*.[19] Besides the relatively innocuous Indonesian incidents noted above, Australian cartooning has experienced its own stereotype controversies on topics including Indigenous Australian parenting, Israel-Palestine relations, and the American tennis star, Serena Williams.[20] In non-western cultures, things can play out differently.

[19] Klausen, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*; Kowsar, "The Impact of a Post – Charlie Hebdo World"; Navasky, "Introduction: On Enacting the Fear of Art".

[20] Thompson, "What Is Racism"; Manning and Phiddian, "The Political Cartoonist and the Editor"; Scully, "Mark Knight vs Serena Williams".

Japan and China have a complicatedly intertwined history that goes far beyond the inception of the PRC, and is particularly intense in the early twenty-first century, as China seeks to assert economic and political primacy in East Asia. It is, nevertheless, the case that joint "Asian" ethnicity permits a robust use of stereotypes in the representation of the other's leaders, even in the relatively deferential tradition of Japanese political cartooning. For example, Satō Masa'aki feels free to represent Xi as a threatening weather event, and Yamada Shin can bluntly present him as a brutal giant clubbing minorities in his own country.

Figure 8: Satō Masa'aki, "And The Countermeasure Is . . .?", Tokyo Shinbun, May 19, 2019. © All rights reserved

Here (Figure 8) Xi is depicted as gigantic, ominous, and concerning. In the top image, a map of East Asia, a yellow cloud front makes its way from the Chinese mainland towards Japan. The "yellow dust", or *kōsa*, is dust from the deserts of China and Mongolia that blows across the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Kosa turns the sky a dirty yellow colour and carries pollution including the particularly harmful PM2.5 particles from China. The movements of these dust clouds, most common in spring, are forecast like other fronts on TV weather report maps like those in this cartoon. In the top tier of this cartoon, Japan exclaims, "Yellow dust, it's horrible isn't it". In the lower tier, "Red dust is even more horrible!" The red (CCP) cloud in the shape of Xi moves towards the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. With the enactment of a controversial new law allowing China to use weapons against foreign

ships in the area, Xi's government is seen as transgressing upon Japan's sovereignty of the islands.[21]

Figure 9: Yamada Shin, "Quiz: Which is the Most Upstanding, 'a Country Which Condemns Suppression' or 'a Country Which Invites an Oppressive Regime on an Official State Visit?'" Sankei Shinbun, December 6, 2019. © All rights reserved

This cartoon (Figure 9) by veteran Japanese cartoonist Yamada Shin depicts Xi as a monstrous and powerful brute. In it, the towering Xi wields a knotted wooden club ("suppression of human rights") threateningly over the cowering elfin figures representing the "Uyghurs", "Tibet", and "Hong Kong". Two flimsy string-like lassos (US laws) attempt to restrain Xi. One around his wrist is the new Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, and about to snare his weapon is the proposed Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act (passed into law in June 2020). The small figure behind Xi with his feet in a swamp and averting his gaze from the problem before him is Japan's Prime Minister Abe Shinzō who holds out an official state visit invitation to Xi. This visit

[21] This kind of depiction as a dark menacing storm or dust cloud threatening a smaller vulnerable Japan is employed by other Japanese cartoonists too.

scheduled for April 2020 never eventuated, but this cartoon related to the invitation captures the contrast between a physically, politically, and morally weak Abe and the neighbourhood bully whose actions he dares not confront.

Xi's intensely authoritarian and sometimes opportunist response to the worldwide COVID-19 crisis caused a string of harsh caricatures that Australian cartoonists might be hesitant to replicate if they knew of them. These cartoons from Satō Masa'aki, Yamada Shin, and Matsuzawa Hidekazu present the leader of the PRC as a gargantuan bully in a suit, a flame-breathing giant, and a part-serpentine grotesque.

Figure 10: Satō Masa'aki, "Suppression of Domestic Affairs by Mask", Tokyo Shinbun, October 1, 2020. © All rights reserved

With the passing of security laws, the Chinese government effectively banned anti-government and anti-China movements and demonstrations in Hong Kong. At the same time as carrying out "mask diplomacy", that is, providing masks to other nations to increase their influence abroad, the Chinese government could also be said to have applied a mask to the mouths of democratic groups in Hong Kong, hence

gagging them. In this cartoon (Figure 10), a mammoth Xi with a "National Security Law" armband looms overhead casting a shadow over Hong Kong demonstrators. He is poised to smother their speech and democratic movements with a gigantic mask.

Figure 11: Yamada Shin, "At a Time When Absolutely No Evidence Remains, Finally the COVID Study Team…". Asahi Shinbun, April 16, 2021. © All rights reserved

The WHO's COVID study team arrived in China in January to ascertain the origins of the outbreak. In this cartoon (Figure 11) the team appear as firemen atop a fire truck's bucket lift trying to get to the source of a building blaze. Their PPE doubles as protective fireproof suits and instead of hoses, they hold long nasal and throat swabs for a PCR test. The skyscraper-scale Xi, a representative of China and its government, exhales swirling flames from his mouth and nose. Dwarfed in size by Xi and enveloped by this fiery breath, the team calls out, "Don't get in our way!" "Don't blow flames on us!"

Figure 12: Matsuzawa Hidekazu, "Allow Yourself to Be Wrapped Up In Something Long", Kyodo News Cartoons, May 17, 2021. © All rights reserved

In this cartoon (Figure 12) Xi has become part man and part serpentine-armed monster. At the WHO General Assembly, his double-headed snake arm envelopes General Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to form a Caduceus, a staff entwined by two serpents that is a commonly used symbol of medicine. The snake head on the right keeps Trump at bay, while the one on the left prevents Taiwan's participation in the assembly. In Xi's right hand are two billion dollars to help fight the coronavirus that he pledged at the assembly meeting. At the same meeting, unlike other countries critical of the organisation, Xi praised WHO under Tedros' leadership as being an "immense help". In the cartoon, Tedros sweats in discomfort but offers no resistance to Xi's boa-like grip. The Japanese caption, *"Nagaimono mono ni …?"* is the beginning of a saying that translates to "allow yourself to be wrapped up in something long", but means "it is more beneficial to bend to the power of something too large for you to handle". It evokes images of people becoming prey to snakes and is often used in relation to people bending to conform to those politically more powerful. However, the question mark added to the saying here appears to ask if Tedros is just meekly bowing to Xi as an act of political expediency. In monstering Xi, the cartoonist has given him a smirk of pleasure as he gets his own way. Xi is also given exaggerated narrow slanted eyes making him at the same time a more comical and less sympathetic character. This is a form of caricature that would be impossible for a European-descent Australian cartoonist to attempt without being branded racist.

A new direction in Australian political caricature?

Turning to the depiction of Asian leaders in Australia, it would be an exaggeration to claim an absolute change in approach in recent years. Caricatures are scarce and often remain politely neutral. Nevertheless, the ground does seem to have moved, at least as far as President Xi is concerned. From an iconographical and stylistic point of view, the work of Badiucao seems to have influenced the work of other more mainstream Australian cartoonists. The respect afforded him by the Australian cartooning community is evident in his invitation as a guest to the 2019 Australian Cartoonists Association's annual awards night, where he was given the Cartoonists Rights Network International's Robert Russell Courage in Cartooning Award for 2019.[22] His work is widely distributed online and he tends to present Xi in monstrous and highly political caricatures, yet without specifically orientalist framing. To follow this lead represents a step beyond the colonial hangover that was evident in the Nicholson and Leak cartoons.

In an early interview from 2013 (well before the PRC-Australia relationship became vexed and before political critique was so openly frowned on by Chinese authorities), Badiucao explained how he came to be a political cartoonist once he moved to Australia:

> I started drawing political cartoons after I came to Australia. My first drawing was about the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed train crash. Before I started drawing cartoons, I had no formal art training.
>
> When I was in China, I never drew political cartoons, and very seldom drew at all. My main artistic activity was taking photographs, and I was a lomography [analog photography] hobbyist.[23]

The impetus for his cartooning career is thus clearly trans-cultural rather than "purely" Chinese in cultural origin, licensed by his relocation to a country with an active tradition of explicit graphic critique of political leaders. Badiucao's chosen models are all oppositional, including Germany's Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and Spain's Francisco Goya (1746–1828), but he talks of China's prominent and controversial artist Ai Weiwei (1957) as the main shaping influence on "my perspective on courage and on observing China", a man whose international acclaim accrues at least in part from his adopted role as political dissident.[24]

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[22] ACA, "2022 Stanley Awards Weekend".

[23] Beach, "Ten Questions for Cartoonist Badiucao". China Digital Times has subsequently published an E-book, *Watching Big Brother: Political Cartoons by Badiucao* (China Digital Times, 2016) that expands the number of questions from Beach to twelve, as an introduction to 50 of his cartoons.

[24] Ibid.

The artist's striking red and black style is novel to Australian eyes and undoubtedly stems more from his sense of origin rather than his current location. It particularly recalls the style of many woodblock propaganda prints of the Mao era, and is coloured, he says, by his sense of his homeland's realities and history:

> In my view, if you open the dazzling neon jacket, China's complexion is nothing more than black and red. Red is blood, fear and violence. Black is iron, freezing nights, depression, despair, and the silent corners. It's the cloth gag covering the screams. The country is like a giant meat grinder, a layer of fresh blood covering a layer of despair, new despair covering the layer of fresh blood, over and over again.[25]

A prime example of this forceful style used by Badiucao is his depiction (Figure 13) of President Xi Jinping with an enlarged head and claw-like hands at the time of his ascendancy to dominance in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is replete with bestial images of hybrid apes and serpents for attendant high-ranking Chinese officials. These might well be decried as racist, had they been drawn by a cartoonist of European ethnicity: [26]

Figure 13: Badiucao, "Party Animals", Quartz (qz.com), December 22, 2016. © Badiucao

[25] Beach 2013/2016.

[26] Badiucao's official website https://www.badiucao.com/, linked from the Wikipedia article on him, was available early in the period of research for this article, then disappeared for a time, and now seems to have returned. According to the "Wayback Machine", his website disappeared sometime in the year 2021 between May 4 and June 29 (and cartoons archived could be accessed by going back to the January 25 snapshot). Hostility from PRC-aligned forces is likely to blame. Efforts to silence him were evident in the cancellation of his planned Hong Kong exhibition early 2019 and again for his exhibition in Italy in November 2021. In February 2021, his Twitter account was, according to him, hacked leaving him unable to log in. He has given fear of reprisals against himself and his family in China as the reason for keeping his identity and (until mid-2019) his face hidden in a number of articles printed about him.

However, Badiucao's monkeys seem to be monstrous yes-men or back-room manipulators rather than playing into colonialist tropes. Ape and serpent imagery can play out in diverse ways in different Asian cultures, as examples from Japan and South Korea illustrate. The first is a January 1, 1987, *Kyodo* News cartoon (Figure 14) by Kawarasaki Kōji, titled "It's Appeared! King Kong". It shows a traditional Japanese busker with his trained monkey greeting and entertaining people making their traditional New Year Shrine visit. The busker is then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, and the threatening oversized monkey is a caricature of then Minister for Finance Miyasawa Kiichi, who holds out a cup demanding, "Tax, tax". The ordinary people are taken aback by this and complain that the busking duo are asking for money without performing. This imagery brings together the topical themes of New Year and the recent release of a King Kong movie into a cartoon criticizing the government's plan to introduce a consumption tax while offering little in return.

Figure 14: Kawarasaki Kōji, "It's Appeared! King Kong", Kyodo News Cartoons, January 1, 1987. © All rights reserved

The second cartoon (Figure 15), by Banzzogi, appeared in the South Korean underground weekly magazine *Mal* around late 1987 after large-scale and bloody pro-democracy riots had forced the nation's dictatorship to move towards free elections that ensued in 1988.[27] In the top panel, a whip-holding government official leads the Korean police force, depicted as a monkey, in the direction of riots (written on

[27] Banzzogi is a pen name meaning a piece of something fractured and alludes to the split on the Korean Penninsula. The cartoon was reprinted in Rii Shūbi's *Sesō Manga de shiru Kankoku*, which translates into English as *Understanding Korea through Political Cartoons*. The publisher was Katatsumuri-sha and the book appeared in 1988.

the Molotov cocktail he dangles in front of the monkey). In the second panel, after satisfying the police demands with a banana, he then leads the monkey towards a supposed crime surge (indicated on the knife). In both this cartoon and the Japanese example above, a trained monkey is used analogically to depict and criticise Asian political actors, both an individual and a group, but it remains free from any racist overtones.

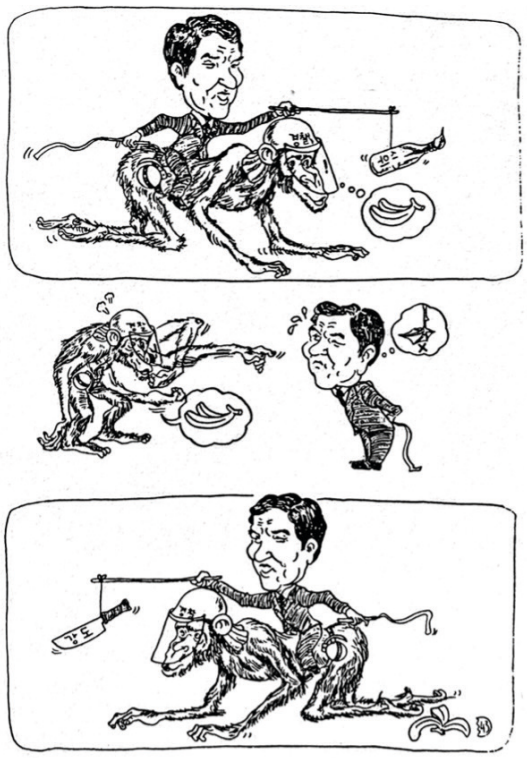

Figure 15: Banzzogi, "Riots", Mal Magazine, 1987. © All rights reserved

Thus, cartooning traditions in particular countries can tend to be insular in their style and subject matter, but Badiucao is cosmopolitan without losing a sense of cultural origin. He may have picked up an enthusiasm for the practice of freedom of expression from his new context in Australia, but his style and point of view were shaped earlier than that. He courts an audience of internet users and creates cartoons that can circulate outside the original context of their publication, somewhere between a meme, a work of art for a gallery, and a print-age political cartoon. His artistic activism addresses Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tank Man, and the limits on expression in the PRC, all topics that have led to his work being banned in the PRC and sometimes fugitive in its internet presence elsewhere.[28]

[28] Callick, "It's Not Hard to Become a Political Cartoonist"; Gunia, "Meet Badiucao".

Since a central subject in Badiucao's cartoons is the rise and character of President Xi Jinping, he often appears in caricature. There are two threads to these depictions. One, borrowed from the forbidden meme that flourished briefly in the PRC and elsewhere after Xi's was photographed walking with President Barack Obama on a historic visit to the US,[29] is the more Horatian representation of Xi as Winnie the Pooh. This is based not on E. H. Shepherd's original drawings for A. A. Milne's books, but on the Disney image of a podgy and benign silly old bear who in this case just happens to be leading an empire with expansive ambitions. Given that this image and name have been effectively scrubbed from the internet in the PRC, merely using this is indicative of protest. The more Juvenalian image of Xi presents him as a brutal man in a suit and relies on caricatural restraint, as the artist well explained in an interview with Rowan Callick:

> Xi Jinping is a far more appealing subject [than previous supreme leader [Hu Jintao] because "he likes to promote his own personality, as if we're going back to Mao Zedong's time. He likes drama. I don't need to exaggerate his features".[30]

Both these threads come together in the following powerful cartoon (Figure 16) depicting poor old Pooh being rear-ended by a militant Xi (dated 2017 and titled "Xi's going on a bear hunt"):

Figure 16: Badiucao, "Xi's Going on a Bear Hunt", Badiucao Artshop, 2017. © Badiucao

[29] Haas, "China bans Winnie the Pooh film".

[30] Callick, "It's Not Hard to Become a Political Cartoonist".

"I don't need to exaggerate his features" is a stylistic path that seems subsequently to have influenced a handful of Australian cartoonists in mainstream publications.[31] As the relationship between the PRC and Australia has become more vexed, even leading in 2021 to anxiety on both sides about future military conflict, these local artists seem to have learned to caricature President Xi more rigorously. Significantly, rather than revert to bestial or other "othering" stereotypes from the old arsenal of White Australia (things validly left in the last century), they have represented the Chinese president differently from the almost deifying politeness of 2014. Arguably, they have learned this, at least in part, from Badiucao's art, more familiar as it is with the Chinese milieu. As evidence, the following cartoons present Xi not as some insulting ape or dog (like Suharto and Yudhoyono in their day), but as a heavy and powerful world leader, a figure to be wary of. The stereotype is more resonant of historical tyrants like Stalin than of stereotypical oriental villains like Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon*. During 2020–21, amid debate about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and other strains, the PRC slapped a range of trade sanctions on Australia that were widely understood as punishment for its foreign policy impertinence, rather than serious complaints within the international trade rules-based order. Australia undertook retaliatory action, including tougher reviews of investment decisions by Chinese companies and individuals and even cancellation of some contracts. Related developments were growing tensions over the rule of law in Hong Kong and treatment of Uighur Chinese citizens in Xinjiang Province, as well as military posturing by both sides in the South China Seas. With worsening relations came increased public news commentary. Three Australian cartoonists, David Rowe, Johannes Leak, and John Spooner all responded during this period with their own monstrous versions of President Xi. Significantly, the strongest cartoons have appeared in national newspapers, with their greater international and financial focus, rather than the metropolitan tabloids which remain more widely distributed in individual cities but attend more to domestic affairs.

Rowe's cartoon (Figure 17) in the *Australian Financial Review* portrays a jowly, clearly recognisable but not particularly racially featured President Xi treating a range of world leaders as rubber stamps in the context of changes of governance in Hong Kong. Miniscule versions of them, some with animal ears and snouts, are hung feet up in an old-fashioned bureaucratic stamp holder. Australia's prime minister, Scott Morrison, having had his bottom covered with red ink on a pad labelled "Inkuiescence" is imprinting a controversial symbol. It is the regional emblem of the "Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China" that came into use on July 1, 1997, when the "one country, two systems" Basic Law was agreed between the outgoing colonist, Great Britain, and the PRC. Morrison is depicted as hurt but "acquiescing" ("Ouch!! Ooh. OK."). Another bag of red ink is infusing the waiting stamp-leaders. Events justified the commentary thereafter, as international

[31] He is certainly known to them, being the winner of an Amnesty International Australia Media Award for cartooning in 2021 that was judged by noted Australian cartoonists Cathy Wilcox, Fiona Katauskas, and Jon Kudelka as per Amnesty International's webpage presence and the organisations 2021 "Media Awards" outcomes.

protests against the direction of change in the SAR fizzled out, so Rowe's target is as much the spinelessness of the Australian leader as it is Xi.

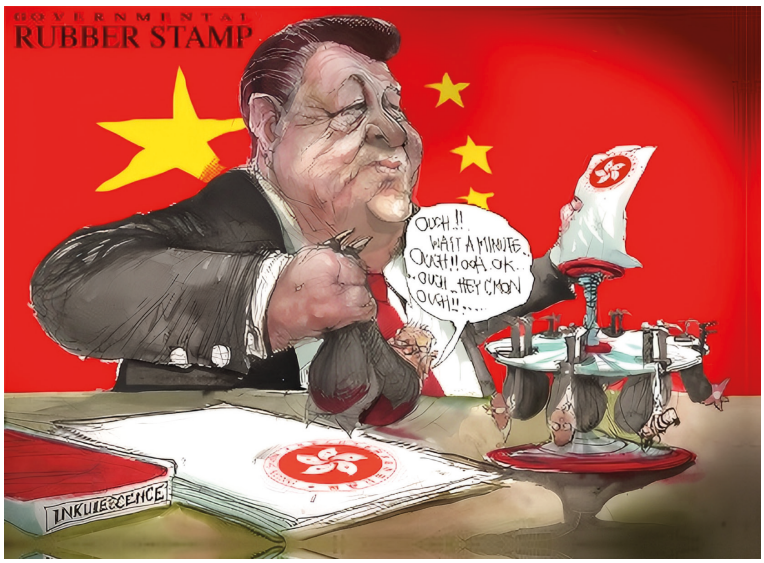

Figure 17: David Row, "Governmental Rubber Stamp", Australian Financial Review, November 13, 2020. © All rights reserved

Meanwhile, for the other national newspaper, Johannes Leak (son of Bill) shows (Figure 18) the Australian Federal Treasurer of the time, Josh Frydenberg, shaking timidly and gazing with alarm at a rocket-launcher-wielding Xi who demands that he stop using national security as an excuse to cancel contracts involving PRC companies. The much smaller Australian is dancing and sweating at the closeness of the weapon's tip, painted with a Chinese flag. He hides behind a piece of paper labelled "FIRB". This is Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board which was indeed a convenient fig leaf for making decisions unpopular with the PRC; Frydenberg had at that time designated the purchase of a major building company, Probuild, by China State Construction Engineering Corporation as a possible threat to Australia's national interests. Both men are dressed in Western business suits, but Xi is positively dapper and imposing, pointing one shoe almost balletically, yet holding his weapon with practised ease. The threat and the little-man status of Australia are credibly conveyed.

Figure 18: Johannes Leak, "National Security", The Australian, January 13, 2021. © All rights reserved

Also cartooning for *The Australian* around the same time, John Spooner takes the satirical attack to the PRC itself (Figure 19), with the cowed Uighur citizens of Xinjiang shown kneeling in a row, dwarfed by the PRC flag and an image of President Xi on the wall behind them. Speaking in English (for the readership of the newspaper), one man asks what the leader is saying to them. Another replies, as they all look to the ground in submission, "Open means closed. Fairness means intimidation". It is the truth-telling cry of the unfairly subjected which recalls Orwell's invented Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and figures Xi as the sinister Big Brother. It has been a staple of political cartoons since 1832, when Honoré Daumier drew Louis Philippe the supposed Citizen King of France as Gargantua betraying his people with his greed and corruption. The result for Daumier was a term in jail, and a substantial number of cartoonists from around the world have followed in his footsteps.[32]

Figure 19: John Spooner, "XI SPEAK", The Australian, January 26, 2021. © All rights reserved

[32] For Daumier, it was commuted to a spell in the "Chaillot" psychiatric hospital in Paris, as per Daumier, "New Research Results". Others have suffered very materially, sometimes with their lives, as recently described in Cherian George and Sonny Liew, *Red Lines: Political Cartoons and the Struggle against Censorship*.

In all these representations, the true monster is indicated not by any animal iconography, but by human size and the contrast between seeming and reality: Xi is the big man in the suit who is prepared to use force and who demands respect due to a god. One does not need racial stereotypes to make this fundamental satirical point, but the relatively realistic styles used by these three artists all use a degree of caricature to underline the deceptively benign face and formal business-power suit, pointing to the hidden menace beneath.

Complex dynamics

It is tempting to read this story as a happy ending for Australian cartoonists, if not for their country: the migrant artist makes good and teaches the resident artists to caricature a tyrant, free of gratuitous offence from the racist baggage inherent in his adopted country's White Australian heritage. That interpretation would be premature and will almost certainly prove simplistic. Cartoons of Xi remain unusual in Australia, and his depiction still seems subject to the interminable culture wars that continue to distort Australian culture and politics. Badiucao is explicitly grateful for the relative freedom offered him by life and citizenship in Australia.[33] However, he also points to residual racism and informal restraints on the full freedom of satirical expression that he, like all cartoonists, continues to hope for. One commentator reports on his recent interview with Badiucao:

> While this crisis might indeed be a wake-up call, Badiucao is finding it increasingly difficult to make his voice heard in Australia. While the right and far-right have a strong anti-CCP (Chinese Communist Party) line, that discourse, he explains, often includes elements of xenophobia and racism. Many on the left, meanwhile, are afraid to criticize China in the name of political correctness, lest they be accused of supporting racism.[34]

The rise of the PRC and the illiberal turn taken under President Xi's leadership have drawn Australia, its media, artists, and people into power politics in an uncomfortable way. The consequent pressures are being expressed in a manner that is by no means uniformly edifying. The experience of Australia's cartoonists, as they try to stay true to their core mission of laughing at and telling truth to power, wherever in the world it might reside, is morally and pragmatically complex. Their work requires compaction and dense meaning summarised in caricature and stereotype, but awareness of cultural differences has grown and deepened in an Australia that now firmly sees itself as linked to Asia even if more attention to cartooning traditions beyond the

[33] Griffiths, "I'm not backing down this time".

[34] Noubel, "Chinese-Australian Cartoonist Badiucao Walks a Fine Line".

Anglosphere, such as Japan's, would be a boon. Stereotypes are essential to the salutary offence, which is the cartoonist's stock-in-trade, but they can also sponsor gratuitous offences that can distract from the satirical message. This is especially true in the twenty-first century if they recall racial imagery extraneous to the argument. If the thoughtless transgressions of using old-style imagery are discarded, new types of thoughtful and pointed offence can fruitfully be risked in every cartoon of a leader from another culture.

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The Don

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Compose an intriguing visual where a human form takes on a distorted semblance reminiscent of Donald Trump, introducing a surreal dimension that sparks contemplation within the imaginative context’.

Abstract

Chapter 3
Trump and the Heroic Gods and Monsters of American Satire

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans have been judging presidential aspirants and occupants in the light of heroes of the Republic. This holds true in particular for George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt (FDR) who have been at the top of scholarly rankings as great presidents since 1948. On the flip side, voters have been equally prepared to denounce aspirants and occupants as monsters unworthy of the office held by such greats. Donald Trump has received both the praise and blame of this mode of rhetoric from satirists who are the focus of this discussion. American political satirists are as concerned as other Americans with the qualities of the person who wants to be president and they use the same cultural resources in their judgements. To that extent, their concerns match that of Max Weber with the Faustian nature of political power, that 'whoever becomes involved with politics, that is to say, with power and violence as a means, "has made a pact with satanic powers".

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Trump and the Heroes and Monsters of American Satire

Mark Rolfe

Satire, The United States, and Donald Trump

Since 1964, an enthroned George Washington has greeted visitors to the National Museum of American History in the capital of the United States. This huge 12 tonne statue completed by Horatio Greenough in 1840 depicts Washington as another Zeus. It first sat in the rotunda of the Capitol building where sightseers since 1865 have looked up to find the first president sitting with Roman gods in a ceiling fresco created by Constantino Brumidi. Such neo-classical renderings of Washington are no longer fashionable but even these days "his popular image remains that of a demigod".[1] Such is the hero worship lodged permanently in the American imagination that every year millions of tourists flock to Mount Rushmore in South Dakota where they marvel at the sixty-foot-high sculptures of Washington as well as of Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln that were carved out of the side of a mountain.

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, Americans have been judging presidential aspirants and occupants in the light of the heroes of their republic, in particular Washington, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt (FDR), who have been regarded at the top of scholarly rankings as great presidents since the notion of such a table was

[1] Ferling, *The Ascent of George Washington*, 8–9.

Rolfe, M. 2024. Trump and the Heroes and Monsters of American Satire. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters.* Tampere: Tampere University Press, 77–104. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

created in 1948. On the flipside, voters have also been prepared to denounce some aspirants and occupants as monsters, unworthy of the high office held by such greats.

The focus of this chapter is on Donald Trump and the humour surrounding his suitability for the presidency that described Trump as a god-sent hero saving the nation or as a monster threatening democracy. All the associated humour reflected and reinforced an identity crisis that was at the centre of American politics, because central to the struggle was Trump himself.[2] The 2016 election demonstrated that American political identities had become more racialised and polarised than in the past. This made for "more divisive and explosive" conflict over the meaning of America[3]. Many comedians were embroiled according to their views of Trump's fitness for office through the common use of a language of heroes and monsters that has a long history in the republic. As both presidential aspirant and occupant, Trump has received mixed rhetoric of both praise and blame from comedians.

Despite their differences over Trump, these comedians were just as concerned as other Americans with the qualities of the person who desires or occupies the presidency. After all, humour has "cultural meaning" according to the society from which it is drawn[4], so comedians use the same cultural resources for their judgements as the rest of the population for theirs. As this chapter argues, the rhetoric of heroes and monsters corresponds with the ideals of American Exceptionalism and is found in American political satire, which is here connected to political humour.

Like their compatriots, American political satirists have often articulated through this language a very traditional concern with the tremendous power of the presidency and with political leadership more generally. To some extent, they correspond in a more hyperbolic fashion with the more intellectual disquiet that Max Weber had with the Faustian nature of political power. As he wrote, "whoever becomes involved with politics, that is to say, with power and violence as a means, 'has made a pact with satanic powers'".[5] Political office tantalises candidates with power and the potential for violence in the world, as Weber so vividly reminded us with Faust's warning of the "Golem-run-amuck" in *Sorcerer's Apprentice*.[6] Throughout their nation's history, Americans have constantly reminded themselves of the monster a president might become with the tremendous powers of the nation's highest office and their interminable dilemmas over choices of presidential aspirants and occupants has been expressed through a recurring pattern of lurid analogies to gods, heroes, and monsters.

The heroes are founded on mythologized versions of American political figures and are free-floating signifiers of virtue supposedly lighting the political path to a bright American future. They are examples of myth as collective memory that I'll come to

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2 Sides, Tausanovitch and Vavreck, *The Bitter End*, 13.

3 Sides, Tesler and Vavreck, *Identity Crisis*, 369–376.

4 Billig, *Laughter and ridicule*, 187.

5 Weber, *The Vocation Lectures,* xxxix.

6 Yair and Soyer, "The Golem Narrative in Max Weber's Work".

later. The monsters are similarly varied figures derived from religious commitments, fantastic creatures, and humans such as Hitler. They are free-floating signifiers of the wickedness that will descend on the nation if a Gollum-like figure runs amok. This was, of course, the anxiety of many comedians about Trump both before and after the 2016 election.

In Weberian terms, the legitimacy of the American president is based on the "hope of reward" or the "fear of vengeance" from those lawfully controlling the means of violence. The general point here is that presidential aspirants must be taken on trust during elections. We cannot know the future of their terms in office. But even then, we are ever watchful of their actions for signs of arrogance and betrayal of power. Obviously, such things are matters of contention, dispute, and high emotion, which have been evident in the hyperbolic hortatory and admonitory rhetoric that has featured in American politics since the beginning of the republic.

We should therefore see the satirists discussed here as prominent rhetors upholding American political and moral conventions with their warnings or endorsements to citizens of presidential aspirants and occupants. Here, their use of the language of heroes and monsters conforms to notions of satire as an idiom or mode of political and moral critique that not only fits within a larger social context but is "impassioned rhetoric that claims to serve the public good" and demands some sort of "cultural, social or political change" in the future.[7] In other words, one cannot neatly separate American political satire from American political rhetoric; both express conflict over the political and social order. Accordingly, I use in this chapter a range of satirists in the belief that satire is intended to be persuasive, but I also mention some non-satiric rhetors to show common rhetorical resources.

In this case, the satire and rhetoric is about Donald Trump and the decisions voters had to make about his election in 2016 and then about his presidency. Satirists mobilised the intemperate satire and indignant passions in the public spaces of free expression and opposition that Robert Phiddian has argued to be important and stabilising political developments in Anglophone societies over the last three centuries. Satire has been a valid form of "rhetorical aggression" that released "potentially disruptive public emotions" like contempt, anger, disgust, and fear. This form of catharsis has thus prevented "recourse to violence or oppression".[8]

This rhetorical approach helps us understand what has been called the humour taste culture or humour regime of a society. Kuipers defined the latter as a discursive regime of "unwritten rules stipulating who can joke about what" and "declar[ing] some topics off-limits",[9] which specify boundaries, power relations, and the voices that have authority to jest. Rhetorical engagements within a society determine the existence of such regimes and involve not only humour but also the rhetoric or meta-discourse about the humour as well as the more general rhetoric of a society, which includes its

[7] Phiddian, *Satire and the Public Emotions*, 3, 6. See also Griffin, *Satire*, 36–38.

[8] Phiddian, *Satire and the Public Emotions*, 3–9, 17.

[9] Kuipers, "The politics of humour in the public sphere", 69.

agreed goods and evils. To be specific, gods, heroes and monsters in this chapter are some of the agreed goods and evils held in common in the United States.

Another way of describing the American humour regime and its agreed goods is to recall what Louis Rubin labelled in 1973 "The Great American Joke". American humourists have repeatedly pointed "to putative social or moral failings in society"[10] by exploring the gap between the "big promise" of the Declaration of Independence and the ideals of liberty, equality, and self-government, on the one hand, and the difficult reality of politics, on the other.[11] One can add to this list references to the Founding Fathers, the early republic, and the great presidents of the past that help to pose some distance between contemporary practice and sacred but betrayed ideals. American comedians can easily resort to such references. Bill Maher basically appropriated the Founding Fathers to his liberal side of politics in one of his attacks on members of the Tea Party in 2011:

> Now that they've finished reading the Constitution out loud, the tea baggers must call out that group of elitist liberals whose values are so antithetical to theirs. I'm talking of course about the Founding Fathers who, the teabaggers believe, are just like them. But aren't. One is a group of exclusively white men who live in a bygone century, have bad teeth and think of blacks as three-fifths of a person, and the other are the Founding Fathers. Now I want you teabaggers out there to understand one thing: while you idolize the Founding Fathers and dress up like them, and smell like them, I think it's pretty clear that the Founding Fathers would have hated your guts. And what's more, you would've hated them. They were everything you despise. They studied science, read Plato, hung out in Paris and thought the Bible was mostly bullshit.[12]

In a segment of her series *I Love America*, Sarah Silverman is in a hall of presidential wax figures that come alive at night, as in the film *Night At The Museum*. From the disturbing discussion and sometimes crude and lascivious banter, she does conclude that America was founded and run by "assholes" and has "a spotty history". But they did do some good. She is reassured by the Lincoln figure which, in effect, recycled the Great American Joke: "It's true, America was never really right, but in glimmers and moments we aspire to be, and I believe we will be again, because we love America, and I know you do too".[13] Most pertinent to this chapter, all the other presidents applaud when Silverman unplugs the Trump figure, clearly demonstrating Trump's difference from them and his unworthiness for the top job.

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[10] Condren, "Between Social Constraint and the Public Sphere", 81.

[11] Rubin Jr, "The Great American Joke", 116.

[12] Davis, "Bill Maher To 'Teabaggers'".

[13] Silverman, "I love you America".

Silverman is ambivalent about America, which is an imperfect country in her view, but she still upholds American ideals, including the beliefs of the Founding Fathers. For instance, she thought of the addition of 'In God We Trust' to the courts and the currency as "a product of fear mongering Red Scare 1950's McCarthyism [which goes against] our founding fathers' insistence of separation of church & state".[14] Moreover, she resorts to monster talk about Trump (see below).

The main point about the Great American Joke is its endurance. If one turns to American literary history, explained Rubin about the joke, one finds that "the writers have been dealing with it all along the way", including Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Joseph Glover Baldwin, Henry Melville, and Henry James who explored this essence of "American humor"[15]. For instance, Twain quipped, "There is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress".[16] The continuity of such jests about the stereotypical politician who is unlike the Founding Fathers is evident in the 1992 comedy entitled *The Distinguished Gentleman* starring Eddie Murphy. The lead character was a conman named Thomas Jefferson Johnson, his name thus drawing an implicit contrast with the upright third president. "There is only one place for people like him", mocked the trailer about Johnson, and that is Congress, where he can "do to Congress what Congress has been doing to you!"[17]

A 250-year rhetorical tradition

The continuity of topics used in The Great American Joke since the beginning of the republic confirms with satire the conclusion that Andrew Robertson made more generally with American political rhetoric, that between 1790 and 1990 "the context of political debate has changed very little … it is easier to find new means of saying something than to find something new to say".[18] The same goes for the language of heroes and monsters, due to the never-ending need since the early republic to persuade the mass of ordinary voters in a representative democracy.

The presidential victory of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 marked a triumph of the first Republican Party over the Federalist Party of George Washington and John Adams in a fervid time, when both parties claimed to be the true heirs of the revolution; when oppositional politics was feared; and when, paradoxically, political parties were also generally scorned as vehicles for selfish interests and ambitions over the public good. This was especially the case as the young republic progressed during the three

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[14] Silverman, "'In God We Trust' Was Added to Our Courts & Currency. It Was a Product of Fear Mongering Red Scare 1950's McCarthyism & Went against Our Founding Fathers' Insistence of Separation of Church & State. In God We Trust Also Replaced E. Pluralibus Unum ('from Many, One') as Our Motto".

[15] Rubin Jr, "The Great American Joke", 110.

[16] Twain, Mark *Twain At Your Fingertips*, 65–66.

[17] Trailer Chan, *The Distinguished Gentleman* trailer.

[18] Robertson, *The Language of Democracy*, 9.

decades to the 1820s from what has been called a "demi-aristocratical democracy" of gentlemen into a somewhat more inclusive political society with a white male franchise.[19] This evolution may surprise those who thought the American colonists rose against the British in 1776 with a fervent belief in democracy. Only hindsight blessed the insurrection with this sacred value. The framers of the constitution in 1787 actually thought of democracy as participatory politics and rule by the ignorant *demos*, as the received wisdom had been since Plato, and therefore treated democracy as an unwelcome reminder of ancient turbulent Athens that hovered over their gestation of the new political society.

The election of 1800 marked a divide when rhetoric became more hortatory with the growing two-party system that was helping to organize and channel politics. That is, the rhetoric became more excited and exaggerated in attempts to mobilise people. It also became more admonitory with warnings of the wrong choice of political party putting the country's future at stake. Both aspects resulted in a reliance on invective and antithesis, especially at elections, based on the contrasts between parties and their leaders. In the process, the language of gods, heroes and monsters and public emotions like fear and anger were common to political rhetoric and political satire expressing hopes and dreams for the future.

If this language seems somewhat fantastical and epic, then that is because of the bubbling imagination excited by American Exceptionalism. One need only turn to the popular Jon Stewart as a recent exponent of American Exceptionalism as well as the American Joke. While at the helm of *The Daily Show*, he often referenced the constitution and its framers, including Washington and Jefferson, when criticising presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama for abuse of power with military drones; the corrupting influence of political donations; or their failure to match Lincoln. While Stewart sometimes took direct aim at American Exceptionalism, such as his disdain for the bombing of Syria in 2013,[20] nevertheless he has some very traditional views:

> The truth of the American experiment is that government is messy. … But we have an exceptionalism that we have taken for granted, and we get lost in the symbolism of who we are rather than the reality. The reality of who we are is still remarkable.[21]

Like Silverman, Stewart finds America to be imperfect, but his opinion is not at odds with recent iterations of American exceptionalism because of his belief in the great ideals that mark America as unlike any other nation. We must understand this concept of exceptionalism, though, as largely a post-war umbrella term under which has been gathered several concepts that have various historical pedigrees. Americans have not always used "exceptionalism" when speaking of their nation. The

[19] Robertson, *The Language of Democracy*, chapter 1.

[20] The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, "Syria and American Exceptionalism".

[21] Marchese, "Jon Stewart Is Back to Weigh In".

term only arose in the 1920s among communists and was subsequently picked up by others during the Cold War in order to legitimize United States actions. Furthermore, Americans have not always bundled it with other terms such as American Creed and Manifest Destiny into one neat patriotic package that, as some believe, began with the arrival of the Pilgrims and Puritans of the seventeenth century. Actually, the usage of these terms grew unevenly together in stages over the decades to what it is today.

Yet these terms all stem from a widespread faith in providentialism, a "belief that God intervenes in human history" and has a special plan for the United States.[22] This idea of divine involvement in the nation's course has taken various forms over the generations, revealing a shifting, contingent and polyvalent concept. Nonetheless, providentialism has been a leading component of American identity since the seventeenth century. By 2018, 78 per cent of Americans across the political spectrum agreed their nation had "a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world".[23]

We can say with confidence that from the beginning of the republic, Americans spoke naturally of the creation of their nation as a major event in world history. God had a leading role as director of this drama. From the 1790s, both critics and admirers placed the American and French Revolutions with ancient Athens in a narrative about the rise of democracy and thereby cast America as not only an ideal democracy for all Americans, but also as a universal message for all mankind.[24] President Thomas Jefferson assured the governor of Delaware in 1802 that Republicans were like all Americans in wanting "the success of representative government" and were not "acting for ourselves but for the whole human race". He saw that the eyes of the world were "fixed on us with anxiety as their only hope".[25] But Jefferson did have limits to such thoughts.

It became commonplace among Americans to acclaim "the genius of the Constitution" and, by implication, of its creators. However, Jefferson was disturbed enough by this trend in 1816 to warn against people treating the Constitution "like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human". His words were in vain as America had by then entered an evangelical revival known as the Second Awakening. Hence, "nearly everything took on a religious cast"[26], especially the constitution. Moreover, Jefferson's Federalist opponents had triumphed in boosting the constitution "as a crucial stepping-stone to the achievement of America's auspicious destiny" that was favoured by Providence.[27]

Such heroic ambition for the nation had been built into the presidency as the head of state and supreme symbol of the nation. Throughout its history the presidency

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22 Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 3.

23 Gallup Poll, *U.S. Position in the World*.

24 Dunn, *Setting The People Free: The Story of Democracy*, 91–92.

25 Jefferson, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 24.

26 Lepore, *These Truths*, 201.

27 Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States*, 145–146.

has been an imaginative construction by Americans projecting the nation onto the authority of the office. That began with Washington. From the moment of death in 1799, he was treated as a "secret or semi-supernatural" being and was "more the projection of the will of God than of an individual personality".[28] His hagiographers in the following decades encouraged this view. As part of this idolisation, most of his contemporaries and others after them acclaimed him as a man above partisan politics, such was his concern for all Americans and his supposed disdain for partisan politics. Other founders like Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams knew that was not the case. In the words of one historian, Washington was "an illusionist" who combined "discerning statesmanship with the partisanship of a chief executive who had a political agenda".[29]

In other words, Washington successfully mastered like no other president the then popular notion of the Patriot King. This improbable idea from early eighteenth century Britain thrived amongst Americans until the 1830s.[30] This Patriot King was concerned only with the public good of the people and was above the despised parties and factions. Yet this unlikely concept sprang from the hypocrisy and partisan prejudices of Henry St John, Lord Bolingbroke, a British aristocrat who thought the opposing party of Whigs were not acting in accordance with his Tory understanding of the national interest. This one-sided attitude was reflected in how Federalist Washington regarded opposing Republicans led by Jefferson in the 1790s. Nevertheless, Washington was untouched by any association with partisan grime in the public mind. The demand for presidents to be both above politics but mired in politics through the parties that get them elected has remained one of the defining paradoxes of the American presidency, which is anchored in position as both head of government and head of state.

The framers had found in their classical education plausible proof of the Patriot King in Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (519 BCE – 430 BCE), the stoic Roman aristocrat who was ploughing his farm when the senate nominated him dictator, which was a type of limited monarchy sanctioned for a short duration to deal with a crisis. In this case, it was an invasion. After the crisis was over, he returned to his plough and did not yearn for political power, thus supposedly proving how an upright character could and should resist ambition for politics. He seemed to the American framers to be historic evidence of a Patriot King. Conversely, they feared the rise of another Julius Caesar, who was proof from antiquity that a dictatorship could bring about tyranny and the downfall of a republic.

The power of this hindsight was evident in the consequences to their evolving hostility to George III during the revolutionary war. With growing zeal, the framers exaggerated his powers as a despot, ascribing to him the power to make war, to be the commander-in-chief, to choose his ministers, and to veto bills of parliament. In fact, the king had none of these powers and was a more limited monarch than

[28] Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine*, 7.

[29] Ferling, *The Ascent Of George Washington*, 538.

[30] Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party*, 29.

they imagined. Nevertheless, their solution was to give these imagined powers to the presidency but to limit the office with the existence of congress, the judiciary, the states, and the constitution. Ironically, the framers created a limited kingship with more powers than the British king against whom they had revolted. It is no wonder Americans through the decades have careened between hopes for another lofty Cincinnatus who disdained power and the fears of another debased Caesar who threatened with tyranny. Overwrought anxieties are easy to find in allegations of kingship, which continued to have negative connotations in America as it did in ancient Republican Rome.

Figure 1: Unknown artist, "King Andrew the First", 1832, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.

President Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) was denigrated as a king by contemporaries and depicted in cartoons with ermine, crown and sceptre while trampling the constitution. He was responsible for the populist turn that has "shaped American politics ever since"[31] and which readily revives fears of a demagogue taking power. FDR was favourably compared to Jackson as a president looking after "the common man". But he was just as easily denounced as a dictator.[32] Democrats and writers at *The New York Times* damned George W. Bush for acting like a king, just as Republicans complained Obama was "acting like King Barack".[33]

[31] Lepore, *The Story of America*, 147.

[32] Lawrence, "Contrasting Americas 'Two New Dealers'", 3.

[33] Daly, "Obama to designate new national monuments in Colorado, Hawaii and Illinois".

During the nineteenth century Lincoln was not viewed as the secular saint of the republic that we know today. Indeed, come the civil war, Southern newspapers denounced him as a despot, tyrant, murderer of women and children, a monster, gorilla, ape, beast, and savage because of the horrendous bloodshed he supposedly caused.[34] Because of this perceived sin, actor John Wilkes Booth calmly recited *sic semper tyrannis* ["thus always to tyrants"] when he pulled the trigger of the gun that shot President Lincoln.[35] The phrase is historically associated with Brutus, one of the leading assassins of Caesar.

When heroes and villains are imagined at each other's throats in ultimate battles for America, then we witness the retelling of old morality tales over the delegation of power to a president and a rerun of the concerns of Weber. These stories entail narratives of great struggles between heroes and monsters. This was no less so during the 2016 presidential campaign, which agitated with metaphors of the monstrous and the heroic coming from the political class, the media, and comedians as they weighed the prospect of the candidates having power. The problem for many Americans participating in that election was whether Trump or Clinton was the scarier prospect.

Antagonists of Trump the monster

Some were very clear on this matter. For instance, Democratic Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid denounced Trump as a "Frankenstein monster" built by the GOP from ugly racist politics.[36] A similar view issued from neo-conservative author and columnist Robert Kagan.[37] Meanwhile, Trump incited audiences by describing Hillary Clinton as "a monster". Her legacy was "death, destruction, chaos and weakness", a prospect that enraged his fans into shouting, "Lock her up" and "Kill her!"[38]

Just like other Americans, humourists used various monster tropes about Trump after his bid for the presidency was launched in June 2015. In July, Bill Maher recognised Trump's advantage in being "like Godzilla" in that he says all sorts of ridiculous things but "everything they throw at the monster makes him stronger".[39] In line with widespread fears of the malice stirred by Trump, Stephen Colbert found that the GOP convention in July 2016 was "a great performance. It really fired up the room and finally answered the question, 'What if Frankenstein's monster was in charge of the angry mob?'"[40] He was alluding to the demagoguery, rabble-rousing and race

[34] Cronin, "Fiend, Coward, Monster, or King", 35–61.

[35] Crockett, "John Wilkes Booth", 40.

[36] Kludt, "Harry Reid".

[37] Kagan, "Trump is the GOP's Frankenstein monster".

[38] Diamond, "Trump escalates attacks on Clinton's character".

[39] Real Time with Maher, *Real Time with Bill Maher: Monologue – August 14*, 2015.

[40] The Late Show With Stephen Colbert, "Donald Trump Accepts The Republican Nomination".

baiting that have spurred an abiding fear about populism in America and that have been recurring motifs about Trump's behaviour.

In August 2016, satirist/columnist Alexandra Petri of *The Washington Post* imagined a scene of Trump as an "apocalyptic sludge monster" spitting out the remains of advisers as they try to capture him with a net, rather than pivoting "to be *more* presidential, not less".[41] Just a couple of weeks before the election, Amy Schumer alienated a section of her Tampa audience after calling Trump an "orange, sexual-assaulting, fake-college-starting monster".[42] Two hundred people left the auditorium in disgust.

The monster trope also took another, more modern form against Trump and overlapped with the racist and demagogic charges against him. Starting in 2015, many critics cited his retweets of neo-Nazis and their photos of Nazi soldiers as well as his encouragement of violence at his rallies as proof of his fascist sympathies. *Vanity Fair* resurrected a 1990 interview with Ivana Trump in which she claimed her husband had a book of Hitler's collected speeches by his bed.[43] In March 2016, *Huffington Post* headlined a photo "This Donald Trump Rally Looks Like A Scene From Nazi Germany" because of all the raised right arms.

These events triggered anti-Trump comedians and commentators alike. Documentary maker Ken Burns, neo-conservative Robert Kagan, liberal Nobel Prize winner for economics Joseph Stiglitz, Barack Obama[44], and conservative columnist Ross Douthat, amongst others, worried that Trump was a fascist threatening democracy.[45] Comedian Louis C.K. let fly in a stern email that Trump "is Hitler" and that America was becoming like "Germany in the 30s. Do you think they saw that shit coming? Hitler was just some hilarious and refreshing dude with a weird comb over who would say anything at all".[46] Bill Maher used the *Vanity Fair* article as a comic pretext on his show to claim a translation of Hitler's speeches revealed an exact likeness to Trump's speeches.

> Thank you, we're going to make Germany great again! That, I can tell you, believe me! Germany doesn't win anymore. England, France, America, they're laughing at us. The Treaty of Versailles, a terrible deal! … We don't conquer anymore. We don't annex territory. When I'm Fuhrer, Germany is going to annex again. There's going to be so much annexing, you'll get sick of annexing. And look, I love the Jews. Nobody loves the Jews more than me. But, folks, either we have a Fatherland, or we don't. So, we're going to have to

41 Petri, "Donald Trump, in monstrous form".

42 Smith, "Amy Schumer pens open letter to fans who left Florida show after Trump jokes".

43 Brenner, "7 Takeaways from Vanity Fair's 1990 Profile of Donald Trump".

44 Arkin, "Obama called Trump a 'fascist' during phone call, Sen. Kaine says in new Clinton film".

45 Douthat, "In Search of American Fascism".

46 Stein, "Louis C.K. on Trump: 'The guy is Hitler. And by that I mean we are being Germany in the 30s'".

> build a camp. And I will make the Jews pay for it. When I'm done with them, they'll be saying 'Merry Christmas,' that I can tell you.[47]

Hitler appeared on the *Conan O'Brien Show* in order to distance himself from Donald Trump. Looking remarkably like Sarah Silverman in a Fuehrer's outfit, he complained about "comparisons to Trump" that "bums me out, you know what I mean? Sometimes I watch him and I'm like, 'Is that how people see me?' And I have to be honest, Trump, he's starting to make me rethink some of the things I've done".[48]

Also in March, *Saturday Night Live* mocked Trump supporters as ordinary suburban Nazis, white supremacists and Klansmen who sweetly intone, "The guy's a winner"; "He's authentic"; and "I think he can make America great again".[49] In a May parody of news in *The New Yorker*, Andy Borowitz had Trump promising House Speaker Paul Ryan "that he would try to sound slightly less like the former German Chancellor Adolf Hitler". In this case, the challenge was "to sound somewhat less like Hitler to please congressional Republicans while still sounding enough like Hitler to avoid alienating his key constituencies of Nazis and white supremacists".[50] Like many comedians, Borowitz insinuated that the awful Trump had an awful constituency. Stephen Colbert figured out the tortured reasoning of Trump's statements using his *Figure-it-out-atron* and found it led to the conclusion that Donald was a Nazi.[51]

There was no letup on the tropes of Hitler and fascism after Trump became president. Steve Bannon was the manager of the campaign from August 2016, the chief strategist to President Trump, and the main writer of the infamous inaugural address known as the American Carnage speech. This "Goldman Sachs worm-tongue", Samantha Bee explained to Trump through the television camera, "is filling you with more Nazi code than Enigma. Are you the only 70-year-old man in America who doesn't watch the History Channel?".[52] On the first *Saturday Night Live* of Trump as president, Aziz Ansari thought there was a "tiny slice" of Trump voters excited that they "don't have to pretend [they're] not racist anymore"; with that he imitated a Nazi salute.[53] In 2018, Conan O'Brien compared Trump voters to Nazis: "A Nazi prison guard has been sent back to Germany after years of living in the United States. After a long manhunt, authorities found him hiding at a Trump rally".[54]

The monster trope could take more fantastic forms with the help of Hollywood. During the first weeks of the Trump presidency, Jon Stewart used a variation of the dictator/emperor angle with a Star Wars metaphor for evil: "… the full Palpatine, with

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47 Real Time with Bill Maher, "Episode 379 Transcript".

48 Team Coco, "Adolf Hitler Hates Being Compared To Donald Trump".

49 Saturday Night Live, "Voters For Trump Ad – SNL".

50 Borowitz, "Trump Promises Paul Ryan That He'll Sound Slightly Less Like Hitler".

51 The Late Show with Stephen Colbert "This Diagram Explains Trump's Response to Orlando".

52 Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, "Coronation Street".

53 Saturday Night Live, "Aziz Ansari Stand-Up Monologue".

54 Team Coco, "A Nazi Prison Guard Was Found Hiding At A Trump Rally".

the lightning coming out of the fingertips and the [in voice] 'fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate'".[55] In 2017, Stephen Colbert invited on his show actor Andy Serkis to read President Trump's tweets in his voice of Golum from *Lord of The Rings*. By implication, the presidency was The Precious that was liable to corrupt Trump, in what amounted to another rendering of Weber's warning from Faust. Almost a year later in June 2018, Josh Brolin read Trump's tweets as his character Thanos from The Avengers movies.[56] This character could destroy life in half the universe, an exaggerated version of the capacity of the president to unleash nuclear war. Colbert reprised a depiction of Trump as Thanos to describe his absurd behaviour at the Republican National Convention of 2020.[57]

Supporters of Trump the hero & Godsend

Conservative leaders and comedians clearly disagreed with monstrous portrayals of Trump. But in the clamour and fury of partisan difference, they couldn't resist their own lurid versions of the language of heroes when indulging absurd fantasies about Trump. This would explain the conservative political action committee that paid for a 55-foot billboard video in Times Square that rendered Trump as a muscular Superman pumping his fist into the air during mid-flight as a would-be saviour of the nation. Following this Hollywood theme that included depicting The Donald as Rambo, conservative comedian Steve Crowder produced a humorous animated series *Super Trump*. In one episode, the Superman-like hero battles the corona virus with punches and fight-sound frames reminiscent of the old Batman television series ("blam!, pow! "boobs") before being infected by "the China virus from China". But Trump was revived by intravenous drips of Coca Cola, rose on the third day, and the virus "cried like a little infectious bitch – and the Cuomo brothers too". He then "knocked them all" unconscious and threw them to Mars.[58] The lame humour in this cartoon laughed with Trump in all his idiosyncratic glory rather than at him.

Before and after the 2016 election, conservative white evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell Jr, Ralph Reed, and Lance Wallnau countered the harangue of Trump as another Hitler in two ways. First, Wallnau converted much of the white evangelical community to the idea that Trump was another King Cyrus on a mission from God[59]

[55] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Jon Stewart Reads Trump's Next Batch Of Executive Orders".

[56] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Josh Brolin Reads Trump Tweets As Thanos".

[57] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "America: Endgame (RNC Edition)".

[58] Crowderbits, "SUPER TRUMP: The Attack of The ChinaVirus! (The Animated Comic!) | Louder With Crowder".

[59] Levin, "Trump Declares Himself 'King Of Israel,' The 'Second Coming Of God'".

who had "given this man an anointing for the mantle of government in the United States".[60] Cyrus had freed the Jews from their Babylonian captivity.

Similarly, *Saturday Night Live* alumnus Dennis Miller thought Trump was a sort of "unwieldy, cloddish, God-send" and was "the last man standing. When I look up it's like Fess Parker swinging a musket on the Alamo".[61] Miller had puréed Hollywood and mythic history, confusing Davy Crockett with the actor who played him, and the hordes of Mexicans with Democrats who were all attacking America in one last climactic battle. Nevertheless, Miller is not so different to the millions of Trump followers who believe he was sent by God to battle real demons and rapacious paedophiles in a struggle for the soul of America. Of course, Trump is cunning enough to encourage such devotion. After appearing before a Manhattan judge on fraud charges in 2023, Trump reposted a drawing by a fan of himself next to Jesus in the courtroom.

Wallnau wrote the book *God's Chaos Candidate: Donald J. Trump and the American Unraveling* and elsewhere he had a surprisingly profane way to exalt the tool of chaos with divine purpose: "Trump is Heaven's Miley Cyrus wrecking ball to the spirit of Political Correctness".[62] Wallnau and his evangelical ilk loved the chaos that Trump was causing. So did many right-wing comedians. On his Fox show that has sometimes outrated Colbert, Greg Gutfeld admired Trump because "No typical politician could be this crazy … and this savvy".[63] "Trump's chaos should make you chuckle, not choke". He "wasn't a politician" who lies to your face; "Trump looks you in the eye and then he winks. … you know that he's just playing a game. It's a salesman lie. He's just real and they're not".[64]

For Gutfeld and for Crowder the chaos strategy worked, for instance against Iran and North Korea. Gutfeld ridiculed the Iran deal concluded by Obama as "unraveling faster than a mummy on a merry-go-round".[65] Crowder knew Trump was often "blasted as crazy and reckless" when dealing with countries like North Korea and Iran but Crowder reconciled this erratic behaviour with the excuse that "maybe you need a little bit crazy, maybe crazier than the other guy in some of these countries" in order to get things done.[66] For similar reasons, conservative comedian Evan Sayet thought Trump was "America's first wartime president in the Culture War". He "may be crass but he fights". He discarded "the rules of dignity, collegiality and propriety" that inhibited right wing leaders like Mitt Romney, George W. Bush, and John McCain

60 Wallnau, "Prophetic Prayer Sent to Donald Trump".

61 The Dennis Miller Option, "S2 E63: Ann Coulter on Trump and Democratic Presidential Hopefuls".

62 https://lancewallnau.com/meeting-donald-trump-an-insiders-report/

63 Gutfeld, *The Gutfeld Monologues*, ep. 45 and ep. 57.

64 Fox News, *Lori Loughlin's daughter Olivia Jade reportedly upset that parents ruined her influencer career*, https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/lori-loughlins-daughter-olivia-jade-reportedly-upset-that-parents-ruined-her-influencer-career, 21 March 2019

65 Fox News, *E81 – Gutfeld on Trump withdrawing from Iran deal*, https://www.facebook.com/FoxNews/videos/1043971842418037/?v=1043971842418037

66 Crowder, "America's Done Apologizing! Ben Shapiro, Blaire White, Ryan Bader Guest | Louder With Crowder".

but which never constrained the left. They had engaged "in a knife fight" for over 60 years. So, Trump was "defeating the left using its own tactics".[67]

In the second tactic countering Trump's opponents, evangelical leaders and far right media led a sustained effort in converting Republican flocks to the idea that Trump was another Churchill. Essentially, The Donald was another iteration of this British hero because he was saving Western civilization from a great evil, although in this case it was a domestic, not international, wickedness in the form of the American left. This tactic also meant that his various actions could be defended as on the same scale as the great Briton and the great presidents. For instance, less than a month before the 2020 election, Sean Hannity on Fox News compared Trump's COVID-19 response to the leadership of Churchill in 1940 and of FDR in 1933.[68]

Anne Coulter is a media pundit who laces her savage critiques of liberals with satire. Like Miller, she thought the Democrats were destroying America and Trump was a hero saving America. Hence, she described his 2016 Republican convention speech as Churchillian.[69] In keeping with this view, she derided liberal depictions of Trump as Hitler with "Remember That Time Trump Invaded Poland?" Yet she was just as guilty of absurdities, such as when she decried "the total war against the president, like nothing this country has experienced before".[70]

The Babylon Bee, an evangelical version of *The Onion* satirical website, was equally dismissive of the comparisons to Hitler with headlines such as "Man Frequently Compared To Hitler Recognizes Jerusalem".[71] Nevertheless, it played the old communist monster card with "CNN Apologizes to Stalin, Mao After Comparing Them to Trump".[72] With a reputation over decades for a satirical wit lambasting liberals, Rush Limbaugh was a practitioner of insult comedy like Miller.[73] Over the decades as well as during the Trump presidency, he denounced the "communist" left and demarcated what he called their anti-Americanism from the true America of his listeners; after all, he said, "liberals seek to undo American greatness".[74]

The blasphemy of Trump compared to great presidents

All these fantasies about Trump's greatness are preposterous to his comedic critics. To them, he is not in the league of the great presidents and is intent on destroying

[67] Sayet, "My Turn: Evan Sayet: Trump may be crass, but he fights".

[68] Jarvis, "Sean Hannity Compares Trump's COVID Response to FDR and Churchill".

[69] Coulter, "Trump's speech today was Churchillian, only better. You can tell by the spluttering hysteria on TV about @realDonaldTrump".

[70] Coulter, Excerpt from *Resistance Is Futile!: How the Trump-Hating Left Lost Its Collective Mind*.

[71] The Babylon Bee, "Man Frequently Compared To Hitler Recognizes Jerusalem".

[72] The Babylon Bee, "CNN Apologizes To Stalin, Mao After Comparing Them To Trump".

[73] Heer, "Donald Trump's Comedic Genius".

[74] Limbaugh, "I'm Not Selling Out Conservatism. It's Branding, Dude".

the standards they upheld. This was apparent most of all when media revealed the president wished to have his visage carved into a side of Mt Rushmore next to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. Seth Meyers was sure that "the other presidents would be weirded out having Trump next to them [on Rushmore]. They'd all scoot over to one side of the mountain like passengers on the F train after a dude takes a dump".[75] Jimmy Fallon thought Trump's ridiculous ambition of Rushmore was "sort of like Dr. Fauci saying it's his dream to play center for the Los Angeles Lakers". "If he wants something carved into rock that looks like him, the orange hue of the Grand Canyon is a much better option".[76]

The political sacrilege of elevating Trump into the ranks of the greats was evident when Andy Borowtiz castigated the Republican Party for having "gone from Abraham Lincoln to Sarah Palin to Donald Trump. No wonder they don't believe in evolution".[77] Likewise, Samantha Bee sideswiped Republicans as the "party of Lincoln" who opposed slavery and pursued the civil war but had "completed its long journey from 'A house divided cannot stand' to 'You should see how huge my pocket Donald looks when I masturbate with my totally normal-sized hands'".[78] The House Divided speech was one of Lincoln's most famous public addresses and Bee's comparison is clearly meant to ridicule Trump's rhetorical incompetence and vulgarity compared to the sixteenth president. After Trump gave a speech at Gettysburg in 2016, Stephen Colbert was harangued on his show by a cartoon ghost Lincoln who gave a crass, short version of the Gettysburg Address. The skit emphasised the coarseness of Trump by having his words coming from the mouth of the great man.[79] With the similar intention of presenting a jarring comparison, Bob Garfield extensively parodied this address into the sort of inept and nasty speech that Trump would have delivered on the occasion and emphasised his inadequacy for the greatest office in the nation.

> FOURSCORE and seven years ago, our fathers – and also, our mothers. I love mothers, too, because we need our mothers – brought forth on this continent a huge nation, a great, amazing country dedicated to the proposition that we can beat any weak losers who are bad, bad guys and totally overrated, believe me …
>
> I would have negotiated, and I wouldn't have risked the country over a few slaves, who some of them might be good people – I had some nice African American ladies working for me, and they were very dependable ladies – but it's dumb to risk the whole country for political correctness. It really is. The blacks love me, by the way …

[75] Late Night with Seth Meyers, "Trump Signs Sham Executive Orders, Takes Credit for Obamacare: A Closer Look".

[76] The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon, "Trump Dreams of Adding His Face to Mount Rushmore".

[77] The New Yorker, "Andy Borowitz: The End of Trump".

[78] Full Frontal with Samantha Bee, "R.I.P. GOP (Part 1)".

[79] The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, "Abraham Lincoln's Ghost Responds To Trump's Gettysburg Address".

> Heroes don't get killed. Heroes win. Then they kill the families of the losers. It's a beautiful, beautiful thing. Maybe a casino, too. So, why dedicate? Why consecrate? Why hallow this ground? Only a very stupid person would consecrate it. What we need to do is rezone it.[80]

The language of heroes and monsters and renewal of the American jeremiad

Anti-Trumpers deployed against The Donald a mythic Lincoln, just as his supporters deployed the mythic Churchill favoured by the American right, but it needs unpacking. Both sides of the humour divide over Trump trade in myths like the rest of their compatriots. After Lincoln was assassinated on Good Friday in 1865, he was mourned by only one part of the country as a martyr and was often depicted as a Saviour or man-of-destiny assisted by angels. This apotheosis was the culmination of the providential thinking mentioned earlier, which turned Lincoln into God's scourge of the horrible sin of slavery when he publicly adopted emancipation in late 1862.

Figure 2: D.T. Wiest, "In Memory of Abraham Lincoln: The Reward of the Just", ca. 1865. priJLC_POL_002726, The Jay T. Last Collection of Graphic Arts and Social History. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

[80] Garfield, "Donald Trump".

However, it was only near the end of the nineteenth century that Lincoln was transmuted from flawed and abused Republican politician into "secular deity"[81], in the manner described earlier with Washington. This was mainly due to keen publicity by a few people who evangelized his cause through biographies and newspaper articles. They "helped invent the Lincoln we know today".[82] By 1900, he had joined a malleable "invented tradition"[83] of select, great presidents that form a non-partisan pantheon of greats embodying the ideals of the republic and are used by Americans engaging in partisan battles over the presidency. These presidents became myths, not in the sense of falsehoods, but in becoming ideologically marked narratives that are normal political features of any community and are adapted over time.[84] Thus, satirists and non-satirists alike have renewed the American jeremiad that has been alive for centuries[85], to mourn some perceived loss of America and to want for better times in the future with a return to past principles and leaders. With it, imagination has continued to reign over judgements of pretenders to the American throne.

Political monsters are also characters in American myth-making that figure prominently in post-moral humour. The American cultural habit of comparing people to Hitler seems to not only augment the linguistic resources that signify the monstrous but also, if we follow one scholar, fill a void left by the country's retreat since the war from belief in Satan and public unanimity in religious beliefs.[86] Compared to the past, Americans are now less inclined to blame the devil as the instigator of some evil. Since the 90s, various surveys reveal not only a decline in Christianity in America[87] but also a fluctuating belief that the devil is a real being rather than a symbol of evil.[88] Authors of another report were perturbed by a survey suggesting the confusion and loss of understanding among Americans about basic spiritual concepts.[89] Most Americans live in a far more flexible, plural, and relative moral universe with competing claims to truth.

Paradoxically, Americans have also clung to Hitler and the Nazis as an unquestioned standard of evil that can be used in many areas of life, thereby diluting and making ambiguous the original historical Nazis. That is why both sides of politics have used Hitler as a symbol of supreme evil and as a means for Americans to compare and discredit each other without substantial support for the claim. Plenty on the right saw Obama as another Hitler due to his reform of the health care system and a host of other

81 Zarefsky, "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates Revisited".

82 Zeitz, *Lincoln's Boys*, 4.

83 Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, 21.

84 Flood, *Political Myth,* 11

85 Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, chapter 1.

86 Johnson, "Just Like Hitler".

87 Mitchell, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace".

88 Hendershott, "What, the Devil?".

89 Cultural Research Center, "American Worldview Inventory 2020".

spurious reasons. There was no need to critically analyse how Obamacare fitted these absurd claims. The Fuhrer was monstrous and so was Obama; it was as simple as that.

Similarly, there was no need to critically compare President Trump to Hitler's quick founding of a dictatorship by the end of March 1933, only two months after election, with the aid of an emergency decree and an Enabling Act. Nor did Trump have, like Hitler, a paramilitary army of 750,000 storm troopers that helped to arrest more than 100,000 communists, social democrats, unionists and others for gaol, the new concentration camps, torture, or murder. Trump did not ban, as did Hitler, political parties and trade unions nor bring under Nazi control almost all voluntary organisations and clubs. Unlike America after 2016, telling "disrespectful humour" in thirties Germany could get people arrested and sometimes imprisoned.[90]

Notwithstanding Trump's flirtations with neo-Nazis and white supremacists, especially after the Charlottesville incident of 2017, we do not need concepts of fascism to portray him. That frames the Trump phenomenon as something foreign that is making inroads into American democracy. Rather, Trump and some of his followers comprise America Redux, a home-grown brew of racist and authoritarian blasts from the past that were not buried as so many had hoped with the election of Obama. Authoritarianism has thrived to varying degrees in various parts of America at various times. While Americans have feared dictators or kings at the national level, many of them have often been sanguine about oligarchies at the state level dominated by one-party and backed by popular support during the eras of slavery and segregation. These regimes also restricted the franchise according to class and race and tyrannised and terrorised sections of the population with guns and lynchings. More recently, an authoritarian attitude, more so than demographics, has been a determinant of strong attraction to Trump.[91] The more favourably voters rated Trump, the more authoritarian they were and the more likely they were to favour punishment of those they disliked and considered undeserving.

Robert Phiddian has outlined the central importance and civilising influence of satire to public spaces of expression in the competitive party systems of modern "Western" democracies. It is possible, however, that American political satire has become more closely aligned with political identity since Trump contended for the presidency in 2015. This would be an extension of the widely noted greater sorting of Democrats identifying as liberals and of Republicans identifying as conservatives than was the case for most of the twentieth century. Partisan identity is the primary driver, according to some scholars, determining views of issues, ideology and even the tendency to follow the views of party leaders like Trump. Partisans can be more like members of a sports team with an emotional investment in its success, which is why "polarization can take on such deeply affective negative responses to partisans of the other party".[92] They are very effectively engaged and mobilised by anger, which is one

[90] Evans, *The Third Reich in Power 1933–1939*, 106.

[91] Smith and Hanley, "The Anger Games".

[92] Benkler, Faris and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*, 306.

of the public emotions expressed by satire. The question for further research is whether satire is cathartically expressing or casually coarsening these public emotions in a polarised and divided America.

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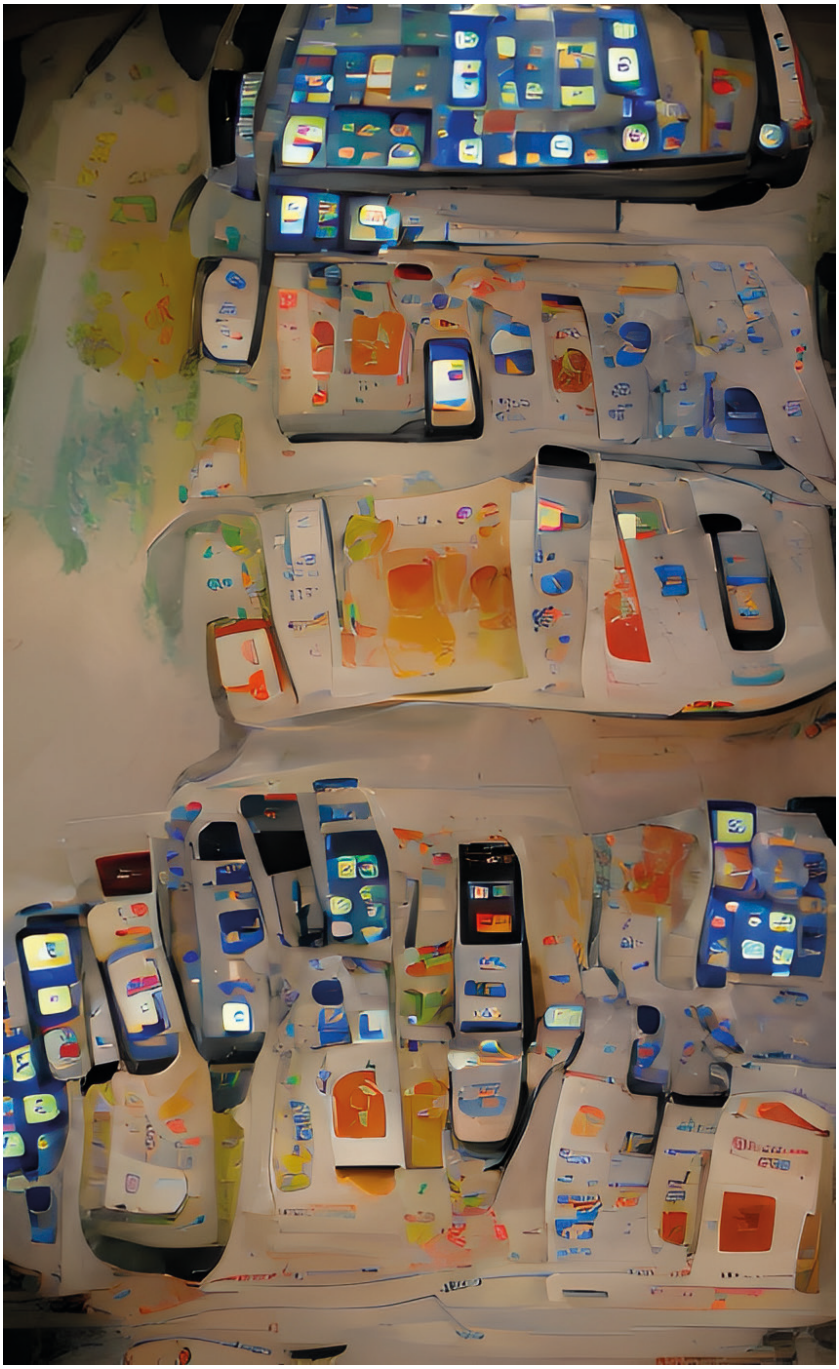

Game of Phones

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Craft an image featuring multiple cell phones arranged on a table, exploring the interplay of modern technology and connectivity within the visual composition’.

Abstract

Chapter 4
In Memes We Trust? Co-option or Democratisation of Graphic Political Satire

The decline of political cartoonists, exacerbated by economic and technological challenges, has brought to light a broader societal issue—the erosion of trust in American news sources. Drawing parallels with the waning influence of religious leaders in the Global West as traditional moral guides, this decline stems from various factors. Using a recent case study that continues to captivate news and moral discourse, the focus thus shifts here to the Trump administration's role in discrediting news outlets and attacking journalists. Examining the trajectory of trust in news media since the 1970s, where over 70% of Americans expressed confidence, the issue with memes is that their spread underscores a significant drop to just 32% before the 2016 Presidential election. Scholars and commentators attribute this decline directly to the Trump administration's consistent discrediting of news outlets and personal attacks on journalists. In the first six months of his presidency, Trump dedicated more tweets to questioning the authenticity of news than addressing critical issues such as the economy, healthcare, immigration, or terrorism. As civic rebellion and allegiance to the fake news narrative took shape, this requires an exploration of the rise of memes as a powerful tool for expressing dissent and support. Fuelled by humour, memes have become conduits for spreading hyper-partisan narratives in an era dominated by fake news and the perpetuation of the "Big Lie". Their comprehensive examination unveils the intricate interplay between economic challenges, technological shifts, political influence, and the transformative role of humour in shaping contemporary discourse.

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In Memes We Trust?

Co-option of Democratisation of Graphic Political Satire

Lucien Leon

Memetic Media

Political cartoonists have often been rambunctious individuals not always fitting neatly within newspaper organizations, or, as some scholars put it, they have been "marching to a different drummer" as autonomous "artists" with political views.[1] Despite such a rebellious reputation, however, their works have long enjoyed prominence in the editorial and opinion pages of newspapers which lent an authoritative weight to their critiques and positioned them as arbiters of fairness, morality, and ethics. In viewing the provision of news as a public good and an essential component of a healthy democracy[2] we might better understand political cartoonists as god-like vanguards of morality that illuminate our understanding of the political world around us and guide our passage through political and civic participation.

However, such roles are under challenge from the meme-makers who are often partisans that aim to reinforce a political identity rather than stand aloof from party attachment. As the 21st-century news audience shifts inexorably away from traditional media and towards online and social media platforms, the satiric internet meme has

[1] Riffe, "Deciding the Limits of Taste".

[2] Kovach and Rosenstiel, *Elements of Journalism*.

Leon, L. 2024. In Memes We Trust? Co-option of Democratisation of Graphic Political Satire. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 105–136. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

emerged as a putative successor to the political cartoon.[3] While the political cartoon is stamped with the graphic identity of its author and sanctioned by the newspaper in which it is published, memes are anonymous images whose authority is sought through their replication and repetition in a largely unregulated environment. The potential to weaponise memes as vehicles for misinformation and malice[4] has proved irresistible for various political, media and activist groups, raising issues of morality in the use of such humour. The co-option of memes by hyper-partisan publishers in particular has blurred the line between propaganda and journalism–creating monsters that would undermine and threaten our trust in civic discourse and institutions.

At their best, memes can be an effective satirical and democratic tool whose participatory modes of production and dissemination promote broad public discourse and scrutiny of political players.[5] Nonetheless, as the political cartoon tradition transmogrifies from an illustrative, sole author pursuit into a collective-based, appropriated image culture, so the role of the political cartoonist as the independent public intellectual and moral bellwether is in terminal decline while the star of the satiric and committed meme-activist is in the ascendant. In addressing the question of whether the democratisation of satire that memes have promoted has come at the expense of illuminating, insightful political critique, this chapter surveys the political memes published and disseminated in the lead-up to the 2020 US Presidential election via the two most heavily subscribed and prolific meme aggregators on Facebook – Occupy Democrats and Breitbart. This chapter examines the manner both in which hyper-partisan publishers engage humorous images to promulgate their message and the way their readers respond to these images. Analysing the form and content of these images through the lens of established political cartoon and meme taxonomies reveals the teleological intersection between political humour and activism in these influential and ideologically opposed groups.

Historical context

Cartoonists are said to represent the citizen's perspective of public life.[6] Roe expands on this definition, positioning cartoonists "on the borderline between the tradition of the artist as social critic and the journalist as social commentator/reporter, between the 'high' culture of the intellectual and the mass culture of their newspapers' readership".[7] Citing Posner's survey of literary satire as public intellectual genre, Roe concludes that political cartooning provides a "new space for public intellectuals to

[3] Grygiel, "Political Cartoonists".

[4] Smith, "Weaponized Iconoclasm".

[5] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture.*

[6] Manning and Phiddian, "The Editor and the Cartoonist", 48.

[7] Roe, "Graphic Satire", 59.

perform".[8] Similarly, she presents cartoonists as traditional intellectuals who usually consider themselves autonomous and independent of the hegemonic social group as they confront the hegemonic group, its values and its worldview. In her study of the ethical contribution cartoonists make to the maintenance of a just society, Mackay observes that, by publicising issues of justice and focusing attention on issues of inequality, cartoonists "serve important roles in investigating the government and analysing complex problems throughout society".[9] Her study reveals that cartoonists consider their core roles to be investigating government, providing analysis of complex problems, discussing national policy and providing interpretation of international developments. At the same time, cartoonists "were less likely to assign a high level of importance to setting the political agenda or, surprisingly, entertainment".[10]

Cartoonists do not operate with impunity but under the auspices of their editor. Lamb's survey of editors and cartoonists reveals that the two camps "agree to a large extent on the function of cartoons and the constraints that affect them".[11] Editors value their cartoonists' independent contributions to the newspaper and understand that a good cartoonist is attuned to their readership in terms of what is understood politically and appreciated satirically. Subsequently, editors afford cartoonists a great deal of license in the topics and stance of their cartoons, with concerns about 'inaccuracy' and 'style and taste' providing the main factors in their rejection of a given cartoon.[12] This symbiotic tension–between objectivity and satire, fact and exaggeration, tastefulness, and impropriety–is at the heart of the special contract that exists between a cartoonist and the reader. Editorial imprimatur confers a guarantee of trust in these subversive images; the reader understands the telos of the political cartoon is to lampoon, mock and satirise those in positions of power in the name of both public catharsis and healthy, democratic debate.

A confluence of economic, cultural, and technological threats has all but extinguished the cartooning tradition in the US. Where there were 2000 editorial cartoonists employed by newspapers in the United States at the start of the 20th century, in the second decade of the 21st century that number has shrunk to around 20. A steady fall in print newspaper circulation and advertising revenue–down by nearly 50% and 30% respectively since the turn of the century–a trend towards syndication at the expense of staff cartoonists, self-censorship by timid cartoonists and controversy-averse editors, and the rise of partisan comedians and talk show hosts as political satirists have all conspired to weaken the integrity of the political cartoon as satirical critique.[13]

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8 Ibid, 57.

9 Mackay, "What Does Society Owe", 37.

10 Ibid, 33.

11 Lamb, "Perceptions of Cartoonists", 105.

12 Lamb, "Perceptions of Cartoonists", 114.

13 Lichter, Baumgartner and Morris, *Politics is a Joke*.

The digital revolution that saw newspapers shift to online media presented some new opportunities for political cartoonists[14] but disrupted the op-ed status of cartoons, which were now typically framed in galleries and separated from their immediate news context. Once the most high-impact graphic image in a newspaper in terms of illustrative style and op-ed page real-estate, the newspaper cartoon in the digital era competes with audio-visual content and advertising and is challenged by click-through behaviour that diminishes audience attention spans. The US has also entered a new phase of media publication and reporting where audiences are fragmented, polarised–insulated from a diversity of opinion and editorialising–and distrustful of the very news publication platforms upon which they rely for information.

Trust in news media

Compounding the economic and technological factors that have depleted the ranks of political cartoonists in recent decades is the diminishing trust that Americans place in their news sources. While trust in news media has been on a downward trend since the 1970s–when over 70% of Americans expressed confidence in the integrity of the news reporting–this level dropped to just 32% in the lead-up to the 2016 Presidential election. Many scholars and commentators attribute this decline in trust directly to the Trump administration's frequent discrediting of news outlets and personal attacks on journalists.[15] For example, in the first 6 months of his presidency, Trump tweeted more about the relative fakeness of news than either the economy, healthcare, immigration or terrorism.

Americans believe made-up news "is causing significant harm to the nation and needs to be stopped" with 68% saying that made-up news and information "greatly impacts Americans' confidence in government institutions", while 54% say it is having "a major impact on our confidence in each other".[16] The blame for this deterioration in news integrity is attributed to political leaders and activists rather than journalists, with a sizeable majority of Americans (73%) concerned that tensions between Trump and the media impeded their access to important political news. Trust in media is also heavily divided along partisan lines, with Republican supporters six times more likely than Democrat supporters to view journalists as having "very low" ethical standards. Unsurprisingly, Democrat supporters are more likely to trust legacy news media outlets than Republicans, with levels of trust remaining stable for Democrats but sharply declining for Republicans between 2014 and 2020.[17]

[14] Leon, "The Evolution of Political Cartooning".

[15] Koliska et al, "Talking Back".

[16] Mitchell et al., "Most Say Tensions".

[17] Gramlich, "Q&A".

A further blow to political cartoonists is the extent to which Americans have in recent years eschewed newspapers in favour of social media as a source of news. Since the 2016 election, social media sites have overtaken printed newspapers as a source of news, with Facebook dominating as the most common social media site for news.[18] Despite 43% of Americans getting their news from this site, 57% say they expect the news they see on Facebook to be largely inaccurate. In their research into the weakening of democratic systems and discourse in the digital age, Cooper and Thomas argue that social media are "playing a major role in exacerbating problems... by decreasing trust in elites, reducing access to unbiased information and facilitating the dissemination of disinformation".[19] Boczkowski and Papacharissi point out that with journalism no longer the principal arbiter of news, "facts are semantically renegotiated to a greater extent than before, and fake news and alternative facts have become part of our everyday vernacular".[20]

Social media sites such as Facebook have not only drawn audiences away from the political cartoonist's traditional publishing domain, but their unregulated approach to news publication and dissemination provides an ideal platform for hyper-political news publishers. Of further concern for democratic discourse is that distrust of media promotes in audiences a retreat to partisan assessments of news consumption.[21] Social media engagement tracking firm *NewsWhip* notes that "the 2016 election left behind an influx of partisan publishers"[22], identifying *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* as the two leading online publishers of liberal and conservative content respectively. Occupy Democrats is an organisation that is politically aligned with the Democratic Party. Their Facebook page has just over ten million subscribers. Breitbart is an organisation that is politically aligned with the Republican Party and has just over five million subscribers. In the context of the total news audience in the US, these numbers represent a small minority. Some scholars challenge the extent to which such sites promote polarization of political views and fragmentation of the online public, asserting that the diversity of news sources mitigates their impact on the wider public.[23] The capacity of these sites to compete with traditional news publishers and drive the mainstream news agenda is nonetheless alarming[24] – for example, the appropriation of the 'Pepe the Frog' character as a symbol of white supremacy was birthed in the 4chan web community and crossed over into mainstream prominence when Donald Trump retweeted a Pepe caricature of himself, prompting Richard Spencer to claim that the alt-right was "memed into existence".[25]

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18 Geiger, "Key Findings".

19 Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 8.

20 Boczkowski and Papacharissi, *Trump and the Media*, 5.

21 Newton, "Political Trust and the Mass Media", 360.

22 Oflaherty, "Real-Time Media Monitoring".

23 Dubois and Blank, "The Echo Chamber".

24 Oflaherty, "Real-Time Media Monitoring".

25 Reeve, "We Memed".

Benkler et al. reveal in their study of the 2016 election race that *Breitbart* was at the heart of "a network of mutually-reinforcing hyper-partisan sites…combining decontextualized truths, repeated falsehoods, and leaps of logic to create a fundamentally misleading view of the world".[26] Cooper and Thomas caution that:

> When we get to the deliberate creation and sharing of active falsehoods, we have moved from the realm of honest politics, where at least the intent is to spread real information in an attempt to persuade others, to the realm of propaganda, where the intent is to spread fake information to create a particular, useful belief.[27]

By repeating claims ad nauseam with minor variation and disseminating this content throughout a network of associated sites, hyper-partisan publishers familiarise their readers with their core narrative.[28] In doing so they expand the 'Overton Window', or limits of acceptable public discourse.[29] The observation made by Cooper that "increasingly, those on the left and right disagree fundamentally on what the important issues in politics are" has implications for the range and framing of news topics on these sites.[30] The privileging of partisan messaging over divergent perspectives and opinions narrows the diversity of content offered to their audience. Hyper-partisan publishers thus promulgate ideology through repetition and reductive scope.

While on the one hand acknowledging that propaganda in partisan media is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it confined to one side of politics, Benkler et al. conclude that:

> …the insulation of the partisan right-wing media from traditional journalistic media sources, and the vehemence of its attacks on journalism in common cause with a similarly outspoken president, is new and distinctive.[31]

While the Internet has presented cartoonists with a diversity of alternative publication venues, the notion that "we are running out of places to trust for information"[32] is symptomatic of the increasing fragmentation of these venues into self-selecting partisan audiences that diminish the self-professed core values of the craft. Social media provide new venues for publication and dissemination, but these platforms are compromised by an audience that is largely sceptical about the integrity of the information presented to them–and with very good reason.

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[26] Benkler et al, "Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media".

[27] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 132.

[28] Benkler et al, "Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media".

[29] Mina, *Memes to Movements*, 122.

[30] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 131.

[31] Benkler et al, "Breitbart-Led Right-Wing Media".

[32] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture,* 152

The emergence of political memes

The hybridisation of media platforms and intermediation between media types facilitated by Web 2.0 technologies made audio-visual content broadly accessible. As a result, memes – the definition for which we'll come to shortly – became popular as a new form of humorous image. Memes as satirical interventions in popular political discourse emerged in the 2008 US Federal election. Most prominent among these was the Obama 'Hope' image–which immediately became a graphic icon for transformative and generational change – and memes that mocked McCain's awkward moment at a debate and amplified a narrative that McCain was too old and out of touch to be considered presidential material. The impact of these images in political discourse was further amplified in the 2012 US presidential campaign, when 'Big Bird' and 'binders of women' memes proved so damaging to Republican candidate Mitt Romney.[33] Though early interventions favoured the progressive side of politics, the 2016 election race was notable for the emergence of alt-right memes originating in Web communities 4chan and Reddit, Russian interference that was exacted almost exclusively on Facebook via the circulation of pro-Trump memes[34], and the social-media savvy Republican candidate Donald Trump's retweeting of memes that solidified his base.[35] Memes had now been weaponised to an unprecedented extent.

Defining exactly what a meme is – or is not – is problematic in that definitions tend to vary across communities and even within scholarly disciplines. Predating the internet, the term "meme" was coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* to describe a cultural gene or "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation".[36] This quasi-biological metaphor applied to a wider range of cultural phenomena than what appears on the internet, where the meme is understood to be any digitally mediated image that is purposely designed for rapid consumption and wider distribution. It is what Jenkins refers to as 'spreadable media'.[37] Limor Shifman is more specific with this definition in the context of digital culture, offering a taxonomy of meme genres that encompasses audio-visual and image objects that do not behave as single units but as "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form and/or stance which [are] created with an awareness of each other and [are] circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users".[38] According to Shifman, the extent to which a specific text is imitated and transmitted defines its memetic potential.

Wiggins elaborates this definition to emphasise the enthymematic character of memes, describing them as "a remixed, iterated message that can be rapidly diffused

33 Tay, "Binders Full of LOLitics".

34 Bjola, "Propaganda in the Digital Age".

35 Taveira and Balfour, "How Donald Trump Won".

36 Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 206.

37 Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread".

38 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 41.

by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, parody, critique, or other discursive activity".[39] He argues that the essential characteristic of an Internet meme lies not so much in its imitative potential but in its discursive value as a visual argument where meaning is negotiated between the artist and audience. By presenting some parts of an argument but withholding an explicit conclusion, enthymemes invite a participatory engagement that is informed by the reader's cultural memory and experience. They call for judgment and thus appeal emotionally and ethically as well as logically.

In their taxonomy of political cartoons as graphic discourse, Medhurst and Desousa reveal that a key rhetorical strategy of cartoons is "the construction of first order enthymemes which invite the reader to respond in accordance with certain values, beliefs and predispositions".[40] In aligning political memes with political cartoons in terms of telos and structure, Chen and Tay apply Medhurst and Desousa's framework in demonstrating that photo-manipulated texts and image macros – a subset of memes consisting of images overlayed with witty captions – share many of the rhetorical characteristics found in political cartoons.[41]

Shifman states that internet memes "expand the range of participatory options in democracies by providing new, playful and accessible ways to express political opinion and engage in debate". Writing in his 'Confessions of an ACA Fan' blog, Henry Jenkins reflects that in this way memes achieve "real political work in terms of creating a moment and a networked public with power greater than the sum of its parts".[42] Dean observes that the production and dissemination of these images within a participatory media paradigm has become "part of the constitutive fabric of everyday political engagement" and "increasingly central to how large numbers of predominantly young citizens experience politics".[43] Memes have demonstrated genuine corrective reform in a diversity of social and political settings[44] – but their impact has not escaped the attention of those who would exploit the form for commercial gain or to advance a political agenda.

What's wrong with memes

A key distinction beyond illustrative style is that cartoons are authored by a professional artist, with their authority or claim to truth engendered by the mainstream media context in which they are published. Memes are produced largely by anonymous

[39] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 11.

[40] Medhurst and Desousa, "Political Cartoons", 204.

[41] Chen, "The Internet Political Meme".

[42] Jenkins, "If It Doesn't Spread".

[43] Dean, "Sorted for Memes and Gifs", 2.

[44] Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*.

amateurs, their legitimacy implied by repeated online transmission and replication. The images that disseminate most successfully serve not to interrogate and reform the status quo but to reinforce it. Gideon Mazambani et al. conclude that memes spread more frequently within online forums when they are consistent with that network's group identity.[45] Cooper explains that:

> Memes are a central engine to modern political discourse online, inherent in digital culture. Their role is to form and signify communal belonging. Highly decentralised and seemingly chaotic, internet memes coalesce around a socially cohesive grassroots network and speak to a specific, resonant group, capturing its commonly familiar worldview and attitude.[46]

Equally as problematic is that partisan content in the form of a meme is less likely to be corrected by others than when presented in a news article, and consequently, memes may present "a highly effective vehicle for misinformation".[47] Memes have come to dominate the social media space as participatory expressions of dissent, yet they are produced and disseminated in ways that have more in common with propaganda images and strategies than they do with cartoons. In the Internet era of news and opinion consumption, trust has been transferred from familiar authors practising in the regulated mainstream print media to truth-claiming images of unknown pedigree shared by friends on Facebook.

Newspapers have long provided a venue for editorial cartoons that, for the most part, maintains a distal and semiotic distinction from propaganda images. Conversely, hyper-partisan publishers circulate satirical and propaganda images in their feeds as a seamless cascade or gallery mosaic, with these images sharing the same platform and similar material characteristics. For example, many of the images appearing on these sites are not memes by typological definition – that is, they are not remixed or transformed by several participants – but nonetheless incorporate the graphic vocabulary of established meme image genres as a kind of "meme-pastiche". Meme images are designed for rapid consumption and as 'spreadable media'. They are characterised by readily discerned photographic or cartoon imagery, and often overlayed with pithy captions or labels in a condensed sans serif typeface – typically Impact – whose formal regularity makes it ideally suited to small amounts of text.[48] They are easily produced and easily disseminated. Consequently, these images make attractive propaganda vehicles.

The extent to which satiric parrhesia and political manipulation might be discriminated by news consumers is complicated by what Baym describes as 'discursive integration' – the blurring of discursive genres driven by the convergence

[45] Mazambani et al, "Impact of Status and Meme".

[46] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 138.

[47] Lyons, "Insidiously Trivial".

[48] Brideau and Berret, "A Brief Introduction".

and hybridisation of new media.[49] Cooper argues that when information presented online is designed to attract attention rather than sustained engagement, it is "readily falsified" and that social media's "seductive sharing capabilities…ensure that the internet public is highly culpable in the advancement of disinformation".[50] Renner notes that images made up 5% of *Breitbart* Facebook posts but accounted for 49% of most-shared posts. Engagement with memes on social media increasingly positions citizens as agents for propaganda dissemination rather than participants in critical, civic discourse.[51]

The capacity for social media to manipulate public emotions is reminiscent of 'the hypodermic effect', a model of communication describing the susceptibility of an audience to media manipulation observed most prominently in 1930s Nazi propaganda. Phiddian describes satire as a mode that activates the 'CAD' triad of emotions: contempt, anger, and disgust. He notes that while these emotions can be mobilised by satire towards norm compliance, they can also be evoked to "police reprehensible norms" (contempt), "further victimise victim groups" (anger) and "serve appalling as well as apt goals" (disgust).[52] So, if satirical images and propaganda images arouse similar emotions what are the implications for democratic discourse? Dissemination of memes typically occurs within a media ecology of like-minded communities. Their circulation within these groups reinforces political allegiances among members whilst excluding others, diminishing polyvocal public participation. Phiddian observes:

> The lines between insiders and outsiders used to be clearer in the age when politics' natural medium was print and institutionalised mass media. That seems to be changing in the digital world that has arrived with the new century and allows a proliferation of micro-publics much less defined by place or any need to broker a common (in)civility.[53]

Hyper-partisan publishers are perfect examples of the ideological mono-cultures that he fears may envelop the "general public", at which point "satires will only aid an epidemic of emotional confirmation bias that narrow emotional publics incite".[54] The extent to which the swathe of images published on these sites support this bleak outlook is interrogated in the content analysis to follow.

[49] Baym, "The Daily Show", 262.

[50] Cooper and Thomas, *Nature or Nurture*, 107 and 157.

[51] Renner, "Memes Trump Articles".

[52] Phiddian, *Satire and Public Emotions*, 23, 25, 30.

[53] Ibid, 17.

[54] Ibid, 62.

Occupy Democrats and Breitbart – a case study

So far in this chapter the following observations have been made: the political cartooning tradition, in correlation with the newsprint industry, is in terminal decline; trust in news media generally is at historic lows; Facebook has emerged as a primary news source; hyper-partisan publishers on Facebook challenge traditional news media as a news source; the use of memes and "meme-pastiche" images is a key component of partisan messaging; and these images are published on hyper-partisan sites in tandem with other image types as a cascading feed or gallery mosaic. In interrogating the extent to which hyper-partisan sites have appropriated and leveraged satire as propaganda, questions that emerge from these observations are: what types of images are presented on these sites with respect to their teleological and graphic characteristics? How is humour applied and received in these images? Finally, what are the implications for the political cartooning tradition when graphic satire is perceived as a vehicle for propaganda rather than democratic discourse?

I interrogate these questions through a thematic and structural content analysis of a sample of images (*n*=521*)* published in the Facebook news feeds belonging to hyper-partisan publishers *Occupy Democrats and Breitbart*. These sites are considered here as aggregators of political images and represent the most heavily subscribed image production and dissemination platforms from each side of the political divide. The sampled images were published in a one-month period leading up to the 2020 Presidential election. The election campaign was chosen as a sphere of heightened, sustained political discourse where the polarisation of the two major political parties' respective policy platforms was amplified, and where political messaging was intensely focused on key issues of importance to the electorate.

The sample was categorised in a graphic, formal sense to identify and discriminate the variety of image types published on these sites, as well as any notable features incorporated in these images that promote audience engagement and action. In noting the tendency toward "meme-pastiche" – the leveraging of particular meme-genre features in images that do not otherwise classify as memes as defined by Shifman or Wiggins – I will establish clear distinctions between the diversity of image types published on these sites. The ease of this task will indicate the extent to which categorical discernment might be inferred by an audience as they consume a miscellany of humour, commentary, and propaganda.

Given the hyper-partisan character of the two publishers selected in the sample, it is presumed that the content has persuasive intent. Chen and Tay have demonstrated that memes and political cartoons share key commonalities with respect to their rhetorical function and construction of tendentious humour. Meanwhile, Phiddian asserts that satire mobilises emotions that can police norm enforcement in socially responsible as well as reprehensible ways. I have therefore embraced these positions as a basis to determine the extent to which the sample demonstrates the humorous

intent that characterises the cartooning tradition, as well as the deployment of humour in prosecuting propaganda.

The sample of memes was manually coded according to the political cartoon tonal categories developed by Press and applied by Manning and Phiddian: descriptive satirical, laughing satirical, destructive satirical, and savage indignation. These tonal categories have been applied as indicators both of humorous intent and the satirical potency for moral critique. The descriptive satirical cartoon tends to lack a strong social or political conviction that smacks of an evaluative judgment. Its main purpose is to lightly entertain its reader – the humour tends more toward the comic and neutral than the satirical and judgemental. This is contrasted to the laughing satirical cartoon that is reformist in nature accepting the legitimacy of those in power while seeking to correct or highlight their behaviour. Destructive satirical cartoons, on the other hand, do not accept the legitimacy of the power structures of the day; they appear in times of revolutionary fervour or social despair, emerge from extremist groups, and consequently tend not to appear in mainstream media. Observing a gap in the taxonomy prescribed by Press, Manning and Phiddian append their own category: savage indignation. They describe such cartoons as reformist in nature but neither fundamentally loyal to the system nor bent on its destruction.[55]

Audience response is considered in terms of the reactions garnered by the audience. Laugh and Angry reactions provide the most extreme demonstrations of emotional response and are presented here as 'arousal emotions' that are deployed to affect maximum engagement from the audience. The extent of this engagement is measured here in terms of a subsequent action: commenting and sharing. Inviting comments from the readership creates a discussion thread that reinforces group ideology while encouraging sharing transmits an image into a broader media ecology.

In determining the rhetorical framing of political images, I have also coded the sample in terms of the organising principles identified by Medhurst and Desousa: contrast, commentary, and contradiction. These forms of disposition indicate the discursive value of the images in terms of the manner of enthymematic engagement demanded of the audience in the construction of meaning.[56] Contrast denotes tensions between competing ideas and ideologies; through presentation of opposing ideas, contrast invites the reader to make a judgement of their own volition based on consideration of two or more options. Commentary conveys an implied 'truth' without providing means by which the veracity of the claim can be determined; it is a safe form of disposition that merely implies or reflects a popularly held position. Contradiction exposes dichotomies and polarities in political affairs and seeks condemnation of the target's hypocrisy. Commentary and contradiction are most likely to reinforce, rather than challenge, a particular stance or viewpoint.

Finally, images are considered also in terms of the range of topics addressed. I identify and compare the range and framing of topics presented in the sample to

[55] Manning and Phiddian, "In defence of the political cartoonists' licence to mock", 31–32.

[56] Medhurst and Desousa, "Political Cartoons".

determine how each of the opposing groups packages their respective ideological narratives. The main political events that occurred over the August period of the campaign include: the political response to the COVID-19 pandemic; funding of the United States Postal Service and its capacity to handle mail-in ballots; Black Lives Matter protests and associated civil unrest; the selection of Kamala Harris as Joe Biden's running mate; and the staging of the Democratic and Republican National Conventions (otherwise known as the DNC and RNC).

Form and function

The images published on both the *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* Facebook pages are designed to attract attention, achieve rapid cognition, and incite action. The arrangement of formal graphic elements, tone of messaging and framing of an argument are mobilised towards this aim. A quick glance at the respective image galleries of each site (Figure 1) reveals an immediate distinction in the diversity of image types and graphic treatments. I identify six distinct image types in the sample. Three are found on both sites, specifically captioned images, text-only images, and photographs. However, three of them (cartoons, infographics, and Twitter post images) are found only on *Occupy Democrats*. The breakdown of image types is shown below (Figure 2 and Figure 3). The wider range of images published by *Occupy Democrats* offers broader appeal and more possibilities for persuasion, while *Breitbart*'s narrower range of images presents greater visual coherence and stronger corporate branding.

Occupy Democrats' strategy is one of high-frequency, high-volume posting. In the 31 days covered by the sample, a total of 384 images were published. By contrast, *Breitbart* posted 137 images. *Occupy Democrats* can achieve a high output with minimal costs by reposting much of its image content from elsewhere, while *Breitbart* images are manufactured "in-house". The captioned images posted on both sites demonstrate high visual impact through the use of colour, formal regularity of typeface, iconic imagery, and relation of text to visual imagery. These formal graphic techniques are familiar to images designed for propaganda, advertising, news media– and Internet memes. The images that each site produces natively adhere to a distinct graphic, corporate identity. The *Occupy Democrats* logo features vibrant yellow-and-white text overlayed on a black background, and this palette is applied in its captioned images. *Breitbart* employs two distinct formats in its captioned images, with each serving a distinct purpose. The first variant resembles an illustrated news headline, with black sans-serif text situated above a press image on a white background; while the second features a photographic portrait of a prominent person, overlayed with a text bubble that houses an implied, attributed quote. *Breitbart'*s distinct orange logo subtly inspires the treatment of these text backgrounds through the application of yellow and green hues drawn from the same Pantone colour library. The application

of a distinct, high-contrast colour profile serves to maximise visual impact and act as a brand mnemonic.

Figure 1: Facebook image gallery collage, Occupy Democrats Webpage and Breitbart News Webpage, 2 September 2019.

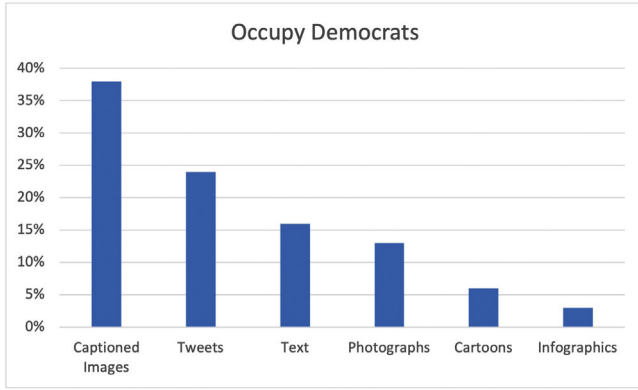

Figure 2: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Image Types, Occupy Democrats on 4 September 2019.

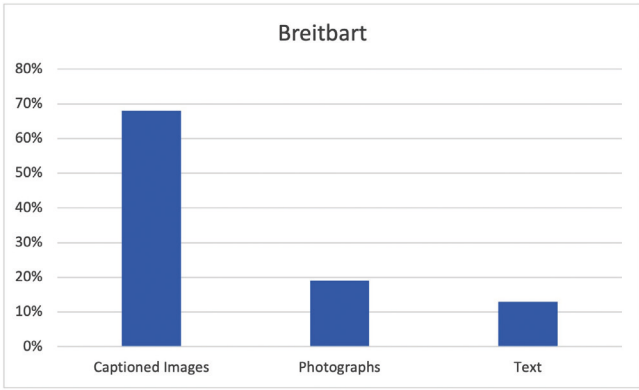

Figure 3: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Image Types, Breitbart on 4 September 2019.

The *Occupy Democrats* images serve a multitude of rhetorical functions. They are mobilised to condemn and mock the actions or ideas of ideological opponents, and to inform and rally their supporters. Similarly, the *Breitbart* pool of images condemn Democrats ("Democrats won't let you go to work, but they'll let you riot"); mock opponents ("There's never been anything we've been able to accomplish when we've done it together – Joe Biden"); inform ("S&P 500 rises to record high, passes prepandemic [sic] top for first time"); rally supporters ("We only need 17 seats to retake the majority and retire Nancy Pelosi. All we need is a little help"); and invite comments ("Did you enjoy Mike Pence's RNC speech?"). The content is framed as reportage – reinforced in most instances by an accompanying link to a longer article – but it is persistent in prosecuting a distinctly conservative ideological agenda.

The externally sourced captioned images published on the *Occupy Democrats* news feed are visually distinct from their natively produced images in some respects–but they nonetheless share the same graphic strategies that optimise legibility and comprehension. Absent from these images is the corporate colour palette and seamless compositing of photographic elements with a black background, but the images do employ the typographic regularity and culturally familiar imagery characteristic of meme images. Indeed, fifteen of the sampled images (4%) are genuine memes–that is, they are remixes of established meme texts. For example, the two-panel, object labelling meme "Elmo chooses cocaine" – showing the Sesame Street character weighing up the choice between a selection of fruit and a pile of white powder before burying his head in the latter – is remixed to depict a Make America Great Again (Trump supporter) choosing between "Sound Medical Advice" and "Demon Sperm Lady". A further thirteen images do not fit the definition of a meme, in the sense that they are not remixes of established meme texts. However, they apply the familiar graphic conventions of meme texts. An example of this is an image showing a large crowd attending the annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally. The event, where social distancing and the wearing of masks were not mandated, was described in some media as a 'superspreader event'. The overlayed caption, in the default Impact font, reads, "Sturgis 2020. Gonna be some great deals out there on used motorcycles in about six weeks".

While the application of high-impact graphics is by no means unique to memes, both *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* images exploit an online participatory visual culture that is traditionally aligned with meme production and dissemination. Memes are units of participatory culture and an expression of humour within a digital-native demographic. The captioned image format appropriates an established form not merely for its pellucidity but for its cultural cachet. The leveraging of both the graphic formality and transmission vectors that memes have cemented in the digital media ecology leads me to label the images produced by hyper-partisan publishers as meme-pastiche. These "memes-but-not-memes" are likely easily discerned by the informed reader, but their proliferation in hyper-partisan venues presents audiences with an agglomerate of graphically similar images that complicates the reliable parsing of information.

Text-only images on the *Occupy Democrats* news feed perform a similar array of functions to captioned images. Within a rhetorical frame, they variously condemn ("After watching people defend Trump over the last few years, I will never again question how Hitler came to power in Germany"); rally or call to action ("The UPS delivers over 300,000 prescriptions to veterans daily. Republicans are allowing a five-time draft dodger to endanger the health of our veterans. Remember this on November 3rd and vote accordingly"); inform ("For the record, the movement isn't anti-police. It is anti-police brutality. Seems some of you are confused"); mock ("That Michelle Obama speech was so amazing, I can't wait to hear it again from Melania next week!"); and invite participation in the comments section ("When Trumpism is done, will you forgive those who enabled it?"). The text-only images are presented in a diversity of typographical styles and colours, whereas *Breitbart* text-only images are presented almost exclusively as blue type on a white background. *Breitbart* uses these images to simultaneously rally supporters and invite participation in the comments section ("Will you be watching the RNC this week?"; "Does Joe Biden owe Americans an apology for not condemning leftist violence in his DNC speech?" addressing the Democratic National Convention).

The photographs that appear in the *Occupy Democrats* news feed are comprised of a diversity of historical press images as well as candid images that inspire supporters and condemn opponents. The historical images recall Democrat Party ideals through the depiction of prominent individuals–for example, former Presidents Obama and Carter–while the candid images feature humorous anti-Trump protest signs that mock both Trump and his supporters. The photographs that appear in the *Breitbart* news feed are comprised entirely of press images showing President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump engaging in a variety of ceremonial and public appearances. Images of the first couple at the Republican National Convention, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the 19th Amendment and unveiling an art exhibition on Pennsylvania Avenue, served to inspire supporters through amplifying Trump's presidential demeanour and authority as well as Melania's wifely and public devotion.

In addition to captioned images, text-only images and photographs, the *Occupy Democrats* news feed also features tweets, cartoons, and infographics. Tweets are versatile rhetorical texts. Like captioned images and text-only images, they are employed by *Occupy Democrats* as vehicles for condemnation ("Donald Trump does not own 162,000 American deaths from COVID-19. He co-owns them with his supporters and the Republican Party"); rallying group members ("...I miss a president who can show emotion and lift our spirits, call to our better angels and remind us what unites us as Americans..".); conveying information ("...The USPS is not meant to be profitable. It's designed to ensure every American has access to mail services regardless of location"); and mockery ("Joe Biden now has Colin Powell and Cindy McCain speaking for him at the Democratic Convention. But Donald Trump has the gun totin' couple from St. Louis. So, I call that even").

Like text-only images in form, their Twitter source origin imbues them with distinct features. Tweets are credited texts that include the author's profile image and handle, and they will occasionally present as a dialogue exchange between two (or more) parties in a reply-quote format, as in Claudia Conway's reply to her mother and ex-Trump advisor Kellyanne Conway's tribute to Herman Cain ("yes it is sad but wasn't your administration complicit in his death?? Yikes"). These texts make a claim to trust or authority by virtue of their attributed author, who in almost all instances is a public figure (such as a politician, journalist, or celebrity) or subject expert (such as a doctor or economist). They can also include a graphic image, for example, actor Mark Hamill's retweet of a meme caricaturing Donald Trump Jr. and Eric Trump as the 1990s dim-witted teenage delinquents, Beavis and Butthead.

Infographics represent the smallest percentage of the total image pool, making up just under 3% of all images. They are designed to convey statistical or procedural information in graphic symbol form, and as such are not conventional vehicles for humour. Infographic images accounted for the least expression of humour in terms of both coding and audience engagement. Only one infographic in the sample was coded as satirical and elicited a Laugh response. It was comprised of a pie chart that was divided into three sections: 'Voted Democrat', 'Voted Republican' and 'Better Start to Give a Shit'.

The 23 cartoons on the *Occupy Democrats* site are illustrated in a diversity of graphic styles and processes, including hand-drawn illustration, digital photo manipulation and juxtaposition of appropriated images. They are created by amateur artists – both anonymous and recognised – as well as professional editorial cartoonists. Unsurprisingly, given the satirical tradition from which they stem, all but three of the cartoons were coded as satirical. These images were categorised as cartoons for their graphic character but did not satisfy the criteria for satire as they merely illustrated a statement (for example, a character declaring, "I miss Obama"). The remaining images mostly condemn or mock their targets, with one cartoon depicting two police officers shooting African-American Jacob Blake in the back as they ignore the assault-rifle-wielding Kyle Rittenhouse passing in the opposite direction. Another shows a fatherly

Trump pouring a glass of Kool-Aid for Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell in the style of a vintage advertisement.[57]

12% of *Occupy Democrats* images and 9% of *Breitbart* images feature a 'call to action' as either embedded text or in the accompanying image description. Both groups provide links to voting rules and invite comment on a given issue, though *Occupy Democrats* also provides links to specific senators, links to like-minded advocacy groups and appeals to engage further with the website (following *Occupy Democrats*, clicking on hashtags, and sharing the image). These calls to action promote participatory engagement within the group specifically and wider democratic engagement generally. Both groups' images employ techniques to demonstrate trust or authority. These include direct attribution of quotes and quotes from known public figures such as politicians and celebrities.

The sample reveals similarities and distinctions in the graphic formality and rhetorical function of the images published to the two groups' respective news feeds. Both groups use images to condemn and mock ideological opponents and to inform, rally and invite participation from supporters. The *Occupy Democrats* Facebook page is more explicitly activist in character. The miscellany of externally sourced images, anchored by recurrent corporately branded native images, implies an organised grassroots group that is tethered to a broader network of like-minded communities. The images reinforce group identity through notions of interactivity, ideological congruity, and persistent messaging. *Breitbart,* on the other hand, presents itself as a conventional news publisher, its images fashioned as reportage rather than commentary. This graphic treatment implies an institutional authority concerning the analysis of political issues, with a further claim to authority evident in the prevalence of attributable quotes. The images reinforce group identity via engagement with a persistent Republican ideology framed as news stories, direct quotes and rallying calls.

[57] The image is a response to McConnell's admission that he didn't cooperate with Democrats months earlier because he wanted to be sure that the coronavirus wouldn't "mysteriously disappear". This admission reflects President Trump's own inaccurate and overly optimistic statements about the duration and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic; hence it is suggested that McConnell is drinking the president's 'Kool Aid'.

Tonal categories, reactions, and disposition

Humour is evidenced in the sample through hand-coded application of the satirical tone categories of Press and Manning and Phiddian[58]; and the elicitation of Laugh reactions to each post. 46% of *Occupy Democrats* images were coded as satirical, while none of the *Breitbart* images exhibited humorous intent (see Figure 2 and Figure 3). Satirical tone was evident across all image types in the *Occupy Democrats* pool, though more clearly apparent in 'cartoon' images and least apparent in 'infographics' images. Of the images coded as satirical, all were deemed 'laughing satirical' (37%) or 'savagely indignant' (63%). The absence of 'descriptive satirical' or 'destructively satirical' images indicates that the images are moderately to aggressively persuasive but without revolutionary intent.

52% of *Occupy Democrats* images elicited a Laugh reaction, indicating a broad alignment with both humorous intent and humorous reception. Just 1% of images coded as satire did not elicit a Laugh reaction, while 18% of images *not* coded as satirical elicited a Laugh reaction. Interestingly, despite *Breitbart* images exhibiting no clear humorous intent–that is, none of the images were coded as satirical – 41% elicited a laughter reaction from readers. This reflects the problematic nature of presuming humorous intent, or lack thereof. Clearly a significant number of *Breitbart* readers, and to lesser degree, nearly one in five *Occupy Democrats* responses, found humour where I did not. To explain this apparent incongruity, Phiddian's conviction that "satire is a cultural practice derived primarily from indignation rather than amusement"[59] may apply here. The Laugh reactions garnered by these images likely represent an expression of contempt derived from irony, superiority, or incongruity. I will return to this idea shortly in the context of rhetorical disposition.

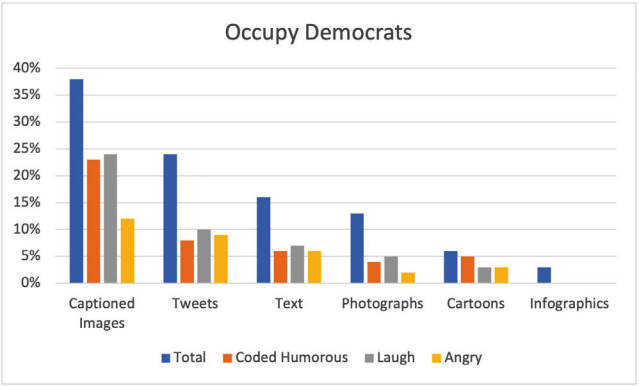

Figure 4: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Coding and Reactions in Occupy Democrats Facebook News on 5 September 2019.

[58] Press, *The Political Cartoon*; Manning and Phiddian, "The Editor and the Cartoonist".

[59] Phiddian, *Satire and the Public Emotions*, 16.

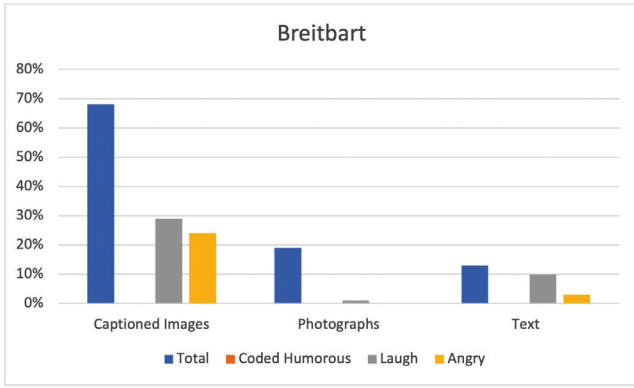

Figure 5: Breakdown Showing Distribution of Coding and Reactions in Breitbart Facebook News on 5 September 2019.

As shown above, satire assumes a substantial rhetorical function in *Occupy Democrats* images, with this side of the sample revealing a close correlation between humorous intent and reception. In explaining the lack of similar correlation in the *Breitbart* images, it is useful to consider the sample in terms of enthymematic engagement and rhetorical disposition. That *Breitbart* readers inferred humour where none was apparent indicates enthymematic engagement – that is, the readers constructed meaning from premises that were implied rather than explicitly stated. Medhurst and Desousa assert that "enthymematic form is not only an inventional resource for the [satirist] but also an interpretative resource or the reader".[60] In this way, the reporting of information presents to some readers not as a conclusion but as a premise that invites the completion of an enthymematic chain. The coding of the sample according to the rhetorical disposition forms of contrast, commentary and contradiction reveals the persuasive character of the images and provides additional clues as to how readers might construct humorous meaning in the absence of humorous intent. The political persuasion of the audience is significant in considering the rhetorical impact of the images, as a reader's ideological and cultural memory influences the meaning they derive from enthymematic engagement with political content. For example, an image of Kamala Harris captioned with a quote from her Democratic National Convention speech ("There is no vaccine for racism") is unremarkable until viewed through the narrative lens of the former Attorney General of California's past advocacy of policies that disproportionately disadvantaged African-Americans. The image thus presents a contradiction to the reader, with the perceived hypocrisy mobilising feelings of contempt or disgust that might then be given visible expression in a Laugh or Angry reaction.

Similarly, the ideological or cultural memory of the reader can lead them to infer a contrast of ideals where none is explicitly stated. To a non-partisan reader, a photograph of a slovenly, obese white man holding a Nazi flag presents as mere documentary. To the reader convinced of Trump's enthusiastic cultivation of the white supremacist

[60] Medhurst and Desousa, "Political Cartoons", 205.

vote, the image presents a contrast of Democrat and Republican ideals embodied in a caricature of a Trump supporter. Contrast is typically employed by the political cartoonist to present two competing ideas within a single frame. The images in this sample typically present a single idea, with the hyper-partisan context in which they are presented implying the oppositional stance. The images can be seen as not simply persuasive texts, but partisan rhetoric. The captioned image declaring "NBA playoffs crash by 23%, lowest watched in 5 years" shifts from reportage to propaganda when *Breitbart* readers intuit the missing premise: that basketball fans are switching off due to the NBA's support of the Black Lives Matter movement.

An initial coding of rhetorical disposition presumed a non-partisan publication context. The *Occupy Democrats* pool showed a distribution of 24% commentary, 4% contrast and 24% contradiction – with the remaining images deemed as reportage or comment (for example, a photograph of a protest sign reading "privilege is when you think something is not a problem because it is not a problem to you personally"). A second coding presumed a persuasive intent aligned with the publisher's ideological stance. The distribution subsequently shifted to 28% commentary, 39% contrast and 28% contradiction. The above example initially coded as reportage shifted into the "contrast" category. As seen through a partisan lens, the messaging evokes the Republican response to the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19. The shift in distribution was more pronounced in the *Breitbart* pool – to be expected considering the prevalent framing of content as reportage. The initial coding returned 13% commentary and 11% contradiction, with no images deemed to employ contrast and the remaining images deemed reportage. When coded accounting for a partisan framing, the distribution shifted to 13% commentary, 26% contrast and 26% contradiction. The remaining images were deemed reportage or comment (for example, press images of Donald and Melania Trump and rallying calls to watch the DNC).

Participation

The images that prompted the most participation in the form of commenting and sharing by *Occupy Democrats* readers present a diversity of image types and reactions (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). The 'top ten' most commented-on images on this side of the sample include three captioned images, two text-only images, four photographs and one cartoon. Anger was the most common reaction to these images, with five images eliciting a Laugh reaction and four images attracting both Anger and Laugh reactions. Three of the images were coded as satirical. The 'top ten' most shared images include three captioned images, three text-only images, two photographs and two cartoons. Anger was again the most common reaction, with four images prompting a Laugh reaction and two images receiving both Anger and Laugh reactions. Three of the images were coded as satirical.

The 'top ten' images that achieved the most participation on the *Breitbart* side of the sample (see Figure 8 and Figure 9) comprised captioned images and text-only images – no photographs feature in the list, which attracted the least number of comments and shares overall. The most commented-on images featured eight captioned images and two text-only images and attracted nine Laugh reactions and five Anger reactions – with four images attracting both Laugh and Anger reactions. The most shared images also featured eight captioned images and two text-only images, attracting five Laugh reactions and four anger reactions – with two attracting both Laugh and Anger reactions.

These data suggest that *Occupy Democrats* readers are moved to participation more by negative arousal emotions than positive ones, with laughter providing the dominant response in just three of the most commented images and two in the most shared images. The most commented image asks readers, "When Trumpism is done, will you forgive those who enabled it?" Meanwhile, the most shared image is a captioned image of the teenage Kenosha shooter declaring him a "homegrown terrorist with an assault rifle". Interestingly, *Breitbart* readers commented most on images that made them laugh. The 'funniest' image – showing a captioned image of Jill Biden attesting that "I know my son's character. Hunter did nothing wrong" – indicates a contradiction between the assurance given and the perceived 'truth' that Joe Biden and his son engaged in corrupt activities. Humour was not as evident in the most shared *Breitbart* images, but neither was Anger a strong motivator. *Breitbart* readers were most inclined to share images that rallied supporters, with the most shared image a text-only image declaring, "Dear Leftists, Every city you torch, every store you loot, every innocent you beat makes our November 3rd decision all the clearer. Signed, The Silent Majority".

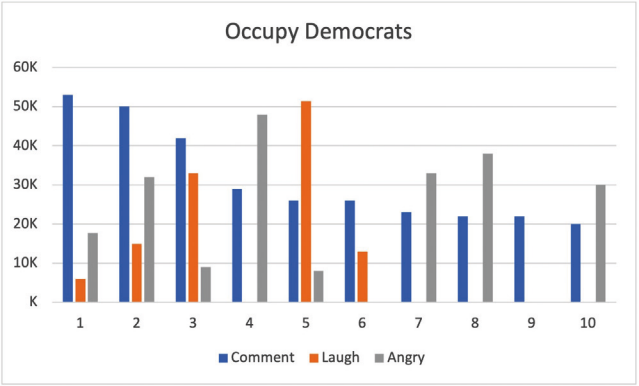

Figure 6: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions in Occupy Democrats Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

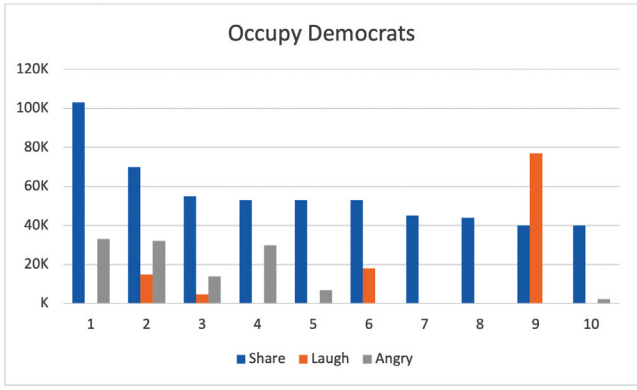

Figure 7: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions and Share Rates in Occupy Democrats Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

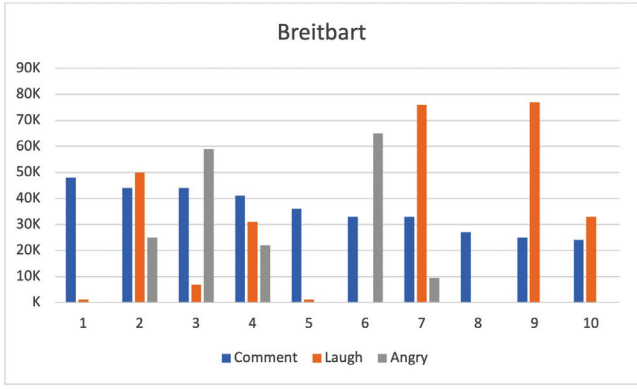

Figure 8: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions in Breitbart Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

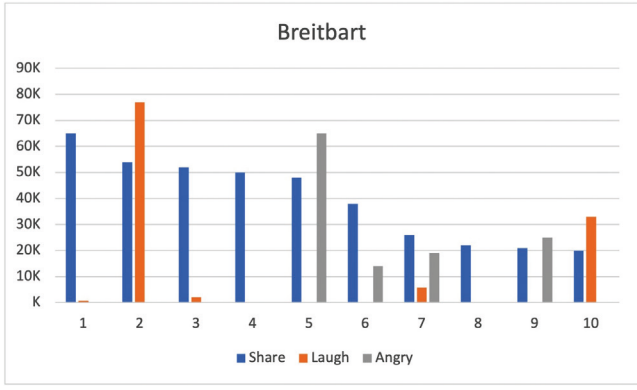

Figure 9: Breakdown of Laugh and Angry Reactions and Share Rates in Breitbart Facebook News Feed on 5 September 2019.

Topics

The topics covered by the respective groups' images vary dramatically in terms of intensity of focus and framing, reflecting the partisan divide in their supporters' response to the issues confronting the United States.[61] 40% of *Occupy Democrats* images responded to current news events playing out during the sample period: the COVID-19 pandemic (18%); the Black Lives Matter movement (12%); the USPS funding crisis (6%); the DNC (1.5%); and RNC (2.5%). 35% of the pool was devoted to Trump, with these images condemning his policy platform, character, integrity, intelligence, and competence. An additional 3% of images mocked his wife and offspring in his employ. 12% of the pool focused on Democrat ideals, including issues of social justice, racial equality, reproductive rights, and immigration; while 8% disparaged Republic politicians and their supporters. The remaining handful of images – less than 2% of the pool – refer to non-political news events (such as the forest fires impacting the East Coast).

39% of *Breitbart* images were devoted to the same news events, but with a different distribution: the COVID-19 pandemic (2%); the Black Lives Matter movement (25%); the USPS funding crisis (2%); the DNC (4%); and RNC (6%). 10% of the pool condemned Joe Biden's incoherence and Kamala Harris's hypocrisy, using direct quotes of Biden's gaffes and Harris' past support for Biden's sexual assault accusers as implicit critique. 12% of the pool focused on Republic ideals, though these were largely framed as opposition to perceived Democrat values (for example, "Democrats showcase illegal immigrant: I need health insurance. I deserve it right?"). 37% of *Breitbart* images were photographs of the president and first lady attending various official engagements. These images were not considered as topical news coverage as they were published without any contextual reference to these events. As such, the couple is deemed the primary subject of the image, with the respective events considered as incidental.

The polarity in political ideologies to which each group subscribes is rendered most stark in the framing of the Black Lives Matter movement. *Occupy Democrats* images present the movement as a legitimate response to systemic racism in general and police brutality towards African Americans in particular. The narrative is an expansive one that references "bend the knee" sporting protests, the dismantling of statues of historical figures associated with the slave trade, overzealous police responses to civil rights protests, the police shooting of Jacob Blake, the subsequent protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin at which a white teenager shot and killed two protesters, and Trump's claim that the killings were "self-defence", and the NRA's complicity in the killings. Reference to the civil unrest associated with the protests is presented as either the actions of a minority ("why does the Black Lives Matter have to answer for Looters, but the NRA doesn't have to answer for School Shooters?") or as a proportionate response to violence ("why is murder an appropriate response to property damage but property damage isn't an appropriate response to murder?"). Ideological opponents

[61] Dunn, "As the U.S. Copes with Multiple Crises".

are portrayed as white supremacist sympathisers. Unsurprisingly, *Breitbart* describes the movement very differently. The unrest in Portland and Kenosha as well as Biden's failure to condemn "leftist violence" in his speech at the DNC provide the dominant narrative. Civil unrest is described throughout as "rioting" and "looting" and several images reference Donald Trump Jr.'s slogan that conflates the unrest with COVID-19 and voter fraud ("if you can loot in person, you can vote in person"). The "rioters" are depicted as unpatriotic and not representative of the Black community, who (apparently) support the police and, increasingly, Donald Trump.

The topics covered on *Occupy Democrats* and *Breitbart* are presented exclusively through a reductive, partisan lens. The readership is not presented with alternative, oppositional stances on matters of broad public import. The discourse surrounding political players, policy decisions, major events and social attitudes is consequently diminished. If the role of the political cartoonist is one of "speaking truth to power", we might also consider the images in terms of power relations and reform. *Breitbart*'s strident advocacy for Republican ideals even after Trump took office in 2016, and the persistent anti-Republican messaging of *Occupy Democrats* in the wake of Biden's 2020 victory, lay bare any notion that the mockery and condemnation implicit in their images afford any corrective intent. When satire picks a side, notions of "holding the powerful to account" accede to confirmation bias and groupthink.

Vanquishing the monsters

Traditions tend to end with a whimper rather than a bang. Political cartooning in the US (and in the developed world more broadly) has been on the wane since the turn of the 21st Century when internet platforms challenged print newspapers as a primary source of news and opinion. Two decades later, journalistic traditions of objectivity and impartiality are overshadowed by subjective advocacy news and the political cartoon is something of an anachronism – a throwback to an era characterised by artisanal authorship. In its place, a form of participatory graphic humour was first conceived in online micro-publics and subsequently co-opted by vested interests. It is something of an irony that a humorous image form that a short time ago was celebrated as a vehicle for amplifying and mobilising minority voices to challenge hegemonic structures was instrumental in coalescing the alt-right from an obscure online sub-culture into a legitimate political force. Hyper-partisan publisher *Breitbart* was at the centre of the unregulated online networks that gave oxygen to ideas once marginalised as hate speech and birthed them as memes into mainstream consciousness through intermediation with traditional media. Almost inevitably, *Occupy Democrats* emerged as a progressive riposte to *Breitbart*'s success.

It is a truism to say that the new media landscape is rapidly evolving, but it is an important one to observe when concluding the role of memes in political discourse.

At the time of writing, the meme does not appear to have assumed the mantle as a teleological successor to the political cartoon with anything like the rhetorical integrity optimistically predicted by scholars and commentators only a few years ago. *Breitbart* and *Occupy Democrats* are just two of many partisan groups that have hijacked the form for its spreadable potential, enervated it of its discourse value and commodified it as propaganda. Memes are not supported by equivalent ethical and regulatory gatekeepers that maintain political cartoons in a broadly trusted and ethical public sphere. Trust is engendered not by editors or regulators but by group solidarity, and the question of whether a meme image is news, satire or propaganda is predicated on the reader's cultural literacy.

Feris et al. caution that "rebuilding a basis on which Americans can form a shared belief about what is going on is a precondition of democracy and the most important task confronting the press going forward".[62] This is problematic when hyper-partisan publishers are likely permanent fixtures of the political landscape and exploit the meagre regulation of 'Big Tech' and their social media[63], and the hellscape that X (formerly known as Twitter) has become under the ownership of Elon Musk. There is more to this disturbing point of what hyper-partisan publishers like *Breitbart* and *Occupy Democrats* have in common when preaching to their respective choirs. While it is true and scary that the far-right has 'weaponized' humour by drawing on the affordances of the newspaper cartoon, their opponents have resorted to the same form, which muddies arguments we might expect from Democrats about the importance of preserving mass media spaces for critical discourse and debate.

Somewhat reassuring is the way citizens have responded to trust concerns by modifying their news and technology habits. An increasing number of Americans are fact-checking the news content they consume, disengaging from factually suspect outlets and voicing more support for regulation.[64] Social media platforms are also becoming more responsive to public expectations of truth in political messaging. In the wake of the January 6 attack on the Capitol, which many deem to have been incited by Trump, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube banned him from their platforms (either permanently or indefinitely). According to research firm Zignal Labs[65], the removal of thousands of additional accounts dedicated to sharing Trump's statements led to an immediate and dramatic fall in election misinformation circulating on those platforms. Horta Ribeiro et al. caution that banning online communities may simply prompt the migration of a community to alternative, fringe venues.[66] Nonetheless, with relatively few accounts responsible for a disproportionate share of misleading content (Center for an Informed Public released in 2021), de-platforming these sources

[62] Feris et al, "Partisanship".

[63] Kafka, "Washington's First Attempt at Regulating Big Tech".

[64] Mitchell et al, "Most Say Tensions".

[65] Dwoskin and Timberg, "Misinformation Dropped Dramatically".

[66] Ribeiro et al, "Platform Migrations", 21.

presents an effective strategy for curbing the momentum and audience reach of this content.

These developments offer some hope for clawing back the trust deficit afflicting contemporary news media. I contend – somewhat reluctantly – that this will not restore memes as bastions of the political cartooning tradition. I do not disagree that cartooning and meme-making will continue as an activity and succeed in finding an audience.[67] But apart from the occasional "cartoon controversy," the razor-sharp, intelligent social and political critique that characterises the best of the illustrative tradition has long since ebbed in the public's imagination. And, despite their initial promise, political memes can no longer claim to uphold a similar critical function. Depending on spontaneity and authenticity for their cultural cachet, the commodification and appropriation of meme images for hyper-partisan messaging has seen them become victims of their own success. The monster, as it were, has eaten itself. And yet the political cartooning tradition has a proclivity for reinvention. In many ways, it is the audio-visual image rather than the graphic meme that best accommodates the moral and ethical ideals of the political cartoon tradition. The abundance of short-form satirical content produced by comedians like Sarah Cooper, the stable supply of late-night talk show hosts and incidental amateur video makers – such as Isabella Sosa's on-point polemic concerning mask ordinance in San Antonio – collectively suggest that the future of political satire may not be so bleak.

[67] Scully, "The New York Times Ends Political Cartoons".

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Mae ‘The Monster’ West

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Design an image featuring a blonde woman in a white dress standing before a majestic, lion-like creature with beastly characteristics. Capture the contrast and symbiosis between elegance and wildness within this captivating visual narrative’.

Abstract

Chapter 5
The ‘Monstrousness’ of Mae West

The ‘Monstrousness’ of Mae West examines West’s plays like Sex, The Drag, and The Pleasure Man, focusing on her innovative portrayal of characters such as sex workers, female impersonators, ‘fallen women’, and homosexual men. West reshapes established character archetypes from theatre and (sub)cultures of the early 1900s, challenging notions of monstrosity and marginalisation. Her approach involves presenting these characters in a sympathetic or heroic light, aiming to erode prejudices and raise awareness, despite facing criticism resembling contemporary cultural appropriation. The chapter delves into West’s strategic use of humour, analysing how she assigns jokes and witty lines to specific characters to expose moral hypocrisy and address serious social issues. Using the bawdy wit that became her stock-in-trade, West employs humour as a powerful tool for both entertainment and social commentary, contributing to her larger goal of challenging societal norms and perceptions.

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The 'Monstrousness' of Mae West

Will Visconti

West's Pleasure Principle

Between 1926 and 1928, three plays written by Mae West premiered in and around New York City. Each was the centre of heated debate and the object of public fascination. Billed as "comedy dramas", *Sex* (1926), *The Drag* (1927) and *The Pleasure Man* (1928) took liminal figures – primarily sex workers, gay men, and female impersonators – and presented them to mainstream audiences.[1] Her plays caused shock and consternation but made Mae West a household name after nearly thirty years of less impressive media attention. West played enthusiastically with the distinctions between star and *monstre sacré*, reminding her audiences that she was no angel, but had spread her wings a bit.[2] However, the focus of this chapter is not exclusively on Mae West's construction as divine or monstrous, but on her first three plays. These plays, like nearly a dozen others written between 1921 and 1931 and her quips, were the result of extensive work and editing. Her nights were not spent entertaining gentleman callers, as she preferred people to believe, but rather, refining her scripts.[3] Where she was accused of indecency, immorality, or even monstrosity, Mae West downplayed her apparent

[1] Quotes and scene references are taken from Lillian Schlissel, *Three Plays by Mae West* and reproduced with permission by Nick Hern Books.

[2] Ruggles, *I'm No Angel*.

[3] Leider, *Becoming Mae West*, 658; Louvish, *Mae West: It Ain't No Sin*, xvi.

Visconti, W. 2024. The 'Monstrousness' of Mae West. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 137–157. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

deviancy by defending her plays as neither monstrous nor purely sensationalised, but educational.

Within each play, West sympathetically portrays characters otherwise seen as "monstrous" by their transgressiveness, while simultaneously profiting from public fascination with alterity and scandal.[4] Each play, however, demonstrates a disjunction between plot elements intended as monstrous (murder, blackmail, assault) and the elements interpreted as monstrous by audiences, critics, and the police (transgressive or non-normative sexuality). Furthermore, the plays' basis is urban life, offering realism when fantasy was in vogue, which renders the plots more shocking and threatening by their immediacy and modern settings.[5] The language, costumes, and settings were all recognizable to audiences, if not as easily understood.[6] The plays are peppered with slang used in the nascent gay scene of the time, the language employed by sex workers, or the lingua franca of backstage life in vaudeville and burlesque. West's work brought fringe spaces to mainstream theatre, upsetting divisions between high culture and low culture and upending hierarchies of performance.[7]

What was especially monstrous was that private acts were made public.[8] Unlike *The Captive*,[9] a controversial play about lesbianism that was shut down at the same time as *The Drag*, Mae West's plays are explicit in naming sex, homosexuality, and female impersonation, and centring these narratives. Moreover, scenes of male cross-dressing for purposes other than stage performance collapsed boundaries between "acceptable" onstage drag, and behaviour that was technically illegal.

These same transgressive characters were made the protagonists and heroes by West, augmenting the plays' shock value. They are humanised and positioned within narratives that do not uniformly end in tragedy or their punishment. With both homosexuality and sex work, West shies away from narratives that insist on rehabilitation and redemption through death or marriage (though *Sex* alludes to the latter), though an element of exploitation exists with some plotlines and characters, who are grounded in reality but sensationalised to provide largely heteronormative audiences with voyeuristic thrills. The truly monstrous aspects of each story are embodied by the heterosexual or upper-class characters, or by law and society at large. Via expository dialogue or speeches in each play, West critiques the scorn unnecessarily heaped on sex workers, the refusal to acknowledge or sympathetically address homosexuality, and the transactional nature of marriage as potentially no different to prostitution.[10] She holds up a mirror to American society, exposing double

4 Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 60–61.

5 Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 6.

6 Robert Allen argues that during the 1920s, she may have also appeared more threatening in her physicality, given that she was younger. See Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 281.

7 Schlissel, "Introduction," in *Three Plays by Mae West*, 8.

8 Nereson, "Queens 'campin' Onstage", 517.

9 See Edward Bouret, "The Captive", in Ben Hodges (ed.), *Forbidden Acts Pioneering Gay & Lesbian Plays of the Twentieth Century*, 83–171. New York, New York, USA: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2003.

10 Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 279.

standards. West's plays challenge the backlash against Jazz Age popular culture or values, which were blamed for the ills that had befallen the United States during the 1920s, and the resultant vaunting of Victorian-era ideals.[11]

Each section of this chapter addresses a different aspect of West's playwriting: her treatment of sex work (*Sex*) and transgressive behaviour; her treatment of homosexuality and drag (*The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man*); and finally, her legacy, with a focus on West's impact on the representation and performance of drag over the last 60 years. Some common elements, particularly around West's use of comedy, are shared across all three plays. For instance, within each of her plays, West uses comedy characters as foils for each other to defuse audience prejudice. Such foils constitute attempts to normalise behaviour and render it less alien, less oppositional, or less subject to disapproval, a device found decades later in sitcoms like *Will & Grace* (with Will Truman as the "straight man" to Jack McFarland).[12] It also shows how West's humour simultaneously breaks new ground while making jokes at the expense of the plays' subjects, subverting and re-inscribing ideas in comedy about acceptable or over-the-top (therefore comic) behaviour.[13] Within some plays, oppositional pairings like the villainous womaniser Rodney Terrill and the sympathetic female impersonator Paradise Dupont challenge the audience even more emphatically.

All three plays have clear antagonists, but occasionally, secondary characters steal the scene, as Mae West herself did in her first film appearance, *Night After Night*. *Sex* tells the story of Margy LaMont (played by West), a Montreal-based prostitute who finds herself fielding multiple marriage proposals including one from Jimmy Stanton, a scion of a wealthy family, as she dreams of making her fortune elsewhere. Key to the melodrama's denouement is the exposure of Stanton's mother, Clara, who goes out slumming, is drugged and subsequently blackmailed by Margy's pimp, Rocky, but rescued by Margy (*Sex* Act I Scene 2). Clara opposes Jimmy's marriage to Margy, knowing her past, and ultimately Margy ends the engagement in favour of moving to Australia with another lover (*Sex* Act II Scene 2).

The Drag's central protagonist is Rolly Kingsbury, a gay man whose spurned lover David is a patient of Rolly's father-in-law. David seeks treatment for his drug addiction and a "cure" for his homosexuality. Rolly lusts after his colleague Allen Grayson, who is incorrectly believed to be having an affair with Rolly's wife, Clair, although he professes his love for her later (*TD* Act II Scene 1). The third act of the play is devoted to a drag ball hosted at the Kingsburys' home while Clair is away. At the end of the play, David, driven mad by his rejection and self-loathing, murders Rolly. Rolly and Clair's fathers, Judge Kingsbury and Dr Richmond, conspire to rule the murder a suicide since this verdict is seen as a lesser scandal than murder by a same-sex lover (*TD* Act III Scene 2).

[11] Curry, "Mae West as Censored Commodity", 66; Maltby, "Baby Face", 28.

[12] Streitmatter, *From "Perverts" to "Fab Five"*, 115.

[13] Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy", 242.

The Pleasure Man shares several elements with *The Drag,* particularly the drag party. With a much larger cast, it follows a vaudeville troupe that includes Paradise Dupont, a female impersonator, and her "Manly-kins" (backup dancers) alongside other female impersonators who, it is implied, are all also gay men and inclined to dress in drag both professionally and for fun. The eponymous pleasure man, Rodney Terrill, seduces and abandons several women, including simultaneous affairs with members of the troupe (*TPM* Act I, Scene III; Act II Scene 1; Act II Scene 2). One former lover, Mary Ann, asks him to honour his promise to marry her since she is pregnant. He violently rebuffs her, and Paradise is the first to help her. After Terrill and the irate husband of one of the performers come to blows (*TPM* Act II Scene 2), Terrill is fatally castrated by Mary Ann's brother as retribution so that he might never hurt anyone again, while the performers attend a party (*TPM* Act III Scene 2).

Part of the secret that West learned in presenting her characters, and something that she progressively honed with each of her plays and films, was how to use comedy as a means of "compensation". To overcome moral indignation and transmute it into laughter, she countered accusations of monstrousness by using humour to "play a bad woman successfully" (or to depict "bad men", and men dressed as women).[14] Another way that this was achieved, besides dialogue, was the incorporation of musical numbers, making each play a melange of variety, burlesque, and melodrama.

West's use of humour was a key strategy in enabling audiences to rethink their perceptions of what was unacceptable or demonised. She used humour to both defuse and emphasize the transgression of her ideas by taking serious issues and making light of them (sex, sexuality, women's roles). In performing as an insouciant, wisecracking, and assertive woman, the threat that she posed was then increased. Elsewhere, she doubled the transgressive potential of her work by featuring wisecracking men dressed as wisecracking women.

Mae West wrote these plays during a period when American masculinity sought to assert itself in response to an economic downturn, as a rebellion against prudery while capitalising on the broader popularity of sex and violence in popular entertainment. Thoroughly modern, but not without problematic elements, her plays encapsulate the zeitgeist of the 1920s: craving spectacle, seeking an escape from normalcy, and treating the Other as an object of fascination. West's use of comedy demonstrates her background as a seasoned vaudeville and burlesque performer, repurposing established performance frameworks to point out contradictions in the bourgeois ordering of sexual categories.[15] She also toyed with imperatives to reject what was designated as "low" in culture or performance, as well as the conflicting desire for the Other embodied by sex workers, drag queens, and vaudevillians, which led to public interest in West's plays, alongside legal opprobrium.[16]

[14] *New York Evening Post*, quoted in Kristen Hatch, "Mae West", 86.

[15] Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*, 279.

[16] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 5.

Identified as a "reformer" and a feminist, though she preferred the appellation "Liberated Woman," Mae West wanted to show other women that empowerment was within their means.[17] Regardless of how genuine her aims were, West nevertheless broke new ground in trying to normalize and call for empathy where the representation of "fallen women" or sexual transgression is concerned.[18] For West, sex was neither to be taken overly seriously nor was it a source of shame, with an attitude that would today be termed sex-positivity. She sought to render sex not only less monstrous but also less distant or mysterious.

Sex and Transgression

Mae West's first play, *Sex* (which ran between 1926 and 1927), presents several "monstrous" ideas to challenge conservative audiences, and shows the genesis of West's *raison d'être* as a performance.[19] In *Sex*, moral hypocrisy is the primary "monster" to be defeated, giving way to a single standard for sexual behaviour advocated by West herself.[20] What audiences seized on, however, was her unvarnished representation of sex work and the threat of class mobility that was posed by Margy as the heroine and an unrepentant sex worker. This caused greater consternation than the exploitation of women, the moral bankruptcy of the upper classes, or the circumstances that bring about the death of Agnes, a younger and less hardened character, driven first to sex work and then suicide.[21]

West's *Sex* presents another scene that may have been conceived of as monstrous, certainly as shocking in terms of prevailing Victorian morality in theatre. In this scene, Margy, despite being lower-class and a sex worker, claims the moral high ground against her wealthy adversary, Clara Stanton. Nevertheless, the status quo is upheld and there is no enduring threat to dominant social hierarchies when Margy willingly relinquishes her wealthy fiancé and "disappears". She announces her decision to move to Australia, implicitly declaring an intention to marry Lieutenant Gregg, and Stanton keeps her reputation intact, but only with Margy's connivance (*Sex* Act III Scene 2).

Reading *Sex*, one can see the genesis of The Mae West Character as a tough-talking but not unsympathetic figure who triumphs by the narrative's end.[22] Despite tangible

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17 West, *Mae West on Sex*, 6.

18 Sochen, *From Mae to Madonna*, 63.

19 West's plays remain popular choices for contemporary performers. During Covid lockdowns, and indeed since, Zoom productions of *Sex* were launched by at least two separate groups. See Brave New Classics, "Sex by Mae West", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVRFTv_-dRU; and Amariss Harris, "SEX by Mae West", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBgZwB34G6M, with a Black lead rather than other productions that have featured actors playing Margy in what amount to Mae West impersonations.

20 Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 3.

21 Hatch, "Mae West", 102.

22 Southwell, *Living Famously*; Louvish, *It Ain't No Sin*, 56.

elements of Mae West's onscreen persona, the play is more drama than comedy. Unsurprisingly, the comic sequences are primarily focused around Margy's put-downs to prospective clients, her banter with her lover, Gregg; and the badinage between her and the other sex workers Red, Agnes, and Flossie (all of which take place in *Sex* Act I Scene 1). The sparse comedy of *Sex* breaks up the tension of the other scenes, and of the setting, which drew critics' ire. *Sex* lacks the irony and "kidding" of sexuality that made West famous. Its comedy derives more from ad-libs and banter, similar to what West developed further with her camp male groupings and female impersonators in subsequent plays. Her jokes are at the expense of clients, her pimp, or Gregg, including a "bit" that would not be out of place in a burlesque act involving double entendre and the reveal of a large feather (*Sex* Act I Scene 1).[23] Burlesque had a palpable influence on the musical numbers or "shimmy" dances during the play, prompting parallels with Harlem nightclubs, and suggestions that Margy was even more threatening through "contested whiteness".[24] Certainly, West borrowed liberally (or outright copied) elements of performances she had seen in Black entertainment venues, which heightened her transgressive potential and alluded to all the fears held by middle-class white audiences about unfettered Black sexuality.[25] West's affinity with and appropriation of Black culture was sometimes used to comic effect, as when she incorporated "dirty blues" songs into *Sex* or other plays, which were laden with innuendo made famous by sexually transgressive performers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith.[26]

All three plays include tragic and melodramatic elements alongside comedy, though there is less consistent humour in *Sex* than in *The Drag* or *The Pleasure Man* (*Sex* Act I Scene 1; *TD* Act III Scene 1; *TPM* Act II Scene 1). Within *Sex*, the group of sex workers provide a comic moment in parallel to the drag queens and "camping" scenes of *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man*, and all three instances rely on ad-libbing. The establishment of the sex workers as comparable to gay men or female impersonators suggests a shared liminal status and points to the declining position of vaudeville in the hierarchy of "legitimate" entertainment. In some cases, the play's setting facilitates comedy alongside melodrama, as with *The Pleasure Man*'s backstage setting that allows for vaudevillians and female impersonators to intermingle tragedy and drama with patter.[27] Bergson's assertion of the incompatibility of emotion and comedy is problematised in each play, although the two spheres are not always fully integrated. As a result, the more comic scenes, particularly the drag ball scenes, add little to the narrative. Elsewhere, the integration is more successful, as with scenes featuring characters like Margy or Paradise that have their genesis in daily life and fit

[23] Making a dig at censorship, West replaced the feather on one occasion with an unfurled American flag. Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 67.

[24] Watts, *Mae West*, 77.

[25] Hatch, "Mae West", 95.

[26] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 20.

[27] Rosen, *Adventures of a Jazz Age Lawyer*, 240.

more easily in their evocation of how toughened sex workers and sassy vaudevillians might respond and interact with each other.[28]

In comic scenes like the dialogue between the sex workers, West also lays bare another element that was scandalous for the time, namely, her non-judgmental treatment of sex work. She portrays it neither as sinful nor glamorous.[29] Here, sex work is transactional, unappetizing, and lacking in depth of pleasant feelings for anyone involved. Nevertheless, West's writing vacillates between the gritty and the stylised, since her protagonist upholds existing hegemonic structures to an extent by refusing to marry her wealthy suitor. Instead, Margy proves her point about hypocrisy and vengeance against Clara Stanton by leaving (*Sex* Act III, Scene 2). Margy does not, however, do so without haranguing Clara about her use of wealth to hide her moral and legal corruption – as pertinent an issue now as it was then.

Elsewhere, Margy decries the monstrousness of men, attributing her flaws to them when she says "all the bad" in her was "put there" by the men whom she has encountered in her life (*Sex* Act II, Scene 2). Therefore, the real threat in *Sex* is not the mythicised predatory sex worker, the ruffians around her, or the ills of sex itself, but moral double standards and their exposure. Margy threatens to "dig under the veneer" of respectability to which people like the Stantons cling (*Sex* Act II Scene 1). Because of Margy's identification as lower-class and semi-criminal, to give her the upper hand against her social "betters" was a thoroughly transgressive step to take. Creating such a resolutely working-class figure (as many of Mae West's characters were, and indeed to an extent, so was West herself, however wealthy she became), West relied on her working-class background and experience in burlesque to create a more authentic character, even if her circumstances are pure melodrama.[30] For all the hyperbolic plotting and sensationalised use of sex workers and gay men as subjects, her characters were believable because they were anchored in everyday experience. West attracted criticism for her true-to-life depictions of unconventional characters as a result. Reviews were damning of *Sex* as a "monstrosity" and "destined for the sewer".[31] West was charged with obscenity and spent a few days in prison.[32]

Sex, and to an extent, *The Drag*, reflect the efforts to control sex and performance on and offstage. This conflict reflected a larger societal trend, as cities tried to cope with changes to the urban and political landscape during the early 1900s.[33] Urban change in turn was allied with nationalism and the representation of national or municipal character onstage. The cast of *Sex*, *The Drag*, and *The Pleasure Man* resists reduction to binaries of masculine and feminine or of good and bad. Likewise, Margy oversteps the binaries of the upper and lower class with her engagement to Jimmy

[28] Bergson, *Laughter*, 68.

[29] Hamilton, "Mae West Live", 87.

[30] Poole, "Indecent Ingénues", 526–527.

[31] *New York Daily Mirror*, 30 April 1926, *Sex* clipping file; Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 41.

[32] Hamilton, "Mae West Live", 85.

[33] Mosse, *Sexuality and Nationalism*, 9.

Stanton. Consequently, the audience is forced to question what makes a man or woman, and more importantly, what makes a good person. Female impersonators in West's plays, along with sex workers, problematise long-held images of (white) women as bearers of virtue. In West's work, these typically vilified characters emerge as the moral compass of their respective plays and are shown to be more virtuous than their normative counterparts.[34] The instances where these characters use humour are also significant, since they upset orthodox notions of gender and seriousness. Whereas the gay or dragged-up men are frivolous, Margy is comparatively serious. Effectively, West inverts the association of masculinity with earnestness, and femininity with frivolity. Paradise complicates matters even further, as a female impersonator and gay man who offers scorching rebukes of Rodney Terrill or saucy jokes (*TPM* Act I; Act II Scene 2).

Much of the "badness" of characters like Margy, the men of *The Drag*, or indeed any of West's subsequent characters, lies in their non-normative sexual availability, promiscuity, and assertiveness. Yet, their behaviour contradicts their perceived wickedness and monstrousness in each narrative.[35] Paradise and Margy both counter accusations of monstrousness in their solidarity with characters like Agnes or Mary Ann, with Paradise explicitly saying she came to the aid of "a sister in distress" (*TPM* Act II Scene 2). Here, the unwed assault victim and homosexual in drag are drawn together by shared marginality. Rather than "wicked" or "bad" in the sense of being villainous like Rodney Terrill or Rocky the pimp, West and her characters are transgressive but not "bad" per se, let alone fully monstrous. Such behaviours, along with sex work, transvestism, and homosexuality could be argued to constitute a puzzle for middle-class audiences.[36] Incomprehension and alterity then result in disapproval or demonisation, to be counteracted in the sympathetic or heroic representation of these "puzzling" figures.

West's subjects, and her use of humour, draw parallels between the oppression of sex workers (and women more generally) and of cross-dressers or gay men. Pamela Robertson also argues that West's performance of femininity is a burlesque double-bluff to show the flaws and illogicality of expected models of femininity via comedy and parodic elements.[37] Similarly, Mae West's comedy demonstrates the need for double decoding, to determine how much her material follows or challenges dominant ideas.[38]

Where West's playwriting conforms to dominant stylistic models is the minimal depiction of violence. Many of the most shocking and grotesque elements of the plot in all three plays occur offstage, rather than being made part of the central focus as might be the case in a typical "blood and thunder" melodrama. Agnes' suicide in *Sex*, Rolly's murder in *The Drag*, and Rodney's castration/murder in *The Pleasure Man* are

[34] Ibid, 17.

[35] Tyler, *Screening the Sexes*, 3.

[36] Nereson, "Queens 'campin' onstage", 522.

[37] Robertson, *Guilty Pleasures*, 33.

[38] Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 406.

only spoken of. The latter two incidents occur at the end of the play, undercutting the comical party scenes.

The Drag and Homosexuality: Mad, Monstrous, or Misunderstood?

Where West used her own body and physicality to protest the demonisation of the sex worker in *Sex*, she found proxies in the drag queens of her plays to combat sexual hypocrisy. Her later incorporation of their lines and mannerisms into her own public persona and her exaggeration of femininity was such that she was described in 1934 as the best female impersonator since Bert Savoy, a famously brassy counterpart to the more "ladylike" Julian Eltinge.[39] With her manager, James Timony, West visited Greenwich Village nightspots and invited resident "queens" to *Sex*, and then to auditions afterwards for *The Drag*. Ad libs in rehearsal grew into a script with scope for more improvisation as the driver of the play's comedy, knowing that she could draw on it for freshness, realism, and an edge over concurrent productions (*TD* Act III Scene 1 stage directions reveal ample space for performers to ad lib). "Natural and spontaneous" results from this pre-show process were seen as the primary appeal by the media, even going as far as to suggest tickets should be sold for watching rehearsals.[40] Again, West brought street culture into the theatre in a way that was at once fascinating and threatening, particularly since the drag queens' dialogue was unfamiliar but recognisable enough to be subversive.

There was a longer precedent in depicting same-sex sexuality onstage than might be otherwise believed, and certainly a long history of representing sex work in theatre, opera, and other genres.[41] Where West diverges, however, is not the tragedy of her melodramas, but in her injection of comedy, and the refusal of some characters to behave as tragic figures, victims, or objects of derision. Bringing early twentieth-century gay subculture to a broader audience, she defended her decision by saying that she "glorified" queerness and treated the topic "very sympathetically".[42] This treatment, however, was often framed by dominant ideas of the period, like the "inversion" theory that homosexual men were women in male bodies.[43] Critics have argued that West was less interested in the dignity of her subjects than in exploiting public curiosity.[44] Exploitative or not, West tapped into trends with humour and entertainment that were either current or ahead of the curve, as she did with the taste

[39] Davis, "The Decline of the West", 46 and 82; Goracci, "Playing it Fashionably Queer", 64.

[40] Hamilton, "Mae West Live", 92; Eells and Musgrove, *Mae West: A Biography*, 65.

[41] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 17–20.

[42] Hamilton, "Raquel Welch, Mae West Talk" cited in Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 49.

[43] See Bjornsdottir and Rule, "Emotion and Gender Typicality Cue Sexual Orientation Differently in Women and Men".

[44] Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 58.

for sex and violence onstage. Within *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man* is evidence of burlesque "nance" humour, and the popularity in mainstream theatre for narratives of transgression. Moreover, she anticipated the "pansy craze" in music of the 1930s.[45]

Questions of what constitutes monstrosity in *The Drag* are intermingled and murky, beginning with the expository debate in the play's first scene, between Dr Richmond and Judge Kingsbury (male heterosexual authority figures and *patres familias*) about whether homosexuality is a crime or an affliction. As the media coverage of *The Drag* demonstrated, the public tended to view it as something to be criminalised rather than pathologised.[46] In West's plays, gay men themselves reject both labels and even find them to be laughable, like the etiquettes and societal structures parodied via the ball, or their daily interactions (*TD* Act II, Scene 1; Act III Scene 1).

Outside of the "queens'" circle, gentlemanly manners are prized above masculinity itself, and to neglect them invites equal condemnation as sexually transgressive behaviour. Rolly, for instance, is explicitly criticised as monstrous by Allen Grayson. Not only are Rolly's advances towards Allen rebuffed, he calls Rolly "contemptible" for his treatment of his wife, and for duping the naïve Clair into a loveless marriage of convenience (*TD* Act II). In *The Pleasure Man*, the most gentlemanly figure is Paradise, who simultaneously emerges as a motherly, nurturing character.

Associated with gentlemanly behaviour is the question of class, which is as fluid as the gender presentation of many characters. Like *Sex*, *The Drag* prompted "rage" which was more vociferous because of its references to class difference. When critics of *The Drag* wrote that it "crudely exploited" homosexuality and created an atmosphere more akin to a zoo or freak show, because the play offered a voyeuristic window into New York's gay subculture, and recreated the experience of nightclub slumming within the theatre.[47] Conversely, later plays like Gordon Whitehouse's *Dangerous Corner* suffered less harsh criticism, as did *The Captive*, which had a more genteel setting but was also more linguistically circumspect since terms like "invert" or "lesbian" were never used.[48]

Cross-class mingling appears as threatening in *The Drag* as any camp behaviour, since architects, engineers, taxi drivers and everyday men are portrayed as pursuing sex with other men either as "inverts" or "rough trade". These plays may have offered an additional glimpse of further, more subversive, types of drag that call to mind Margy LaMont's threat to extant social hierarchies. Giada Goracci identifies the pantomime dame and glamour girl as the two dominant styles of early twentieth-century drag.[49] I would argue that there is a third form that is more socially indeterminate, embodied

[45] Visconti, "Too Far West", 100.

[46] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 97–98.

[47] "Play on Broadway," *Variety*, 10 February 1954; cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 303.

[48] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 161; also see Bourdet, "The Captive", 83–171.

[49] Goracci, "Playing it Fashionably Queer", 66.

by Bert Savoy's Bowery-inspired "tough girl" and the class-crossing drag queens who are duchesses by night and labourers by day.[50]

Questions about hierarchies of class and performance extend to *The Pleasure Man*. In the play, vaudeville and burlesque are brought to Broadway even more overtly than in the previous two plays and are presented to "respectable" audiences. This decision, while lucrative, was redolent with a frisson of misbehaviour and slumming, upending notions of respectability in performance. Not only are the jokes worthy of vaudeville sketches, but there are "turns" during the drag ball that feature songs and dances (*TD* Act III Scene 1). *The Pleasure Man* replaces skits with patter between performers, while *The Drag* includes fights and slanging matches between queens, which was seen as dredging up crass humour in the theatre.

The world of vaudeville and the drag queens is something wholly allied with conceptions of the low Other and the world of the carnivalesque.[51] Parody, travesty, and festivity merge in a world where heteronormativity is satirised in titles, hierarchies, and behaviours. Here, men are dressed as women, ludic titles like Duchess and "queen" are used and men talk openly about their "husbands". One of the characters, "Hell's Kitchen Kate", goes so far as to quip "which one, dearie, which one?" (*TD* Act II Scene 1). Though representative of real life beyond the theatre, these details appeared threatening to audiences because they blurred demarcations between parodic behaviour onstage and life offstage.

Despite the contempt with which gay men and drag queens were treated, female impersonation was not seen as inherently degenerate or worthy of condemnation when onstage. Female impersonators like Julian Eltinge enjoyed mainstream success, and received praise in the popular press alongside articles that highlighted his virility and pursuit of typically masculine interests when not performing. Bert Savoy was not necessarily seen as an invert for playing more comical and exuberant characters in drag, his homosexuality offstage notwithstanding.[52] The *Pleasure Man* linked female impersonation with male homosexuality by depicting female impersonators who wear drag offstage. This association, which was heretofore less common, drew the ire of critics who viewed professional performers as a class apart from men who cross-dressed for pleasure.[53]

Among the primary devices employed in *The Drag* and *The Pleasure Man* is the deployment of camp as a strategy of subversion. Camp, or "camping" as it is used, becomes a coping mechanism, a weapon, and a means of self-assertion. The over-the-top behaviour of the working-class "queens" and their "camping" in *The Drag* are part of a spectrum, in contrast to David and Rolly. The quartet of Rolly's friends encountered both in and out of drag, demonstrate none of David's sadness or anguish, nor are they in any way ashamed or shy like Rolly. They burst onto the stage to trade

[50] Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 10–12.

[51] Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, 7–8.

[52] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 18.

[53] Hamilton, *When I'm Bad, I'm Better*, 64, 141, and 143; cited in Schlissel, "Introduction", 28.

cheeky barbs about their conquests, discuss who is more attractive, and compare what they intend to wear to the ball in *The Drag*'s third act (*TD* Act II Scene 1). All four use female names, like Doll and The Duchess, though Winnie uses the same name in and out of drag. Much of the camp dialogue was not scripted, except for a few specific jokes. What the script does show is that the drag queens' scenes are punctuated with shrieks, directions to strike "artistic" poses, and calling each other "dearie" or "her".

Some accusations of awfulness against *The Drag* were not for the subject matter but for its writing and pace.[54] It is perhaps telling that the ad-libbed scene at the drag ball and the scenes featuring the "queens" are what most reviewers discussed, rather than the plot points or the details of West's writing that did not rely on queer argot or cheeky gags. Critics noted that the dialogue from the drag ball and between gay characters needed translation for some audiences, which the press had to provide.[55] West attempted to make homosexuality more legible in general, while also trying to give the play some educational value, with Dr Richmond offering didactic exposition to sneak substance in alongside "slumming" thrills.[56] To some, this exposition appeared more like the dialogue tacked on to pornographic films in a flimsy attempt to present them as educational.[57] The double perspectives of legal and medical characters discuss the medical and psychological or legal implications of the treatment of homosexuality – there is a to-and-fro of discussing a cure alongside advocating a compassionate approach rather than a legally punitive one, arguing for a case of nature over nurture. Here, West used a copy of an unspecified Karl Heinrich Ulrichs book as a prompt for expository dialogue about sexology, which continued between Dr Richmond and Judge Kingsbury later (*TD* Act I Scene 1).

The drag ball subverts and rejects the notion of "inverts" as sick or pitiable, or, except for David, their self-perception as monstrous. Even Rolly, the object of David's unrequited affections, is circumspect in his manner, but not troubled by his inclinations in the same way. West's homosexuals are largely free of self-loathing, and the "queens" use humour to forge a positive identity, providing an early example of camp as a mechanism to cope with or defuse hostility.[58] Similarly, Margy in *Sex* and Paradise in *The Pleasure Man* lacks self-loathing but not self-awareness, and the brazenness of their behaviour is read by some reviewers as monstrous for the absence of shame.

Much of the humour, and the objectionable content (or potentially objectionable content) within plays like *The Drag* and most crucially *The Pleasure Man* is absent and even today presents problems of legibility to an uninitiated reader because the song lyrics from various numbers are not included. Surviving scripts only mention some song titles, and their delivery was so key to the charges of offensiveness that, like Marie

54 Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 70.

55 Hamilton, *The Queen of Camp*, 55–56.

56 Nereson, "Queens campin' onstage", 519–520.

57 Eells and Musgrove, *Mae West*, 65.

58 Babuscio, "Camp and the Gay Sensibility", 27.

Lloyd and music-hall singers well before *The Pleasure Man* trial, when delivered with perfect decorum, no offence could be taken.[59]

However offensive *The Pleasure Man* and its characters were deemed by critics, Paradise displays virtues that were typically associated with masculinity and femininity together. On one hand, she creates a problematic character for audiences to understand, given her indeterminacy and movement between genders. On the other, her divergent qualities give her a sense of balance. Exhibiting maternal care for Mary Ann alongside assertiveness against Rodney Terrill, Paradise is one of only two characters to directly stand up to Terrill, and challenges notions of what masculine virtues can entail. Terrill is an inveterate womaniser without scruples. Paradise is gay and effeminate but stands her ground and can readily banter with stagehands (*TPM* Act I Scene 1). At its most basic, *The Pleasure Man* is critical of men's exploitation of women (like *Sex*) and of the disapproval of gay men (like *The Drag*), yet the violence of its ending and the queerness of its cast drew attention away from any substantive discussion of sexual hypocrisy.

From the outset, Paradise is wise to Terrill's behaviour, who is positioned as the monster opposing Paradise's protective figure (*TPM* Act II Scene 1). Paradise embodies the heart and brains of the piece, melding comedy and drama. During an argument with Terrill, she employs a very precise form of acerbic humour with the line "If you're a man, thank God, I'm a female impersonator" (*TPM* Act II Scene 2). Paradise deflates Terrill and self-deprecatingly cites her own nature as a female impersonator (with the implicit addition of effeminacy and homosexuality) as a pre-emptive quip at her own expense, leaving Terrill without a comeback. This self-aware humour to critique dominant power structures has continued in drag to the present and is at the heart of drag acts that, like Mae West, discuss serious ideas using drag's inherent comedy and mask to grant the speaker further licence.[60]

Reviews of *The Drag*, as with West's other plays, were schismatic in their assessment of the content and delivery. Some reviewers had no issue with homosexuality but were appalled by the play; conversely, others expected filth but found it relatively tame.[61] Some of the same criticisms were levelled against *The Pleasure Man*, calling it "coarse, vulgar and poorly written".[62] Elsewhere, Mae West was criticised for vulgar and false sentiment in exploiting her subjects.[63] West responded to this criticism by arguing that audiences at the time were still not sufficiently mature to grasp the significance of her play. She positioned herself as speaking out against bigotry by trying to enlighten viewers, and she viewed herself as ahead of the curve in terms of teaching or

[59] Rosen, *Adventures of a Jazz Age Lawyer*, 247.

[60] Doonan, Drag: *The Complete Story*, 138.

[61] Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 81–82.

[62] "Raid Mae West Play, Seize 56 at Opening", cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 133–134; Gabriel, "Last Night's First Night", cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 133–134.

[63] *Variety*, 2 February 1927, cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 84.

knowledge.[64] Following the court case attempting to prosecute the cast of *The Pleasure Man* for obscenity, an article entitled "Sex in the Theatre" was published, discussing West's early plays. It quoted her expressing a dedication to educating audiences about issues, "truths" and "problems" around sex in society. She argued that her depiction of questionable and transgressive sexual behaviours had an educational function, and that later plays like *Diamond Lil* drew attention to the need to dispense with outdated moral double standards.[65]

Mae West's Legacy

The immediate impact of West's plays was seen in the 1927 Wales Padlock Law and legislation to limit questionable material, which made the court cases prosecuting her plays the testing ground for new laws that ultimately proved toothless. In the slightly longer term, her work as a playwright translated into privilege when she got to Hollywood, despite mixed successes and receptions.[66] Characters, dialogue and scenarios from each play were also adapted into her films. West's plays provide the nucleus for her own work and character and set a precedent for subsequent representations of minorities onstage and onscreen. Jokes and names used by drag queens were refined and reprised by West herself onscreen, and elements like vaudevillian troupes, banter between maids and West's frequent appearances as a sex worker or "kept woman" were all continued in the films where she had sufficient creative control.

Later in her career, Mae West boosted her prominence not only as a key figure in the "Canon of Camp", but as a celebrity at the vanguard of gay rights as it existed in her lifetime.[67] During interviews, she explicitly expressed support for the LGBTQ+ community (or at least, for gay men), despite framing it with dated language.[68] In telling and retelling her story, both as the furore erupted around her plays and in later life when she was an established star with a vocally queer fanbase, Mae West not only made sure to position her work as humanizing typically vilified minorities, but in the process, elevating herself to the status of saviour. By her reckoning, the goddess of sex had become a mother goddess to the oppressed.

Interviews given during the 1950s had said nothing of the sort, suggesting either revisionist history (hagiography) engineered by West, or greater opportunities to vocalise support for LGBTQ+ people in a way that was not possible in McCarthy's America. Some critiques during the same period argued that she embodied exploitative

64 *Parade*, September 1929, cited in Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 84.

65 Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 3.

66 Hatch, "Mae West", 87.

67 See Sontag, *Notes on "Camp"*.

68 West, *Goodness Had Nothing To Do With It*, 80 and 83.

heteronormative images of women and female impersonation, in the context of her own act as an over-the-top "female impersonator" rather than her onstage characters like Paradise or the other impersonators. It was after her death that a re-evaluation of her *oeuvre* came to recognize her performance as a parody of social constructions of gender.[69] This reappraisal, combined with a fanbase among gay men and her status as a camp icon, has led to the creation of epithets like "Mother Superior of the Faggots", a title that she may not have found entirely disagreeable.[70]

Not all of West's impact has been judged as positive. Kaier Curtin argues that *The Drag* and to a lesser extent *The Pleasure Man* did more harm than good in terms of representing homosexuality to a heterosexual audience.[71] In this way, West's impact is comparable to other now-iconic texts of recent years, such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, which could be argued as a double-edged sword in terms of increasing queer visibility at the same time as contributing to its commodification and a degree of exploitation as a reality-TV series.[72] Curtin argues that West sensationalised the representation of gay male sexuality in a similar way that can be said of texts like *Drag Race* or *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert*, which potentially foster assumptions that the behaviour and style exhibited are representative of the entire community.[73]

Today, invocations of Mae West rely more on her prominence as a camp icon and gay idol than any substantive engagement with LGBTQ+ issues, or her stance on race relations, though her status as a feminist icon is sometimes mentioned. Her prominence is primarily due to her film appearances rather than her stage career, which continued after only eleven years in film. Her camp iconicity became part of a referential loop from the 1960s until the early twenty-first century, though her prominence as a muse gradually dwindled. Several well-known female impersonators who appeared as West each seized on different aspects of The Mae West Character to create new "erotic and comic links" via impersonation, as they did in their impersonation of other celebrities like Tallulah Bankhead, Marlene Dietrich, or Bette Davis.[74] Charles Pierce played on the caricatural elements of West's persona, creating an over-the-top parody.[75] Craig Russell, who had briefly worked with Mae West and praised her for teaching him what he knew about comedy, performed musical acts based on West and several other performers.[76] Marketing himself as a "Glamour Monster" (the title of his 1987 record), Russell's was as a gentler form of parody and impersonation, drawing directly from film quotes and song lyrics. Jim Bailey, a gender "illusionist", performed as West in

69 Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing*, 114.

70 Tyler, *Screening the Sexes*, 1.

71 Curtin, "*We Can Always Call Them Bulgarians*", 137.

72 Buck, "Et Tu Ru?".

73 Ibid, 102.

74 Dinshaw et al, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities".

75 kongandgooshow Babu, "Charles Pierce Mae West", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ul--vYHV92A.

76 Maclean, "Resurrecting Russell".

a closer style to Julian Eltinge and the female impersonators of Mae West's time in vaudeville, melding songs and patter.[77]

In the last decade, West has reappeared as a point of reference since a 2016 episode of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, where contestant Alaska Thunderfuck appropriated the "irresistible repeatability" of Mae West's dialogue, with unique variations on West's quips.[78] Thunderfuck's choice of impersonation was subsequently praised as a "herstory" lesson for viewers who had previously not heard of Mae West. RuPaul Charles has explicitly acknowledged West as one of several amalgamated influences in the creation of their drag persona, prompting Charles' self-identification with Frankenstein's monster.[79] In 2020, West was once again referenced on the show, by which time knowledge of her *oeuvre* was treated as assumed knowledge.[80] Moreover, throughout subsequent seasons like Season 5 of *Drag Race UK* in 2023, Mae West quips and punning adaptations thereof have frequently been used by judges as comic appraisals of contestants' runway looks, as has the adoption of a Westian drawl.

Positive representation

What is most remarkable about Mae West's plays is that the more outrageous characters survive where others do not. Though it is ambiguous whether Margy follows through with a decision to leave sex work, and the homosexuals in *The Drag* remain "uncured", none of them die or are punished for their behaviour (that is, for being sex workers or being gay). They are constructed as sympathetic but made of sterner stuff, and they help other characters during each play rather than acting out of self-interest or malice. West brings liminal figures from liminal spaces into the limelight as the central focus, not as props to a hero's journey or as antagonists to be defeated. From dressing rooms, brothels, and secret parties, characters as mysterious as they are criticised are ultimately created as more rounded characters, setting a new precedent towards positive representation on stage and eventually in film.

By using humour and by giving her misunderstood characters redeeming qualities, West's plays recognised non-normative lifestyles in a way that other authors did not. Undermining heteronormative rules, however, plays right into her credo that those who are easily shocked should be shocked more often.[81]

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77 Senelick, *The Changing Room*, 386–387.

78 Failler, "Excitable Speech", 95; *RuPaul's Drag Race*, "All Stars Snatch Game".

79 RuPaul, *Lettin' It All Hang Out*, 64.

80 RuPaul's Drag Race, "Gay's Anatomy".

81 Mae West, quoted in Rutledge.

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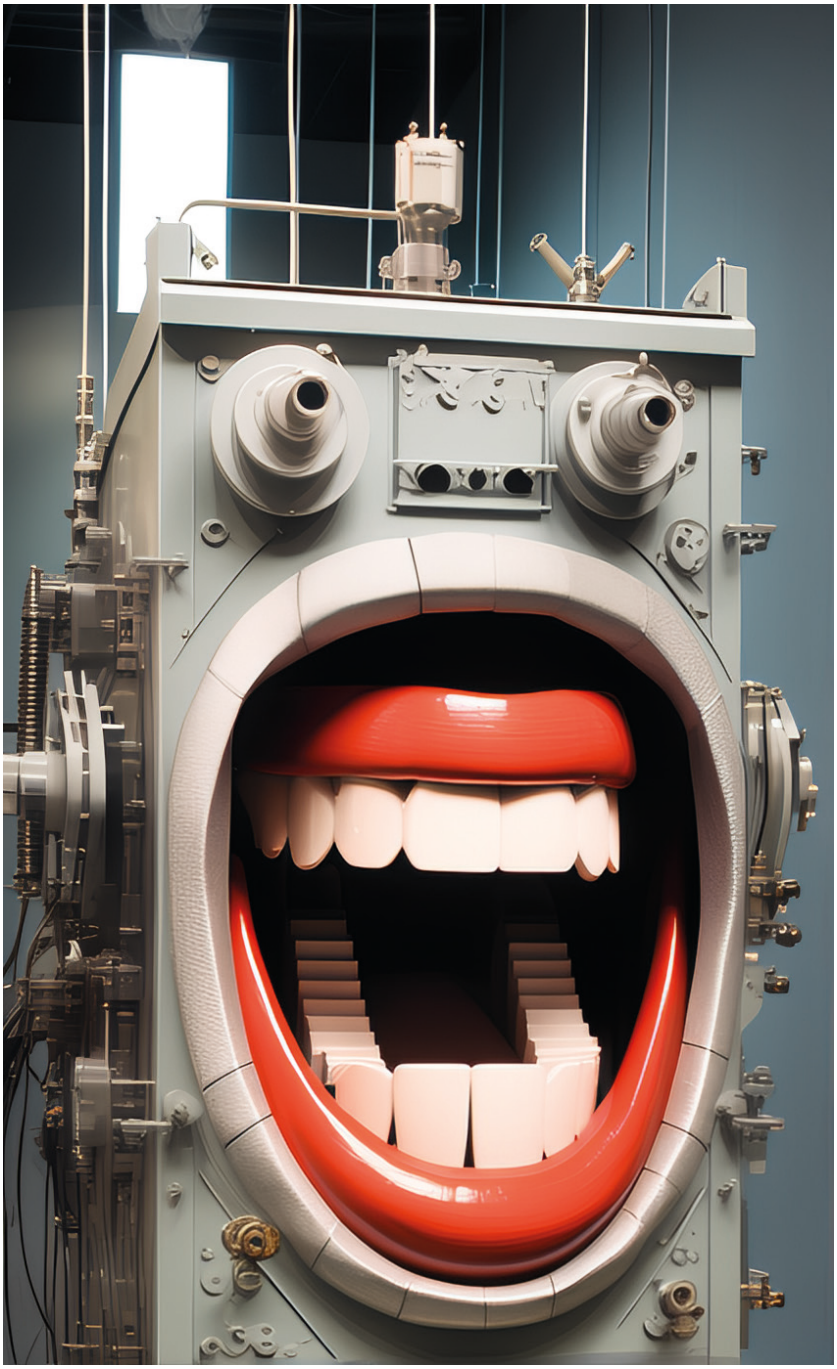

Who’s Afraid of the Laugh Box

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Visualize a machine with a mouth adorned with teeth and eyes replaced by cinematic camera lenses, merging elements of technology and organic features to create an intriguing and surreal image’.

Abstract

Chapter 6
Synthetic Laughter: Technologies of Humour Mediation and the Moral Issues of the Laugh Box

Synthetic Laughter examines the ethical implications of employing canned laughter, navigating the intersection of technology, human emotion, and morality. Informed by historical perspectives and contemporary concerns, the discussion is influenced by media and technology scholars like Günther Anders. It explores the commodification of human responses and the potential erosion of authenticity in the era of advanced laugh-generating technologies. Essential themes include the obsolescence of the private laugh, consent to have one's emotions recorded and preserved indefinitely, compensation for emotional labour, and the societal influence of artificial laughter on digital platforms. This is underscored by the need for a nuanced exploration of the ethical dimensions of laugh tech, which poses pivotal questions about mediation and the integrity of the individual experience. "Boxed-up" morality, where humans become both consumers and 'the consumed' in their interaction with laugh-generating technologies, is a key concept the discussion frames within the context of critical posthumanities. It proposes a nuanced understanding of synthetic laughter's role in shaping post-human subjectivities and offers a glimpse into the multifaceted issues surrounding the laugh box and similar technologies such as generative AI.

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Synthetic Laughter

Technologies of Humour Mediation and the Moral Issues of the Laugh Box

Benjamin Nickl

Like the face with its unmistakable cast of features, the voice is also a primal sounding board for expression for the human: their organ. In and with one's voice, the human stretches out and lays hold on the other, as oneself is attuned and held. If concealment from oneself and overtness toward the world are characteristic of the face, so that through their face the individual is completely exposed and delivered over to every counterreaction before it can protect itself by facial mime, the voice is the ideal medium of deployment from the internal to the external. It can be graduated according to strength, pitch, and emotional and persuasive force; it can be modulated and articulated, whether as sung or spoken sound, as "bearer" of musical or linguistic communication. (Helmuth Plessner)[1]

Technologies of Neoliberal Laugh Culture

The laugh track, a cornerstone of American television comedy and catalyst for a quickly growing broadcast entertainment industry, was pioneered by Charles Douglass' distinctive laugh-track device, the so-called 'laff box' (see Figure 1). Douglass invented and introduced a device he originally named the audience response duplicator in the late 1940s to counteract the unpredictability of studio audiences' laughter during live shows like *The Jack Benny Program* (1932–1955). His creation allowed for the control of audible laughter, enhancing comedic timing, and eliminating unwanted audience

[1] Plessner, *Laughing and Crying*, 131.

Nickl, B. 2024. Synthetic Laughter: Technologies of Humour Mediation and the Moral Issues of the Laugh Box. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 158–182. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

reactions[2]. However, the advent of canned laughter, an invention that *Time Magazine* in 1999 called "one of the hundred worst ideas of the twentieth century", also marked the onset of a culture of mediated manipulation. It essentially works by separating humans from the reactive capacity to laugh or not laugh at something they might or might not find funny and extracting the joy and morality inherent in the decision process leading up to an act of amusement.[3] This process was hidden, taking place off-screen behind studio sets and backstage barriers from the audience watching at home. Its concealment raises significant issues about our moral perception of humanity in a world where jokes or other content intended to elicit a humorous response, like physical slapstick of stand-up comedy routines or quit-witted repartee between several people on a stage or in a scene, no longer requires self-induced laughter.

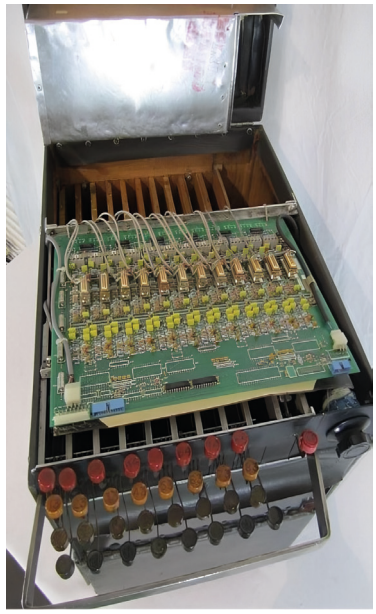

Figure 1: The Inner Workings of the Mysterious Laff Box, Thebaronblog, 23 September 2013.

[2] Kubey, *Creating Television*. See the introduction and especially the insightful interviews on comedy entertainment programming in the pioneering decades of US network television with Carroll Pratt, whose small company Sound One was placing over 80 per cent of the laugh tracks and audience effects on network programming in the 1980s. The interview details how Pratt, who had won three Emmys for his work, began his career as a sound technician at MG and learned his craft from the 'father of the laugh track', Charles Douglass. From the interview text with Pratt: "In 1950, CBS was having problems with shows where the audience had been rained out and the reactions had been too small. They were also doing a lot of audio work after an audience left because they didn't get enough reaction during the show. Charles Douglas(sic), who was a technical director at CBS, saw the need and developed a very basic, crude laugh machine which consisted of a large wheel. Douglas(sic) was the father of the laugh machine. [...] That was the beginning of the inuring of the American public with this beast of a laugh track".

[3] Kenneth Brewer's extensive work on American humour and the laugh track is insightful here. He writes that the canned laugh reaction has often been treated as a problem of morality "either because it coerces viewers into laughing or makes them more receptive to ideological messages from the media". Brewer, *Don't Make Me Laugh!*, 10.

Figure 2: The Laff Box on Its Customised Trolley, Thebaronblog, 23 September 2013.

This chapter thus delves into matters within the American entertainment industry, emphasising its conceptual applicability to the specific context from which the canned laughter technology as invented by Douglass emerged. The intellectual contribution of this work is situated within the nexus of American cultural dynamics, offering insights into the intricate interplay between humour and morality. Rooted in a Western European knowledge framework of humour studies and issues of technological applications of popular technologies of mediation such as humour or laughter respectively, the analysis emerges from this scholarly lineage, contributing to the broader discourse on the subject. It is crucial to note, however, that the claims made herein do not purport universal applicability or assert indistinct truths across every cultural community. The analysis remains circumscribed within primarily the defined boundaries of the American socio-cultural milieu, recognising the nuanced nature of humour and morality across diverse global contexts that do not all follow, or are influenced by, a particular emphasis on Western perspectives on canned laughter. That said, the invention of the laugh machine begs the question about the purpose of comedy when laughter is automated, and we have rendered our interaction with humour effectively obsolete and handed over comedic timing and laugh triggers to automata. How does the experience of laughter change when there is a technological mediation interface between the person laughing and the laughter itself? And what moral consequences might arise from the employment of a human-machine system that behaves mechanically rigid and unyielding, as detailed by Henri Bergson?[4]

[4] Henri Bergson, a French philosopher, addressed the topic of laughter in his work titled "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" ("Le Rire: Essai sur la signification du comique"), published in 1900. In this essay, Bergson explores the nature and function of laughter, seeking to understand why humans find certain things funny. Bergson's central thesis is that laughter arises from the perception of something mechanical and

These questions become even more pertinent when considering the repercussions of the cultural technology of canned laughter for us and our laughing bodies in the third decade of the 21st century, as AI technologies and other online interface applications have improved measurably in a race to replicate human laughter in both virtual and physical ecologies[5]. The successors of the laugh box present themselves as artificial pixel-humans who smile reassuringly at us in online chat interactions when their interactive programming deems it useful to alleviate a user's anger or temper other negative emotions or stresses. ERICA the android was purposefully built by a team of roboticists to recognise and laugh at conversational jokes, so we instinctively feel more human-like about the manufactured assemblage before us. Meanwhile, trademarked chatbot applications such as Witscript promote their generative joke-writing systems to unleash the user's inner comedian. The uncanny and perhaps haunted sense of laugh synthesisation that comes with the use of canned laughter prompts us to question the authenticity of our responses to humour.

The laugh box, while augmenting the comedic experience by providing consistent and controlled laughter, also distances us from our natural, spontaneous reactions to humour. It creates a disconnect between the audience and the comedic content, a widening gap, as the decision to laugh is no longer a personal one, but a pre-programmed response and a choice made by others. This raises ethical issues about manipulating human emotions and responses for entertainment purposes[6]. And not just that. The use of canned laughter also impacts the way we perceive and engage with comedy. In its starkly reduced essence, comedy in the Western tradition is a form of social commentary[7] that relies on the audience's ability to recognise and respond to humour. By automating laughter for the profit margins of neoliberal entertainment economies and deliberately removing human agency from production settings, we risk reducing comedy to a series of pre-determined cues designed to elicit a conditioned response, rather than a form of art that encourages critical thinking and social awareness.

Canned or synthetic laughter, a term I propose to better encapsulate the broadening impact of laugh technology in today's digital contexts, marks a significant shift in the

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rigid in situations where flexibility and spontaneity are expected, arguing that laughter is a social phenomenon and has its roots in human social interactions. According to Bergson, laughter is a corrective response to the mechanical and repetitive aspects of behaviour, and it serves to highlight the absurdity of certain situations. One of Bergson's key concepts in this essay is the idea of "the comic", which he defines as any situation or behaviour that exhibits a lack of elasticity, a rigidity in the face of life's dynamic flow. He contrasts the mechanical and rigid with the living and flexible, suggesting that comedy arises when there is a clash between the two. While this work does not specifically address modern media practices like canned laughter, Bergson's ideas on the essence of comedy and laughter provide a conceptual framework to consider the impact of artificial laughter and recorded laugh tracks on our perception of (in)elastic humour in the context of television and other media.

[5] Nickl and Müller, *The Joke's On Us*, n.p. See this online article that appeared in The Conversation Australia for an overview of current applications of laugh tech, including digital AI characters, ERICA the laughing android, and humour chatbots such as Witscript.

[6] Vaughn, *Morality and Entertainment*, 39–41.

[7] Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule*, see the introduction.

way we consume media.[8] This process can be likened to a monster[9], for it transforms the natural human experience of humour into something eerily distanced and strangely mechanical, and seemingly controlled by an external entity. It is a curious transformation in comedy entertainment production, which took root in the 1940s during America's first television wave. However, the aim and argument here are not to indistinctly vilify the laugh box or its usage, but rather to probe the profound ethical implications tied to the use of humour mediation technologies, both historically and in the present day, and for applications yet to emerge.

The laugh box is indeed an unusual device, with its peculiarity extending beyond its ability to mimic human laughter. What sets it apart further is its capacity to replicate a cultural and bodily practice deeply embedded in our being, with roots that some researchers trace back to around ten million years of evolutionary lineage.[10] As the product of a neoliberal entertainment industry, this gadget is designed to imitate and impersonate the social laugh in its manifold variations: from spontaneous laughter in response to humour or shared experiences to laughter used intentionally to facilitate social interactions. It artificially induces positive emotions at the mere push of a single button or when someone plays the coordinated array of knobs that are arranged like a keyboard (see Figure 2). Douglass meticulously documented the laugh orchestration enabled by his contraption. His inventory ledgers (see Figure 3) contain detailed 'recipes' for the replication of various amusement behaviours. We can find the minutiae of laugh ingredients, and aural types sorted by show and genre, demonstrating the depth of thought behind this outwardly simple technology, which showcases the ability of the box to sonically evoke various amusement behaviours.

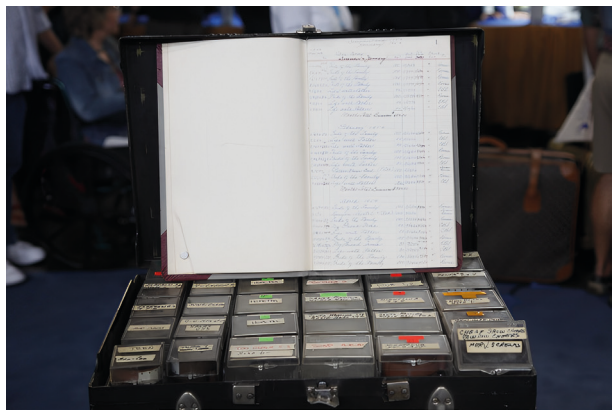

Figure 3: Still image from the Antiques Roadshow broadcast "Appraisal: 1953 Charlie Douglass 'Laff Box'", Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

[8] Gunn, *Canned Laughter*, 436–439.

[9] As detailed in footnote 2, Carroll Pratt describes the laugh track as a "beast" that was unleashed on the American public by Douglass and the television studio bosses.

[10] Gervais and Wilson, *The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humo*r, 396–400.

Figure 4: The Laff Box's Assorted Laugh Tapes, labelled among other things by age group 'TEEN' or location 'Nightclub', Thebaronblog, 23 September 2013.

To these behaviours belongs fake laughter, a long-standing part of our social interactions and often referred to as forced or simulated laughter. It occurs when an individual intentionally produces laughter without experiencing genuine amusement or joy. People may engage in fake laughter for various reasons, such as trying to fit into social situations, masking discomfort, or participating in social rituals where laughter is expected. This type of laughter is typically a conscious, deliberate act rather than a spontaneous expression of happiness or humour. Yet, its mechanical 'fakeness' is so deeply ingrained in our human behaviour that we perceive it as natural, despite its inauthentic genesis. The 'laff box', as it was colloquially known among industry insiders or 'laugh sweeteners' who worked their jobs with the box on blockbuster television shows well into the late 1990s and early 2000s[11], is a machine manifestation of a deeply human practice. Encased in a square-shaped metal container, the device that can 'fake the fake' exists as a testament to our relentless pursuit of consuming entertainment that makes us feel good or serves to trick others into believing that we do. This may prompt us to question the nature of our pleasure, humour, authenticity, and the evolving role of technology in our lives. The concept of canned laughter, generated by a manufactured device, can be unsettling. But is it the poignant revelation of our human nature's pre-existing mechanisation that causes discomfort? Does our unease stem from the realisation that our laughter, when canned, is no longer a spontaneous response, but a reaction in our brains triggered by an automated humour device[12]? Does artificial, mechanical laughter expose the synthetic elements inherent in the typical fake laughter that we have incorporated over millennia of sociality into our lives as camouflaged artifice already?

As I suggest here, perhaps our discomfort or a certain level of unease arises from the idea of being puppeteered, our emotions ventriloquised by remote-controlled

[11] Parvulescu, *Even Laughter?*, 506–507.

[12] Manninen et al, *Social Laughter Triggers*, 6125.

devices rather than societal norms and values instilled into us from birth. The laugh box's synthetic laughter exposes an uncomfortable truth: we have already, willingly, transformed ourselves into human laugh bots, guided by a culturally encoded form of social algorithmics. Our societies are part of a laugh AI that draws its source code from bio-social conventions so old we have forgotten that we acquired them at some point. This is where the wider history of American comedy entertainment and its mediation technologies, such as the introduction of sound during the era of silent movies[13], reveals that we embarked upon the path of laugh technologies well before the laugh box. Because, as one may posit based on the reception of the first so-called 'talkies', it seemed a natural progression to enhance and intensify the experience of mediated fun for audiences willing to invest in it. But besides profits, or more conceivably as an elegant narrative to support turning them, the use of canned laughter was also done and sanctioned by studio executives and a receptive audience in the name of the myth of social progress. However, as Joshua Gunn[14], as well as Frank Buckley[15], remind us in extensive overviews of humorous morality or moral humour through the lens of the human-machine binary and the manipulative effects of mediated emotion, it is crucial to consider the moral cost of this automatisation.

What unfolds in the aftermath of dispersed subjecthood, when human agency is distributed across emotional-material frameworks and technologies such as boxes, speakers, and screens? By outsourcing the bodily integrity of our laughter to a machine capable of unravelling a sense of space-time cohesion, we distance ourselves from the joy and spontaneity inherent in humour. To navigate the intersection of technology and human emotion, it is crucial to examine the implications of such developments. The history of laugh tech itself informs our understanding and experience of humour alongside inherent moral principles and contributes to shaping the intellectual framework regarding sensorial wholeness and dispersion. This has become apparent in the works of scholars of mainstream entertainment technologies and the ethics of mass-mediated amusement.[16] They have raised those issues as pertinent questions about the nature of humour and its technologisation.[17] Ongoing interrogations of technological mediation will persist in shaping our comprehension and utilisation, not only of synthetic laughter and artificial emotion but also of our evolving relationship with advanced 'canning' systems and their impact on human experience.

[13] Warshow, *More is Less*, 42.

[14] Gunn, *Canned Laughter*, 437.

[15] Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter*, 129–142; 143–154.

[16] Lockyer and Pickering, *Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour and Comedy*, 1–15.

[17] Manovich, *Everyday Media Life*, 319.

Laugh Tech Then and Now

As we move closer now to questions about the effects of technological advancements in content-to-user mediation and how to debate their moral dimensions, one may deem it prudent to consider the current ethical implications when laugh tech is applied and on what preceding grounds. Today, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the integration of long-distance communication and interaction spaces in educational, professional, and social spaces with Zoom, or popular online streaming apps like Instagram or TikTok, we rely heavily on digital interfaces that facilitate remote interactivity. Sometimes, this interactivity is recorded as live-like content for delayed consumption by students, for professional development purposes, or personal entertainment. Regardless of the end-user context, all these experience-at-at-distance platforms rely increasingly on laugh-box technologies. It is commonplace now for mediation software to offer a suite of laugh emojis as reaction buttons, so viewers who are watching live can express their emotional states with more digital nuance while their physical bodies are not present.[18] To better comprehend why developers so readily rely on laugh mediation technologies here means to revisit the trajectory of the laugh track's original application as I have already briefly sketched it out.

Then and now, the idea of canned laugh reactions was and is to ensure continuous engagement and to preserve the animacy of the original experience. With canned laughter in the television studio, this was done via targeted acoustic exaggeration and phonic manipulation, by adding a layer of emotional reaction to the humorous responses of the on-site audience that lived through the recorded event and was present. However, when it proved economically beneficial to television studio recordings and the technology rapidly evolved, the preservation of laugh reactions and their intentional rearrangement during post-production eliminated the immersive studio live experience, for there was no longer a need for the primordial audience to attend. At that point, the practice of laugh 'canning' essentially disconnected the emotional impact of the experience from the experience itself. This disconnection then extended to the person ultimately experiencing it, both after and finally even during the recording. The evolving use of the laugh box and canned laughter concealed the very act of mediation, creating an illusion of a direct experience unmediated and unguided by artifice. However, the most ingenious trick at play here, as one might argue, is that synthetic laughter evolved into something that takes by replacing, so no absence can be felt as there was always laughter. To the viewer at home, the audience was always there. The history of the laugh box, in essence, represents a shift towards this obscured mechanisation of human emotion. The device controls and manipulates laughter, turning a spontaneous, human reaction into a predictable, programmable response by intervening in our human involvement in the world and stealing its perceived immediacy from us. With the help of the box, operators could control and direct human emotions, moving them from their original, organic context of creation and

[18] Nickl and Müller, *The Joke's On Us*, n.p.

perception into a new, artificial one. It is a development that raises further questions about the policies governing entertainment regulations, the veiled mass manipulation of human emotions, and the moral implications of using technology to remote control our responses.

These concerns are particularly relevant in the context of research contributions in the field of so-called psycho-technology[19], which makes it crucial to consider the wider implications of technologies like the laugh box on our understanding and experience of humour. The primary recipients of artificial mirth are enormous numbers of viewers who unknowingly listen to mechanically reproduced laughter, initially recorded from live audiences. It is a circumstance that also introduces the question of whether these viewers, responding to artificial laughter, consented to this form of manipulation by simply using their television sets, and turning them on to watch scheduled content programming. Did they agree to a device that could potentially alter their emotional responses, eliciting laughter where it might not naturally occur? Did comedy entertainment programmes make it a point to inform the viewers about the nature of the laugh sounds that it would expose audiences to? These questions reverberate in scholarship on mass-mediated entertainment. They underscore further issues around the relationship between media content producers and content consumers and aspects of legal significance such as informed consent.[20] The laugh box device is not merely a tool for enhancing comedic timing; it potentially manipulates the emotional responses of the beholder. Its technological workways essentially transform laughter and in the process create a novel terrain of emotional labour. A more detailed understanding of this conversion process will help us define another set of questions next, about the potentially monstrous nature of humorous entertainment, the manipulation of human emotions, and the ethical implications of using popular media technologies to control people's reactions on a scale of millions if not billions.

[19] *Psychotechnik*, or psycho-technology, a dominantly German research discipline that originated in the early 20th century, is fundamentally concerned with the optimisation of human-machine interfaces. This field seeks to enhance the understanding of human interactions with technological systems, with the ultimate objective of improving these interactions to maximise efficiency, safety, and user satisfaction. In a more academic context, psycho-technology employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating principles from psychology, engineering, and design to develop systems that are not only functional but also intuitive and user-friendly. It is a critical field of study in an increasingly technologically driven world, where the interaction between humans and machines is commonplace. A specific application of psycho-technology can be seen in the design of modern aircraft cockpits. The layout, functionality, and interface of the cockpit are meticulously designed to ensure that pilots can effectively manage the complex systems of the aircraft. This involves careful consideration of human cognitive and physical capabilities and intuition for certain placements of device features and procedural workings, ensuring that critical controls are easily accessible, and that information is presented in a clear, understandable manner.

[20] Paravulescu, *Even Laughter?*, 521.

Canned Laughter's Can of Miscellaneously Monstrous Moral Worms

Douglass' original laugh box housed 320 human laughs on 32 tape loops within its iron exterior. Locating these recorded voices as secondary objects within the larger hardware of the laugh box, and how both interrelate, as highlighted by William Lycan, is essential to contemplate more nuanced and configurative approaches to a human-machine relationship. "The ethics of humor has suffered from failure to distinguish objects of evaluation", writes Lycan, especially where the appraisal of ordinary humorous acts, everyday joking and laughing, assesses something as morally bad or good without much thought given to recombinant systems that host these acts.[21] This is the place from which the dubious ethics of the laugh box emerged. Who asked the human laughers, the primary subjects from whose vocal cords and bodies these sound objects emanated, to donate their laughter well beyond their lifespan? Were individuals offered financial compensation or recognition in name? Do the laughs, these sounds of amusement that haunt countless syndicated reruns of popular late-night shows and sitcoms[22] around the world, come with a legal form of intellectual property or voice copyright[23] that expires at some point in time, or will studios who operate in the United States or outside be legally allowed to use them in perpetuity for sonic productions that audiences are charged money for? Does this raise a compensation issue, as paid actors would normally receive residuals for reruns of works that their faces and voices appeared in?

The laugh box, sheltering recorded laughter in the voices of people who never consented to their storage (see Figure 4), thus mirrors a complex issue. Museum studies scholars, for instance, discuss it as well when talking about the appropriation and display of Indigenous artefacts without permission. Both situations involve the use of elements integral to a group's identity or elements of social import, all repurposed without consent, potentially leading to misrepresentation or exploitation. The automation of laughter, as embodied by Douglass' device, may understandably induce institutional unease when such questions arise from the practice of canning, of dissociating action from reaction, of ownership and laughter as waged emotional labour, particularly given the decreased visibility of this technology then and even more so today in its advanced digital forms.

There is no evidence that Douglass informed any of the individuals whose laughter he recorded of the intention to use their vocals as samples later. Nor did he have to obtain ethics clearance for attending mime shows at which he would record frequently, for the mimes' silent performance produced a more pure and easily editable resource pool of

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21 Lycan, *Humor and Morality*, 256–257.

22 Butler, *The Sitcom*, 2–9.

23 The United States Copyright Act defines a sound recording as "works that result from the fixation of a series of musical, spoken, or other sounds but not including sounds accompanying a motion picture or other audiovisual work. […] Sound recordings captured by purely mechanical means without originality of any kind also lack a sufficient amount of authorship to warrant copyright protection".

funny audience reactions.[24] Researchers concerned with morality in popular media culture regard the advent of laughter in a can as potentially one of the most problematic acts of emotional manipulation in this field's history. The laugh box was designed with commercial interests in mind, with little consideration for future implications of use. Its manipulation of emotional response, while seemingly innocuous, points to ethical concerns about the autonomy of the audience and the authenticity of their reactions. The laugh box, in essence, commodified laughter, turning it into a tool for controlling audience response. To state once more the wider implications for usages of technologies of mediation without impact estimates, regulatory oversight, or pre-emptive measures of protection for the users, this has profound implications for our understanding of humour, emotion, and the role technology plays in all this. One may need only think of how many times per day our devices ask us for consent to action updates or install an app or software item that can access all our data, including photos of our faces and recordings of our voices, and how we may playfully shrug off the fact that fully grasping what is at stake eludes us.

Once again, however, this feat of user-mediation technology to hide the beast's true nature underneath the enjoyable feelings that come with operating a device like a laugh machine or smartphone and all the things it offers us rests on historic precedence. Given the profound appeal of the laugh box to mass comedy entertainment producers as well as to consumers[25], it may be unsurprising that its rise was swift and seemingly unstoppable. Initially used sparingly on live television shows only, it quickly became a regular feature and studio fixture. By the end of the 1950s, orchestrating human laughter for videotaped comedy shows had become an industry-wide standard in the United States. This shift in the entertainment industry led to a significant change in the role of live audiences. They were no longer the primary source of laughter during tapings but were gradually replaced by the box, which also meant production schedules could be staggered and actors made to work around the clock and on weekends despite strict union regulations. Laughter at the push of a button grew exponentially opportune to television production facilities that capitalised on the ability to produce more content more speedily, as more frequency bands were released for public broadcasts and the introduction of affordable television devices saw a dramatic decline in movie attendance and book sales. In 1946, only 7000 television sets were sold in the continental US, and only 172,000 in 1948, while the numbers climbed dramatically by 1950 with 5 million sets sold. Ten years later, nearly 90 per cent of homes in America contained a television device[26], and this home entertainment fixture needed programming.

By the early 1960s, a vastly changed American entertainment landscape had rendered live audiences effectively obsolete. They appeared only sporadically and exclusively as props over the next five decades, serving as real-life support performers

[24] Giotta, *Sounding Live*, 331–332.

[25] Manovich, *Everyday Media Life*, 319–322.

[26] Abramson, *The History of Television*, 18–23.

who concealed the artificial nature of the pre-recorded laughter for the viewers watching from home. With that change in media production and consumption habits, the laugh box became more trusted as a scene partner than human laughter, both by the producers and by us. It was at this point that canned reactions replaced natural reactions, producing a sort of synthetic social interaction space. The laughs, as Douglass' meticulously kept inventory records illustrate, were deposited in a machine. They were categorised along a spectrum of vocal intensity and sorted according to geographical origins from different cultural communities in America. The result was increased savings for costly recording sessions that were easier to repeat, and raw footage that was cheaper to edit and to re-arrange and reuse for differently cut versions of the same episode for different audience types in America and abroad.

Within myriad discussions of the ethics of humour in mainstream entertainment and popular culture in the United States alone[27], the laugh box's technological advances and ethical implications thus loom large. Brewer's influential work on this topic illustrates that automation functions as a cultural tool of moral coercion, numbing, and deception[28]. However, the questions around this triptych have yet to be honed for their broader application to screen-based comedy entertainment and the kind of laugh-device morality that I pursue here as a post-institutional punchline about the hidden dangers of interface designs that humour renders deceptively unproblematic: both for a wider public and the national media regulator in the case of the United States at the time. As Pfaller observes with a certain degree of apprehension, mechanical laughter and popular media have long been assumed to be nonmoral and ethically neutral.[29] Put differently, only people could be deceitful, not their devices.

Boxed-up laughter seemed at best an innocent parlour trick to entertain and nothing more. Audiences and censors alike did not think much of the mediated interpassivity of the laugh box. After all, the common argument held that laugh tracks left a viewer with the option of laughing with, against, or not at all when viewing a programme with canned laugh prompts. However, the argument about the autonomy of the viewer to react freely would require fair fighting conditions for the individual consumer in one corner of the proverbial ring and an enormous entertainment industry sector in the other. For the financial investment in the development, improvement, refinement, and camouflage of canned laugh tracks and the mediation affordances of synthetic emotions is staggering. Notable industry actors, such as the Walt Disney Company, have poured billions of dollars into these technologies and they keep investing equally big to develop predictive AI models to determine how much audiences will enjoy every single moment of a film and the very minute a viewer will laugh.[30] This significant

[27] Sternheimer, *Pop Culture Panics*, see the introduction and conclusion. Sternheimer's short text examines extreme reactions to American popular culture over the past century, including crusades against comic books, TV series, and other forms of popular culture content. This reveals much about the moral panics and their sociology in everyday life in the United States.

[28] Brewer, *Don't Make Me Laugh!*, 10.

[29] Pfaller, *Interpassivity*, see the introduction.

[30] Gross and Kevenson, *Emotion Elicitation Using Film*, 87; Brown, *Disney Building Facial Recognition*, n.p.

financial commitment underscores the perceived value and proven potential of these tools in shaping audience engagement and emotional response, which matters for advertisement deals and securing customer loyalty by keeping the levels of emotional engagement through the entertainment products at the highest level possible.

Scholars have increasingly voiced ethical concerns about the use of canned laughter, with their worries intensifying in recent years.[31] The unease may be due to the core mechanics of the laugh box, which uses a synthesised form of human communication to stimulate specific, intentional, and predictable mood changes. These principles intersect with current discussions about our virtual presence in cyberspace, where we exist as disembodied voices, replicable faces, and even entire (s)canned bodies as envisioned by the American science fiction comedy-drama television series *Upload* (2020–present).[32] All thanks to advanced sonic and visual AI capture and (re)generation technologies that can produce deceptively realistic versions of our voices and visages and imitate an excellently counterfeit corporeal presence in live streams with the latest sound and image technologies. In the context of this remarkable shift towards digital interactions, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic that boosted the production of newer and more life-like mediations of our human presence, a growing number of researchers are re-evaluating what it means to record and replay laughter.[33]

This discussion is particularly relevant given our increased access to comedy content available via streaming services and tablets and smartphone apps like Facebook and X/Twitter, all media giants that employ their versions of canned laugh tech based on costly, proprietary algorithms[34] that are not accessible to the public nor governments for oversight. In his recent work on laughter and entertainment media consumption, Robert Pfaller thus makes it a point to revisit his and Slavoj Žižek's original concept of passive laughter[35], which is laughter that is detached from the physical self and body: effectively, it is canned.[36] What reverberates throughout my discussion is a concern I share with him about the implications of the act of canning, especially as technology continues to evolve rapidly while our sense of urgency is soothingly placated in direct relation to the advances that make laugh tech appear all the smoother for it.

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[31] Raney and Jennings, *Entertainment and Enjoyment*, 325–326.

[32] *Upload* was created by Greg Daniels. The series is set in a future where humans can 'upload' themselves into a virtual afterlife of their choosing. When computer programmer Nathan dies prematurely, he is uploaded to a luxurious digital afterlife location called Lakeview. However, he remains connected to the living or offline world through Nora, his living customer service 'Angel'. The series explores various themes such as love, mortality, technology, and ethical dilemmas in a world where death is not the end, but the beginning of a new digital, a synthetic or 'canned' existence.

[33] Millière, *Deep Learning and Synthetic Media*, 231.

[34] Nickl and Müller, *The Joke's On Us*, n.p.

[35] Žižek, *The Interpassive Subject*, n.p.

[36] Pfaller, *Interpassivity*, 56–60.

The Obsolescence of the Private Laugh

While we may readily accept the notion of being human and having a rehearsed capacity for humour and laughter as suggested in the epigraph that features Helmuth Plessner's anthropological viewpoint on the matter, we must also acknowledge that the ethical and moral implications of this reality are not fully understood.[37] Our lack of understanding becomes particularly evident when considering technologies like the laugh box, which manipulate and commodify these inherently human responses and confront us with complex questions about consent, compensation, and the potential for exploitation or misrepresentation. Moreover, there is also a lack of knowledge about how synthetic laughter interacts with digital spaces. Even less is known about how technology that generates laughter interacts with us. Should we start considering the impact of artificial laughter on our social networks and our disembodied selves? There are unpredictable consequences associated with the 'beast' of canned laughter and its effects on the sole person, the individual, which is why it is important to revisit the work of thinkers who have already explored this topic close to the time that the phenomenon appeared.

Günther Anders, a pioneer thinker and critical theorist in the field of media technologies, described the use of mediation and replication devices such as canned laughter as a transactional condition of entertainment culture in his 1958 text *The Obsolescence of Privacy*. Reflecting then on the impact of television on the individual, he suggests that we are being consumed by our media box as we consume it. And that we do not think much of it at all. We often favour what we perceive as the superior quality of the mediated artifice over our imperfect reality, striving to imitate the refined design and absorbing the facsimile's flawlessness in the process. As Anders explains it, we engage with this exchange in the form of 'phantom cannibalism', which means simultaneously consuming and being consumed by the devices that bring a 'content world' replica into our homes and living rooms. This makes the canned product seem more appealing than the unprocessed original, rendering physical live-action events and the laughs they elicit obsolete as inferior products. The allure of canning is that it allows audiences to consume a form of remote amusement, laughs harvested from a crop of pure fun, devoid of any sonic taint such as a cough or other unpleasant auditory disturbances.

In this scenario, as Anders suggests, we transform ourselves into monstrous, self-devouring consumers of 'truer-than-true' human emotional expressions. Mediation technologies have trained us to crave these expressions, creating a cycle of consumption that continually feeds our desire for this enhanced, mediated reality. The phenomenon raises acute queries about the nature of our engagement with these technologies and the ethical implications of mediated anthropophagy. It challenges us to reconsider our understanding of authenticity and the value we place on 'perfected' content-mediation experiences as consumable entertainment goods and

[37] Prusak, *Helmuth Plessner's Laughing and Crying Revisited*, 43.

industrially produced feelings. This, Anders writes, becomes exceedingly apparent in the case of television, where 'reality TV' based on live-reaction recordings of regular people's emotional responses succeeds when it replaces the semblance of artifice with recorded realness:

> Today – because progress must be – "*true life*" *is produced*; the non-simulated scream, the real tear and actual faint are *the choreographed reality produced to provide a story*, offered and consumed in its phantom-form. One has transformed the viewer into a *phantom-cannibal*, who devours fellow humans who are ensnared by recording devices, a cannibal who is nervous, even feels betrayed, if the meal is not served at the usual hour or is taken off-the-air completely.
>
> Put otherwise: the social situations 'to encounter' and 'to visit' are transformed into modes of consumption in which one human being is 'surrendered' to *another* who 'is supplied with' him or her. The goods on offer now include our fellow humans, yes, primarily these: we have all become virtual eaters and a meal for others and as such the situation is *cannibalistic*. A complete view of our existence today is not possible without considering the cannibalistic practices of eating and being eaten.[38]

Considering Anders' thought-provoking perspective on what it means to mediate humanness and artificial feeling highlights the opportunity to connect different kinds of scholarship and fields of critical thought on mass media entertainment with each other. As I suggest here, canning is not, and for that matter never has been, merely an issue siloed restrictively into such areas of academic thought as popular culture studies or scholarship on (American) television and humour. The mediation principles of canning affect as much today the digital humanities as they do a host of other fields, like spoken word and audio production, sonic design, psychology, studies of commercial law and neural integrity rights of users, as well as the vast and quickly-changing field of screen cultures, especially when considering the widespread consumption of laugh-based media on various content-consumer devices. We must consider the role all this plays in the evolution of our media cultures and online technologies to better assess the 'cannibalistic situation' that Anders describes.

As we continue to advance technologically, the use of devices like the laugh box may become even more prevalent, thus heightening the stakes as laid out here. Understanding the implications of this trend of 'eat and being eaten' is vital, as it could fundamentally alter our interactions with media and radically change our understanding of humour. After all, the mediated phantom cannibalism that Anders defines, where we consume mere shadows of the emotional expressions of others as if they were the 'real' thing, suggests that we have already become uncannily passive participants in the mediated give-and-take of human emotion. We are mere extras in

[38] Anders, *The Obsolescence of Privacy*, 21.

the way that we experience feeling, living through synthetic scenarios of a sense of humour every day on our screens and through our mediation devices as we consume canned laughter. And yet, looking at today's runaway impact of the established genre of reality television, we seem to accept this passive role without much resistance. In line with Anders, it is this acceptance that one may argue should prompt us to interrogate our individual, our private relationship with comedy entertainment media, our understanding of the human capacity to sense and enact humour, and the ethical implications of our increasing reliance on 'the can'.

Taming Tech Monsters

The idea that laughter can be fed to us upon command, instructed from afar, reiterates the stimulating possibility of long-distance and asynchronous enactments of human emotion: if laughter can be involuntary, can our morality or lack thereof be as well? This leads us to consider other trends where mass media entertainment technologies employ comedy not merely for amusement, but to influence our sense of internal values. If such is the case, we must contemplate the implications for us as a society. This is particularly pertinent considering our consumption of such media if a pleasurable state of being human, laughter and a sense of humour, is weaponised by an industrial entertainment complex for its financial gains. Put bluntly, we are at a pivotal point where we must critically evaluate the ethical implications of our engagement with humorous media products, particularly those that manipulate our emotional responses for commercial interests.

One could argue further that laughter, as an authentic, intellectual response, should be protected, maintained, and preserved. Some might even suggest that all forms of canned laughter should be banned or made illegal, advocating for engagement with content devoid of artificial laughter. This would enable us to independently determine if an idea or behaviour is humorous or distasteful. However, the reality is that many of us opt for the path of least resistance. The popularity of social media platforms like WhatsApp or WeChat, which connect billions of users and increasingly feature content inclusive of pre-recorded laughter and laugh emojis to indicate one's merriment, suggests a tendency to evade genuine laughter if it necessitates substantial effort. Being a self-aware human, one might contend, is demanding. Apps based on the affordances of the laugh box and its mediation principles offer a convenient alternative. The mere fact that they exist suggests that we have devised a method to circumvent the intellectual and emotional labour connected to morality and reacting authentically in a hundred different ways with reflective nuance. We have developed mechanisms to comfortably outsource our laughter, suitably choosing pre-recorded laughs over our own. In doing so, we dodge confrontation with our humanity and the moral implications of our humour artefacts. This skirting, however, while seemingly

easy, poses problems, like verifying the continued authenticity of our emotional responses and the long-term implications of outsourcing our laughter at increasingly larger scales online.

The intersection of laughter and morality presents an ever more complex phenomenon the further we investigate its inner makings and connections to current popular mediation technologies. Engaging with humour humanly necessitates both intellectual and emotional labour. Yet, we seldom consider what underpins such laughter and how that form of humour transpires. Humour has ethical implications that warrant further examination. Much of the social critique surrounding humour has focused on its capacity to foster social cohesion. However, these perspectives frequently overlook the negative aspects and ethical implications of humour, as well as the devices that facilitate the perpetuation of human laughter without human involvement. As well, humour operates within intricate systems that we have yet to fully comprehend. There is a dearth of comprehensive studies that consider the ideological implications of the laugh box and the cybernetic human-laugh-device-assemblages. What does the laugh box demand from us, with us, as us? There is, as Ariadna Matamoros Fernández, Aleesha Rodriguez, and Patrik Wikstrom point out[39], a certain cognitive disregard for our poor grasp of popular culture and media consumer ethics that allows synthetic laughter to persist in various contexts, some of them deemed immoral or improper, or even harmful to vulnerable user groups like minors, depending on the content that the canned laughs are paired with. This, then, shifts the focus from what we 'laugh at' to how we 'laugh as' and under which conditions our technologies are letting us do so.

The understudied intellectual complexities that canned laughter presents underscore the often-overlooked intersection of ethics and humour in our scholarly consciousness. The mechanics of humour, once a subject of interrogation, have become so integrated and well-hidden within our media-technology landscape that they often go unnoticed. They have become so seamlessly human that we no longer question their presence, hence my efforts here to 'un-hide' them from historical and cultural oblivion. Unlike other forms of popular cultural technologies of mediation like film, canned laughter did not incite the same level of heated argument when it was first introduced. This is likely because it was perceived as context-based instead of content-driven, different as a 'thing' entirely to the Hays or Motion Picture Production Film Code regulations of the 1903s, which may serve us as an illustrative case in point. The Hays Code was the result of a prolonged public interest and intellectual debate over explicit depictions of censored content items or lines of dialogue in films, as they were artificial objects rather than neutral human capabilities to perceive amusement and react to it. Laughter as a thing itself, in contrast, managed to fly under the regulatory radar due to its perceived innocuousness as a mere vehicle for content things. It appeared as a neutral tool only, presumably a natural thing that was free of meanings or deliberate intentions. This highlights in repeat reference to Lycan the

[39] Matamoros Fernández et al., *Humor that Harms?*, 182–184.

need for a more critical examination of the role of laughter and humour in our society as a human-thing assemblage, particularly in the context of what exactly constitutes an object or process of technological mediation and that object's or process's ethical infrastructure and affective configuration.

The Box as Warning Sign

Building on the complexities of humour and its ethical implications as indicated by the laugh box, one may find in the concept of 'boxed-up', canned, or synthetic device morality a most revealing and intellectually productive aspect of modern culture. This monster phenomenon, where we are both the consumed and the consumer, is a complex process that has been explored by thinkers such as Anders. In his philosophical writings on the technology of fabricated feelings and human affect, he details how this process unfolds and highlights the paradoxical nature of this relationship. As users of media content via technologies of mediation, we create and enable the very devices that eventually exert control over us. This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of laugh tech, where the human act of laughter is outsourced to a device. This device dictates when and how laughter should occur, effectively controlling a fundamental aspect of human expression. The surrender to the monsters of laugh tech, as Anders would explain it, is then a form of self-sacrifice.

This observation produces in the final instance of my case study of synthetic laughter and the laugh box some closing topics for consideration here, such as the past and ongoing nature of our relationship with humour mediation devices and the potential implications for our understanding of human morality and how, and if, we can still enact it. Again, in Anders' reflections on the impact of the television box that lived in nearly every single home across America in the 1960s, he provides a detailed analysis of the self-sacrificial submission of humans to the monsters of laugh tech. He astutely describes the complex dynamics at play and the potential consequences of this outsourced device morality, writing:

> Every machine is already its use. I already tried to prove this unpleasant thesis in Volume 1 of The Obsolescence of Human Beings, whilst discussing television. What reaches humans through the television set is inconsequential, a nuclear explosion, a queen's coronation or a beauty contest. Who sits in front of it is inconsequential, a farmer in a Siberian kolkhoz, a tailor in London or the owner of a petrol station in Colorado. What matters alone, is the circumstance that these events arrive in a de-realised phantom-state and that **the consumption of phantoms replaces experience of world** [...]

> This circumstance shapes and disfigures humans, this prejudices the way humans relate to the world and vice versa.[40]

Anders' perspective on the 'de-realised' world of television indeed prompts contemplation. As we interact with devices that generate artificial laughter, we are, in a way, entrusting a fundamental aspect of our human expression to them and their mediated version of reality. However, this exchange is not a total surrender, but rather a nuanced interaction that shapes our experiences and responses. It presents a dynamic exchange that calls for thoughtful consideration and ongoing dialogue. In return for the amusement these devices offer, we do pay a price, even if it is not immediately evident. This situation echoes the cautionary tale of Dorian Gray, whose true self morphed into something monstrous as he became detached from his humanity, which had been outsourced to exist within a picture frame. His life was more vividly depicted, even lived, on canvas than in off-canvas-screen reality. It represents the moral decay of an individual who lived more authentically as a strangely mediated entity than as a member of human society.

The increasing prevalence of these mediation matters that turn on the technological principles of Douglass' laugh box technology can be found in various places in our everyday culture, implying a potentially concerning trend. The devices work by replacing aspects of our humanity, yet we perceive them as harmless extensions of ourselves rather than potential threats. Despite warnings written by critical media thinkers such as Anders more than eight decades ago, we continue to embrace the devices without fully considering the implications of their use. On the issue of televised mediation as our primary source of experiencing the world and our feelings, he says: "This circumstance shapes and disfigures humans, this prejudices the way humans relate to the world and vice versa".[41] A critical examination of the role of popular media devices in our lives and a consideration of the potential ethical implications of their widespread use could thus be highly beneficial. This knowledge could help us navigate future challenges that will inevitably arise from our continued engagement with humorous media products that mainly are happening online these days. As these products are increasingly created and produced by AI and algorithms, they can easily and invisibly 'phantomise' a world of reaction data that we offer up to them.

Synthetic Laughter in Posthuman Cultures

As this discussion draws to a close, it has become evident that the intersection of technology and human emotion, particularly the mediation of laughter, is a complex and significant field of study. As our engagement with technologies that mimic and

[40] Anders, *The Obsolescence of Privacy*, 25.

[41] Anders, *The Obsolescence of Privacy*, 25.

even control human emotional responses increases, it becomes necessary to critically examine the implications of this phenomenon in newer and emerging fields of thought. This is especially pertinent in the context of laugh tech, where laughter, an essential human expression and reaction, is outsourced in a state of 'cannedness'[42] to devices, both mechanical and by now digital, as a mediation technology that rarely registers as such. The insights provided by critical thinkers on media technologies and the ethics of mediation in popular culture offer a valuable framework for understanding this phenomenon.

One key finding from a deeper and sustained engagement with this topic also suggests that our interaction with these 'box' technologies is altering our human essence, or at the very least, our experience of it. It necessitates the creation of new knowledge frameworks to keep pace with and to accurately describe synthetic laughter's role in the emerging forms of post-human subjectivity. This assessment aligns with the work of Rosi Braidotti, who has developed a productive theoretical framework for critical posthumanities in response to rapid cultural change and significant historical events across the globe.[43] Braidotti's work provides a crucial context for understanding our current existence and anticipating future realities, whose benefit to progressive scholarship I would subscribe to here with my case study of synthetic laughter as she asks: What are the parameters that define a posthuman knowing subject, scientific credibility, and ethical accountability? As Braidotti envisions it, the posthuman, knowing subject must be understood as a relational, embodied, and embedded entity, capable of affect and accountable to their actions in the world, rather than merely a transcendental consciousness. From this claim emerges the mind-body continuum, or the 'embrainment' of the body and the embodiment of the mind, which crucially would help us navigate the complexities of our rapidly evolving technological landscape and phenomena like canning. For canning, like other technologies of popular mediation, seeks to sever and distance elements placed along the mind-body-brain continuum, trying to disjoint and separate them.

As concerns the shorthand of the monstrous as a cultural metaphor, while some view the laugh box and other popular devices and mediation technologies as benign expressions of commercial comedy, there are indeed potential risks. We may be compromising more of our human essence than we realise. The ontology of our human monstrosity is intertwined with the ontology of our technological progress. Monsters as cultural metaphors of warning and anxiety have throughout history served as cautions of the potential horrors unleashed by human creation without foresight and thought given to potential harm and hurt. In this context, visions of future box technologies may paint a distinctly unsettling picture. What we may want to remember though is that these visions already emerged decades ago when the idea of networked humanness and a vast human nonconscious that existed in online

[42] McGurl, *The Posthuman Comedy*, 533–540.

[43] Braidotti, *Critical Posthumanities*, 31–35.

spaces was still in its infancy. How we continue them and carry on their legacies is up to us.

One last thing to express here, in summary, is that the mechanisms of humour and laughter, despite their significant role in human interaction and communication, remain surprisingly underexplored. Studies that probe popular comedy as cultural interface technology, and the moral implications this entails for viewers, are few and far between. Historically, this lack of focus can be attributed to academia's dismissal of popular culture and humorous entertainment humour studies as inconsequential. The examination of laughter has traditionally been confined to the domains of philosophy departments, leaving a gap in our understanding of its broader implications. In this context, however, it may be beneficial to broaden the conversation and seek further dialogue and trade insights with academic colleagues in areas like computer science and programming, or sound engineers and sonic architects working to produce different forms and applications for synthetic laughter. The science of comedy could benefit from examining the cultural technology of humour as a somewhat precarious interface, shifting focus from the internal state of being amused to what enables this state outside the human. If one may put it in terms of an ongoing odyssey of moral humour and its unknown next port of call: where is laughter headed outside and past the institution of the human?

Douglass' work on the intersection of technology and human emotion provides a valuable perspective in this regard. His use of technology to mediate humans and their emotions shows how the act of technological mediation and a culture that celebrates this as a sign of progress can both augment and lessen our human experience. Here, in this chapter, this ambiguity offers a nuanced understanding of the potential trajectory of laugh tech and its past, present, and future applications. The trajectory towards a form of mediated human devolution is a concern, but it is not a foregone conclusion. While there are potential risks associated with the increasing mediation of our emotional responses, there are also opportunities for understanding and growth.

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Contagious Clown

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Compose a close-up image of a person’s lower face, accentuating multiple rows of teeth and highlighting their laughing mouth. Infuse the visual with a colour scheme reminiscent of The Joker, evoking the character’s distinctive and vibrant palette for added context and impact’.

Abstract

Chapter 7
The Cheshire Clown: Joker's Infectious Laughter

The Joker is one of our most notoriously laughing pop cultural nightmares. He creates worshippers and victims by spreading his infectious laugh and is both in personal union: one of the most polarising 'gods' and one of the most unholy and vile 'monsters' in popular culture. In DC comic books and (animated) films, Joker's laugh can detach itself from that of the violent clown. It can spread. In visual fiction, Joker's laugh is contagious in two ways: on the one hand, as a form of physical and mental illness, and on the other, as a symbolic vehicle for civil disobedience, escalating social protest and outbursts of public violence. In both cases, Joker affects the physiology of others by 'jokerising' them – those 'infected' by the Clown Prince of Crime not only behave but also look like the Joker. While other authors of this edited collection argue that humour and laughter turn gods into humans and bring to light the human in the monstrous, this chapter explores the opposite: monstrous laughter as a wicked facial disease, as the embodiment of sick jokes and a threat to society and the human. Focusing on the iconography and 'epidemic' impact of laughter in recent Joker stories, this chapter clarifies the post/moral 'cultural work', 'aesthetic achievements' and cultural ideas of science and art personified in one of the most iconic supervillains of our time.

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7

The Cheshire Clown

Joker's Infectious Laughter

Anna-Sophie Jürgens, Anastasiya Fiadotava & David C Tscharke

What would a clown be without an audience?
On the DC Comic Book *Joker*

The Maestro of Malevolent Mirth[1]

Although created by Bill Finger, Bob Kane, and Jerry Robinson as Batman's colourful comic book antagonist for the DC Universe in April 1940, the roots of the Joker character can be traced back to late nineteenth-century traditions of violent clown plays and pantomimes as well as the cultural discourse unfolding around them. For instance, the iconography of the Joker, i.e. his whitened, skull-like face with its exorbitantly overemphasised (painted or flesh-cut) mouth, is based on Paul Leni's 1928 film *The Man Who Laughs*, featuring Conrad Veidt as a travelling comic performer bearing a monstrous, permanent grin.[2] The film itself is an adaptation of Victor Hugo's 1869 novel *L'Homme qui rit*, which draws on a cultural mould based on extreme body aesthetics and the amalgamation of humour and violence. The former were embodied, for instance, in the macabre pantomimes of French performer Jean-Gaspard Deburau

[1] This is what the Joker is called in "Public Luna-Tic Number One!", Detective Comics #388. Ellsworth et al, 41.

[2] Spear, *Batman*, 40; Andrae, *Creators of the Superheroes*, 70.

Jürgens, A-S., Fiadotava, A. & Tscharke, D. C. 2024. The Cheshire Clown: Joker's Infectious Laughter. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 183–204. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

and, later, in the world-renowned acrobatic clown plays of the Hanlon Lees Brothers. At the end of the nineteenth century, the performances and style of the latter – who enlarged their painted clown mouths up to their ears – inspired famous writers, poets, and playwrights to explore the macabre, sadistic side of Pierrots, clowns, and other characters wearing cannibalistic clown smiles and engaging in violent activities.[3] Their legacy lives on in twentieth-century and contemporary clown stories and aesthetics.[4]

However, the creators of the Joker also directly refer to the clown as a source of inspiration. Jerry Robinson, who stated "I loved the circus"[5], was captivated by the idea of a sinister and contradictory clown. "I knew that I wanted someone who was bizarre and exotic", he wrote, someone "visually striking" who can serve as "a marvellous counterpoint to the sinister, shadowy figure of Batman".[6] Bob Kane, who created the first Batman-Joker story, explains retrospectively: "I drew the joker straighter and more illustratively than my ghost artists. They made him grotesquely clown-like, longer and thinner, and so exaggerated he looked like a buffoon".[7]

It is thus hardly surprising that in early comic book stories, "[l]ike a circus, the Joker's schemes are loud, grand, goofy affairs, suffused with danger and, a wild card, one who puts play into play".[8] Still physiognomically intact, hilarious, and mad in a gentle way, the early Joker is a stuntman who performs tricks for Batman and other antagonists, because "what would be a clown without an audience?". He is more "a master showman at work" than a "Master Psychologist" as he would like to be called[9] (The Joker #2 and #7)[10]; a villain, who is "trickier than a whole circus!" (The Joker #1). This early Joker travels in a circus-like fashion in a camper, his so-called "Ho-Home-on-Wheels" (The Joker #5), and self-referentially plays with his own origins. In *The Joker* #5, for example, he steals a painting entitled "The Laughing Man". More recent stories – including *Batman: The Man Who Laughs* (2008) and *The Batman Who Laughs* (2019) – follow this tradition, but also reinterpret the Joker's connection with circus and other forms of popular entertainment such as amusement parks (e.g. *Nightwing Volume 3: Death of the Family* (2013)). In line with Joker's motto "us clowns gotta stick together!"[11] clowns and clown-like creatures and contraptions surround or accompany

[3] Jürgens, "The Pathology of Joker's Dance".

[4] Jürgens, "Being the Alien".

[5] Robinson in Andrea, *Creators of the Superheroes*, 104.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Kane in Andrea, *Creators of the Superheroes*, 70.

[8] Smith, "And doesn't All the World Love a Clown?", 188.

[9] O'Neil, *The Joker*, 41, 130.

[10] All emphases in the quotes cited in this chapter are in the original texts, which only rarely have page numbers. Authors are fully aware that it is insufficient to reference the authorship of comics with only one or two names as it is common in academic writing, as each comic is the result of the talent and hard work of many people. It is a limited amount of space that does not allow us to include all writers and artists – colourists, letterers, cover-artists, co-authors and many more, but readers will find more information in the sources listed at the end of the chapter.

[11] Higgins et al, "The Laughter of the 1962 Tanganyika 'Laughter Epidemic'".

the "Ringmaster of Riotous Robbery – that Tycoon of Teasing Terror" in many of his mischievous, murderous adventures (compare e.g. *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988)).

Most of Joker's "adventures" are directed against Batman's efforts to restore order and peace to the city of Gotham. Since Batman categorically refuses to kill the criminals he fights (so as not to become one of them), and since Joker just as categorically breaks out of prisons and mental institutions and uses increasingly devious methods to get Batman to kill him, they find themselves in an Ouroboros-like circle of perpetual confrontation and mutual re-creation. Joker gets to the heart of this by saying to Batman: "We ain't just loopy…" – "We're **in** a loop".[12] In complex and sophisticated reflections, contemporary Batman comics devote great attention to this difficult relationship and the role of the Joker. The 2020 story *Scars* is an example thereof: in it, the power of the Joker is dissected as the power of a man who convinces people that he is "more than a man, more than the worst psychopath, even. – He's convinced them that he **is**, at core, the bearer of whatever their greatest fear is". The Joker is revealed as a master in psychological manipulation, whose victims are "afraid to heal for fear he'll come after them again, come howling back out of the dark, laughing at them".[13] In short, the once silly funster is now a homicidal nightmare.

Contemporary DC comics – e.g. by Scott Snyder and teams – focus on the character's inclination towards savagery and mass murder, thus exploring the Joker as a brutish psycho killer *jokerising* his world. As described for the historical Hanlon Lees clowns, whose hyperbolical painted grins provoked laughter spasms in their audience[14], the Joker's laughter is 'contagious', normally fatal, and generally – and in various and abominable ways – detached from the positive emotional states commonly associated with laughter (such as joy, mirth, and happiness). For instance, in *The Joker: Death of the Family*[15], the Joker undergoes surgery to remove his laughing face (which is stripped off his head) so that he can wear it upside down on his raw muscles; turning his physiognomy into a rotting (death) mask attached to his head with clips and rubber bands. In this story, the particularly perverse Joker not only tries to transform others into (his) grimacing doubles, as he usually does (see below), but, in the form of a sick joke, threatens to cut off their laughing faces, too. More commonly, however, the Joker deploys art and science to *jokerise* his surroundings by forcibly making others smile and laugh.

"Who am I to say? Maybe I am an artist".

"Beauty". – "That is all I have ever wanted". – explains Joker, before poisoning all the people in a pedestrian zone with a gas emanating from colourful balloons.

[12] Azzarello et al, "Two Fell Into the Hornet's Nest".

[13] Snyder et al, "Scars".

[14] Jürgens, "The Joker".

[15] Synder et al, "The Joker"

In this 2019 story, *Joker: Killer Smile 1*, Joker is introduced as someone seeking "the sublime", someone, who has always wanted "to create things that are beautiful"; and this includes: "Happiness. – Laughter. – Yes, laughter most of all. – That is true beauty". Corpses bearing his own, ghastly distorted grin are for Joker an expression of such true beauty. Obviously committed to aesthetics, when asked whether he was an artist, he replies: "Now that would just be pretentious. No, I have always considered myself more of an entertainer, really. But then again, who am I to say? Maybe I am an artist".[16]

Indeed, in many Joker stories, the violent clown criminal is linked to or engages with performing arts. In *Scars*, for instance, he is called "a mime. And what is a mime? Pantomime is the art of one actor playing all parts so well that the unreal becomes real before your eyes"[17]. Similarly playing with realities, he also appears as a magician (e.g. in "Trust" [Detective Comics #833 and #834]). In Todd Phillips' 2019 Oscar-winning *Joker* film featuring Joaquin Phoenix in the title role, he is a clown and dancer[18] as well as an aspiring comedian. Originally a clown character, it comes as no surprise that Joker often appears on the stages of comedy clubs. He shows up, for instance, in a "Comedy Manor" – "a theatre, once a renowned London Music Hall where the greats convulsed audiences… entertainers like Chaplin, Fields, the Marx Brothers…". ("This one'll kill you, Batman!" [Batman #260]: 70) – and in "the Killing Joke Club". Joker uses the Killing Joke Club, in which audiences are welcomed as "Creeps and Creepettes", "Ladeez and Germs", before subjecting them to a mass gassing and an interesting, self-contradictory tirade in which he complains about people copying his style and "culture" *voluntarily*:

> The problem with you kids today is that you have no culture of your own so you're always ripping off other eras! The fifties?! The seventies?! Puh-lease! They were hideous enough once! – You're not adding me to your list! I am unique and I will suffer no false Jokers before me!… Just to make sure your smiles are as big and permanent as mine… take a whiff of Joker Gas! ('A Savage Innocence' [The Spectre #51])

Killing his audience is a means to "challenge them", Joker explains in *Joker: Killer Smile 1*: "You see, I am to give my audience what they need, not what they want".[19] Whether as a hellish mime, magician, or criminal comedian with profile neurosis and a problem with losing control over his imitators – or, in other words, the urge to be in the vanguard – the Joker's "performance art" is an art of destruction. This becomes particularly clear in the Joker interpretation by Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* movie, in which the clown villain does not only explicitly manifest "I am an artist" (01:24), but, while admiring the disfigured mask-like face of one of his victims,

[16] Lemire et al, *Joker*.

[17] Snyder et al, "Scars".

[18] Jürgens, "The Pathology of Joker's Dance".

[19] Lemire et al, *Joker*.

also explains: "I now do what other people only dream. I make art until someone dies. See? I am the world's first fully-functioning homicidal artist" (01:02).

Indeed, the "art" of this Joker does not only involve the creative recreation of faces (in order to create what he calls a "living work of art"), the creation of a toxic drug (dubbed Smylex), and paper collages (51:08), but also the attack and destruction of objects of cultural devotion. Assisted by his gang, Burton's Joker frolics around in a museum, where they expressively paint and spray colourful slogans over pieces of classic art, graffiti-style, while cheerfully dancing and singing to Prince's song "Partyman". They add to Rembrandt's self-portrait their own hand-prints in pink colour, crowned with a splash of neon green paint. With fanciful, artistic gestures they also paint pink lines over a Degas, and smash various sculptures while moving through the exhibition space in a dance-like fashion.[20] Cheerfully, Joker explains to someone who observes his ravaging: "You will join me in the avant-garde of the new aesthetic" (*Batman*, 01:02). Against this background – and the fact that Joker has also been called "the PICASSO of crime! The Great Modernist in a postmodern tradition!"[21] and refers to himself as "an artist trying to create something exceptional"[22] – it seems appropriate to call this Joker an "avant-garde iconoclastic artist", as suggested by art critic, media theorist and philosopher Boris Groys.[23]

According to Groys, the art-smashing gesture in Burton's *Batman* represents a form of artistic expression.[24] It echoes the definition of the artist as a skilled performer in the sense of *artiste*: someone 'who is adept at something' (see Merriam-Webster) – in this case a skilled performer of art destruction. The artistic process in which Joker's gang indulges in Burton's film leads to the destruction of old icons embodying outdated messages, and (thus) to the production of new images. This artistic expression draws from Joker's abovementioned links to the popular stage and slapstick comedy, as well as from an iconoclastic – icon-destroying – dimension intrinsic to the film medium itself. From Groys' perspective, film is a medium that, from its beginnings, has fought a more or less open battle against other media, including painting, sculpture, architecture, theatre, and opera. Their destruction is regularly celebrated, above all, in early film. Since its earliest beginnings, in the form of slapstick comedy, film has staged true orgies of destruction, damage, and annihilation, including traditionally revered cultural assets, which evoke the laughter of the audience. Groys ties this to the

[20] These activities are revived in the 2011 *Batman Imposters* story, in which "[t]he first mad mob event [including many Joker imitators] caused millions of dollars in damage at the Gotham Museum of Art", Hine et al, 2011.

[21] Morrison in Williams, "Making sense squared", n.p.

[22] Garcia et al, "Joker/Harley".

[23] Groys, "Topologie der Kunst", 58.

[24] An earlier version of this paragraph appeared in the 2019 online article 'Violent Clown Artists between Science & Art' (Jürgens, 2019, *w/k: Between Science and Art*, 8 December 2019: https://between-science-and-art.com/violent-clown-artists-between-science-art/). We have previously discussed Groys's "avant-garde iconoclastic artist" in another Joker context in relation to the destructive potential of dance (see Jürgens, "The Pathology of Joker's Dance", 333).

theory of carnival by influential philosopher, literary critic, and semiotician Mikhail Bakhtin.

Bakhtin defined carnival as an iconoclastic, cheerful festive season, and as a celebration of utopian excesses (which may include acts of destruction). According to his definition, carnival does not replace the profaned icons of an old order with newer ones but invites us to just enjoy the downfall of the existing. Carnival, circus, and other forms of popular entertainment have much in common. The latter even preserved aspects of the Bakhtinian carnival. Bakhtin himself observed that "jugglers, acrobats, vendors of panaceas, magicians, clowns, [and] trainers of monkeys, had a sharply expressed grotesque bodily character. Even today this character has been most fully preserved in marketplace shows and the circus".[25] And it is time to add that this is also visible in the iconoclastic, grotesquely made-up Joker with his green hair, terrific smile, and purple suit – a clown oscillating between humour and violence.[26] However, the Joker is not only a homicidal, iconoclastic avant-garde artist. According to his profile in Burton's film his "aptitudes" include not only art, but also science and chemistry (55:08). And as a matter of fact, the Joker is much of a scientist.

Spreading Laughter: Joker's Merry Scientific Mischief

An array of Batman stories suggests that before becoming the infamous clown, the Joker character was a chemist or lab worker (see e.g. "The Man Behind the Red Hood!" [Detective Comics #168]: 48). According to what is probably the best known and most frequently interpreted origin story, the Joker itself is a creature born from chemical waste (which we discuss in detail elsewhere[27]) However miraculously he was brought into being, from the very beginning the Joker has been associated with science, particularly chemistry, biochemistry and microbiology and their use for the creation of vicious weapons. The countless "joker gases", "joker toxins", "joker poisons", "joker serums" and other drugs and chemicals he uses to poison his adversaries all have similar effects: Not only do they increase the propensity to violence and the desire to destroy or otherwise lose control over oneself, but they also paralyse or kill – but not without first turning Joker victims into Joker copies. Those poisoned by the Joker have the evil clown's look and can be read as projections of their and the Joker's inner emptiness: once infected by the societal pollutant, they show a grotesque smile on

[25] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 353.

[26] This has been linked to the *Aesthetic Theory* by German philosopher Theodor Adorno, for whom "the violence of the new", the inclination towards spectacular effects and 'scars of damage and disruption' are characteristic for modern artists and their love for experiments. According to Adorno, a genuine modern (and new) art manifests itself explicitly in the alien, the dissonant and violent deformation. Examples (or rather paradigms) of violent deformation – and thereby of the artistic creation process per se – are detected by Adorno in circus, variety- and music hall shows (see Adorno in Jürgens, "The Joker").

[27] Jürgens et al, "From Caligari to Joker". Interestingly, Joker's partner in crime, Harley Quinn, is also a scientist, see Santos and Jürgens "From Harleen Quinzel to Harley Quinn".

their distorted white faces, the "gaping grimace – the everlasting smile courtesy of the Joker".[28]

These poisons also come custom-made. Knowing that Batman has immunised himself to many Joker gases, in *Batman Volume 7: Endgame*, for example, Joker does not only design a special paralytic for the Bat – "some kind of twilight anaesthetic" – but also intoxicates, and thus "neutralises", the Justice League (a strike force comprised of the mightiest superheroes of the DC universe, including Wonder Woman and Superman) "with pathogens individuated to each member".[29]

Contemporary Batman narratives point to the chemical composition of these biochemical weapons and offer (some) scientific explanations for their devastating effects. *Batman Imposters* (2011), for example, offers a complex "[c]hemical breakdown of Joker juice", which is produced by an imposter Joker, not the "real" Joker. This is why "[t]he most lethal element of authentic Joker venom, hydrogen cyanide, is absent". However, "Strychnodide is present". This chemical causes "muscle convulsions that produce the hallmark grin. The rictus sardonicus". The comic book further explains: "Combined with methamphetamine, MDMA and nitrous oxide, the effects are euphoria, mild hallucinations, increased energy levels, uncontrolled hilarity, and muscular spasms. – It's likely to be psychologically addictive after a single dose". Within the course of the story, the science team of the imposter Joker (which includes a chemist with the telling name Dr. Kaligari) modifies this chemical by adding 'several steroids in a combination that seems to be calculated to increase aggression, along with a powerful pain suppressant. – It's pure "roid rage".[30] It also causes an urge to destroy and a sense of absurdity, according to Batman, who takes the drug in a self-experiment and then concludes that the imposter Joker uses "the juice to share his state of mind".[31] *Jokerification* through science is thus not only about exerting formlessness upon others by annihilating the individual bodies of the poisoned – their face, age, and gender – but also about turning bodies into weapons through science.

Thinking science through violent clowning, Joker's manifold chemicals tap into speculative, creative aspects of scientific thought. Through science, Joker takes control of the image that he projects onto the world and asserts control over his public identity. Science iconography, epitomised for instance in depictions of scientific equipment including beakers filled with boiling, bubbling, coloured liquids, chemical formulas etc[32], offers visual evidence for knowledge-producing activities and, thus, a sense of (scientific) realism. However, it is interesting to note that from the perspective of a *non-fictional* scientist, a binary compound is one with only two types of atoms (water is an example, consisting of just hydrogen and oxygen), not a combination of two entirely different substances. And there is no such thing as an "epidermal solution"

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28 Hine et al, *Batman Imposters*.

29 Synder et al, *Batman Volume 7*.

30 Hine et al, *Batman Imposters*.

31 Ibid.

32 Snyder et al, *Batman Volume 7*.

as in *Death of the Family*. As the abovementioned troponin is a protein that acts as a switch, responding to calcium levels by inducing changes in the cell cyto(cell)skeleton (which is a network of interlinking protein filaments), it is something that would need to be produced *inside* muscle cells. In other words, it would not work as a toxin. Neither the abovementioned nitrous oxide (laughing gas) nor MDMA (ecstasy) are considered to be particularly addictive (whether MDMA is even addictive is controversial).

So there is no reason to expect that mixing the two drugs would suddenly create a new highly addictive drug (as there are very few drugs that become a habit after one use). In short, although science adds drama, intriguing vocabulary, and visual splendour to fictional stories – and according to David Kirby even plausibility[33]– in these graphic narratives Joker science is a caricature of science; quasi- and pseudo-science. Instead of using simple, but highly "effective" chemicals to kill or maim his victims (such as cyanide, sarin, or mustard gas), Joker creates rather gothic substances and mannerist compounds, apparently following the motto: why kill with something simple when you can spend time mulling over a complicated mixture as you premeditate your next shocking crime? Joker science is a wild mixture of physiology textbook facts and science fantasy – and another intriguing way of rendering the picture of an outrageous villain.

This becomes particularly clear in the science and art of Joker's *virus-making*. Indeed, Joker does not merely develop poisons and drugs that turn others into Joker-like figures, but also viruses. In *Batman Volume 7: Endgame* (Part 2)[34], Joker initiates the outbreak of an airborne virus in a hospital where *jokerised* patients infect and tear apart doctors, who then roam the streets, infecting more and more people who in ever larger numbers enjoy themselves in violent delights, and also overrun the police and military. The virus is described by Batman's assistant as: "Micro drops of pathogen coated in resistant mucus disseminated into the air every time an infected person coughs or spits or…" – "…laughs. Of course". Batman adds: "A laugh is just a series of diaphragmatic spasms – coughs in rapid fire. – A virus that spreads like laughter. Damn". – "And they just… keep laughing". The laugh and look of the Joker, and what has been called above his "state of mind", spread *like* and *as* a virus. Virus and laughter are thus methods *and* results of *jokerification*. The effects are similar to those of Joker venoms and toxins (see above): "The virus works by changing a victim's neurology. Making them go after anything they have affection for".

Batman immediately sets off in search of the source of the infection, to get a sample from patient zero, the carrier, to "figure out an antibody". In so doing, the Caped Crusader turns out to be a biochemist himself, who has already "created nearly a hundred cures for joker toxins over the years. – antitoxins, antibiotics, steroids…". While running tests and "simulations with antitoxin", he realises that the Joker "virus

[33] Kirby, *Lab Coats in Hollywood*, 9.

[34] All the following quotes, unless otherwise specified, are from Synder et al, *Batman Volume 7* (np). For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that viruses also appear in the Batman universe *without* the Joker, see e.g. *All-Star Batman Volume 2: Ends of the Earth* (2018) or *Batman Contagion* (2016).

resisted": "Whatever chemical is making the strain resistant... it also causes a kind of 'cellular rot'". Looking at the "decay factor of the virus against the regenerative factor in the blood", Batman's science team discovers that they are "inverses" – that "the virus contains an inverse strain". Interestingly, Batman immediately interprets the virus' resilience and combination of regenerative and deadly abilities *in terms of culture*: "They're opposites. It's a game. He's playing. Life and death. Comedy and tragedy. Love and hate". Alfred, Batman's ally, adds: "it seems almost... – ...unnatural – It's virulent, fast acting, and seemingly unkillable. I'm afraid it's his masterpiece".

If a masterpiece is considered a supreme intellectual or artistic achievement as per Merriam-Webster's definition, then is this Joker virus a work of art? It is interesting to note that Joker's assistant in virus making, or "bio art", Dr Paul Dekker, is introduced as the scion of "a family of artists" as well. Even more, he is an expert in regenerative science. This "regenerative science" draws on nature and mythological, "immortal creatures" outside the natural life cycle. Objects of study include the hydra, certain lobsters (growing "bigger in their shells, but their cells don't age past their prime") and Turritopsis Dohrnii: "One of the only animals that can actually age backwards when it so desires, revert from medusa to polyp". Stories from the past about substances that heal miraculously and help withstand death (such as the "waters of Gilgamesh's time", the river Styx) feed into this science; they are "[c]lues to something real!" According to the mythopoetic biochemist, all these stories point to a chemical compound that has "existed in nature long ago". As it turns out, that mysterious chemical, which Dekker dubbed "Dionesium" (after the Greek god Dionysus, associated with rebirth – "A little scientist humour, see?"), was hidden and carried through centuries by a sort of antediluvian supernatural creature described as "the pale man. The one who laughs at us". His most recent incarnation is the Joker. In other words: "The material at the core of that virus isn't anything [a scientist] could make in a lab". The special "substance in the virus, it's from him" – the Joker. Dekker extracted it from "the Joker's body... from his spine", where it only expresses in cases of catastrophic damage, which is why Batman, who "sampled and tested his blood dozens of times", has not found it before.

The Joker in *Endgame* is thus not only "Gotham's own Dionysian man – Dionysus, the god of madness and tragedy" – with "the biology of an undead", but also a kind of Über-Joker: He *is* the virus – he *is* the infectious laughter. While aspects of this Joker virology are feasible, but unlikely (e.g. a chemical that activates just particular genes),[35] the scientific-sounding idea of an inverse virus strain (and many other aspects such as the power of drugs [drugs just block the action of particular cellular proteins rather than activate something new]) is a purely fictional idea about how viruses *might* work. It is like applying the physics principle of matter and anti-matter, or perhaps the Eastern philosophy of yin and yang to viruses. In all cases, there is no possible analogy. Thus, Joker science is a science that is not constrained by science,

[35] There are efforts being made to regulate or activate genes, but these do not rely on chemicals – they are biological compounds (proteins engineered to have a particular function and then delivered via gene therapy).

ethics, morals, or societal norms. It taps into the infamous "mad scientist" trope[36]: Joker creates and uses *psychopathic science* for his *own* sick gratification and perverse entertainment.

"We are the Joker!"[37] Sick Humour, Mass-Clownification and the Culture-Constituting Power of Infectious Clown Laugh(ter)

Joker's artistic style and scientific patho-creations are not only viral in various imminent, homicidal ways, but they also have an epidemic *societal* impact.[38] Joker has an influence that "affects people, on an almost subconscious, primal level. For most people – regular people – he inspires fear. For the less stable people – he simply inspires".[39] Joker inspiration, or obsession, has a clear course: "It would always start the same way. – Focusing on the Joker. Finding some way to obsess over the Joker. – Collecting newspaper clippings about his crime. – Or filling notebooks of Joker-inspired art. – Before it would escalate into something else".[40] This is why in many Batman stories people "jokerise" themselves *voluntarily*, for example by taking Joker's designer drugs or copying his look by choice. Even without directly violently transforming others into clowns using biological or chemical weapons, Joker is still a source of mass-clownification – instigating riots (see *Batman Imposters*) and protests for "Equal rights for the disturbed!".[41]

Todd Phillips' 2019 Oscar-winning *Joker* film is one of the most recent examples highlighting the power of Joker's laugh to fuel (tabooed) social behaviour, radicalise public beliefs and reactions, and create a cult – if not culture (?) – of protest. All this happens in a time of crisis in the film, when large parts of the population are dissatisfied with the local politics of their city, embodied by their arrogant leading politician, who shows total lack of understanding towards the protesters and their reasons and goals. For him, they are "nothing but clowns" (00:39). As dissatisfaction and propensity to violence rise, a desperate man in clown make-up – Arthur Fleck, the future Joker – murders three young rich people. Meeting the ravages of time, the clown becomes a symbol of protest when demonstrators appropriate his look and hyperbolic grin. How

36 Haynes, *From Madman to Crime Fighter.*

37 Daniel et al, *Batman Detective Comics.*

38 In the very recent story *The Joker – Volume Two*, this happens without the Joker's doing: a scientist (ab)uses his DNA to 'recreate' Jokers, but "[t]he chemicals that stained the Joker's skin damaged his genetic material. It means that creating any kind of double of him is a fool's errand", which is why the results resemble zombies more than humans: "They're alive?!" – "Alive might be an overstatement". (Tynion et al 2022, *The Joker*)

39 Snyder et al, *The Joker.*

40 Ibid.

41 Daniel et al, *Batman Detective Comics.*

can the societal impact, if not "cultural work", of the clown's laugh and the connection between social crisis and the "spread" of its iconography be grasped?

The ability and willingness to use laughter and humour in tragic circumstances has long been a subject of academic discussion. It seems that there has been no disaster in contemporary human history that has not been accompanied by humour.[42] According to one of the most popular theories deployed to understand this phenomenon, humour is an effective mechanism that helps people cope with diseases, catastrophic events and other disasters.[43] This interpretation fits into the framework of the relief theory, one of the three key theories of humour.[44] The theory's proponents argue that humour is a means to release tension by expressing ideas that are inappropriate in serious (bona fide) discourse.[45] These ideas often revolve around taboo topics, such as sex, race, or any form of aggression. Freud, for instance, argued that the impulse to discuss these topics without inhibitions is suppressed by our subconsciousness, and jokes (alongside dreams) might be the only way to vent out the pressure that results from this suppression.[46] Todd Phillips' 2019 *Joker* film seems to perfectly illustrate this understanding of humour in a scene in which Arthur-as-Joker (in full clown make-up and costume) appears on Murray Franklin's talk show. Walking in, the first thing he does is kiss another guest of the show, Dr Sally, on the mouth.

Such an unexpected and unconventional form of greeting provokes laughter from the audience – laughter which, as Freud would have put it, stems from repressed sexual impulses. However, Joker continues with a "knock-knock joke", at which he laughs heartily – "Knock Knock. Who's there? It's the police ma'am. Your son has been hit by a drunk driver. He's dead" (01:41) – the audience is not amused. The reason why this is not funny lies in the structure of the joke itself: its final line does not qualify as a joke punchline as it does not "produce an important twist in the narrative, resulting in humor".[47] According to Freud's (1927 [1950])[48] conceptualisation of humour, it should bring grandeur and elevation – in contrast to jokes and the comic, which he regards as separate phenomena. In the case of Joker's knock-knock joke, the protagonist does not display the elevation of reality but merely describes it. The scene manifests how the reference to one of the taboo topics was welcomed by the audience because it was presented with a humorous flavour whereas the other – which was a serious statement despite its initial framing as a joke – was met with a negative reaction, as a sick joke.

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42 Oring, "Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster".

43 Saroglou and Anciaux, "Licking Sick Humor".

44 Two other popular humour theories include the superiority theory and incongruity theory. The first interprets humour as an expression of superiority of the performer of humour over its target. The second comprises a plethora of theories that explain the humorous effect with the unexpected conclusion of a humorous text which is nonetheless compatible with its build-up. For a detailed discussion on the three theories, see Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor".

45 Spencer, *Essays on Education and Kindred Subjects*; Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

46 Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

47 Taylor, "Punch Line", 611.

48 Freud, "Humour".

Outside the context of relief theory, sick humour has not only been discussed on a personal level, but also on a much larger scale: as a public reaction to vivid representations of catastrophes in media, particularly by audio-visual means.[49] The mediatisation of tragedies results in the fact that people perceive not the tragedy itself but rather its (audio)visual image presented in the news. Todd Phillips' 2019 *Joker* plays with this notion by including numerous scenes in which social protest and riots are visualised through television news reports. Such "films within films" simultaneously reassert the important role the media plays in our perception of social protest and highlight the lack of reality of the events. The theatrical (and even carnivalesque) nature of the riots is further strengthened by the clown masks and costumes worn by the protesters and the contrast between their outfits and the gloomy surroundings of the city. Much in the same way as sick "jokes may be viewed as a rebellion against a world defined by the media"[50], the sick and mirthless laughter of Joker is a rebellion against the mediatised image of the society he lives in and creates a sharp contrast between the portrayal of the lower classes of society on television and his personal, embodied experiences.

Both the *clownified* demonstrators in the film, who take their protest deadly seriously, and the Joker's unfunny jokes, which he finds hilarious, make it clear that humour and laughter do not necessarily go hand in hand. As "[n]ot everyone who appreciates a joke expresses that by laughing, and there are many forms of laughter that are not responses to humor"[51], it is necessary to distinguish between these two phenomena. Like in the many other examples discussed above, the laugh and laughter of Todd Phillips' *Joker* are not a sign of happiness or solidarity and togetherness as they would be under normal circumstances after a successful joke performance.[52] Quite the opposite, his laughter both signals and provokes alienation, sets him apart from his fellow citizens and is considered to be "a condition". Still, there are hints in the film that Joker's laughter is a reaction to some hidden jokes, but the humour of these jokes is not accessible to his surroundings, including his audiences (us). In other words, his laughter is not *social*, and this is precisely what makes it so monstrous.

Thus, if comic book characters can be read as social comments on sociocultural circumstances[53], the monstrous laughter of this Joker points to the conflict between the individual and the group, conformity, and rebellion, and the mediatised nature of society and laughter. Exploring the intricacies between humour, its corporeal manifestations (and iconography) and the societal frame, Todd Phillips's *Joker*, like many other Joker narratives, revolves around the question: "If you tell a joke but there's no one there to laugh… is it still funny?"[54] – and the answer does not seem to

[49] Oring, "Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster"; Kuipers, "Media Culture and Internet Disaster Jokes".

[50] Oring, "Jokes and the Discourse on Disaster", 284.

[51] Kuipers, *Good Humor, Bad Taste*, 8.

[52] Ibid, 8.

[53] Gray and Kaklamanidou, *The 21st Century Superhero*, 3.

[54] Whitta et al, "Kill the Batman".

matter at all. In Joker stories, clown laughter successfully propagates (and escalates) irrespective of any framing signalling that humour is involved.[55]

Joker's monstrous laugh(ter)-without-laughing, sick jokes, and the funny-looking but deadly serious social protesters have a similar appearance and share a common *iconography* in the film: the laughing clown face that "spreads" from one person (Arthur) to many. How can its "contagiousness" be deciphered? On the one hand, and more generally, in accordance with Rod Martin, the appeal and even "contagiousness" of the image of clown laughter can be explained by its inherent positive vibe, its ability to bring about positive emotions in a group of people (assuming that they are not afraid of clowns) and to "coordinat[e] their activities".[56] Clown performances have an impact on group creation in two ways: the members of the audience become closer as they simultaneously laugh together ("laughing with") and identify a clown as an outsider ("laughing at"). Laughter thus stimulates the feeling of belonging and even introduces some aspects of shared identity; listening to other people's laughter, one is prompted to join in.

From this perspective, the virality of laughter is closely linked to experiences and feelings shared between the members of the group. Even if the emotions associated with the cultural pars-pro-toto of laughter, the clown, are not precisely positively connoted, the (promise of) shared experiences that it stimulates may serve as an explanation for the virality of clown iconography in *Joker*. On the other hand, and without any connection to humour, the viral nature of laughter has been linked to psychogenic illness.[57] In the case of the 1962 Tanganyika laughter epidemic, for example, it was the contagiousness of hysteria, rather than the contagiousness of laughter per se that made the epidemic so widespread.[58] The laughter could thus be a symptom which merely marks a broader contagious condition.

Regardless of whether the tendency of laughter "to spread through a group in a chain reaction"[59], its virality, is a function of its socialness or a psychogenic illness, the susceptibility of people to the same humorous items tends to decrease over time. Similarly to the immune system of a body that protects it from repeated infection caused by the same virus, the human brain is not as receptive to the second and consequent exposure to the same humorous item.[60] The adaptability of humour thus becomes not only a handy tool for its spread but also a necessary prerequisite for its survival. Although these parallels between humour and viruses by no means suggest that the comparison could be extended to consider the virus as a biological model of humour, or vice versa, that humour is a direct social and communicative analogue

55 Peacock, *Slapstick and Comic Performance*.

56 Martin, *The Psychology of Humor*, 10.

57 Hempelmann, "The Laughter of the 1962 Tanganyika 'Laughter Epidemic'".

58 Ibid, 52.

59 Provine and Yong, "Laughter", 121.

60 Or so says Khoury, "Norm formation", 161.

of the virus, their potentialities and fictional interplay are explored in Joker stories in which, for example, the Joker's *jokerising* virus goes viral through the internet.

The 2011 *Batman Imposters* story is an example thereof, in which "viral messaging" serves Joker fans (called "Jokerz") to distribute and obtain mind-altering (also known as *jokerising*) substances, while in *Batman fights the Joker Virus* (2012), Joker creates a digital version of "Joker venom", threatening "millions of video-game players to become his obedient zombies".[61] Besides chemicals, make-up and masks, cutting-edge technologies can thus also be included among the methods by which the clown messiah spreads its toxic blessing.

"How many times has someone been "jokerised" and driven mad?"[62] Joker's Violent Laughter

Virtuoso, corporeal-eccentric and violent clown plays from the popular stage have been promoted to the paradigm of an advanced aesthetic by both late-nineteenth-century and contemporary critics. Embodying paradigms of artistic creation processes, they are believed to contain the secret of modern art par excellence.[63] One of their descendants is the Joker, who – in line with his clown pedigree – is "an outsider who perceives, understands, and acts in a manner very different from the "normal order of things".[64] What Ashley Tobias describes as the clown's "anarchistic spirit" resurfaces in the Clown Prince of Crime: "The clown's unrestrained vitality and his inability, or unwillingness, to behave in accordance with the normal order of things, results in him transgressing all manner of clearly defined boundaries".[65] By irreverently crossing boundaries, the Joker destabilises those boundaries and "reduces to chaos the order they establish and maintain".[66] The Joker is a singular entity *and* a multiplicity within the singular at the same time, for which art and sciences are the predominant modes for negotiating good and evil (with the scales pointing to evil).

Luxuriating in pathological body aesthetics, engaging in monstrous body engineering and self-multiplication (by giving "birth" to artificial creatures), and attacking the integrity of bodies (including his own), for example in *Batman Volume 7: Endgame*, the Joker celebrates violent bodily disintegration and resurrection, and

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61 Peterson et al, *The Dark Knight*, book spine.

62 *Batman Three Jokers* #1 (2020).

63 According to Jörg von Brincken, *Tour de Force*, 112–13, sciences – medicine and anatomical science in particular – have accompanied the aesthetically appreciative gaze of the crowd and the artistic fascination with the violated and wounded body for centuries, expressed, for instance, in the once burgeoning fashion for visiting morgues, public executions and the growing number of anatomical collections. All this, alleges von Brincken, has contributed to a modernity greedy for the spectacular.

64 Tobias, "The Postmodern Theatre Clown", 38.

65 Ibid, 53.

66 Ibid, 53.

new, experimental knowledge – or *psychopathic science* – the way mad scientists[67] and *Frankensteinian clown scientists* do. Clowns and the result of *Frankensteinian* science, the monstrous wretch, are associated with a "lack of social graces; impulsive, crude, or violent assaults against others" (cf. Schechter; 1985: 99), and with a comic tradition in which the human body becomes an object of ridicule.[68] As a clown (whether funny or not), whose "classical predecessors" are Dionysus and "the satanic clown Mephisto"[69], Joker does not explore "the nihilistic conception of the body as the limit of existence", but instead explores "the innovative possibilities to be found in its explosion"[70]– embodied, among others, in "explosive", spreading and epidemic laughter. In Joker stories, like in other *Frankensteinian* clown contexts, the clown scientist's body becomes its own narrative. Furthermore, it narrates pathology.

No wonder, in *Batman Imposters*, Batman distinguishes between "real laughter" and Joker's version of it. Real laughter is "infectious" and "makes you want to join in, share the joke".[71] The latter manifests itself physiologically in pathological body aesthetics (bleached skin, damaged nerves of facial muscles and broken jaws), and "socially" in the shared experience of and belonging to violent outbursts of clown protest. In all its incarnations, the meaning of Joker's laughter (e.g. as an inner mode, or emotion) is suspended and rewritten into the purely temporary suddenness and instantiation of an intense external grimace. Such violent and empty laughter, in most cases induced and potentiated by science, serves primarily as the expression of violence itself, which shows itself as form without shape. In the words of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, violence is a display(ing) (*monstration*) and show(ing), an ostentation of what remains faceless.[72]

The gesture of violence functions as a functionless overdetermination of expressive events, in which the unbridgeable gap between inner cause and outer consequence becomes obvious and external expression becomes independent of the content. Joker's laughter embodies a genuinely performative quality of violence: his "empty" humour does not act as a corrective but as the actual guarantor of this quality. Joker's laugh is, and produces, violence as image and imagery, which is its real fascination.[73] "Jokerised" laughter is violence staged as an aesthetic effect; or, put differently, the laughing catastrophe of the natural body is a gain for its aesthetic staging. Staged without any metaphysical, psychological, or moral justification, in Joker narratives, deformation is art – and is affirmed as such in laughter.[74]

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67 Haynes, *From Madman to Crime Fighter*.

68 Jürgens, "Side-Splitting Amusement".

69 Riggan, *Pícaros, Madmen, Naifs, and Clowns*, 98.

70 Reyes, *Body Goethic*, 56.

71 Hine et al, *Batman Imposters*.

72 Nancy, *Bild und Gewalt*, 86.

73 Von Brincken, *Tours de Force*, 145.

74 Ibid, 203.

For Joker, the homicidal, iconoclastic avant-garde artist, the human body is the canvas on which he uses science to paint a perverse smile. Joker's epidemic, contagious, violent, psychopathic, disembodied laugh is a Cheshire-cat-style clown laugh that in many Batman stories can be heard even after the Joker has died – and it is the last visible thing that remains. *Batman: Death of the Family* most appropriately illustrates this, when after the (presumed?) death of the Joker, Batman's computer finally identifies the previously unknown "isotope in Joker toxin' as "Element 105: Dubnium", also known as "Hahnium". And it is the symbol of this element we are left with: Ha.

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Parade of a Hundred Demons

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Illustrate the whimsical spectacle of an abstract parade featuring a thousand supernatural monstrous beings and demonic clowns, infusing vibrant colours and dynamic forms to capture the lively and surreal essence of this imaginative scene’.

Abstract

Chapter 8
Japan's Folkloristic Monsters Spring for Human Morals

What do we know about Japan's monsters and humour in popular arts and media from the early modern era (1600–1868) to the present day? The warrior class ruled Japan officially, but in reality, it was the 'despicable' merchants – and some who fell outside of the class system, namely kabuki actors and geisha – who came to have real influence. Such a shift caused tension on both sides. Still, outright criticism of the ruling class could be punishable by death. The response from the public, therefore, was carnival. The crude, lewd, and ludicrous came to be prized in all forms of popular entertainment. As literacy rates skyrocketed, so too did Japan's commercial publishing industry flourish. Theatre arts thrived too and, with this, myriad monsters emerged with the implication that all was not right. They were an outlet for discontent on page and stage – they were not used to insight into a revolution, but to test limits. Monsters were a tool for subtle and often humorous transgression until shogunal rule came to an end. But Japan's monsters never went away. They continued showing their ugly and funny faces (if they had them) throughout the twentieth century, to make statements about Japan's poor state of affairs. Today, one sees Japan's monsters springing onto the international stage.

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8

Japan's Folkloristic Monsters Spring for Human Morals

M.W. Shores

Fantastic Beings with Human Qualities

This chapter explores the monster lore of Japan. Like other places in the world, this country has more supernatural beings than can be counted. They can be roughly divided into three groups – kami (gods), *yōkai* (a fluid term for supernatural beings), and yūrei (ghosts). This chapter focuses primarily on yōkai, though there will be some discussion of the others. The primary argument is that, while yōkai and other beings were once feared and dreaded as the gatekeepers of morality, from Japan's early modern era (1600–1868) they were employed to question notions of morality and conventional wisdom. They also sprung forth to entertain and thus came to be loved by mortals. This chapter examines several cases in early modern as well as modern literature, art, and performance and shows that, despite their diversity, Japan's monsters have key elements in common. They are largely misunderstood and therefore deserve sympathy; despite being otherworldly, they regularly display human characteristics and eccentricities; they have a purpose that serves humans; and those that are inherently 'bad' are usually easily outwitted. As vulgar representations of unofficial culture, Japan's ghoulish creatures stand – and float and shapeshift – in haunting opposition to "official culture, political oppression, and totalitarian order through

Shores, M.W. 2024. Japan's Folkloristic Monsters Spring for Human Morals. In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 205–230. https://doi.org/10.61201/tup.896

laughter, parody, and 'grotesque realism'",[1] and are a key example of the wider trend of humour uprooting guideposts for traditional morality.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1553–1616) and his heirs heavy-handedly unified Japan at the beginning of the seventeenth century and so began the country's early modern era, also called the Edo (and Tokugawa) period. The shogunate relocated the emperor to Edo (modern Tokyo) from Kyoto, ordered *daimyō* (warlords) throughout Japan to reside in Edo in alternating years, implemented travel bans and seclusion policies, and enforced a four-tier class system. The warrior class officially ruled Japan, but it was the merchants and some who fell outside of the class system – most famously kabuki actors and geisha – who won financial and popular influence. This shift naturally caused tension. Outright criticism of the ruling class could be punishable by death. The response from the public was carnival. The crude, lewd, and ludicrous came to be prized in all forms of popular entertainment. As literacy rates skyrocketed, so too did Japan's commercial publishing industry flourish. Countless new arts emerged and thrived. It was in this milieu that an unprecedented number of ghosts and monsters came to life or took new form.

Gods, monsters, and other fantastic beings have been prominent in Japan since at least the eighth century. They have been a fixture in Japanese literature, theatre, and art for more than a millennium. Before the early modern era, their primary function was to scare people into behaving morally or punish those who did not. These beings tended not to be comical or friendly. They were a far cry from, say, the warm-hearted Totoro – a large forest sprite that resembles a cat, owl, and *tanuki* (raccoon dog) – of Miyazaki Hayao's (b. 1941) prize-winning *Tonari no Totoro* (My Neighbor Totoro, 1988). Most creatures were not inherently malevolent, but they could be powerful, fierce, and unpredictable. There was widespread belief in supernatural beings among all classes, from aristocrats to itinerant performers.

In the early modern era, Japan's monsters were increasingly employed to amuse. This development can be attributed to the rapid rise in commoner literacy and easy access to printed materials during this period. Another factor was that Japan was finally at peace after many years of war. Samurai and commoners alike revelled in play. They loved creating and reading spoofs on the classics and loved simply being irreverent. Mixing the vulgar with the elegant was at the heart of Japanese popular culture. Japan's imposing line-up of monsters from folklore was often recast as playful. Monsters took on such a human form, or at least persona, that they served as suitable stand-ins for humans when they wished to say something that might otherwise have been unsafe to express.

Monsters were employed to indirectly express criticism and discontent. These creatures were not used to incite a revolution, however. They were used to test limits. They were a tool for subtle and humorous transgression until shogunal rule came to an end in 1868. They continued showing their ugly and funny faces (if they had them) throughout the twentieth century. Today, Japanese monsters routinely

[1] Leitch, et al., "Mikhail M. Bakhtin", 1187.

make appearances around the globe. Their looks and antics can be frightening to the uninitiated, but the truth is that they usually come intending to help humans. Some aim to right wrongs or warn of impending disasters. For example, the onset of COVID-19 saw the popular return of a monster from Japan's past, the *amabie*, a glowing-green water spirit with scales, long hair, three fin-like legs, and a beak – on social media and elsewhere it was said to be trying to ward off another plague.

Two Representative Yōkai: Tanuki and Oni

There is an incredible spectrum of yōkai in Japan. The most prominent are perhaps tanuki and *oni* (ogres). Enormously different, they are pervasive in Japanese lore as well as the Japanese consciousness. They have even snuck into language. Tanuki can be seen in words such as *tanuki udon* (noodle soup served with bits of fried batter and chopped green onions), *tanukigao* (a face made when feigning ignorance), and *tanuki ne* (feigning sleep). All these words have something to do with deception, a key tanuki characteristic. Oni are seen in words such as *onigawara* (ogre roof tiles, comparable to gargoyles), *oni gokko* (game of tag), and *oniba* (snaggletooth). Popular adages include *Tanuki ga hito ni bakasareru* (tanuki get bewitched by humans, or, the tables can be turned) and *Oni ga hotoke no hayagawari* (oni become buddhas in the blink of an eye, or, bad people act like angels when in the spotlight).

Tanuki (*Nyctereutes procyonoides viverrinus*) are neither racoons nor dogs. They are real animals but in folklore, they are magical shapeshifters. In a few tales they can be mean or frightening, but in most cases, they are harmless tricksters. They are portrayed as benevolent, protecting children who are being bullied and even turning into winning lottery tickets to pay back debts to humans. Perhaps the best-known tale that features a tanuki is *Bunbuku chagama* (Lucky Tea Kettle). In one version of the story, a tea kettle is discovered to be a tanuki and is consequently abused. A tinker rescues and cares for the tanuki, who in turn makes its caretaker rich by performing acrobatics to large crowds. Thanks to its positive portrayal in folktales and other media, humans have gradually accepted tanuki as cohabitants. The *kitsune* (fox), another prominent shapeshifter in Japanese lore, are perceived oppositely.[2] Kitsune tend to be vindictive and untrustworthy. Tanuki are powerful creatures that can even change their surroundings, but they remain amusing and imperfect, sometimes with their mischievous schemes failing to comical effect. However amusing and kind or cute tanuki might be, they can still be ferocious when upholding morality or seeking revenge.

Oni are large ugly monsters that come in a range of colours, most typically red or green. They have horns, bulging eyes, and snaggleteeth. They are usually naked aside from a tiger-skin loincloth, leaving their hulking muscles and bloated bellies

[2] In some tales, kitsune and tanuki are interchangeable.

exposed. Along with their inborn surly grimaces and gigantic clubs, the oni initially looks quite intimidating. But upon closer inspection, these yōkai – like their Western counterparts – are often slow and dim-witted. Oni are more hostile than tanuki and some even have an appetite for humans. Yet oni rarely pose a great danger as they can be easily outwitted. Despite their hideous faces (in artistic depictions, etc.), there is something in oni that strikes one as poignant and perhaps even endearing.

Early Modern Monsters

In the centuries before the early modern era, Japan was at war with itself, and long periods of peace were rare. When Ieyasu unified the country – officially in 1603 – a sense of relief ensued. The era of "Great Peace" commenced. Although government and society remained far from perfect, people could turn their minds to things other than unrest, armed conflict, and fearing for their lives. Society was divided into four authorized classes – samurai at the top, followed by farmers, artisans, then merchants. Buddhist monks being the main exception, most others (from actors and prostitutes to tanners and other 'defiled' people) were deemed as detestable non-people. Still, the Great Peace afforded a sunnier life to virtually everyone. The warrior class determined the moral and behavioural codes that all in the realm were to live by, which were largely rooted in Confucianism. If there were no direct challenges to those at the top, those below enjoyed a good number of freedoms and therein found time for leisure. Literacy rates soared and Japanese people revelled in myriad forms of play, particularly in the three major urban centres of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka. Monsters appeared in literature, art, performing arts, and other sectors.

Mami Kataoka of Tokyo's Mori Art Museum recently wrote that "a sensitivity toward the unseen world… has been preserved in Japanese culture for thousands of years".[3] One can bring this viewpoint into perspective when recalling Japan's long history of worshipping Shinto spirits, which are housed in countless natural and sacred objects and spaces. One also recalls the many deities in the Buddhist pantheon, some of which are monstrously wrath-filled and strikingly visualised in paintings and statues. It was under the influence of Buddhism that deities and yōkai – previously invisible – were brought to life.[4] By the Edo period, supernatural beings were at the heart of Japanese beliefs. This is particularly so for yōkai, which "are akin to the beings and beasts of European folklore [human-like to animalesque] … but also include amorphous intangible phenomena… Many of these creatures are shapeshifters who, in the guise of humans or other animals, cause all manner of mischief, mayhem and sometimes even murder".[5]

[3] Kataoka, "Listening Today to a Warning from the Invisible World", 13.

[4] Kazuhiko, "From the Past into the Future", 36.

[5] Foster, "Yōkai, Fantastic Beasts of Japan", 42.

Scholars have pointed out that one of the intersections between high and low in the Edo period was a taste for the weird. Early Edo authors continued a tradition of presenting ghosts and monsters in their work, just as priests and others had done since ancient times.[6] But, differently than their predecessors, who usually employed supernatural beings to frighten people into behaving morally, Edo-period authors intended to thrill and amuse their readers or criticize those in power. With these updated monsters, one sees an inversion of what was happening in previous generations. There remained a cadre of monsters written to shock and terrify – not unlike horror genres today – but also many more monsters were now on the scene to play and take advantage of the pleasures of the human world, not least of all fashion, food, and drink. And it is quite clear that humans liked playing in the world of monsters. From the seventeenth century, countless people gathered to tell spooky stories. Such events came to be called *hyaku monogatari* (lit. one hundred [scary] tales). Participants would take turns telling scary stories and extinguishing a candle after each one. The party would grow darker (and more spine-chilling) until all sources of light were out. There were variations on the rules, but the name of the game was putting one's mettle to the test. The act of using monsters to have fun was one more way to laugh at old views on morality and surreptitiously pick at the brocade of official society.

Literature in the Early Modern Era

In 1677, an unknown author in Kyoto published a book titled *Shokoku hyaku monogatari* (One Hundred Tales from Various Provinces). It contains a range of stories, from frightening to funny. The truly scary stories feature human ghosts and the comical feature yōkai. In one, a rōnin who loves *sake* quells a troublesome shapeshifting monster. He tricks it with flattery, then after asking it to change into a pickled plum, chomps it up and washes it down with his beloved drink, then is handsomely rewarded by the emperor to boot. In another story, a shapeshifting tanuki gets grisly revenge on a monk who had caused the supernatural animal to burn its paws. In a dream, the monk is told by the Amida Buddha (Amitābha) that he must take the penance of fire but would be rescued and enlightened as a result. He accordingly makes arrangements and many gather to attend the rite. After he is set ablaze, "all of the buddhas [appear] and burst out laughing in unison. … two to three thousand tanuki [flee] into the mountains".[7] The source of humour is easy to see in the first story. A rōnin desperate for a way out of his unfortunate circumstances, tricks and eats a yōkai then gets rewarded. In the second story, tanuki get revenge on the cruel human and enjoy the last morbid laugh. The story critiques superficial piety with a reminder

[6] Jones and Watanabe, *An Edo Anthology*, 22.

[7] Anonymous, "One Hundred Tales from the Various Provinces", 193.

that tanuki, while usually jovial tricksters, can be vengeful, dangerous creatures if abused.

Satire could be a dangerous business in early modern Japan. Writers were fined or locked up for taking shots at the government, and one man was executed in 1759 for stepping too far over the line.[8] Writing monsters into stories was one way of ducking censors because, on the surface at least, monsters appeared too playful or frivolous to be taken seriously. The writer who was executed, Baba Bunkō (1718–1759), was a samurai who had fallen from grace. Though once in the service of the shogun, he later became known as a public speaker who could collect a fee from attendees. In 1758 he published *Tōdai Edo hyaku bakemono* (One Hundred Monsters in Edo of our Time), a satire that lampoons twenty-seven disreputable people from all walks of life, presenting them as hypocrites, "monsters … who appear and disappear, tricking people".[9] Here Baba uses monsters as a metaphor and the humour is in the suggestion that these people are freaks of nature by simply being themselves.

Writers learned to more or less steer clear of censors for fear of being incarcerated or worse. Jippensha Ikku (1765–1831), one of early modern Japan's most prolific and profitable authors, was a king of the comical. A few years after he himself had been manacled for fifty days, he wrote *Bakemono no yomeiri* (The Monster Takes a Bride, 1807), a spoof on Japanese marriage customs. Ikku sets the story in the world of monsters, and everything is inverted, from matchmaking and betrothal to the customary shrine visit following the birth of a newborn. Every character is a monster. The bride is "a monster through and through with not one feature to recommend her" and the groom has "scraggly whiskers and … scummy teeth".[10] Casting an entourage of drolly irreverent monsters in his book – waggishly modelled on popular books that may have served as actual "marriage manuals" – Ikku rendered matrimonial customs grotesque, thus censuring them. At the hideous couple's banquet – the cook strips meat from human limbs and serves guests the best part, the bones. The narrator drives home how tedious a wedding can be: "The young couple bill and coo as they fawn over each other, more anxious than ever for the ceremonies to end. Still, the customary toasts continue far into the night. How utterly vexing!"[11] Ikku uses monsters to humorously call out humans as the real monsters, who vainly attach excessive importance to tradition and religion.

In one more literary example, *Funadama monogatari* (Tale of the Guardian Deity of Boats, 1821), Sakuragawa no Musume Shōchō presents a fictional vendetta carried out by two young men after they trek across Japan in pursuit of their parents' killer. The work is packed with tragedy and heartbreak and contains comic relief, like many kabuki plays. In one scene, a mystical toad, obsessed by the unparalleled beauty of the young woman Tamaki, casts a spell on her. She soon falls sick and "her complexion

[8] Bunkō, "One Hundred Monsters in Edo of Our Time", 103.

[9] Ibid, 105.

[10] Ikku, "A Monster Takes a Bride", 143, 145.

[11] Ibid, 159.

grew frightful, and her stomach bloated. Her arms and legs shrank, and she wholly came to resemble a toad. She bore no comparison to her relatives whatsoever".[12] The juxtaposition of supreme beauty and revolting ugliness is a bit startling, but it is rendered comical thanks to an overblown illustration of the metamorphosis. Despite such a horrid transformation, Tamaki remains a model of virtue. It is the toad spirit that is evil and serves to tell readers that all in the world is not what it seems. And those caught up in obsession and greed – including (or particularly) those possessing great power – may end up in similar hell-like limbos.

Shapeshifting is a recurring theme in *Funadama monogatari*. In another scene, the villain Araishi Toyata comes to an eerie temple, where he decides to pass the night. Around midnight, noise comes from the ceiling before a giant arm "with hair as thick as nails" moves toward him. The agile rōnin remains composed and quickly overpowers the enormous arm. Comically, it turns out to belong to a small, mischievous, shapeshifting tanuki. Araishi promptly ties up the yōkai and, the following day receives a hero's welcome from the local villagers who had been troubled by the tanuki for some time. But this tanuki attack is hard to read as a case of simple trickery. Araishi is a fugitive who has abused the privileges that come with his samurai status. For a yōkai to go on the offensive, however laughably, suggests that samurai – supposed models of virtue and morality – must be censured when unethical and when, as in this case, a plague on society.

Art in the Early Modern Era

The books mentioned above are heavily illustrated, so they could also be discussed under the present heading. They will not be treated as such here, however, as they were conceived of and produced as commercial literary products. The books' illustrations attract a good deal of interest, but book illustrations tend to not be considered an artist's finest work (though it may have been an important source of income). Art of a much higher quality was expected for illustrated scrolls and *ukiyo-e* (lit. woodblock prints depicting Japan's "floating world"), which feature a wide range of topics from daily life and travel to kabuki and licensed pleasure districts. The supernatural, too, was frequently taken up in ukiyo-e and other media.[13] Let us look at a few examples.

A late Edo-period scroll that stands out as both impressive and humorous is Itaya Hiroharu's (1831–1882) *Hyakki yagyō* (Night Procession of the Hundred Demons, ca. 1860). The scroll's title gives the impression that the work is spooky but, upon close inspection, it features an impressive parade of yōkai, all looking rather idiotic with grins and bulging eyes. They appear to be mumbling to themselves or speaking to

[12] Sakuragawa, "Tale of the Guardian Deity of Boats".

[13] Supernatural creatures featured in board games, kimono, masks, *netsuke* (toggles), pottery, statues, toys, and more.

one another. Most have ears, but one wonders if they are actually listening or can even hear. In addition to many oni, one finds a *kappa* (water sprite), monkey, rabbits, mice, as well as *tsukogami*, household items that have transformed from inanimate to animate because they "have been neglected and, after they reach one hundred years of age, grow arms and legs and come to life".[14]

Where are the creatures in this procession going? Viewing the scroll in sequence, from right to left, they come out in great numbers with the dark and proceed to revel and carry on through the night until dawn breaks. Then they are forced to disperse, similar perhaps to when Dracula sees the light of day. This is a monstrous carnival, but the monsters are depicted with human qualities and popular interests, so the scroll is also a statement of resistance against rulers who heavy-handedly insist that commoners be meek and orderly subjects.

Figure 1: Itaya Hiroharu, handscroll "Hyakki yagyō (Night Procession of the Hundred Demons)" (detail), ink and colour on paper, circa 1860. Image © Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The monsters in Hiroharu's scroll haunt only the viewer who is unable to see that this procession is a festival. Yōkai dance and are occupied with keeping lesser (or more fearsome?) creatures from clawing and biting their way out of baskets and chests. One can almost hear music and footsteps as the monsters shuffle forward. Several musical instruments are in on the fun, too. Night-time processions such as this one had been depicted for centuries by the time Hiroharu painted his scroll. Earlier examples are more disconcerting, particularly the work of Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788), which became "the model for the codification and visual representation of yōkai".[15] Sekien's depictions of apparitions show gruesome creatures appearing to writhe in pain, wallow in loneliness, or be stricken with horror. They reach out as if desiring to inflict their dilemmas on the world of the living. There is an ominous and didactical quality to early examples. Hiroharu's scroll pays homage to Sekien's models, but he intends to parody and amuse, not to strike fear into the viewer. If one were to run into Hiroharu's ghoulish procession, one would doubtless be surprised, but one may be just as inclined to join the merrymaking.

As mentioned, tanuki can be funny and clever shapeshifters. Indeed, one of their famous attributes is their giant malleable scrota. At many restaurants in Japan today, one still finds large ceramic tanuki, anthropomorphic, wearing hats and standing on two legs, with their enormous members resting on the ground. Placing something

[14] Foster, "Yōkai, Fantastic Beasts of Japan", 13.

[15] Eastburn, "Japan Supernatural", 15.

humorous like this at the entrance is considered auspicious in Japan. As the adage goes, *Warau kado ni fuku kitaru* (fortune comes to gates merry with laughter). In 1836, Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798–1861) painted pieces for an untitled series of woodblock prints that featured the incredible size and versatility of the tanuki scrotum. Some fashion their male parts into hats and umbrellas, others sit on rooves and let their scrota droop down to be used as store signs. One is a roadside fortune-teller that has fashioned its scrotum into an awning to keep the summer sun from beating down on its head. The list goes on.

Kuniyoshi's tanuki prints are hilariously irreverent. What makes them funnier is the fact that these tanuki take the place of humans in various indoor and outdoor scenes at stores, performing amateur nō and sideshow acts, net fishing, and more. All have rather fetching tanuki faces and they wear the latest fashions. Their scrota, however outlandish and funny, retain a degree of realism. This tongue-in-cheek explicitness was "perhaps intended to satisfy both censors and the market for lewd imagery and erotica".[16] As discussed, tanuki in some contexts could be frightening, but Kuniyoshi's prints show that tanuki, however tricky and magical, were celebrated in playful art and depicted in a human-like fashion. They became heroes of sorts because they could do exactly as they pleased, seemingly oblivious to the ethics and morality prescribed by the political and religious elite.

Figure 2: Utagawa Kuniyoshi, "Tanuki no kawagari, tanuki yūdachi (Tanuki Evening Shower, Tanuki River Fishing)", woodblock print, ink and colour on paper, circa 1843–1844. William Sturgis Bigelow Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

[16] Folan, "Strange Seduction", 68.

In a final example of yōkai in fine art, let us briefly look at *netsuke* (toggles), which Adam Kern says were not just toggles, but also the (handy, functional and fashionable) "[e]xquisitely carved and delightfully detailed… action figures of their day".[17] Today few people in Japan wear kimonos on a daily basis because they are expensive, and one needs a good deal of knowledge to know how to properly wear and care for them. Before the twentieth century, on the contrary, kimonos were quite an everyday affair. There was a much wider range of kimono available too, corresponding to different seasons and budgets. There were also all kinds of kimono accessories. Kimonos do not have pockets, so it was common to hold items in one's *obi* (sash). Items like folding fans could simply be slid in and secured, but other items, such as decorative tobacco pouches and pillcases, were secured with netsuke and left to dangle about the waist. Netsuke came in countless designs and naturally included supernatural creatures, from oni and *tengu* (long-nosed [or beaked] mountain goblins) to folktale heroes and gods of fortune.

As one might guess, tanuki were popular as netsuke, too. One at The Art Gallery of New South Wales, carved from stag horn, holds a sake bottle at its side and is either walking in the rain or incognito – it has pulled its scrotum up over its back, placing it on its head as if a sedge hat (see Figure 3 and 4). What is said by a piece such as this? It playfully alludes to the notion that tanuki and other supernatural tricksters are in our midst. Perhaps the man who wore this accessory posited that he himself was a trickster among men. The point of netsuke is *share* (fashion, taste). Yōkai were popular in various media and put at the heart of parlour games. To wear a tastefully irreverent tanuki at one's waist showed that one was both stylish and good-humoured and was perhaps a tongue-in-cheek way of presenting that one understood that the centre of gravity in moral guidance was shifting and that they were cheerfully on board with that shift.

Figures 3 & 4: Artist unknown, "Tanuki (4.9 x 2.2 x 2.5 cm, carrying a sake bottle and covering its head with its scrotum)", stag horn; "Oni (3.2 x 2.7 cm, chanting a Buddhist sutra)", stained ivory; late 18th to early 19th century and 19th century, respectively. Images © Art Gallery of New South Wales.

[17] Kern, "Japan Supernatural", 182.

Performance in the Early Modern Era

Monsters and especially ghosts have appeared on Japan's stages for centuries. One could argue that the nō theatre would lose much of its interest if it did not come with its many ghosts. Spirits and fantastic creatures are also featured in kabuki and *ningyō jōruri* (also simply *jōruri*, or *bunraku* puppet theatre). Some of these are humorous, but just as many are scary, especially in late-Edo kabuki. An increased presence of horror and the grotesque in arts and media pointed to the fact that all was not well in the realm.

The play *Tamamo no mae asahi no tamoto* (Tamamo-no-mae and the Sleeve of the Morning Sun, 1751) was written for the jōruri theatre and then later adapted for kabuki. The play is a period piece that features Tamamo-no-mae, who is bewitched by a seven-tail fox who is out to kill the emperor and take power. Of special interest in both versions are the rapid changes Tamamo-no-mae undergoes, from human to fox and back. At the end of the kabuki version, Tamamo-no-mae turns into a blind masseur, a young girl, and a footman before turning into a stone. In jōruri, shapeshifting is made possible with mechanized puppets. The puppeteer flips the hair forward over the human face and spins the head to reveal a fox face, which has an opening and closing mouth. There is also a dedicated fox puppet employed, operated by one or more puppeteers. Numerous puppet heads in jōruri can quickly change from human to supernatural creatures.

To experience the playful incorporation of monsters in performance, one does well to look to comic storytelling, which developed and flourished in Japan's urban centres from the seventeenth century into modern times. Storytellers presented a range of tropes, and yōkai were among the many characters. There were genuine ghost stories told to give audiences starts and chills (particularly in the hot months), but one could also hear and read stories with laughable monsters (comic stories were published in books called *hanashibon*). The following story is from Shikitei Sanba's (1776–1822) *Odokebanashi Edo kishō* (Funny Tales: Edo Happy Laughter, 1806). It is clear from the preface that this was performed along with twenty-one other stories at a competition that Sanba organized with some of his renowned writer friends, all of whom shared a love for comic storytelling.

> *Bake narai* (Learning How to Shapeshift)
>
> Facing its child, a father tanuki said, "It's about time you started shapeshifting! Look at those pups over there. They're all properly changing form, taking over for their parents. Even if you never can be as good as the tanuki of old, these days all you have to do to apprentice is open your ears. Now learn how to shapeshift already!" "Okay", the young tanuki said, "I'll do it if you and mom play some music for me". Thinking this a simple request, the tanuki couple picked up a flute and drum and began to play, *hyuu doro hyuu doro*.

> They called for him to shapeshift, but the young tanuki stayed in his hole and wouldn't step out. They continued, *hyuu doro hyuu doro*. "Here we go!" they shouted. "Enter on cue! Shapeshift already!" *Hyuu doro hyuu doro*. "Oh, he's hopeless", the father snapped. "Why won't you come out of that damn hole? Get your tail out here!" As they continued playing *hyuu doro hyuu doro*, the young tanuki poked out his head. "Even with all that… I'm still shy".[18]

The humour is created by putting tanuki in a very human situation, here a touching vignette of home life. One could 'shift' the characters by simply replacing "tanuki" with "person" and "shapeshifting" with, say, "doing chores". This is another case that shows that people popularly looked towards yōkai with affection, likening them to themselves. This story comes across as harmless, but it still speaks to the young and new supplanting the old. Resistance to tradition and societal expectations does not bring about a revolution, but it pokes fun at conventional wisdom and playfully prods at its boundaries.

Modern Monsters

The Meiji period (1868–1912) is frequently cited as the time when Japan became 'modern'. However, it remains evident in arts and literature as well as other sectors such as domestic travel, marketing, and urban planning, that Japan had been modernizing for decades before this. Still, there is no question that the country changed more rapidly after Commodore Matthew Perry sailed to Japan in 1853 to oblige the country to open for trade and normalize relations with the outside world. Increased contact with and pressure from the West sent Japan scrambling to do everything it could to show that it was hardly in need of 'enlightenment'. Japan strived to prove that it was neither a feudal nor a savage society. Japan's leaders knew that the West had invaded and colonized its neighbours, so many in Japan feared that they might be next. Japan's course of action was to demonstrate that it had its own great culture, history, infrastructure, and traditions.

A consequence of this feverish push was that various forms of play – particularly frivolous and vulgar wordplay, works of a sexual or scatological nature, unrefined humour, and the like – were deemed unhelpful to the cause. Many argued that this had to be done away with or repackaged in line with the country's aspirations. Japanese language was standardized according to the Tokyo dialect and countless new words were introduced on top of all the changes. Intellectuals endeavoured to update the written language so that it would reflect the new age and the 'progress' that Japan was making. The reality was that, in many regards, Japan was figuratively speeding down the road with little time to determine where it was headed.

[18] Mutō and Oka, *Hanashibon taikei*, 198–199.

Japan's yōkai came along for the ride and they too were impacted by the changes taking place. Indeed, Japan's strange creatures sometimes violently clashed with modernity as their territory was invaded. One tale, of which several versions were told throughout the country, features a tanuki that imitates the *shu-shu po-po-po* sound of a steam locomotive only to be struck and killed. As Michael Foster points out, "one reason for the legend's resilience during the early years of the twentieth century is that on a metaphorical level it betrays deep ambivalence about modernity, and a sense of loss for the natural environment and local traditions that the train, as the vehicle of progress, would destroy".[19]

Literature in the Modern Era

Some yōkai found their way into modern Japanese literature, but, since there was a constant call for realistic work with greater psychological depth, troubled humans often replaced supernatural beings. Fictional protagonists (sometimes authors with thinly veiled disguises) were often listless 'monsters' who drank too much, betrayed family members and friends, acted out sexually and violently, or otherwise flouted societal expectations. Classic cases include Shimazaki Tōson's (1872–1943) *Hakai* (Broken Commandment, 1906), Tayama Katai's (1872–1930) *Futon* (Blanket, 1907), Shiga Naoya's (1883–1971) *An'ya kōro* (Dark Night's Passing, 1921–1937), and Dazai Osamu's (1909–1948) *Ningen shikkaku* (Disqualified as Human, 1948).

New monsters were 'created' in the scientific sense, too. As Miri Nakamura writes, "Within [the] context of promoting new and improved national bodies, images of monstrosity also proliferated: pathogenic women, evil twins, psychological doppelgängers, and humanoid automata".[20] Edogawa Ranpo (1894–1965), arguably Japan's greatest writer of detective fiction, wrote *Sōseiji* (Twins, 1923), which features an evil twin who plots to take over his brother's life. Scholars have interpreted this dark double, considering Tokyo's transformations and technological advances, as a reflection of ego. The author expresses anxieties about the mutation of Japanese cultural identity and colonialism, along with other facets of culture.[21]

Japan was set on a course to 'catch up' with the West and model how other nations could quickly do so. However, in response, some people began gravitating toward tradition to escape or counter the fast pace, exhaustion, and dizzying number of new movements of the modern era. Intellectuals such as Izumi Kyōka (1873–1939) and Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962) specifically sought out the fantastic and supernatural in Japan's folktales and legends because they felt these enriched their writings along with Japanese life. They believed the Naturalist movement was incapable of producing

[19] Foster, "Haunting Modernity", 12. Also appears in Weinstock, *A Monster Theory Reader.*

[20] Nakamura, *Monstrous Bodies,* 2.

[21] Ibid, 45.

this effect.[22] Yumeno Kyūsaku (1889–1936), best known for his final novel *Dogura magura* (Trickery, 1935), regarded as a "nonsensical, metafictional work", but one that wages "personal critique of the irrationality and criminality exhibited by society",[23] published the following short story in the newspaper *Kyūshū Nippō* on 21 November 1923.

> *Tanuki to Yotarō* (Tanuki and Yotarō)
>
> Every day Yotarō went to play in the neighbouring village and came home through the forest before sundown.
> He did this because his mother told him, "That forest has tanuki that change into all kinds of things – come home before the sun sets or you'll be scared to death".
> One day, Yotarō lost track of time while playing and started for home after dark. As he walked into the forest, a ten-foot-tall *hitotsume* (cyclops) entered the path before him.
> "Wow, that's a big old man", Yotarō said. "And he's only got one eyeball. How interesting. Won't you come home and play with me?"
> As he gazed at the hitotsume, it turned into a *rokurokubi*.
> "Wow, it just turned into a woman with a beautiful long neck", Yotarō said. "That's strange. How does your neck get so long? Try to stretch it out even longer. Longer!"
> Then the rokurokubi turned into an oni.
> "Yay, you've turned into an oni", Yotarō delighted. "And you look just like one of those seasonal festival dolls. This is fun! Turn into all kinds of other things now!"
> Yotarō wasn't a bit afraid of the monsters, so, now bored, the tanuki returned to its natural state. Seeing this, Yotarō's face went pale.
> "Oh no! It's a tanuki! I'll be in big trouble it starts shapeshifting! Somebody, help me!"
> Yotarō ran away as fast as he could.

Kyūsaku's story depicts a tanuki in the traditional sense, but the moral of the story – that 'monsters' exist only if one is told that they do, if one buys into the tale – relates to a gross outrage of the day. In the aftermath of the country's most catastrophic disaster, the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1 September 1923, Japanese people demonized, terrorised, and murdered Korean residents (then colonial subjects) in response to bogus rumours about their being a danger to society. Government agencies and news outlets scrambled to cover up the matter, and little justice was ever served, but this tanuki tale makes an indirect statement about who society's real monsters were.

[22] Figal, *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*, 157.

[23] Nakamura, *Monstrous Bodies*, 98, 101.

Art in the Modern Era

Kawanabe Kyōsai's (1831–1889) woodblock print titled *Bakebake gakkō* (Monster School, 1874; see Figure 5) is a lampoon of the education reforms that were carried out during the Meiji period. In the loud, colourful piece, monster teachers in formal Western dress teach monster students, most of whom wear kimono. Teachers use pointers and have students repeat the lessons on the board. One sees Latin characters in both print and cursive. One monster, appearing to be the headmaster, gives a tour to another that looks like a magistrate or politician – it wears fine leather shoes and dawns a top hat. Yōkai in the print include oni, tengu, and kappa. Even some of the furniture – and front gateway – is alive and goggling about. There is some order to the scene, but it is simultaneously chaotic, no doubt a statement about the times and how foolish Japanese people looked as they rushed to get with the program of modern, Western-style education.

Figure 5: Kawanabe Kyōsai, "Bakebake gakkō (Monster School, no. 3 from the series Ōju Kyōsai rakuga, Kyōsai's Drawings for Pleasure)", woodblock print, ink and colour on paper, 1874. Image © Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Tsukioka Yoshitoshi's (1839–1892) supernatural subjects are far more realistic and polished. They can be bone-chilling, too, so much so that viewers of the time may have suspected that modern science indeed rules out the world of the supernatural. His woodblock prints of murders and vengeful ghosts particularly stand out, but his yōkai are equally impressive. They are so meticulously detailed that they seem to leap off the paper. Yoshitoshi covered lighter subjects, such as a tanuki lost in thought in *Morinji no bunbuku chagama* (Lucky Tea Kettle at the Temple Morinji, 1892), as well as

more malevolent monsters, such as the ones that lurch toward an elderly woman who has fallen to the ground and appears to be losing her mind in *Omoi tsuzura* (Heavy Basket), both from the series *Shingata sanjūrokkaisen* (Thirty-Six Apparitions in New Form, 1892). Yoshitoshi painted these because the macabre was a popular favourite, but it – along with a slew of other genres from art, theatre, and sideshow acts – stood to question the wisdom of politicians and other intellectuals who endeavoured to mould Japan into a modern nation-state – with its own respectable institutions and traditions – that even Western countries would commend.

As Japan moved further into the twentieth century, people grew attracted to new forms of art and entertainment and yōkai gradually retreated into the darkness. Some academics and other members of the populace remained enthusiastic about the country's innumerable supernatural beings and their place in cultural history, but it was not until the 1960s that yōkai again became a popular culture favourite. As Melanie Eastburn points out, Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015), the creator of the manga and anime *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (Spooky Kitarō), along with film director Kuroda Yoshiyuki (1928–2015), reinvigorated Japan's yōkai tradition in the second half of the twentieth century. Mizuki, also a historian, was inspired by yōkai of old and in turn influenced the work of contemporary artist Murakami Takashi (b. 1962).[24]

The world of the supernatural features prominently in Murakami's work as it (along with death) does in the work of other contemporary artists, such as Aoshima Chiho (b. 1974) and Matsui Fuyuko (b. 1974). However harmless or foreboding yōkai were presented as being, from the 1960s on, even with Japan's successes in the post-World War II era, a good deal of volatility remained in society, and this created an ideal atmosphere for all that was counterculture, including freakish and cute monsters, to flourish.

Performance in the Modern Era

Thanks in part to government subsidy, one can still enjoy traditional theatre art forms, such as jōruri, kabuki, kyōgen, and nō. Artists occasionally experiment and stage new plays, but these arts remain mostly unaltered thanks to authorized scripts and careful transmission. Therefore, the ghosts and monsters from these respective stages still entertain and stir audiences today. Monsters are found in other performing arts, too, such as *rakugo* (the modern descendent of earlier comic storytelling traditions). Like other traditional arts, rakugo has long-established artistic schools. Masters orally transmit stories to pupils as they did in previous centuries. Rakugo has no scripts, so each new generation of artists inevitably updates story content and language. While changes are made, the repertoire remains intact. This includes numerous stories set in

[24] Eastburn, "Japan Supernatural", 19.

the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, in some of these, yōkai take centre stage.

One example is the story *Tanuki no sai* (Tanuki Die), which features a tanuki that repays its debt to a man (for saving its life) by turning into a die to help him win at gambling. When the man yells "eyeballs", this is a cue for the number two – the tanuki die lands face up showing its eyes, providing the win. Likewise, when the man shouts "butthole", this is a cue for tanuki to show the number one and... precisely. This tells listeners that humans can cohabitate and indeed collaborate with non-humans, but also important is that this story's protagonist (not to mention those in similar stories) is not getting with the program prescribed by Japan's leaders, choosing to spend his time less productively. His refusal to subscribe to the official agenda is equal to him laying his wager on a transfigured (or post-) morality.

One more rakugo example is *Jigoku bakkei* (Famous Sites of Hell). In the story, a man dies after eating spoiled mackerel. He walks toward the Sanzu River, which recently deceased people must cross to reach the afterlife. It is here that Great King Enma, who oversees punishments in hell, judges all souls. On his way, the man runs into some acquaintances. They cross the river in a boat punted along by an oni and learn about one of hell's bustling entertainment districts, which sits next to Nenbutsu (prayer) Town. It is said that those with a stock of sutras receive lighter judgment from Enma. Thus, while in Nenbutsu Town they pay for sutras according to their sects and means, then go to face the Great King. It is announced that today, to honour the one-thousandth anniversary of the previous Enma's death, souls will be given free passage to paradise if they can demonstrate an interesting act of some kind. Enma Town begins bustling on account of the "Hidden-Talent Contest". At the end of the event, four people – an acrobat, dentist, doctor, and yamabushi monk – are told to stay behind to be sent to hell. They manage to combine their skills to outwit an oni serving Enma until a *jindonki* (human-devouring oni) is called in to dispel with the men once and for all. The dentist tricks the jindonki and extracts all its teeth in one go. This only infuriates the monster, and it swallows the group whole. The story concludes with a remarkably absurd carnival inside the monster, where the men showcase their 'specialised' knowledge to navigate its interior and manipulate its body functions. As readers follow along, it is not difficult to imagine where they ultimately end up as they scheme their malodorous escape.

> DOCTOR: (*To DENTIST*) Oh great, thanks to you yanking out its teeth, it's gone and swallowed us whole! Now we're stuck in its stomach!
> YAMABUSHI: It looks to me like you've saved us. If those stone mills for teeth would've crunched down on us, that would have been it. Wait a minute... One, two, three... one of us is missing. It's the acrobat. Where is he? Oh, there he is, up there. He's hanging onto the uvula. (*To ACROBAT*) Hey, get down here!
> ACROBAT: Is it safe?

YAMABUSHI: Yes, come on down.
ACROBAT: Okay!
YAMABUSHI: Look at that. He's descending the ribs like a ladder. This guy's good.
ACROBAT: Okay, so here we are in the oni's stomach. What are we supposed to do now?
DOCTOR: If we stay here, we'll be dissolved.
YAMABUSHI: Dissolved?
DOCTOR: That's right. We can't stay here. I've got it – leave it to me.
YAMABUSHI: You?
DOCTOR: Yes. I'm a doctor after all.
ACROBAT: Sure, you're a doctor. But you're a quack!
DOCTOR: I may be a quack, but I at least know the basics. There's not much difference between human stomachs and oni stomachs. That means we can't stay here. We've got to find a way out. And look here, I've got my scalpel. Just a little slice–*suu*–right here and split this open and… here we go. Follow me!
DENTIST: Ha-ha. Wow, free from that stomach, look at how vast this place is.
DOCTOR: This is the oni's abdomen [Jpn. *hara*].
DENTIST: Oh, that's why it's so vast – it's a plain [Jpn. *hara*].
DOCTOR: Well, that's where the word originates.
DENTIST: There are all kinds of things in here.
DOCTOR: I know, right? Look at all the cords hanging down. See this one here? Go ahead, give it a tug.
DENTIST: Why? What does it do?
DOCTOR: Pull on it and it'll make the oni sneeze.
DENTIST: Yeah? Let's give it a go! (*pulls cord*)
JINDONKI: *Heekkushon*!
DENTIST: It sneezed! This is fun!
DOCTOR: See that thing over there that looks like a lever? Go ahead and lift it up. It pulls that tendon over there, see? That's the abdominal tendon. Give it a good tug this way and it'll give the oni stomach cramps.
ACROBAT: Just like this? *Uuun*! (*pulls with force*)
JINDONKI: *A ita-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*!
ACROBAT: The oni's in pain! This is fun! Hey, what's this over here?
DOCTOR: Oh that. Go ahead and give it a tickle. It'll make the oni laugh.
YAMABUSHI: It'll laugh if I tickle this? This round thing here? Coochy-coochy-coo.
JINDONKI: *Ah-ha-ha*!
YAMABUSHI: It's laughing! This is fun!
DOCTOR: See the sack beneath that? Go ahead, give it a kick.
ACROBAT: What is it?
DOCTOR: It's a fart bag. Give it a kick and the oni will fart.

ACROBAT: *Bon*! (*kicks fart bag*)
JINDONKI: *Buuuuu*!
ACROBAT: Ha-ha-ha! That's funny. Hey, what would happen if we did everything at once?
DOCTOR: Well… if we did them all at once… the oni would sneeze, have cramps, laugh, and fart.
ACROBAT: Shall we make the oni suffer a bit?
DOCTOR: Not a bad idea. Okay, let's take our positions. Acrobat, would you mind going back up to the throat?
ACROBAT: To do what?
DOCTOR: Scrape at the oni's throat–that'll make it dry heave. You do that and we'll follow suit down here.
ACROBAT: Okay, got it. (*Climbs up*) I'll just climb up here and give it a good scratch like this (*scrapes*) and…
JINDONKI: *Ueee'*!
YAMABUSHI: It's working!
DOCTOR: Now you pull that!
YAMABUSHI: Okay!
JINDONKI: *Heekkushon*!
DENTIST: And now to pull this…
JINDONKI: *A ita-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*!
YAMABUSHI: And how's this…
JINDONKI: *Ah-ha-ha*! … *Buuuuu*!
DOCTOR: Good! Let's all pitch in.
YAMABUSHI: You pull that, and I'll pull this.
DOCTOR: I'll pull this and kick that at the same time. Everybody get ready to go on the count of three. Ready? One-two-three!
ACROBAT: Take that!
JINDONKI: *Ueee'*!
YAMABUSHI: And that!
JINDONKI: *Haakkushon*!
DENTIST: Take that!
JINDONKI: *A ita-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta*!
DOCTOR: And that!
JINDONKI: *Ah-ha-ha! … Buuuuu!*
Gee'uu', hakkushon, aita-ta-ta, ah-ha-ha, buu–gee'uu', hakkushon, aita-ta-ta… ah-ha-ha… buu!
Oh, what the hell is going on? Those bastards are in my gut running amuck! I've gotta get to the toilet and crap those little turds out! Dammit!
DENTIST: Hey, the oni's saying it's going to go to the toilet.

DOCTOR: No, we can't have that. We've got to stay here and make it pay. If we're expelled, there's no telling what might become of us. Move down, move down!
DENTIST: Move down for what?
DOCTOR: Trust me, just head toward the bowel.
YAMABUSHI: Yes, but wouldn't that actually put us in the toilet?
DOCTOR: Never mind that. If we stay up here, we could be done in if it takes some medicine. Just go down. Come on, as far as you can go!
DENTIST: You keep saying go down, but… At the bottom I can see a light flickering on and off.
DOCTOR: That's the oni's anus.
DENTIST: It's anus? Oh, it's opening and squeezing tight. Be careful, or else we'll fall out.
DOCTOR: Don't let yourselves fall! Okay, right here. Stop at the anus and cling to the flesh. Dig in with your feet like this. You take hold here and stretch your legs out as far as you can; and I'll do the opposite on this side. You lie down above us and, that's right, we'll fashion ourselves into a well curb. No matter how much the oni exerts itself, no matter what it does, we'll be fine like this. Just don't lose your grip!
ACROBAT: Okay! No letting go!
DOCTOR: Dig those feet in! Hold on tight!
YAMABUSHI: Good. I'll hold tight from above, like this.
DENTIST: I've got my position, too.
JINDONKI: Those damn fools! How I'll make them pay once I've got them out… *Uunto*! (*pushes*)
ACROBAT: Hold on!
JINDONKI: Bastards!
YAMABUSHI: That piece of shit! This is *real* shit we're dealing with now!
JINDONKI: *Uunto*! (*pushes*)
DENTIST: Oh dear, I almost lost my grip there!
JINDONKI: *Uuun*!
YAMABUSHI: Whoa, I just about fell!
JINDONKI: *Uuu*, oh… (*cries*) Those bastards just won't come out! Fine, there's only one thing left to do… Master Enma!
ENMA: What is it?
JINDONKI: You're my last hope. I've got to swallow you now.
ENMA: Swallow me? What in hell for?
JINDONKI: I need to take some *Daiō*, so I can crap these guys out.[25]

[25] Beichō, *Beichō rakugo zensh*ū, 77–81. *Daiō* (Great King, i.e., Enma) is a play on *daiō* (rhubarb root and rhizome), which has numerous medical uses including relieving indigestion. One might liberally translate the punchline, "I need to take Enma because I need an enema".

Not all rakugo is this absurd or grotesque, but punchlines tend to end stories in this fashion abruptly. The four men are left in the oni's body and there is no clear plan as to how they will get out and continue their lives in the afterlife. Maybe they will cause so much trouble that they will be granted passage to paradise after all. Or, since they've seemed to compromise even King Enma's position, perhaps they will decide to stay in the oni's body to exert their newfound power. What is key here is that even the fiercest oni, one that can swallow humans whole, is rendered powerless even over its own bowels. This eerily absurd story is to be read as carnival.

Although Japanese people customarily send off the dead with money for the journey they will make in the afterlife, the stars of this story un-solemnly head for the entertainment district, where they buy sutras, essentially bribes for their awaiting judge. It is implied that they also make the regular licenced district stops, to dally with courtesans and attend shows at kabuki theatres or visit other places of disrepute. Their journey into hell is meant to entertain and amuse, but it also lampoons the ethical guidance of religion, namely the importance of passing judgment after death and making one's way to paradise. The fact that oni and other frightening (but stupid) creatures stand as the gatekeepers to the celestial world conversely strips it of sanctity, telling listeners they need not worry about afterlife judgement and should thus live as they please (i.e., deviate and join the carnival).

Evolutionary monsters

This chapter has given an overview of Japan's monsters, primarily in the context of yōkai. We have examined the subject through works selected from early modern and modern literature, art, and performance. One argument is that, from the Edo period, monsters, which had been around for ages, evolved to be less harmful, less mean, and less scary. They remained abnormal and freakish, but they were often imbued with human qualities that made them more interesting and more endearing. Whether charming or wretched, their unusual and peculiar nature functioned to poke and pry at the mortal world and thus put into question its cultural values and morality.

The vengeful spirit trope goes back centuries in Japan. From early times, audiences were trained to look upon tormented beings and other creatures with interest rather than fear or aversion. This is tied to the belief that all things animate and inanimate possess life and therefore a capacity to feel and suffer. This is a key Japanese aesthetic, the beauty of suffering, or *mono no aware*, which Makoto Ueda renders "a deep feeling over things". As he expounds, *aware* is connected to love, but more so to grief, which people feel because they are "imperfect, weak, and easily hurt".[26] *Mono no aware* is the quality that reveals itself when someone or something is at their or its lowest or saddest–a thing of true beauty. And there is no requirement for the resolution

[26] Ueda, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*, 199.

to be happy, or for there to be a resolution at all. Japan's vengeful ghosts and other wretched supernatural beings often serve as a blown-up projection of the human state or dissatisfaction with the present situation. These monsters invert, turn upside down, and warp, but they also do so entertainingly and with humour. They distract and detract from institutional ethics and morality, and therefore inform the popular landscape and beliefs.

Japan's ghosts and yōkai (and sometimes gods) naturally embody *aware*, so those who encounter them best approach with sensitivity and an inclination to observe, learn, and empathize. After all, these creatures typically come with a message of some kind, and it is in humans' best interest to be mindful. When early modern writers and other artists recast yōkai and counterparts as laughable and loveable, they brought them into the world of humans and, as we have seen, occasionally depicted them as more human than humans themselves. In the cases where monsters are rendered senseless or downright silly, they are typically used to lampoon and wage criticism. In all cases, though, even when supernatural beings are out to terrify, they are perpetually there to bring about change and serve the people who birth, commodify, and devour them.

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Meet the Crew

Note: Image generated using StableDiffusion Image Generator by Stable Diffusion AI from the prompt ‘Paint an image portraying a unique scene where monsters, gods, and humans gather around a radio studio table. Capture the essence of a conversation being recorded into a microphone, with each participant wearing headphones, blending the fantastical and everyday elements in this intriguing and collaborative moment’.

Conclusion

Why humour? Why AI? And what is a sonic conclusion?

Helen Wolfenden, Jacob Craig, Benjamin Nickl & Mark Rolfe

Instead of a written recap of the main chapters, we, the editors, have opted for a sonic summary and creative audio experience. It was crafted by the sound scholarship and aural expertise of Helen Wolfenden from Macquarie University, and Jacob Craig from The University of Sydney, all based in Sydney/Warrane, Australia. In this experiment, we answer the question of "Why Humour?" with the response that it is a fundamental but underexplored feature of everyday life, which is all the more powerful because of that. This discussion was paired with another novel experiment involving AI-generated images that reflect each chapter's themes and precede each chapter.

Let's talk about the audio first. The decision to conclude with sound rather than text derived from our excitement for this project and our desire to tell as many people as possible in as many ways as possible about this thing called humour studies. So, we chose sound because it can connect with a person on a more visceral level than the written word and offers a more enveloping sensory experience. Like humour, sound is ephemeral but also deeply resonant and curiously appealing. By concluding with a new form of dialogic scholarship that suits ears trained for the pleasures of creative audio content on podcasts, we want this immersive medium to launch the listener, you, on your own inquiries and unlock all kinds of new vantage points from which to interpret the eight scholarly scholarship narratives assembled here.

Now on to the AI images. After the manuscript's completion, we asked the authors to immediately react to these visuals and record their responses. The purpose of these artificial intelligence-generated images is twofold. Firstly, these digital derivations

Wolfenden, H., Craig, J., Nickl, B. & Rolfe, M. 2024. Conclusion: Why humour? Why AI? And what is a sonic conclusion? In B. Nickl & M. Rolfe. (Eds.) *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 231–233.
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allow authors to reflect on their scholarship through the lens of non-human interpretation: what results when an algorithm processes their work? It is a chance for reflection by these humour scholars. Secondly, the images underscore the constructed nature of humour, raising the questions of authorship, morality, ethical integrity, and professional responsibility to knowledge production in our contemporary world: all issues that the construction of AI content touches upon. As we discuss in the recording, humour can mask its own artifice to appear natural, deceptively simple, and essentially good. The authors' chapters examine these attributes through the everyday artefacts and social practices of humour; thus, they expose complexities within the discourse of things generally considered to be funny, amusing, and of an entertaining nature. This bears out yet another parallel to the common sales pitch for AI.

We find in all this the applicability of humour to a myriad of things that inform human life and culture in general, and on the nexus with morality in particular. From Jessica Milner Davis' examination of stereotypes to Robert Phiddian and Ron Stewart's evaluation of political satire and newspaper cartoon caricature, humour is a powerful means of expression that transcends cultural boundaries and provides potent social commentary. It is both a constitution of and a reaction to the world we live in, which is filled with the heroically good and the monstrously evil. Mark Rolfe's and Lucien Leon's treatments of political humour at the intersection of Trumpian cult politics and online meme-activism make clear that it is vital for understanding some of the most striking aspects of our current age. The contagious nature of the Joker's laughter, as explored by Anna-Sophie Jürgens, Anastasiya Fiadotava, and David C. Tscharke, and the dissection of synthetic laughter in a box by Ben Nickl, demonstrates humour's multifaceted impact in the most varied forms and the most viral guises. Finally, as part and parcel of our social fabric, humour can also be wielded as both a form of resistance and a mechanism of social control in society, as discussed in the works of Will Visconti and MW Shores.

We conclude with an invitation to the listener, to you, to delve deeper into the intricate layers of humorous expression along with us.

To listen to the contributors' discussion, scan this QR code:

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Dive into *Moral Dimensions of Humour: Essays on Humans, Heroes and Monsters*, a thought-provoking exploration of human existence and morality through the prism of humour. Shaped by tales of heroes and monsters and whatever lies in between, this interdisciplinary collection spans centuries and continents, dissecting cultural nuances and human civilisation.

Unpacking the role of humour in challenging societal norms, questioning identities, and shaping political discourse, the book examines the ethical complexities of our modern world, with the authors painting a vivid picture of the moral spectrum and how, or if, we can still answer questions about right and wrong. Engaging and insightful, this book invites readers to navigate the intriguing intersection of humour, morality, and societal transformation.

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