

In-Yer-Face

A Study of Unsettling British TV Comedy, Critical
Discomfort and Public Offence

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Irreverent Humour	6
3. The Traditional Dismissal of Comedy and Laughter	11
3.1 Taste, Power and Popular Culture	12
3.2 The Confused Role of Comedy	13
3.3 Modern Day Limits of Humour	16
4. The Notoriety of Chris Morris	19
4.1 <i>Brass Eye</i>	21
4.2 Public Outrage and Offence	24
5. Humour as Critical Disengagement	27
5.1 Humour as Critique of Ideology	29
5.2 Bakhtin and the Subversive Laughter	30
6. Discussion	35
7. Bibliography	37

1. Introduction

When Michael Grade, then chief executive of British Channel 4, refused to broadcast Chris Morris' spoof documentary show *Brass Eye* unless an offensive sketch set up as a musical comedy about the Yorkshire Ripper Peter Sutcliffe was removed, Morris secretly inserted a caption in a single frame of the tape, visible only when pressing pause, and refused to hand it in until just hours before broadcast. With *Sutcliffe! The Musical* cut out, however, the production team noticed nothing and the show aired as planned in February 1997, albeit now with the small caption reading "Grade is a cunt". Morris was soon banned from Channel 4 and threatened with legal action.¹

The image of the Cambridgeshire born writer and director, who has worked in British radio, television and film since the early 1990's, as the notorious prank master and offensive satirist always upsetting people and making jokes and comedy shows that fly in the face of modern western morality, was formed early on in Morris' career at BBC Radio. When he later brought his crude sense of humour to television and juxtaposed it to disturbing imagery, offence was quick to follow and he was accused of "pulling apart the very fabric of British culture"². Morris' collaboration with Armando Iannucci on the satirical mock news *The Day Today* (BBC 2, 1994) and his own show *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 1997) both dealt with controversial subject matters in disturbing yet comical ways, and the one off *Brass Eye Special* (2001) derived humour from the at the time extremely sensitive issue of paedophilia in Britain. The most experimental show of Morris', *Jam* (Channel 4, 2000), likewise unsettled its audience through the mixing of conventions and absurd use of humour in situations where a high level of seriousness was otherwise required, e.g. in its humorous approach to rape and infant mortality. Morris' latest work and debut film *Four Lions* (2010) is a black comedy following a group of British Islamist terrorists and aspiring Jihads whilst they plan a suicide bombing in London.

I have chosen to name my essay *In-Yer-Face* as an attempt to conjure up the style of comedy used by Morris, and indeed many of his contemporaries in British television; an aesthetic that unsettles its audience by pushing humour to its very outer limits. These shows regularly treat highly emotional and politically charged subjects irreverently and with comic disrespect, offering a flippant and disengaged approach in contradiction to the normative

¹ Lucian Randall, *Disgusting Bliss: The Brass Eye of Chris Morris*, London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd. 2010, p. 166 f, 187 ff.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

seriousness, delicacy and respect with which these issues are usually treated in western cultures. The making light of serious things, however, often ensues both public and critical offence. The term *in-yer-face* was first used in academic context by theatre critic Aleks Sierz to pin down a new mode of expression he saw emerge in British drama in the 1990's. Sierz describes a kind of theatre using shock tactics to create discomfort with the audience through the violation and disrespect of cultural taboos and codes of decorum. The confrontational material dealt with, such as for instance rape, gruesome torture, mutilation and even cannibalism, was explicitly presented on stage to make the audience squirm in their seats and hence become aware that limits were being pushed.³

Deliberate provocation and transgression, however, is nothing new to the arts, and Sierz draws attention also to Antonin Artauds manifesto *Theatre of Cruelty*, in which Artaud calls for a new theatrical expression that would wake up its audience emotionally and reclaim its long lost potential to disturb their preconceptions of the world.⁴ With the rise of modernist literature, the French Decadent poets likewise set out to, in Baudelaire's words, "shock the middle classes" ("épater la bourgeoisie") through provocative transgressions and pushing of the limits of bourgeois notions of decorum, as was the aim of much modernist art.⁵

What separates Morris' and many of his contemporaries' TV-shows (for instance *The League of Gentlemen* or any of the stand-up acts by Jimmy Carr or Ricky Gervais broadcast on TV) from the transgressive art discussed above is their insistent use of humour when provoking their audience and violating moral codes and etiquettes. Not only is the audience shocked with imagery of violence and other immoralities; we are also provoked to laugh in the face of these immoral acts. If *in-yer-face* theatre made us witness brutal torture on stage (as in the plays of Sarah Kane), the TV-shows that I will explore make us laugh at this torture. As such, we effectively gain pleasure from watching for instance the misery of others, but are also forced to confront our own disturbing reaction, which may indeed lead to very contradictory feelings. The bitter aftertaste of having realised that you are laughing at the very sickest of comedy can be illustrated by Jimmy Carr's much-debated joke:

- What do 9 out of 10 people enjoy?

³ Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London: Faber and Faber 2001, p. 1-10.

⁴ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, Trans. Victor Corti, London: Oneworld Classics Ltd. 2010 (1964). p. 60-92.

⁵ Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007, p. 11 ff, 45 ff; Peter Gay, *Modernism: the Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2008. p. 1-10.

- A gang rape.⁶

The use of a non-serious mode of expression when discussing something serious is, as mentioned, a very harsh breach of decorum in the West, and something that does not seem to have changed much since the time of Plato, Carr's rape joke being one of many examples. The dismissal of comedy itself can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece and the beginning of the Western tradition, where the rejection and hostility towards humour and laughter began.⁷ Today, this hostility is particularly interesting when it comes to television because the domestic specificity of broadcast TV has pushed comedy into a very contradictory position, where experiment and innovation (and hence to some extent transgression) is both encouraged and limited, in line with the Platonic tradition, so as to set up normative limits to humour and uphold a certain degree of domestic safety. There is a tendency both to allow comedy to transgress, but only so far as ensuring normative decorum. The clash of these two conflicting demands can be seen when looking at the extreme outrage and offence triggered by Chris Morris' deliberate subversion of these conventions and indeed the limits of humour.

Rather than readily dismissing transgressive comedy by accusing it for being too offensive, vulgar or simply "wrong", as for example *the Guardian* columnist Hadley Freeman does when writing that "rape is rape is rape [...] 99.99% of all rape jokes aren't funny"⁸ (or for that matter praising and idealizing comedy for simply breaking boundaries), it can be worth asking exactly why we find this use of comedy so disturbing. Why is it that as soon as an element of humour enters a discussion about something serious, we tend to disapprove?

Inevitably, some jokes do hurt, damage and appear regressive, but so do statements made by, say, politicians and the media. Todd Akin's recent account on legitimate rape flew in the face of rape victims as much as did Jimmy Carr's joke discussed above, and Akin's from a disturbingly serious stance. Preventing all forms of comedy from entering discussions about difficult subjects is problematic if no study of the actual nature of comedy is made. Unfortunately, the dismissal of the genre as not worth aesthetically exploring is often the case, especially when it comes to film and television comedy, as they still linger on the bottom of the cultural hierarchy. My purpose is to explore what this kind of unsettling

⁶ Jimmy Carr, quoted in Tanya Gold, "Have you heard the one about rape? It's funny now", *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2012.

⁷ Andrew Stott, *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge 2005, p. 17-32.

⁸ Hadley Freeman, "Everyone's talking about rape", *The Guardian*, 21 Aug. 2012.

comedy actually does, aesthetically as well as ethically. I will also try to come to terms with the offence caused and demonstrate how comedy can say very important things albeit in a different mode. Because Chris Morris' TV-shows have proved to be almost inexhaustible sources of offence in Britain, my focus will be mainly on his work.

Most "great" western thinkers have had something to say about humour, comedy and laughter, from Plato and Aristotle to Christian thinkers like St. Benedict and John Chrysostom. Early theories of humour linked it with derision, Baudelaire described the satanic force of human laughter and Nietzsche argued that because human beings suffer so intensely, laughter was created so as to keep us alive. Later, Freud explored the repressed desires involved in humour. In general, most of these theories have focused on humour's negative aspects, and have consequently pushed comedy into the margins of Western cultural tradition. I will focus on a few of these theories in order to better contextualise the critical neglect of modern television comedy, and indeed the offence it tends to provoke when venturing into unsafe areas. It is only recently that comedy has been somewhat re-evaluated in academia. With the rise of New Historicism scholars rediscovered the work of Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin who explored laughter's potentially revolutionary force, a theory that makes for a substantial defence of particularly "low" and gross-out forms of comedy. André Breton's notion of black humour is also useful when understanding the darker elements in the shows that I will discuss.

Not much, however, has been written specifically about film comedy (Geoff King is one of the few) and even less so on television comedy and sitcom. One prominent scholar is Brett Mills, whose work I rely on particularly when exploring the contradictory position of British television comedy. I will further refer to the work of Jerry Palmer and John Morreall, both of whom have written extensively on theories of humour and whose work enables us to redefine comedy and understand it in new and challenging ways.

2. Irreverent Humour

The most notorious and controversial sketch of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (BBC2, 1969-74) is often argued to be the one about the undertaker and his customer who arrives with a sack containing the dead corpse of his mother. Cremation, burial or, simply, dumping the mother in the Thames are on the list of suggestions, neither of which seem particularly appealing. Perhaps then, the undertaker suggests, the body is rather that of “an eater”:

Customer: Are you suggesting eating my mother?

Undertaker: Yes! Not raw, cooked, roasted. Few French fries, broccoli, horseradish sauce...

Customer: Well... I do feel a bit peckish. [...]

Undertaker: Look, tell you what, we'll eat her, if you do feel a bit guilty afterwards, we can dig a grave and you can throw up in it.

Film scholar Leon Hunt describes this sketch as an early attempt to experiment with “black” and “sick” comedy in British television and push the limits of what was permissible to broadcast “within a genre that is ostensibly a branch of ‘light entertainment’ [...] No TV comedy sketch had gone so far into calculated tastelessness before, and Python would never go so far on TV again.”¹⁰ The BBC had themselves been wary of broadcasting the sketch but decided to do so on the condition that it featured a staged outburst of anger from the audience (shouting, booing and exclamations like “that’s disgusting” and “let’s have something decent” is heard in the background), climaxing with everyone raging onto stage in offence.



“I do feel a bit peckish...”



Audience raging onto the studio stage to interrupt the sketch.



If suggestive gags about cannibalism were considered tasteless and sick enough to be pushing the boundaries too far in 1970, the fascination with bad taste was taken to further extremes in British television in the 90’s and early noughties. 30 years after Python’s undertaker skit, Chris Morris found humour in infant mortality in a sketch from *Jam* named “Coffin-Clinic” in which a happy couple shows off the design of their miniature foetus-coffin just collected at the clinic for premature born children, holding their stillborn child. As they coincidentally

⁹ The term “sick comedy” was first used pejoratively in the US in the late 1950’s to describe the macabre and cynical humour of for instance Lenny Bruce, *Mad* magazine and the circulating of “dead baby” jokes. See Leon Hunt, *The League of Gentlemen (BFI TV Classics)*, New York: Palmgrave Macmillan 2008, p. 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

bump into their friends, also on their way to the clinic to receive their little coffin, they greet the presumably dead baby yet inside the mother's womb, waving happily at her belly.



Perhaps more notorious and judged “unacceptable” by the Broadcast Complaints Commission was the sketch “Plumber Baby”, in which a plumber arrives at a house expecting to fix the boiler, but is asked instead to plumb the owner's dead baby into the central heating. “Did I say boiler? I meant baby”, apologizes the woman, and offers him £1000 an hour for fixing the baby that has apparently “stopped working”. Generously, the plumber even sees to it that a tap can be opened so as to let out steam from the baby's mouth, and the mother coos and cuddles her plumbed baby in loving appreciation.¹¹

Not far off, *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC2, 1999-2002) likewise experimented with dark materials for humorous effects, for instance in the many twisted scenes with the children's theatre group Legz Akimbo¹² whose slogan (“Legz Akimbo – put yourself into a child”) filed many complaints with the Broadcast Complaints Commission. The blatant and comically portrayed homophobia in Royston Vasey (the fictional village where the series is set¹³), with the local reverend criticising the theatre for staging shows about homosexuality (“It's going to be performed by Legz Akimbo Theatre Company and it's a show about homosexuality aimed at 9 to 12 year olds. Some people call this Theatre in Education, I call it AIDS in a Van”), and the theatre's own disrespect of disabled people (they name their play about the disabled “vegetable¹⁴ soup”) come across as particularly crude. The portrayal of Herr Lipp, a German teacher and paedophile (“If you don't understand any of my sayings, come to me in private and I shall take you in my German mouth. Alles klar?”) was accused for trivializing paedophilia, and Herr Lipp also acts in one of the series darkest moments

¹¹ Hunt, 2008, p. 30.

¹² “Akimbo” is a body position (hands on hips, elbows turned out), often referred to as “arms akimbo”. When *League* use it to describe the position of the legs rather than arms, it suggests a sexual position.

¹³ Royston Vasey was the birth name of British blue stand-up comedian Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown, infamous for his offensive sexist and racist humour.

¹⁴ “Vegetable” is slang for someone who cannot move.

when he buries his teenage student Justin alive in his back garden, after a failed attempt of date-rape.¹⁵

This seemingly amoral and crude sense of humour is by no means a new phenomenon, and Hunt draws attention to literary uses of similar morbid humour by authors like Joe Orton, whose scandalous and cynical black farce-comedies make similar attempts to jab at the established ethical and moral stances of the time. The first attempt to actually define the kind of humour similar to that featured in the TV-shows mentioned was made by André Breton in his *Anthology of Black Humour (L'humour Noir, 1940)*, in which he introduces the word “black” in association with humour for the first time. “There is nothing”, Breton begins by quoting the French author Pierre Piobb, “that intelligent humour cannot resolve in gales of laughter, not even the void... Laughter, as one of humanity’s most sumptuous extravagances, even to the point of debauchery, stands at the lip of the void, offers us the void as a pledge.”¹⁶

Breton’s emphasis on there being no subject high or pompous enough, nor any taboos sensitive enough, not to be dealt with by humour, is crucial when understanding what goes on also in the TV-shows mentioned. What they effectively do is to take the social mores and taboos of the time; sensitive subject matters that provoke discomfort and are not readily discussed in society, and treat them as any other light-hearted subject open to comic mockery. As Breton puts it, it is a sense of humour that reduces “everything that seemed all-important to a petty scale, desecrating everything in its path”¹⁷, as for example when *The League of Gentlemen* makes “light” the social taboo of paedophilia, a highly emotional issue otherwise dealt with upmost delicacy, by instead treating it with irreverence.

Breton mentions authors like Charles Baudelaire and Marquis de Sade’s insubordination and continuous jabbing at bourgeois values, but holds Jonathan Swift as the “true initiator”¹⁸ of black humour, whose tonal shifts and pervasive misanthropy display a similar disjuncture of harsh subject matter and whimsical approach as the shows discussed above. This can be seen in for example *A Modest Proposal*, in which Swift “humbly” presents his by no means modest proposal to solve the economic crisis and growing impoverishment in Ireland by simply eating the poor:

¹⁵ Hunt, 2008, p. 32.

¹⁶ André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour*, Trans. Mark Polizzotti, London: Telegram 2009 (1940), p. 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 29.

a young healthy child well nursed is at a year old a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food, whether steamed, baked, or boiled, and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee, or a ragout.¹⁹

This horrific and absurd proposal is not far off Monty Python's undertaker sketch in which cannibalism is similarly portrayed as something notoriously unremarkable, albeit that Swift's satirical approach may be of a nobler political agenda. Any such pronounced political agenda, Hunt argues, is sometimes difficult to trace from contemporary British TV-comedy, as one finds rather a desire to shock and offend the audience and simply push the limits of broadcast standards. Much of the humour in these shows, then, could be said to derive from a mischievous and nonconformist attitude towards normative morality, as when going against notions of political correctness and deeply held social constructs. This can be seen in Morris' attack on the notion of motherly love in his "Baby Plumber" sketch, or the immodest playing around with stereotypes on homosexuality and disability in *The League of Gentlemen*. Rather than dismissing these sketches as thoughtless pranks, however, they can perhaps also be understood in a modernist sense, as attempts to renew the arts as many early modernists set out to do by ways of bringing disturbance into normality and rigid traditions and conventions. Rather than dressing language up in pretty words and images, emphasis was laid on violating our senses through shock and provocation and as such challenge our preconceptions of the world and indeed the place of art in it.

What Swift, however, shares with these shows, and which Breton emphasises in his definition of black humour, is the irreverent tone and playfully light-hearted approach when dealing with serious subjects. As such, Breton continues, black humour is "the mortal enemy of sentimentality"²⁰ in that it flies in the face of all the subtle ways in which subjects such as death, poverty and paedophilia are conventionally treated. Instead of crying and sympathising, we are provoked to laugh, but are nevertheless likely to be unsettled by our own reaction because we are laughing at what society, and perhaps our own common sense, tell us should not be laughed at.

This is also a key to understanding the offence that many of these TV-shows have caused. One recent example of this is Ricky Gervais' one off comedy show *Derek* (Channel 4, 2012), in which Gervais' plays a mentally disabled care worker, a portrayal that was soon

¹⁹ Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, Kindle Public Domain 1729, p. 5.

²⁰ Breton, 2009, p. 25.

criticized for mocking the disabled.²¹ If we set aside the question of whether this was the case or not, interesting is the anger aroused when such emotionally loaded subjects, in this case disability, enter the realm of humour. Because comedy, as Hunt emphasised, is a genre we tend to associate with “light entertainment” and view as relatively “safe”, offence is often caused when it transcends this safety zone and derives humour from issues we expect to be dealt with more delicately (by “serious” genres such as the news, documentaries or dramas). Humouristic approaches, at least from a western perspective, seem not uphold the appropriate level of reverence when treating certain difficult (and often taboo) issues. This belief in the inherent limits of humour can, in fact, be traced all the way back to Ancient Greece.

²¹ Sanchez Manning, “’Vile, cynical and dishonest’: Father of an autistic child slams Ricky Gervais’ new show”, *The Mirror*, 16 Apr. 2012.

3. The Traditional Dismissal of Comedy and Laughter

“There’s a part of you which wants to make people laugh, but your reason restrains it, because you’re afraid of being thought a vulgar clown”²², writes Plato in the *Republic*, in which he repeatedly ponders over the place of comedy and laughter in society. By associating it with malice, vulgarity and loss of self-control, Plato depicts humour as something fundamentally incompatible with his ideal state of reason in which pleasure had to be limited to maintain social order. This critical attitude towards comedic pursuits as the very binary opposite of rationality, kept at distance from men of reason and to be practised only by slaves or hired aliens who should “receive no serious consideration whatsoever”²³, as Plato puts it, was a dominating thought at the time, and one that delineated a clear dichotomy between laughter and social order. The attitude permeates also the writings of Aristotle, who distinguishes between comedy and tragedy in his *Poetics* by describing the former as a mimesis of inferior people with no courtesy or manners, whereas tragedy on the other hand dealt with higher beings whose virtues were noble and admirable, and hence well suited for cultivating good manners in a civilised state. The association of tragedy and higher ideals placed the genre in a privileged position in comparison to comedy, and one it has generally maintained in Western academia ever since.²⁴

Christianity later reinforced these ideas as many early monasteries sought to limit comedic pursuits because of the loss of bodily control implicated in the act of laughter. The advocacy of a serious mode of life soon became integrated into Christian theology so as to uphold order, but also due to the belief that gravity of mind was what God intended for his creatures, as Michael Billig argues: “most Christian theologians before the age of Erasmus, and many afterwards, were convinced that God preferred his creatures to be serious of mind and disciplined of body.”²⁵ Laughter was seen as a “dirtying of the mouth”²⁶, professor Jerry Palmer argues, and perhaps more notoriously, for Abbot Ephraem of Syria, it was “the beginning of the destruction of the soul.”²⁷

²² Stott, 2005, p. 18.

²³ John Morreall, *Comic Relief - A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2009, p. 7

²⁴ Stott, 2005, p. 14-32, Morreall, 2009, p. 2-9, Michael Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule – Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London: SAGE Publications 2005, p. 37-53.

²⁵ Billig, 2005, p. 40.

²⁶ Jerry Palmer, *Taking Humour Seriously*, London: Routledge 1994, p. 44.

²⁷ Morreall, 2009, p. 5.

3.1 Power, Taste and Popular Culture

The dismissal of comedy as having nothing to contribute to society was further reinforced during the Renaissance and Neoclassicist era, Palmer argues, when there occurred a “general separation of cultural ‘levels’ in which what has come to become ‘culture’, or ‘canonical culture’ constituted itself by creating a series of norms which were based on the explicit rejection of what became, as a result, ‘popular’ culture.”²⁸ The social elite of the time began self-differentiating themselves by acquiring certain manners and codes of civility, and the importance of reason and seriousness came to push comedy, a genre concerned with unreason and folly, to the margins where it was kept at distance from the upper classes. Tragedy, on the other hand, which dealt with “the actions of illustrious men and women, in other words the political elite of the ruling class”²⁹ came to signify this refined, polite and respectable culture, more “central to the order of civilisation”³⁰.

Aristotle’s dichotomy between comedy and tragedy, as well as the Platonic binary distinction between reason and folly, then, came to reinforce the hierarchical division where the social elite claimed exclusive privilege on certain kinds of culture whilst denigrating everything else. In other words, social power became rigidly intertwined with the cultural categories of seriousness and triviality, and claiming the right to decide what belonged to each category was an effective way to secure ones own power.³¹ As literary critic Allon White argues, “the social reproduction of seriousness is fundamental – perhaps *the* fundamental hegemonic manouvre [---] Seriousness always has more to do with power than with content. The authority to designate what is to be taken seriously [...] is a way of creating and maintaining power”³² This can be seen in many modern day societies where comedies mocking pieties of the time are harshly criticised and even censored, as was the case with Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* (1979), which was banned in many places because the censors deemed it blasphemous in its mockery of Jesus and his followers (when that which officials had decided was to be taken seriously was mocked, censorship was implemented). Similarly, the recent Muhammad videos posted on YouTube lead to severe offence and ended with several people dying in protest of its making light of Islam’s highest piety and prophet, otherwise treated with reverence and respect. The question of whether Google should have

²⁸ Palmer, 1994, p. 121.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 122.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 178.

³¹ Ibid, p. 120 ff.

³² Allon White cited in Andy Medhurts, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, London: Routledge 2007, p. 16 ff.

denied access to the video was also much debated, as it was ultimately blocked in several countries after pressure from government officials.³³

In this sense, Palmer continues, even if “we have largely abandoned the rules of neo-classical decorum in the arts [...] there is still a tendency to make a clear distinction between what is funny and what is serious”³⁴, and what is funny should not transgress into areas where seriousness is required.

The divide between canonical and popular culture is furthermore a phenomenon that still permeates western cultures, perhaps most substantially explored by Pierre Bourdieu who similarly related cultural taste with social power in society. Seen from this perspective, whatever is canonised as elite and refined culture is effectively the taste of those in control of social and political power.³⁵ Because of comedy’s long association with the loss of self-control, unreason and folly; values opposed to those in power practising Platonic and later Christian ideas of reason, pursuit of truth and self-restraint, it is a genre that came to occupy the lower levels in the cultural hierarchy very early on, a position that it has generally maintained until the present day, as Andy Medhurst emphasises:

outside of the demarcated field of humour theory or texts dealing with particular comedic genres or practitioners, most academics seem to fear that comedy might dirty their dignity, and shy away from its grubby, tainting touch. This can reach bizarre proportions. In a useful collection of essays on British cinema in the 1990s, for example, the editor notes in his Introduction that: ‘In retrospect, comedy, which has been Britain’s most important contributor to world cinema in the 90s, ought to have had its own chapter.’³⁶

3.2 The Confused Role of Film and Television Comedy

Taking comedy seriously, however paradoxical that may sound (considering the subversion of seriousness that takes place in humour), is hence not something academics have tended to devote their time to, and any further exploration as to why emotions such as anger, fear and sadness that arise when consuming, say, tragic art should be more valuable and progressive for society than whatever emotions (or, as I will later come back to, non-emotions, or emotional detachment) that arise in us when amused by comedy, is often avoided.

However, it is precisely this perceived lightness and pointlessness of comedy, and tendencies to disregard it without further exploration that has pushed the genre into a very

³³ Claire Cain Miller, “As Violence Spreads in Arab World, Google Blocks Access to Inflammatory Video”, *The New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2012.

³⁴ Palmer, 1994, p. 131.

³⁵ Ibid, p. 178 ff.

³⁶ Medhurst, 2007, p. 16.

powerful position. Because no critical attention is given to comedy and it is so unlikely to be put under scrutiny, filmmakers are left with a freedom to transgress and push the limits without risking censorship because chances are their work will be dismissed as “mere entertainment” anyway, and hence be of little interest to the cultural elite.³⁷

It is, for instance, difficult to imagine “serious” genres, such as documentaries or television news, getting away with transgressions such as the line casually dropped by the character JP in Channel 4’s recent sitcom *Fresh Meat* (2012): “Are you pregnant? If so, get rid. Seriously, don’t even flinch, just get rid.” Considering the recent controversies about abortion³⁸, JP’s statement seems particularly daring, but is made considerably easier because it can be excused as comic banter and silliness that should not be taken seriously. Admittedly, this license to transgress can in many ways be abused, and the fine line between comedy and bigotry is often hard to draw. However, as was the case with *Life of Brian* and the Muhammad videos, many people do react when they believe comedy to have crossed a line.

In other words, we allow comedy to transgress somewhat, and may well enjoy having our moral and ethical stances slightly tickled, but only so far. As soon as our truly rigid and deeply held beliefs are up for comic mockery (or beliefs that secure our social power), we tend to get offended. This can help us understand, for instance, why the word “mong” was censored in *The League of Gentlemen*, whereas other parts, such as the unflattering portrayal of the character Mickey (the representation of a person with special educational needs) passed uncensored. Using the word “mong” simply crossed the fine (and seemingly arbitrary) line, according to the censors, between comedy and prejudice towards the disabled. The deeply held belief in democratic equality and tolerance was considered violated.

This somewhat paradoxical purpose given to comedy; on the one hand licensed to transgress, but never as far as crossing the reverent (yet overtly arbitrary) line that indeed changes drastically according to whom you ask, is what Brett Mills call the confused role of comedy. Whilst we do expect the genre to confront us somewhat, we likewise dismiss or censor the kind of comedy that treads into unsafe areas where it can truly challenge decorum and our set of beliefs.

This is particularly notable when it comes to television comedy when considering the domestic typography of broadcast television. Because TV is projected into the private living

³⁷ Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, New York: Wallflower Press 2002, p. 2.

³⁸ For instance Todd Akin’s argument that women who are “legitimately” raped cannot physically become pregnant, and the outrage caused after a young woman in Ireland died due to birth complications, as she was refused abortion which is illegal in Ireland.

spaces of an entire nation simultaneously (as opposed to cinema that can market itself to niche audiences and easily be avoided by the public³⁹), it tends to be strictly regulated so as to appear relatively inoffensive and uphold domestic safety and normality. Yet despite television's strict regulations compared to cinema, there have also been tendencies to move in the opposite direction and give comedy, as the former UK Broadcasting Standards Commission put it, a "special freedom"⁴⁰ to transgress. The potential of broadcast television to use this special freedom and, in Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton's words, actively bring "disturbance into the ideological emblem of normality and safety: domestic space"⁴¹, makes it a very powerful medium with which to question prevailing social norms and ethical stances. To further complicate things, however, at the same time as the Commission ascribed this "special freedom", they likewise listed those subjects that would cause too much offence if dealt with comically (e.g. disability and death).⁴²

It was precisely this complex topographical specificity of television that ultimately lead to what Mulvey and Sexton refer to as the "culture war" in the 60's and 70's with Mary Whitehouse's countless campaigns to clean up British television and save it from what she saw as a moral collapse in mainstream media, in particularly the BBC which she denounced as a "sex mad" left-winged conspiracy effectively bringing destruction to "the myth of God from the minds of men".⁴³ Albeit that Whitehouse's main source of critique was not comedy, the public debate triggered demonstrates what a powerful effect television can have when used in certain ways. Whitehouse aimed to make the broadcast standards more effectively affirm her own domestic "normality" and conservative Christian beliefs, and impose her own moral stances on the rest of Britain.⁴⁴

The limited potential for comedy to transgress, however, was made somewhat easier with the introduction of the new Broadcasting Act in 1980, in which it was declared that the responsibility of television was not solely to educate and inform the British people (as had been the main emphasis until then), but also "encourage experiment and innovation in the

³⁹ Although admittedly this is changing now, as TV is becoming more like cinema where you can select online what you want to watch and when.

⁴⁰ Brett Mills, "'Yes, it's war!': Chris Morris and comedy's representational strategies" in *Experimental British Television*, Eds. Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2007, p. 191.

⁴¹ Laura Mulvey and Jamie Spexton, "Introduction" in *Experimental British Television*, Eds. Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2007, p. 3.

⁴² Mills, 2007, p. 190 ff; Mulvey and Sexton, 2007, p. 2 ff.

⁴³ Roy and Gwen Shaw, "The Cultural and Social Setting" in *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, vol. 9, *Modern Britain*, Ed. Boris Ford, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1992 (1988), p. 24.

⁴⁴ Mulvey and Sexton, 2007, p. 3 f; Ben Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy, from Vic Reeves to The Office*, London: Haper Perennial 2004, p. 304 ff; Shaw, 1992, p. 24 f.

form and content of programmes”⁴⁵. The Broadcasting Act emerged almost simultaneously as Britain’s fourth television service Channel 4 (BBC1, 2 and ITV were the three others), which likewise opened up the spaces for experimental television and the potential to broadcast more “daring” shows. As the BBC was government funded and as such more protective and wary of domestic safety, Channel 4 launched themselves as the artier alternative, sparking debate and introducing experimentation in British television by broadcasting that which the BBC did not have the guts to show.⁴⁶ This was the case with Chris Morris’s show *Brass Eye*, which was rejected by the BBC (despite them having partly funded the show, and their earlier cooperation on *The Day Today*) as its content was considered too risky. Instead, the show was picked up by Channel 4 who even brought the BBC’s rejection into their marketing technique, as Lucian Randall argues:⁴⁷

The intrigue and mystery added to the appeal of the show and, in real terms, the effect of the BBC’s rejection was negligible – if anything, it helped. Channel 4 liked the idea of poaching talent that the BBC couldn’t handle.⁴⁸

3.3 Modern Day Limits of Humour

Today, then, there is both a tendency to dismiss comedy as light and inconsequential and as such permit it to transgress, whilst at the same time delineate a clear ethics as to how far these transgressions are to be taken. Aaron Smuts argues that the debate about these limits and transgressions often revolves around the question of whether there are times when our sense of humour simply can be said to be “ethically objectionable”⁴⁹, or, as Ronald de Sousa named his much debated article, “When is it wrong to laugh?”⁵⁰

Professor Michael Billig, for instance, introduces an article about the limits of humour by saying that “it is presumed that no reader of this chapter will laugh” at any of the jokes cited, “Rather it is expected that they will be horrified that anyone might find such material humorous.”⁵¹ Albeit that Billig’s examples are unambiguously racist (collected from KKK websites and the like), his statement affirms the prevailing idea that comedy has nothing to

⁴⁵ Mulvey and Spexton, 2007, p. 4.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 1 ff.

⁴⁷ Randall, 2010, p. 140-153.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Aaron Smuts, “The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?” in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Springer, Vol. 13, Issue 3, June 2010, p. 333.

⁵⁰ Ronald de Sousa cited in Smuts, 2010, p. 333.

⁵¹ Billig, 2005, p. 27 f.

do in such serious debates, and that laughing at the “wrong” kind of jokes is inherently harmful and makes you a bad person.

De Sousa suggests, in line with Billig’s conclusion that a morally righteous person will not laugh at racist humour, that in order to find a joke funny one must necessarily endorse its propositions. To laugh at racist joke, in this sense, effectively means that you hold racist assumptions. This argument is problematic because it underestimates the audience’s ability to entertain certain ideas without actually endorsing them. The same goes for when we read a book or watch a film, we can very well gain pleasure without necessarily agreeing with the attitudes presented. If we can distinguish between fiction and reality in this way, it seems unlikely that we should not be able to do so when it comes to comedy. Inevitably, there are times when humour is used to mock and harm socially disadvantaged groups, widen social injustice and hence damage societies based on tolerance and equality. But we often group all kinds of comedy into this unacceptable usage of humour, even though it is not always so easy to tell apart when a joke is truly, say, racist and when it simply discusses racism.⁵²

This ambiguity is often found in darker forms of comedy where the ironic distance may be taken so far that it becomes difficult to make out what is being said, for instance with the character Mickey in *The League of Gentlemen*, as noted earlier, who is portrayed as a grotesquely stereotypical “simpleton” with special needs. Should this portrayal be interpreted as affirming negative stereotyping (and does laughing at Mickey hence become a prejudiced act?), or are the creators of *League* simply mocking and discussing these prejudiced ideas through comic irony?

When de Sousa’s way of arguing enters the debate about this darker and more ambiguous humour, it becomes problematic because the show or joke in question is assumed to be pro certain attitudes simply because it addresses these attitudes in a humorous mode. The separation between comedy that is blatantly, say, pro-rape and comedy that simply discusses the matter is ignored, and comedy is once again dismissed as a lesser discursive mode unable to discuss certain subjects without playing them down as unimportant. The criticism of Ricky Gervais’ show *Derek* can perhaps also be understood in this light, in that the humorous mode used in the portrayal of a disabled man was automatically interpreted as ridiculing the disabled, and that laughing at the show consequently made you prejudiced.

⁵² Smuts, 2010, p. 333-347.



Offensive? Mickey (Mark Gatiss) in *the League of Gentlemen*; Ricky Gervais as Derek in *Derek*.⁵³

One dangerous outcome of trying to avoid the critique that often follows comedy shows that represent certain social groups is that these groups risk disappearing from the world of comedy altogether because no one knows yet *how* to laugh at them without it becoming discriminative, as Brett Mills points out:

By making the representation of, say, race, an extremely problematic phenomenon, comedy's effectiveness, which relies on easily understood texts and instances, is undermined. [...] The difficulty in solving this conflict has resulted in the banishment of such portrayals either to minority channels or off television altogether, and it's difficult to see this as a positive step.⁵⁴

⁵³ Pictures taken from: http://www.screened.com/the-league-of-gentlemen/17-5258/all-images/132-719036/4600683003_e61e6ac20_z/131-417309/ ; <http://www.indiewire.com/article/television/netflix-tca-winter-2013-ricky-gervais-derek-eli-roth-hemlock-grove>

⁵⁴ Brett Mills, *Television Sitcom*, London: British Film Institute, 2005, p. 148.

4. The Notoriety of Chris Morris

Perhaps Chris Morris, “the most hated man in Britain”⁵⁵ as described by the *Daily Mail*, is one of the most notorious offenders of this seemingly arbitrary ethics of humour, as he continuously pushed the limits in his many TV-shows and, as Mills emphasises, spent his career “irritating those who work within broadcasting as much as the audiences who consume his programming”⁵⁶.

Together with comedy producer Armando Iannucci, Morris debuted in television with the mock news programme *The Day Today* (BBC 2, 1994). Having both begun their careers in radio, *The Day Today* was the television spin-off from an earlier collaboration on the radio show *On the Hour* (BBC Radio 4, 1991-92), where the pair set out to humorously question the authoritative and manipulating nature of news programming; its often exploitative treatment of sensitive subjects and tasteless dramatization of insignificant news.

Lucian Randall describes *The Day Today* as an “awkward blend of the savage and the absurd”⁵⁷, as each of the six episodes covers a range of bizarre fictional and often nonsense news read out with apparent authority by Morris acting as the main reporter (such as “sacked chimney sweep pumps boss full of mayonnaise” or “headmaster suspended for using big faced child as satellite dish”), alternated with the cruel abuse given to his many his many inept reporters. The abuse is also aimed at Morris’ studio guests, perhaps most memorable is the bullying of a woman who has spent six months organising a jam festival to raise money for the homeless, but managed to scramble together only the small sum of £1,500. “That’s a pathetic amount of money”, Morris argues, “you could raise more money by sitting outside a tube station with your hat on the ground even if you were twice as ugly as you are, which is very ugly indeed!”

Randall suggests that this mix of cruelty and stupidity positions the show in a specifically British style of comedy, a tradition that the author Jasper Fforde has described as a form of

absurd humour that the British do so well, which started with Jonathan Swift and runs through Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and is reflected much later on in Monty Python [...] The satire [...] is cruel – but then a lot of comedy is cruel. You really squirm. But then the really great

⁵⁵ *Daily Mail* cited in Dennis Limm, “The Gang That Couldn’t Bomb Straight”, *The New York Times*, Oct. 22 2012.

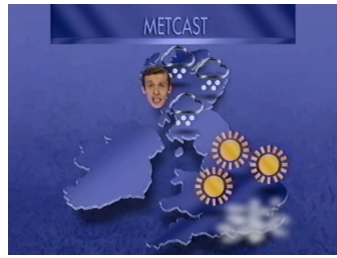
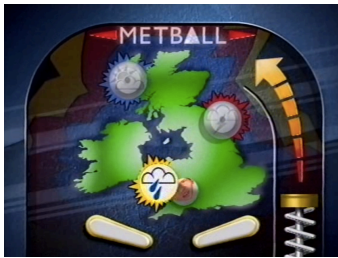
⁵⁶ Mills, 2007, p. 181.

⁵⁷ Randall, 2010, p. 95.

comics are not necessarily the people you always laugh at, but the people who make you think: Ooh, should I really be laughing at that?⁵⁸

The more surreal rather than cruel elements in *The Day Today* are found for instance the absurdist weather reports with Sylvester Stuart, his disembodied head floating around a map of the British Isles in strange ways whilst announcing bizarre forecasts:

a very stupid area of low pressure moving in from the Midlands will bring some heavy breezes later on. A bit like the first rush of euphoria induced by a large dose of heroin. [---] Over the midlands now it will be warm at first but turning cocky later, around twelve. And there should be some cloud around in the shape of a whore.



The overall surreal nature of each episode is reached also through the exaggeration of the often unnecessarily complex conventions of the news format, such as the flashy visuals and animations, somewhat hysterical music and scrolling news feed flashing past at ridiculous speed; conventions that often become distracting and confusing in authentic news programmes rather than enhancing of the content dealt with.

By adapting and recreating the language and conventions of serious news programming with such apparent ease whilst still maintaining its comic dimensions, *The Day Today* demonstrates the artificial nature of the many formal strategies employed the news, and how easily they can be both manipulated and recreated. If Morris can make use of the aesthetics associated with reliable and serious programming whilst reciting nonsense, these set of conventions seem unable to uphold the much asked for distinction between the serious and the comic, and indeed the real from the fictional; distinctions that we expect to be upheld in order for the news to remain reliable. It furthermore shows that the conventions associated with television comedy are likewise merely conventions that are not necessary for the comic effect but rather exist, similarly to those used in serious programming, to uphold the barrier between the comic and the serious.⁵⁹

When Morris deliberately breaks these barriers and merges the identities of the serious and the comic, then, it can both confuse and disturb us because these are binary

⁵⁸ Jasper Fforde cited in Randall, 2010, p. 95 f.

⁵⁹ Mills, 2007, p. 190 ff.

opposites we have learnt to recognise and that are foundational to western civilization. This has led to Morris' shows either fooling, severely offending or, simply, unsettling people and leaving them unsure of how to react, as was the case with *Jam*, to which I shall return later.

4.1 *Brass Eye*

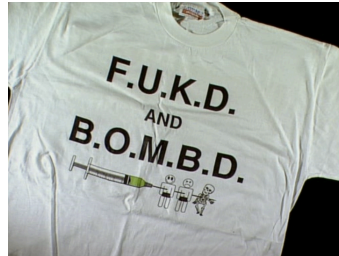
With *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 1997; 2001), however, Morris caused the most public outrage and offence as he pushed his comedy further in its sustained attacks on certain sensitive subjects chosen specifically for their precariousness. If *The Day Today* just about got away with mocking and undermining the conventions of serious programmes, *Brass Eye's* adopting not only of the formal aesthetics of such serious programming (as well as "shockumentary" tabloid TV exposés), but also the sensitive subject matters dealt with in these shows was considered taking it too far.

In its parodying of current affairs documentaries, each of the six episodes of *Brass Eye* took one perennial yet complex social problem otherwise up for grabs only for more "serious" genres, as Randall argues, "the sort of topics that were just too difficult to cover in thirty minutes but which the media regularly tried to simplify to the point of where they didn't make any sense at all".⁶⁰ The reverence and delicacy with which these issues were otherwise treated was in *Brass Eye* completely undermined in its insistence on finding humour in the subjects, and indeed the media's representation of them. Animals, drugs, science, sex, crime and decline were on the list for *Brass Eye*, each of which was presented in the grandiose and macho ways of current affair television. "You haven't got a clue, have you?" plead Morris as the main presenter about the moral decline of Britain, the "moral-meter" indicating zero, "But you will do, if you watch for thirty minutes."

Most memorable are perhaps the nonsense and entirely fictitious campaigns to which Morris managed to get a large number of ignorant but well intentioned celebrities and politicians signing up to without apparent hesitation or caution. The episode *Drugs* included the controversial set-up interview with Conservative MP David Amess speaking elaborately about the fictitious Czechoslovakian drug "Cake". The lethal "big yellow death bullet", as Amess describes Cake, coloured yellow "purely as a fashion thing" and taken in pill form, also fooled comedian Bernard Manning who emotionally agreed and warned against its dangers: "if you're sick on this stuff, you can puke your fucking self to death. One girl threw up her own pelvis bone before she snuffed the lid. It's a fucking disgrace." Perhaps most

⁶⁰ Randall, 2010, p. 156.

notorious was Amess' going so far as to put forth a question in the British Parliament about Cake, alongside the legislation of Khat and GHB.⁶¹ He also promoted Morris' bogus organisations F.U.K.D. (Free the United Kingdom from Drugs) and B.O.M.B.D. (British Opposition To Metabolically Bisturbile Drugs).



MP David Amess warning about cake, later wearing the T-shirt FUKD & BOMBBD to support Morris' fake campaigns; Bernard Manning likewise showing his concern whilst stood next to an enormous piece of cake.

None of the celebrities fooled by *Brass Eye* had any apparent connection to or specialist knowledge of the issues discussed. Rather, they showed up speaking authoritatively whilst reciting absurd lines fed to them by Morris, despite the apparent clues suggesting it was all just a ludicrous set-up. Outrage arose first after the show had aired and people realised they had been fooled. Accusations began to fill the tabloids: Morris had gone too far, the show was tasteless and sick and the celebrity interviews utterly unfair. There was a sense, Randall argues, that comedy had no business in this area of serious issues, and certainly had no right to set people up to talk about such emotionally charged topics only to later mock them.⁶²

There were even broadcast rules against set-ups in entertainment shows, prohibiting such material to air unless a release form was signed by everyone involved, including those fooled. In more serious genres, however, such as the news, set-ups were allowed as long as they were done in public interest. This is a typical example of comedy being degraded in the cultural hierarchy to the lowest level of "mere entertainment" where it is considered incapable of dealing with anything beyond light and ephemeral issues. Comedy had no business in doing interview set-ups according to broadcast standards, and indeed to those complaining about the show, something that Morris' however completely ignored by deliberately breaking the code. This is partly why the BBC would not commission *Brass Eye*, and the show was postponed several times before it finally aired on Channel 4 in 1997, albeit after many heated debates in the studio.⁶³

⁶¹ Amess proposal can be found on the House of Commons Publications & records, case nr. 38968 (see bibliography), or as explained by Randall, 2010, p. 173 ff.

⁶² Randall, 2010, p. 173-190.

⁶³ Ibid, p. 147-153.

The discomfort provoked, however, was not only due to the celebrity interviews, but because of the general tone of the show where sensitive and complex issues were treated irreverently. *Brass Eye* included many fictional stories deriving humour from societal concerns, such as the fake coverage of a school that forces the parents of a young girl (described as “a disaster waiting to happen”) pretend they have killed themselves in order to get their daughter off drugs. “If you don’t take action now, your daughter will be selling her kids in order to shove crack into any available orifice in her body”, Morris informs the parents. A funeral is set up and the daughter successfully keeps off the “ecstasy pipes” in grief. Other controversies include Morris’ hosting a Jeremy Kyle-style talk show in which he distinguishes between “good AIDS” (transmitted through blood transfusion) and “bad AIDS” (through sex or drugs), and in the *Drugs* episode he discusses his own “responsible” intake of heroin as distinct from that of the irresponsible lower classes and ethnic minorities:

Luckily, the amount of heroin I use is harmless. I inject it just once a month on a purely recreational basis. Fine. But what about other people, less stable, less educated and less middle class than me? Builders, or blacks for example? If you’re one of those, my advice to you is, leave well alone.

Most outrageous was the *Brass Eye Special* episode which dealt with the at the time predominant and highly sensitive issue of paedophilia. Aired in 2001, only one year after what Randall describes as the “tabloid-lead campaign of anti-paedophile marches and violence, when any dissenting voices were denounced at best liberal apologists and at worst as defenders of abusers”⁶⁴, *Brass Eye* welcomed its viewer to “Paedogeddon”. There had been a rise in tabloid concern over sex abuse in Britain in the late 90’s, and after 8-year old Sarah Payne was abducted and murdered in 2000, *News of the World* decided that the work carried out by the police simply was not enough, took up their anti-paedophile campaign and, as Randall argues, printed “endless stories about the most abusive UK paedophiles, promising to name all 110.000 on the sex offenders register – ‘virtually one for every square mile of the country’.”⁶⁵ Although the paper denied that vigilantism was encouraged, moral hysteria arouse and nightly paedophile hunts were organised by mobs as soon as names had been published, causing many offenders to leave their homes in panic. Cars were burnt down, innocent families attacked and one offender in Manchester ultimately killed himself when his

⁶⁴ Randall, 2010, p. 231 f.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 237.

home was surrounded.⁶⁶ Making a comedy show about paedophilia, then, was a risky project to take on, and one very much unlikely to pass unscathed.

Brass Eye Special began with the story of a paedophile having just been blasted into space in a one-man prison vessel so as to pose no further threat to children on earth, only to the horrible realisation that an 8-year old boy was placed on board by mistake. “This is the one thing we didn’t want to happen”, a spokesman apologises. More controversial was the footage of Morris’ own son confronted by a paedophile caught in the studio after an attempted invasion by the pro-paedophile organisation Militi-pede. “That is my son”, Morris points out to the man now fastened in a pillory. “Now, are you prepared to tell me that you are willing to have sex with my son?” “Tell me you want to have sex with my son”, insists Morris when the man insinuates that he does not find the boy attractive, “I don’t fancy him”. An awkward moment of crushed pride and intense relief permeates the studio.

But *Special* included also the offensive celebrity interviews, among others was radio presenter Neil Fox who was shown putting a nail through a crab whilst proclaiming that “genetically, paedophiles have more in common with crabs, than they do with you and me. Now that is scientific fact. There’s no real evidence for it, but it is scientific fact.” Phil Collins endorsed the spoof charity Nonce Sense⁶⁷, and even went so far as wearing their merchandise whilst proclaiming that, in order to illustrate the mindset of paedophiles, “I am talking Nonce Sense”.



British Isles turned Paedoph Isles; Neil Fox hammering a paedo-crab; and Phil Collins talking Nonce Sense.

4.2 Public Outrage and Offence

Soon after the broadcast of *Special*, the ITC received near to 1000 complaints and Channel 4 many more, making *Brass Eye* the most complained about show in British broadcast history.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 231-237.

⁶⁷ “Nonce” is British slang for someone convicted for sexual abuse.

⁶⁸ Ofcom, “ITC 2001 Annual Report”; Lucy Ward, “TV spoof to bring tougher regulation”, *The Guardian*, 30 July 2001.

The *Daily Mail* accused the show for being “unspeakably sick”, a quotation directly taken from Home Minister Beverly Hughes who had just dismissed *Brass Eye* live on radio, having read only a detailed summary of the show: “I’ve not seen the whole programme and to be honest I really don’t want to. [...] I’m very clear that this is not the right way to deal with the subject.”⁶⁹ A debate had to be had, she agreed, but a comedy programme was not an appropriate point of departure. *The Sun* soon thereafter speculated in an article if *Special* was not, in fact, “the sickest TV ever?”⁷⁰, and the attacks soon became personal with journalists coming around Morris’ family house uninvited. Particularly vilified were the women participating in the show, Randall explains, “painted by the *Mail* as somehow betrayers of their sex for not only telling vulgar jokes but controversial ones at that.”⁷¹ Caroline Leddy, for instance (then head of comedy on Channel 4), was demonised in the media for having passed the show, particularly scandalous was the fact that she was herself a mother.⁷²

The media backlash was severe, to say the least. Those filing complaints saw the show as offensive, diminishing the threat of paedophiles and trivialising child abuse. The fact that the humour was, as in *The Day Today* and the rest of *Brass Eye*, part of a satirical mockery of media’s manipulating strategies, sensationalist indulging in tragedies and indeed its apparent vigilantism meant surprisingly little to those offended. It was apparently enough to include certain taboo subjects in a comedy show, regardless of intent and treatment, to have it ripped to pieces by the public. Once again comedy was accused for covering topics beyond the limits of its implied remit, and the debate more or less stopped at that conclusion, as Randall argues:

There was a debate to be had, about the show as well as the issues it raised, but the media largely plugged itself straight back into the coherent rage of the previous summer [i.e. the moral panic after the murder of Paynes]. And coverage was underscored with a curious moral fervour, as if implying that the *Special* were somehow a defence of child abuse.⁷³

The fact that people were willing to ignore the point made in *Brass Eye* about media representation shows how deeply rooted the dichotomy between seriousness and comedy is, and how the mixing of the two provokes discomfort. This, however, was of no concern of Morris’. Similarly to how Breton reasoned in his anthology of black humour that there were no subjects precarious or sensitive enough to be left untouched by comedy, Morris likewise

⁶⁹ Beverly Hughes quoted in Randall, 2010, p. 248.

⁷⁰ *The Sun* quoted in Randall, 2010, p. 249.

⁷¹ Randall, 2010, p. 250.

⁷² *Ibid*, p. 247-259.

⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 247.

“refused to accept the conventions of what can and cannot be joked about, particularly in a social arena such as television”⁷⁴, as Brett Mills argues. His continuous playing against aesthetics and subject matters traditionally associated with comedy “constitutes a sustained attack on conventional ways in which comedy is presented and the uses to which it is put”⁷⁵, and furthermore demonstrates that serious genres are not necessarily better at dealing with difficult subject matters in reliable, truthful and reasonable ways, than is comedy.

⁷⁴ Mills, 2007, p. 183.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

5. Humour as Critical Disengagement

Rather than dismissing comedy as simply having no business in certain areas because of its irreverent tone and ironic distance, it can be worth exploring what a humorous mode or attitude actually does to a discussion about sensitive subject matters. To laugh at something is evidently not to take it seriously, but rather approach the matter with a disengaged and flippant attitude. Professor John Morreall argues that this disengagement involved in humour is both practical, in that laughter physically disables us from direct action (our muscles spasm) as well as cognitive in the sense that we show a “lack of concern with knowledge or truth” when we are out for a laugh: “Amusement is evoked by fantasies as easily as by real events. In order to laugh at a cartoon or a film comedy, we do not have to believe that the story is true or even that it could be true.”⁷⁶ Neither are we concerned with moral truths, as we playfully break both linguistic and social conventions, “exaggerate wildly, express emotions we don’t feel, and insult people we care about.”⁷⁷ Because of this non-bona fide attitude, as Morreall describes it, humour cannot be understood as normal assertions, questions or imperatives. Neither can it be linked to certain emotions, because being emotionally involved in something very much requires both practical and cognitive engagement.⁷⁸

The idea of humour as incompatible with emotions is perhaps more famously theorized by the French philosopher Henri Bergson, who argued that the comic “demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. It’s appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.”⁷⁹ When we laugh, we suspend our moral concern and distance ourselves, something that understandably can be taken as offensive and harmful, and perhaps rightly so when compassion is called for. The complaints about *Brass Eye Special* partly came from this ironic distance, as its humour prevented the emotional involvement that many people had with the issue of paedophilia at the time.

However, disengagement is very much also a positive thing when it comes to objective criticism. If the comic appeals not to emotions but rather to our intellect, then all the things we otherwise value, are emotionally attached and hence also partial to, can be looked at from a critical distance. Approaching and discussing difficult matters is also made considerably easier if no reverence has to be shown. When other programmes at the time

⁷⁶ John Morreall, “Humour and the Conduct of Politics” in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, eds. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2005, p. 68.

⁷⁷ Morreall, 2009, p. 2.

⁷⁸ Morreall, 2005, p. 68-75; Morreall, p. 126-138.

⁷⁹ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd. 2008 (1900), p. 11.

treated paedophilia with such delicacy that it effectively shut down debate and had an almost numbing effect on its audience through self-indulgent sentimentalism, *Special* bluntly pounced on the issue and explored it from a variety of disturbing perspectives without hesitation. The comic can in this way stop us from falling into perverse voyeurism of turning horrific subjects into pity parties and manipulative entertainment. As Morris describes himself, “the very specific nature of *Brass Eye* is in identifying a thoughtless, knee-jerk reaction to an issue. If you tackle drugs or paedophilia, then you’re dealing with something where people’s brains are nowhere near the point of debate.”⁸⁰ The exploitative and sensationalist treatment of victims and offenders in drama shows such as *Dispatches!* and *Crimewatch*, or the violence and vigilantism encouraged by the *Daily Mail*, were counterintuitive, Randall argues, because they allowed pain and distress to fester “rather than being illuminated and understood.”⁸¹

The disjunction between comedy and emotionally charged subjects can furthermore provoke complex, contradictory and unsettling feelings among the audience rather than any ready-made emotional responses. We may find ourselves disturbed by our own reaction when disengaged and laughing at something we sense should not. As Geoff King suggests, “It is easy to argue that the presence of the comic dimension risks trivialising or misrepresenting the realities [...] at the same time, however, it could be said that the mixture of tones has the potential to offer a complex emotional experience that is less easy to resolve than the more obvious recourse to bleak and serious ‘realism’.”⁸²

Morris’ mixing of conventions can in this sense be seen as offering complex and more challenging ways of understanding an issue. This is particularly notable in *Jam*, in which absurd and disturbing events are played out without any indication as to which genre the show belongs to. Conventions are mixed and violated to the point of sheer confusion; the editing is distorted, scenes made ambiguous through unusual bleeding of colours, reversed negatives, deliberately bad lightning and blurred visuals, sometimes statically shot in low definition as if imitating CCTV footage. In one scene we witness a fight between a couple: “I love you”, tries the man who has apparently been caught cheating. “It meant nothing! [...] I didn’t even know her name!” “You expect me to believe that?” cries the woman, after which the man makes a ludicrous attempt to make things better: “I was bloody raping her, ok?! [...]

⁸⁰ Chris Morris quoted in Randall, 2010, p. 238.

⁸¹ Randall, 2010, p. 255.

⁸² King, 2002, p. 191 f.

I was out of there as soon as I'd done it, I'll never see her again!" In relief, the woman cries and embraces her husband in reconciliation.

Linking humour with rape may be overstepping many people's ideas about the limits of comedy, yet critiquing *Jam* for doing so is complicated because we cannot be entirely sure of whether the show is meant to be comic at all. Its refusal to conform to any given cognitive tone or mood makes for complex emotional responses and thought provoking self-reflection as to which is the proper or "right" way to react. Are we to take pleasure from the horrors portrayed? The subversion of conventions makes the enjoyment of the show all but a simple task because we cannot lazily rely on the show indicate to us how we are to react, but rather have to figure this out ourselves by thinking and reasoning.

5.1 Humour as Critique of Ideology

It is possible also to take the idea of comic detachment to a more radical level by viewing it as a form of ideological critique. This is better understood if we put comic in relation to for instance the modernist rejection of dominant cultural norms and bourgeois notions of decorum, as mentioned earlier. Baudelaire's emphasis on shock and provocation as ways of disturbing ideologically imposed values can be compared to the transgressions and violations possible in comedy, particularly because of humour's potential to temporarily suspend our emotional attachment to these sensibilities. In the comic it is possible to construct a world in which our otherwise rigid ideological value systems are negotiated and redefined because we remain emotionally disengaged with everything that in normal discourse matters to us.

To go against established value systems in playful mockery is perhaps even better understood in comparison to the Dadaist movement, which held similar anti-bourgeois attitudes and aimed to effectively destroy all art through rendering its former pretences and beauties worthless. Because the reason of man essentially caused the horrors of the First World War, Dadaism moved in the opposite direction from the establishment by creating an anti-establishment, anti-bourgeois and, paradoxically, an anti-art kind of art, that would preach not logic or reason but absurdities, not aesthetic beauty but disgust, ugliness, nonsense and irrationalities.⁸³ This defamiliarisation with cultural values and rationality through communicating unreason and absurdities is precisely what goes on also in the comic, as the emotional detachment allows us to take a step back and treat the rational world with

⁸³ Gay, 2008, p 142 ff.

irreverence, whilst instead anticipating new knowledge and creating alternative worlds opposed to the prevailing rationality and ideology, as sociologist Anton C. Zijderveld argues:

Humour carries an enigmatic quality: it is itself unrealistic and thereby able to demonstrate that reality as we know it could well be otherwise; that alternatives, as unreal and absurd as they may seem to be, are not unthinkable.⁸⁴

This way of critical thinking by ways of disassociation and detachment from all imposed logics and meanings of the world makes humour serve an important function in the critique of ideology because it enables us to assign the world new meanings (to think “aesthetic beauty” in terms of ugliness and absurdities, for instance, as in Dadaism). It can be seen as a way of emptying out ideology in the sense that all the “obviousnesses” of the world (that is, the logics and meanings we take for granted and hence perceive as “obviousnesses” but which are, in fact, imposed on us through ideology⁸⁵) are effectively negated and rendered laughable through comic flippancy and disrespect.⁸⁶

To view the comic as this almost revolutionary subversive force capable of overturning the whole world seems perhaps romantic, but it does make for a substantial defense of comedy as a genre otherwise much neglected in academia, and is most influentially advocated by Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.

5.2 Bakhtin and the Subversive Laughter

Bakhtin’s study of comedy and laughter departs from the role of carnivals in Medieval Europe, which Bakhtin meant held a special position in relation to the otherwise authoritarian society. During carnival, people were allowed a temporary release from officialdom’s hierarchical and bureaucratic ordering, its strictly imposed prohibitions and codes of decorum. Transgressions and violations of social and moral codes were allowed, authorities were mocked and parodied and hierarchies temporarily negated. It was a time of excess in all its senses, Andy Medhurst argues, of “inversion, disrespect, parody, the grotesque and the overflowing, made emblematic in events and activities including feasting, drunkenness, mockery of authority, cross-dressing, sexual license, swearing and both symbolic and actual

⁸⁴ Anton C. Zijderveld quoted in Stefan Horlacher, “A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic and Laughter” in *Gender and Laughter - Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, Eds. Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher and Ulrich Scheck, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009, p. 23.

⁸⁵ As explored by Louis Althusser, see Michael Freedon, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003, p. 26 ff.

⁸⁶ Morreall, 2005, p. 72 ff; Morreall, 2009, p. 126-138; Palmer, 1987, 219 ff.

violence.”⁸⁷ Seen from the outside, carnival was chaotic mayhem and nonsense because it effectively went against all notions of reason, truth and beauty held in the official culture. For those participating, however, it was a regression from the civilized society in a positive sense because people were provided with an unmediated and unpolished reality through which the world and the self could be re-imagined.⁸⁸

To return to the earlier discussion about the Dadaist idea of going against prevailing wisdom and notions of truth and beauty, the carnival can be understood as a space in which all these counter-cultural ideas were able to be played out undisturbed. At the centre of this temporary “rebellion” was the laughter of the people; the laughter that essentially made these transgressions possible because it defeated fear and effectively degraded all that was valued in officialdom through rendering it low in comedic mockery. “Fear”, Bakhtin argues, “is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter [...] Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world.”⁸⁹

The power of the carnival, then, came from degradation through comic laughter, that is, “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract”⁹⁰, as Bakhtin argues, until cultural values and rigid dichotomies were reshuffled and ideological order was, in effect, confused until a new kind of logic and order emerged. This new order, however, appeared chaotic because the world as people knew it had effectively been bracketed out. Nevertheless, this was precisely the point of the carnivalesque, to invert values and create a new logic based not on reason and seriousness, but rather on chaos, nonsense and contradiction:

We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ [...] of the ‘turnabout’, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings [...] a ‘world inside out’.⁹¹

Although Bakhtin’s study is historically specific, it is interesting to note that we still hold certain spaces in society where transgressions are allowed and values can be juggled with, most notably perhaps is the license given to the arts, as Geoff King argues, and in particular comedy which is often considered safe enough for transgressions to be played out. If we assume that carnivalesque degradation goes on also in the comic, comedy indeed has a powerful potential to destabilise ideology, something that makes the critical neglect of the genre rather surprising, particularly when it comes to TV-comedy (which has the potential to

⁸⁷ Medhursts, 2007, p. 68.

⁸⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky, New York: Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1968 (1936), p. 1-58; King, 2002, p. 63 ff.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 42.

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 19 f.

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 11.

mediate subversive messages to millions of people simultaneously). However, as already noted, when central symbols and concepts are threatened by comic degradation today, the permission to mock tends to be withdrawn either through censorship or subsequent offence, particularly in such a strictly regulated medium as television.⁹²

The reason that comedy today is often stopped before transgressing as far as during carnival, Jerry Palmer suggests, is because the risk of it actually changing the minds of people is much higher. In Bakhtin's portrayal of the Middle Ages, the carnival constituted a kind of parallel universe that, albeit oppositional, nevertheless existed alongside the official culture without any problem. There were no restrictions at the carnival because it posed no real threat, but was seen merely as a temporary release from officialdom to which people returned as soon as the festivities were over.⁹³ In this sense, carnivals were never really subversive at all but rather, seeing as they were effectively controlled by the authorities they sought to subvert, functioned merely as tools with which to paradoxically reinforce authoritative power, as King puts it: "If the usual constraints are *permitted* to be breached, in particular circumstances only, the effect might be that of a 'safety valve', a means of letting of steam without really challenging the norm."⁹⁴

In modernity, however, comic mockery and degradation is not part of any parallel universe existing outside of the social world, but rather forms a part of it. As such, the comic directly affects the "real" world and can hence also be truly subversive of it. Comedy that mocks central symbols or concepts in our culture and hence attempts to subvert order, then, is more likely to be censored by authorities (whose power may be threatened should the subversive message go out) or cause offence (with a public who understandably finds it uncomfortable to have their deeply held beliefs undermined).⁹⁵ This was the case with *Brass Eye*, as it questioned the effectiveness and usefulness of *seriousness* when discussing certain topics. Because seriousness, as noted earlier, is such a deeply rooted and highly valued concept in western civilization, and often the only accepted mode with which to address difficult subjects, *Brass Eye* caused extreme offence and was in parts censored (for instance the Yorkshire Ripper sketch). To parody seriousness and lay bare its sometimes ineffectiveness when treating everything with upmost reverence (by verging into

⁹² King, 2002, p. 63-77, 92 f; Palmer "Parody and Decorum: Permission to Mock" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, eds. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, Basingstoke: Palmgrave MacMillan 2005, p. 86-95.

⁹³ Palmer, 2005, p. 79 ff, 86-95.

⁹⁴ Palmer, *The Logic of the Absurd: On film and television comedy*, London: British Film Institute 1987, p. 67.

⁹⁵ Palmer, 2005, p. 86-95.

sentimentalism and voyeuristic sensationalism, for instance), was for both the broadcast authorities and the public taking the permission to mock too far.

Because transgressive comedy tends to be censored as soon as it is truly subversive, then the few permitted transgressions may well be seen as pointless and safe “releases” administered by authorities to let off steam and ultimately reinforce their power, just like in Bakhtin’s carnival. Python’s Undertaker sketch is an example of when broadcast authorities, in this case the BBC, allowed a certain degree of transgression only so as to demonstrate (by staging public offence) just how far the limits of humour could be pushed before it became unacceptable. Transgression was hence allowed merely on account of its ultimate defeat, as was the case also during carnival, as Andrew Stott argues: “Inversion and misrule, then, exist within a matrix of ‘licensed transgression’, and are expedient outlets for reckless behaviour that enable the continuance of the social order.”⁹⁶

However, we can perhaps also ask, Stott continues, how convincing is “this concept of the ‘big brother’ state that permits objection only that it might enforce itself at a much more insidious level”.⁹⁷ Perhaps the carnivalesque, as Palmer argues, “is not then equipped to topple the dominant order but neither is the dominant order able to silence the carnivalesque.”⁹⁸ Bakhtin too emphasises that the festive character was indeed indestructible, that “it had to be tolerated and even legalised outside the official sphere”.⁹⁹ This makes for a rather complex relationship between authorities and their opponents, because in order for authorities to actually affirm their power and codes of decorum, some extent of opposition has to be tolerated because their power is built on the very existence of the excluded and repressed. Even though authorities exclude and sometimes censor those transgressing, then, they cannot do without them, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue:

the top attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover, not only that it is in some way frequently dependent upon that low-Other... but also that the top *includes* that low symbolically, as a primarily eroticized constituent of its own fantasy life.¹⁰⁰

The same goes for the other end; to transgress or break boundaries and codes of decorum is possible because systematic restrictions exist. The liberating feeling of subversion is attainable only if we recognise restrictions and assume our own repression or marginalization. Comedy, in other words, is dependent on the very restrictions or repressions

⁹⁶ Stott, 2005, p. 35.

⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 36

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin cited in Palmer, 1987, p. 89.

¹⁰⁰ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White cited in Stott, 2005, p. 37.

it effectively seeks to subvert.¹⁰¹ Had there been no limits, and all boundaries were allowed to be broken, then comedy would itself stop functioning. It is difficult to imagine, as James F. English argues, the existence of jokes in paradise or any other flawless and completely liberated existence.¹⁰² Because the world is not perfect or without obstacles and need for progress, comedy becomes valuable because it makes us think in alternative, contradictory and unreasonable ways, detached from emotions and preconceptions that otherwise influence our stream of thought. Albeit that comedy cannot bring complete ideological subversion, then at least it enables for a mental subversion. It brings disturbance into our perceived normality and enables us to imagine what the world could be like rearranged, not necessarily utopian or changed for the better, but nevertheless altered and emptied out of its former meanings.

¹⁰¹ Horlacher's analogy to Foucault's work on power can perhaps be helpful to further understand this tension: "repression 'produces' the repressed and simultaneously verifies and attests to its belonging to the repressive system itself", Horlacher, 2009, p. 35.

¹⁰² James F. English, *Comic Transactions: literature, humor, and the politics of community in twentieth-century Britain*, Cornwall: Cornwall University Press 1994, p. 9.

6. Discussion

To analyse comedy through Bakhtin's ideas, and indeed many of the other theories mentioned that likewise explore the aesthetics of comedy; its ironic distance, emotional detachment and disassociation with the world through irreverence and flippancy, allows for a more nuanced understanding of the genre, and one that moves away from a tradition that readily dismisses comedy as a lesser discursive mode unworthy of further discussion.

Why human beings laugh in the first place is itself an interesting question, not least because humour, as Horlacher argues, is both an "anthropological constant and historically relative"¹⁰³ phenomenon. From the theories presented here, the comic can be understood as a space in which the "reality principle"¹⁰⁴ is not in force, as Palmer puts it, because it allows us to play with meanings, denotation and signifiers. In humorous discourse, we say things we don't really mean or even believe, we lie and adopt new personas, imagine the absurd and paradoxical and anticipate new knowledge where cultural values, norms and meanings are reshuffled. Whatever is said humorously, then, may well be deliberate un-truth aimed at our imagination rather than reason; a quality that comedy shares with many other forms of literary and cinematic exploration. The comic can in this way be seen as a form of "cultural juggling"¹⁰⁵ and a playing around with institutionalized meanings and ideological order. This is what happens in *Jam*, in which any sense of normality is undermined by its twisted logic and warped reality, where babies are plumbed into central heating and infant mortality becomes the signifier for happiness and joy.

Undoubtedly, the world in *Jam* is all but utopian and quite the opposite from the ideal carnival that Bakhtin had in mind. However, it nevertheless brings discomfort to normality and gives us an image of what the world could be like rearranged. To laugh at the absurdities and horrors portrayed may unsettle us because our reaction is essentially unacceptable according to prevailing moral norms that hold seriousness and reverence as the only way of understanding certain emotionally and politically loaded topics. To laugh and be disturbed simultaneously, as discussed earlier, makes for a complex emotional experience that is not so easily resolved, and one that does not slip into "over-insistent or 'preachy' realms of melodrama or straight propaganda"¹⁰⁶, as King suggests. The mismatch of serious subject matter and whimsical approach creates a nervous imbalance more likely to increase

¹⁰³ Horlacher, 2009, p. 22.

¹⁰⁴ Palmer, 1987, p. 221.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 23.

¹⁰⁶ King, 2002, p. 107.

disturbance and discomfort rather than trivializing the matter, and one that encourages self-reflection as opposed to lazy conformism.

Instead of dismissing comedy that explores dangerous territories where seriousness is conventionally required, we should perhaps reconsider whether this is not the source of dark comedy's power. To break up logic and traditional ways of thinking about troubling issues, to unsettle, disturb, shock and provoke us into a state of reflection where we remain detached from values to which we would otherwise cling. Used in this way, comedy becomes an ultimate form of critique because it makes us think in alternative ways, disassociated from normative concepts and ideas. Moreover, when Morris violates the conventions of television; an otherwise conservative medium often rigidly supervised and censored, he opens up the possibilities for more diverse and challenging ideas and concepts to enter the domestic living spaces of the nation.

In his manifesto for Theatre of Cruelty, Antonin Artaud argues for a form of art that, rather than agreeing with the official culture, went against it as kind of parallel, countercultural art attempting to defamiliarize us with the world, "a kind of second wind growing within us like a new organ."¹⁰⁷ At its best, perhaps this is what comedy can still provide us with because humorous discourse, as we have seen, has the potential to subvert logic and meaning. Not so unlike Bakhtin's idea of the carnival as inhabiting a parallel universe where officialdom was parodied and rendered low, modern comedy can likewise, when used in certain ways, re-frame issues by approaching them with flippancy, unreason and parody, and perhaps challenge even our rigid idea of the self and subjectivity, as Noël Coward reflects on in his play *Private Lives* (1930):

AMANDA. Don't laugh at me, I'm serious.

ELYOT [*seriously*]. You mustn't be serious, my dear one; it's just what they want.

AMANDA. Who's they?

ELYOT. All the futile moralists who try to make life unbearable. Laugh at them. Be flippant. Laugh at everything, all their sacred shibboleths. Flippancy brings out the acid in their damned sweetness and light.

AMANDA. If I laugh at everything, I must laugh at us too.

ELYOT. Certainly you must. We're figures of fun all right.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Artaud, 2010, p. 5.

¹⁰⁸ Noël Coward, "Private Lives" in *Three Plays: Blithe Spirit, Hay Fever, Private Lives*, New York: Vintage Books 1999 (1941; 1925; 1930), p. 226 f.

7. Bibliography

Literature:

Artaud, Antonin, *The Theatre and Its Double*, Trans. Victor Corti, London: Oneworld Classics Ltd. 2010 (1964).

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *Rabelais and His World*, Trans. Helene Iswolsky, New York: Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1968 (1936).

Bergson, Henri, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, Milton Keynes: Lightning Source UK Ltd. 2008 (1900).

Billig, Michael, *Laughter and Ridicule – Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London: SAGE Publications 2005.

_____, “Comic Racism and Violence” in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, eds. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2005, pp. 25-44.

Breton, André, *Anthology of Black Humour*, Trans. Mark Polizzotti, London: Telegram 2009 (1940).

Coward, Noël, “Private Lives” in *Three Plays: Blithe Spirit, Hay Fever, Private Lives*, New York: Vintage Books 1999 (1941; 1925; 1930), p. 181-254.

English, James F., *Comic Transactions: literature, humor, and the politics of community in twentieth-century Britain*, Cornwall: Cornwall University Press 1994.

Freeden, Michael, *Ideology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003.

Gay, Peter, *Modernism: the Lure of Heresy: From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2008.

Horlacher, Stefan, “A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic and Laughter” in *Gender and Laughter - Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, Eds. Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher and Ulrich Scheck, Amsterdam: Rodopi 2009, pp. 17-47.

Hunt, Leon, *The League of Gentlemen (BFI TV Classics)*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008.

King, Geoff, *Film Comedy*, New York: Wallflower Press 2002.

Lewis, Pericles, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007.

Medhursts, Andy, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, London: Routledge 2007.

Mills, Brett, *Television Sitcom*, London: British Film Institute, 2005.

_____, *The Sitcom*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

_____, "'Yes, it's war!': Chris Morris and comedy's representational strategies" in *Experimental British Television*, Eds. Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2007, pp. 180-194.

Morreall, John, *Comic Relief – A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell 2009.

_____, "Humour and the Conduct of Politics" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, eds. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2005, pp. 63-78.

Mulvey, Laura and Jamie Sexton, "Introduction: experimental British television" in *Experimental British Television*, eds. Laura Mulvey and Jamie Sexton, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2007.

Palmer, Jerry, "Parody and Decorum: Permission to Mock" in *Beyond a Joke: The Limits of Humour*, eds. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2005, pp. 79-97.

_____, *Taking Humour Seriously*, London: Routledge 1994.

_____, *The Logic of the Absurd: On film and television comedy*, London: British Film Institute 1987.

Randall, Lucian, *Disgusting Bliss: The Brass Eye of Chris Morris*, London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd. 2010.

Shaw, Roy and Gwen, "The Cultural and Social Setting" in *The Cambridge Cultural History of Britain*, vol. 9, *Modern Britain*, Ed. Boris Ford, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed., 1992 (1988), p. 2-47.

Sierz, Aleks, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, London: Faber and Faber 2001.

Smuts, Aaron, "The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor be Wrong?" in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Springer, Vol. 13, Issue 3, June 2010, p. 333-347.

Stott, Andrew, *Comedy: the New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge 2005.

Swift, Jonathan, *A Modest Proposal*, Kindle Public Domain 1729.

Thompson, Ben, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office*, London: Haper Perennial 2004

Newspaper articles and internet material:

Claire, Cain Miller, "As Violence Spreads in Arab World, Google Blocks Access to Inflammatory Video", *The New York Times*, 13 Sept. 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/14/technology/google-blocks-inflammatory-video-in-egypt-and-libya.html?_r=0

Limm, Dennis, "The Gang That Couldn't Bomb Straight", *The New York Times*, 22 Oct. 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/movies/24lions.html?pagewanted=all>

Freeman, Hadley, "Everyone's talking about rape", *The Guardian*, 21 Aug. 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/21/everyones-talking-about-rape>

Gold, Tanya, "Have you heard the one about rape? It's funny now", *The Guardian*, 17 Aug. 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/aug/17/heard-one-about-rape-funny-now>

House of Commons Publications & records, case nr. 38968, http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm199596/cmhansrd/vo960723/text/60723w10.htm#60723w10.html_wqn10

Manning, Sanchez, "'Vile, cynical and dishonest': Father of an autistic child slams Ricky Gervais' new show", *The Mirror*, 16 Apr. 2012, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/ricky-gervais-show-derek-slammed-796627>

Ofcom, "ITC 2001 Annual Report", http://www.ofcom.org.uk/static/archive/itc/itc_publications/annual_report/2001/upholding_standards.asp.html

Ward, Lucy, "TV spoof to bring tougher regulation", *The Guardian*, 30 July 2001, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2001/jul/30/broadcasting.politics>

Television shows:

Brass Eye, Channel 4, 1997; 2001

Writer(s): Chris Morris, Arthur Matthews, Graham Lineha, Peter Baynham, Jane Bussman, David Quantick

Director: Michael Cumming

The Day Today, BBC2, 1994

Writer(s): Armando Iannucci, Chris Morris, Peter Baynham, Steve Coogan, Rebecca Front, Doon Mackichan, Patrick Marber, David Schneider, Andrew Glover, David Quantick, Steven Wells, Graham Lineham, Arthur Mathews

Director: Andrew Gillman

Derek, Channel 2, 2012

Writer(s): Ricky Gervais

Director: Ricky Gervais

Jam, Channel 4, 2000

Writer(s): Chris Morris, Peter Baynham, Jane Bussman, David Quantick, Graham Linehan, Arthur Mathews

Director: Chris Morris

The League of Gentlemen, BBC2, 1999-2002

Writer(s): Jeremy Dyson, Mark Gatiss, Steve Pemberton, Reece Shearsmith

Director: Steve Bendelack

Monty Python's Flying Circus, BBC1, BBC2, 1969-1974

(Series 2, episode 13, 1970)

Writer(s): Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, Michael Palin, Terry Gilliam

Director: Ian MacNaughton

(All pictures used are stills from DVD-editions, apart from those on p. 18)