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THE POLITICAL AESTHETICS OF CONTEMPORARY COMEDY

NICHOLAS HOLM

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Nicholas Holm

Humour as Politics

The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy

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For Lucy

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Palmerston North, New Zealand Nicholas Holm

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Living in Comic Times

If situation comedies are any measure of such things, Manhattan during the 1990s was one of the funniest places on earth. From the Upper East Side of *The Nanny* (1993–1999) and *Sex in the City* (1998–2004) to the midtown offices of *NewsRadio* (1995–1999), from *Mad About You*'s Greenwich village (1992–1999) to *Spin City*'s city hall (1996–2002), laughter and hilarity seemed to echo from the boroughs' many work places and private residences. However, even among the many highly successful comic treatments of the city during this time, few New York comedies began to rival the enormous success and cultural resonance of NBC's *Friends* (1994–2004). First broadcast on 22 September 1994, *Friends* followed the comic adventures of "six twentysomethings living in New York [as they] deal with love and friendship" (Owen 1999, 112). Incredibly popular across its ten seasons, the comic escapades of the titular *Friends*—Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Chandler, Joey and Ross—consistently obtained a top ten rank in share of television viewers, peaking in the show's eighth (2001–2002) season, when they commanded the highest viewer-share on American television. Moreover, as impressive as they are, such figures might still underestimate the cultural impact of the show, which was disproportionally popular with the younger demographics that had become known as "Generation X" (Owen 1999, 112–116), and whose growing financial and social clout is intractably tied up with the period. *Friends* could therefore be considered both reflective and productive of a distinct social and cultural bloc (potentially in

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the Gramscian sense) just as that group began to have an impact upon American, and eventually global English-speaking, society.

Friends, however, was far from alone in its success: upon its debut the show occasioned frequent comparisons to that other definitive situation comedy of the period, *Seinfeld* (1989–1998), often to the detriment of the former. Indeed, at first *Friends* appeared ostensibly derivative of *Seinfeld*, in that both followed the lives of a group of friends—George, Elaine, Kramer and the eponymous Jerry in the case of *Seinfeld*—living in New York City, pursuing romance, employment, sustenance, fulfilment and living space. *Seinfeld,* which was frequently referred to by critics as a "show about nothing," had debuted in 1989, but had really only begun to obtain critical and popular acclaim from 1992. Between 1993 and its finale in 1998, *Seinfeld* was ranked as one of the top three shows in terms of viewership, finishing first during both its 1994–1995 and 1997–1998 seasons. Even in its afterlife of syndication, *Seinfeld* is still occasionally hailed as one of the greatest sitcoms, or even television shows, ever produced. Yet, however similar *Seinfeld* and *Friends* might appear at first glance—both follow groups of white, heterosexual, comfortably well-off (somewhat mysteriously, particularly in the case of *Friends*) friends in New York City during the 1990s—the two shows manifest markedly different modes of humour.

On the one hand, *Friends* may be considered an example of a long tradition of American sitcoms, where humour is premised on the unconventional behaviour of wacky characters placed in unusual or uncomfortable situations. Following this logic, individual episodes focus upon different instances of social anxiety and misperformance as sources for comedy: for example, the superficially feminist episode, "The One with the Poker Game," centres upon poking fun at those who fail to perform contemporary gender roles; "The One with the Prom Video" draws its humour from the character Joey's lack of taste and body "flaws" of the characters Rachel and Monica as teenagers; and "The One Where No One's Ready" is a rolling series of wisecracks regarding different characters' central quirks: Joey and Chandler's childishness, Monica's neurotic obsessions, Rachel's fickleness, Ross' passivity and doubt. The humour of *Friends* is thus largely premised upon the different characters mocking and making fun of one another (or themselves) for being stupid, weak, unmasculine, unfeminine, over-opinionated, unobservant or possessed of poor taste: a veritable roll call of metropolitan, middle-class white anxieties in the 1990s. On the other hand, *Seinfeld* serves as a departure from

the ethical and aesthetic strictures of not only its antecedents, but also its contemporaries (Mirzoeff 2007, 39–43). To be more precise, while *Seinfeld* certainly involves ridicule and failure, it is also a show where humour is premised on the acknowledgement of the structures and systems that shape our routine existence, rather than on particular individuals and their deviations from those largely unspoken systems. Where the humour of *Friends* arose in response to clear deviations from expected behaviour, the humour of *Seinfeld* was often a product of intense examination of those very codes of behaviour. To be sure, this broad characterisation certainly overstates its case: *Seinfeld* did still rely on wacky characters and situations, increasingly so in later seasons. Nonetheless, it is with *Seinfeld* we see the beginning of a turn towards new modes of humour—away from laughter at characters to laughter at the expense of structures and systems—that mark the emergence of new forms of humour in popular media comedy.

Perhaps the most perfect example of this mode of humour can be found in one of the most celebrated episodes of *Seinfeld*: "The Soup Nazi." The sixth episode of the seventh season, "The Soup Nazi" revolves around a tyrannical chef who produces the best soup in New York, but demands his customers adhere to a rigid ordering routine, the breach of which results in angry abuse and a denial of service, or, in the character Jerry Seinfeld's words, "He yells at you and you don't get your soup." The strictly delineated routine of the Soup Nazi's customer works as an extension of the commonplace structures and systems with which *Seinfeld*'s characters grapple in every episode, here taken to their comic extremes in the pedantic and inflexible nature of their edicts, the draconian manner of their enforcement, and the banal-yet-redemptive nature of their reward (Fig. 1.1). Yet, despite the bathetic extremes of the Soup Nazi system it is possible to perceive within it the echo of quotidian life, such that this challenge seems merely a logical next step of the romantic, commercial and formal etiquettes with which the show is overwhelmingly concerned. It is crucial to note that the humour of the ordering routine is not premised simply upon its disruption: George and Jerry's first order, which is played absolutely straight, is greeted with hilarity by the studio audience in response to their mechanical and deferential performance of the expected behaviour: even their voices are flat and emotionless (this is repeated later in the episode, when a minor character, Newman, goes through the same procedure, again to guffaws).[1] However, the audience laughter builds further once George begins

Fig. 1.1 Jerry and George of *Seinfeld* carefully place their order with the Soup Nazi (Ackerman 1995)

to deviate from the accepted script: peering into his bag he realises he has not been given any bread, even though those customers before him were. As Jerry, sotto voce and with a growing sense of discomfort, tries desperately to convince his friend to drop the issue, George learns that his appeal to the fairness doctrine of everyday life has no power here, and he is stripped of his soup. The store of the Soup Nazi is both a place of extreme and exaggerated social rules, where borderline behaviour is punished, and a space outside of normal social rules, where George's apparently "reasonable" appeals to fairness as well as common practices of courtesy are rejected. The Soup Nazi has, in fact, instituted a space of new rules, where some ordinary conduct is curtailed and some enforced with increased ferocity.

Humour arises in the adherence to these rules, the breaking of them, and the apparent idiosyncratic ambiguities between those two positions, which becomes even more clear when we learn that while Kramer is

apparently exempt—because he has recognised the Soup Nazi's genius—Elaine is not. Confident in her own exception to the Soup Nazi's rules, Elaine flouts them in cavalier fashion: dithering over her order, drumming on the counter and attempting to engage in banter with the Soup Nazi. The comedy of the scene builds because the audience is aware from previous examples what happens to those who make even minor deviations from the script. Humour can be found here because on the basis of earlier scenes the audience themselves have internalised the Soup rules: without the previous scenes, which instruct us in the requirements of the Soup Nazi, Elaine's behaviour wouldn't seem particularly out of the ordinary for someone ordering in a take-out restaurant. Thus, humour arises not simply from the breaking of rules, but from both the formation and breach of those standards in tandem. Neither the Soup Nazi's rules, nor Elaine's behaviour, are the sole site of hilarity, which arises instead from the gap between the two, which also exists in comic tension with a third set of rules: those carried by the audience and understood as realistically reasonable and reasonably realistic.[2] In its obsession with the pedantic intricacies of these maxims, and their complicated interrelations and interpellations, "The Soup Nazi" is not an exception to the general rule of *Seinfeld*, but the explicit manifestation of the show's driving concerns.

How, then is this different from the humour of *Friends*? One way in which the difference might be framed is that whereas *Seinfeld* explicitly engages with social benchmarks in terms of their construction, maintenance and negotiation, in the case of *Friends* such rules operate invisibly and go without saying. Thus in *Friends*, the social codes being broken are not spelled out: rather it is assumed that the audience will already have internalised them in the form of ideological norms. This scenario corresponds to the model of comedy developed by Umberto Eco in "The Comic and the Rule," where for the comic to be appreciated as such, rules must be presupposed to the extent that they are socially implicit: "comedy" is only perceptible to those who have internalised the rules to the point where they are regarded as inviolable (1998, 272–275.) Adhering closely to this model, the laughableness of *Friends* arises not from the reflexive interactions of characters with abstract sets of social requirements, but rather largely through the presentation of what is framed as idiocy, the humour of which is often fixed through the competitive interactions of the characters with one another, whose quips serve as a form of comic exposition. Such buffoonery and stupidity

do not appear as failed engagements with systems of rules; instead, in context of *Friends*, they appear only as personal failures on the part of characters to behave in a manner that is understood as obvious and correct. Thus, the humour of *Friends* is often (but not always) composed of two parts: the first is when a character fails to adhere to a social script, and the second is when another character brings this to our attention.[3] While the humour of *Friends* can be almost entirely accounted for in terms of ridicule and the defiance of norms, the more reflexive comedy of *Seinfeld* offers the possibility—if by no means the complete realisation—of the potential for new comic forms that would begin to emerge and increasingly define humour in the Anglophone media of the 1990s and 2000s.

The World that Jokes Built

The differences between *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, and in particular the different ways in which the two shows take up and use humour, are central to the project of this book which is concerned with the political work carried out by these new modes of humour. While *Seinfeld* is far from the full realisation of these new modes, it does suggest, in nascent form, the humour of awkwardness, provocation and even absurdity that would begin to assume a prominent role in popular humour over the next two decades. These new modes of humour would change not just the way we laugh, but as a consequence of their popularity and cultural influence, also the way we make sense of, and engage with, the world around us. These were therefore not simply new modes of humour—interesting from an aesthetic point of view—but new ways of thinking about the world and the relation between culture, politics, aesthetics, ethics and empathy. Thus, although the humour of *Seinfeld* has been characterised as a contemporary iteration of a comedy of manners (Pierson 2005, 35–46), such an understanding radically underestimates the shift in contemporary humour presaged by the show. While in the context of *Seinfeld*, radical comic reflexivity would be explored in terms of social rules of etiquette and expected behaviour, in the wider set of texts that are explored in this book this reflexivity expands to encompass the cultural, political, cognitive, and physical rules of both diegetic and non-diegetic worlds, and even the aesthetic and institutional markers of mass media and television in general. These new modes of humour takes

traditional structures of humour and the expectations they engender as a point of departure; as a set of norms whose subversion produces laughter and amusement. Traditional plots, joke-forms and character types become grist to the mill in this new arrangement, as new comic texts engage with the form and history of their antecedents at the same time at which they disavow that connection as something that is now subject to ridicule.

Humour as Politics is concerned with the political consequences of contemporary humour's role as a central aspect of the media-dominated English-speaking world in light of these emergent comic modes. Despite some appearances to the contrary, humour is not trivial, nor a passing fancy, and though it may appear to be of less importance than the tragic, the serious, the sombre and the grave, nothing could be further from the truth. As Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering argue, "humour is one of the most pervasive elements of public culture. It occurs across all contemporary media, in most of their different institutional formats, as well as being a central aspect of everyday life and our day-to-day relationships" (Lockyer and Pickering 2009, 3). Indeed, so profoundly is humour knitted through the fabric of our cultural and social orders, that it is experienced as a demand, rather than an option. Sociologist Michael Billig goes so far as to suggest that "we belong to a society in which fun has become an imperative and humour is seen as a necessary quality for being fully human" (2005, 13). Billig's argument is that not only has humour become obligatory, but that this operation is so profoundly ideological, that the demand for humour is taken up as a tacit and persistent *desire*. Humour is not a virtue that might feel imposed upon us—such as charity, tolerance or fiscal responsibility—but rather one that we clamour to possess; one that "people increasingly come to expect in the kinds of social interaction that take place in all zones of modern life—politics, education, journalism and even religion" (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 237). Across the scope of contemporary society, the practices, pastimes and professions that constitute our world, it seems as if there is no aspect that humour cannot claim to enrich or improve:

> Teachers are increasingly urged by educationalists to enliven their delivery with jocularity. Social protestors train newcomers in the use of humour for non-violent resistance. Teams of doctors dressed as clowns deliver an optimal dose of laughter in children's wards. Psychologists advise organisations on how to use humour to enhance workplace wellness, while negotiating

> the thorny issue of 'political correctness'. When work pursuits are over, laughter clubs offer a means of relieving stress, and personal column editors supply acronyms to assist in the search for a mate with a G(ood) S(ense) O(f) H(umour). (Hynes and Sharpe 2010, 44)

Humour as a cultural category has become not only a persistent characteristic of this society, but also a central demand that society places upon its citizens and consumers: an unavoidable aspect of how we approach and understand the world as a site of meaning, politics and life itself.

Indeed, this claim is particularly true of *my* society: the postmodern, (neo)liberal and highly mediated culture of the Anglophone West since the end of the Cold War.[4] Bound together by innumerable historical events and assumptions as well as a common language, the UK and the settler states of North American and the South Pacific share a common media culture as a consequence of the rapid transmission of the televisual and filmic texts that are the central objects of my investigation. Not only can humour travel between cultures to the extent that those communities of sense share certain beliefs in common, it can also be productive of those cultural commonalities, as well as reliant upon them. Thus, like any other cultural object, humorous texts carry within them certain sets of embedded ideological assumptions that potentially play a role in the transmission and construction of socially shared systems of interpretation. Humour must always be understood within the context of a particular "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977, 48) or, as I have suggested elsewhere "a distribution of the nonsensical" (Holm 2011), in relation to which it is simultaneously dependant, constitutive and productive. It is in the context of this shared media culture that a novel mode of humour emerges in the 1990s and 2000s, which comes to assume a prominent role in the cultural production and consumption of this Anglophone world. In offering this outlook I hope not only to make the case for the political importance of humour—such an argument is increasingly being made by a number of scholars doing exciting work across multiple fields of study—but for the centrality of understanding humour as a form of aesthetics that fundamentally shapes our world and the theoretical, critical and cultural insights that follow from that approach.

Theorising Humour: Incongruity and Superiority Models

Historically, humour has been of concern to many prominent thinkers—Aristotle, Mikhail Bakhtin, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard, Arnold Schopenhauer—though frequently only as a passing concern. As a consequence, humour theory finds itself saddled with a broad range of models, often quickly sketched and often in conflict with one another. A favoured contemporary method for making sense of this proliferation is to organise the multiple competing theories into a tripartite structure of Relief, Incongruity, and Superiority. These humour theories have cast a long shadow across discussions of the politics of humour and therefore a brief introduction to the comparable limitations and advantages of these approaches serves as a useful introduction to how we might think of humour in either political or aesthetic terms. Following the lead of much contemporary writing, I will here be focusing almost exclusively on the latter two categories at the expense of Relief theory, which assumes a highly contextualised and frequently physiological model of humour that is largely incompatible with aesthetic concerns at a social, rather than individual, level. It should be noted as well, that much modern humour research and criticism, breaking with these classical approaches, rejects any clear distinction between these formulae. Paul Lewis, for example, has described humour as a "whole made up of many parts, many variables, many potential topics of inquiry" (2006, 6), rather than as a unified abstract entity. However, in adopting this grab-bag approach, such theorising tends to jettison any critical concern with the politics of humour, reducing it, instead, to a rhetorical tick that can be added to any political point: Lewis himself suggests that the political work of humour is always equivalent to the argument which it is invoked in service of (2006, 113). This contention rules out the possibility of political consequences at the level of form, which brings us back to the original concern with a lack of theoretical attention to the political work of humour itself.

Consequently, it can be useful to consider the ways in which humour has been historically conceptualised by way of the categories of Superiority and Incongruity humour: both of which, however indirectly or informally, imply particular connections between the form of humour and its social function. Briefly summarised, Superiority theory suggests that humour is generated when the subject has a sudden realisation of supremacy with respect to another person or situation. In the words of

Thomas Hobbes, often cited as a founding figure of Superiority theory, "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly" (1994, 54–55). Superiority theory thus understands the experience of humour to arise from an abrupt perception of supremacy in the audience with respect to another person, which brings them enjoyment. This feeling of superiority can arise for a number of reasons: for example, if the object of the humour were, in classic slapstick style, to trip and fall, or if a butt were revealed to be stupid or culturally ignorant. Racist and other disparaging jokes are often cited as an example of Superiority theory at work because they generate humour through the "unveiling" (or maybe more correctly the construction) of the joke teller and audience as superior to the racially conceived butt. Through its recourse to such notions of normality and inferiority, Superiority theory offers an interpretation of the comic as a site of ridicule, rather than rejoicing, that serves to reaffirm existing structures of power and ways of being. The repressive aspects of this understanding can be developed even further with reference to the work of Henri Bergson, who, while often associated with the Incongruity tradition, famously states that humour demands "a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (2005, 3), by which he means that to find humour in a fellow human's situation, it is necessary to regard them without sympathy, and pay no heed to the suffering or humiliation that may be inflicted on them in the course of the humour.

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

relies upon nothing more than the bringing together of two disparate elements, so that they uneasily co-exist (a squirrel wearing a hat, a political pundit obsessed with bears, or a faux-Kazakhstani anthem at an American rodeo, for example)—subsequent commentators have reconfigured the notion of incongruity in a number of politicised ways, many of which regard incongruous humour to be, or at least invoke, a profoundly subversive gesture. Chapters Two and Three will consider, in greater detail, the manifestations and consequences of this politicisation of humour.

Towards a Political Aesthetics of Humour

Neither of these models—Incongruity or Superiority—should be regarded as correct in any final or total way. Both have been debunked through the extensive provision of counter-examples. For example, Michael Billig goes to some length to locate the hidden malice in apparently incongruous jokes (2005, 156–158, 202–207), while the history of opposition to Superiority theory can be traced at least as far back as Francis Hutcheson's eighteenth century observation that a true believer does not find the inferiority of a heretic cause for amusement (1971, 11–14). In the light of the necessary gaps within any universalising theory, we should not therefore treat these models as final or full accounts of how humour operates, but rather as what they are: models. Both are simplified abstractions that allow one to conduct analysis and draw conclusions out of the chaotic complexity of actual occurrences. As such, these models are not best understood as universal accounts of humour—though their authors may have attested otherwise—but should be regarded instead as historically situated attempts to make sense of the way humour works at a particular historical conjuncture. As such, there is a danger that applying them wholesale and unmodified to current humour risks drawing distorted conclusions about the social role and political function of humour. Nonetheless, the totalising tendency of these theories should not be taken to disqualify them entirely either; they are not magic formulas to be played off against one another, but neither are they crude fictions with no explanatory force. Rather, with a full awareness of their located and contingent nature, the current argument seeks to take up earlier theories as indicators for how we might begin to construct a model of humour for the present moment: one which is not concerned with offering a universal theory, but seeks to construct a

model of humour that is rooted in a particular time and location. A central goal of this book is thus to offer a theoretical model aware of its own limitations while adequate to the task of accounting for the particular forms of contextually-specific humour that emerge in the cultural texts of the 1990s and 2000s.

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

> One of the premises of almost all cultural studies to date has been the idea that the concept of politics needs to be expanded way beyond the traditional focus on contestation over state power between organised groups … The expanded conception regards politics as involving all those processes whereby power relationships are implemented, maintained, challenged, or altered in any sphere of activity whatsoever. (2008, 7–8)

I am thus distinguishing between a politics as a separate social sphere of governance and state power, and the wider definition of politics that operates in cultural studies and which can be thought of as cultural politics, but which I will refer to as simply "politics." My evocation of aesthetics is also quite particular: contrary to other (legitimate) conceptions, what I mean by aesthetics here is not a concern with beauty, pleasure, or even necessarily with art, but rather an engagement with "not only the sensations of touch, taste, smell, sight and sound, but also … 'cerebral sensations,' like the tingle of evocative ideas coursing through your brain" (Koren 2011, 46). While closely tied to the notion of art for historical and institutional reasons, the idea of aesthetics invoked here can also inform analysis and understanding far beyond the narrow category of art. In this broad sense, aesthetics is the term for the cultural and formal existence of any cultural object: be it pulp fiction, video games, gardening or indeed popular humour. The enjoinment of these particular perceptions of politics and aesthetics is thus concerned with the question of how the formal features of a cultural text might influence how we engage with and understand our wider socio-political context.

Adopting this approach towards humour means that the politics of humour will be approached in relation to its aesthetic characteristics,

rather than through a consideration of its subject or contents. Political aesthetics names a method of approaching cultural texts and artefacts which is alert to the ways in which the formal and sensual features can inflect and possibly even determine the politics of a given text: it is an aesthetic theory that seeks to situate art and aesthetics within the gamut of wider social forces, as both subject and object of economic, technological, social and political forces. This approach builds on the legacy of a number of scholars, notably Theodor Adorno, Fredric Jameson and Jacques Rancière, as a way to articulate the possible political and social role of art and culture. At the heart of political aesthetics is the argument that it is not only what texts and artefacts show us about the world, but also the way in which they show us—as well as the priorities and categories of interpretation that we bring to bear—that determine our relation to that world, and the social, cultural and political struggles we encounter there. Aesthetic concerns, such as the way we see, hear and feel the world, determine how we interact with it and the particular sites of potential, tension and trouble we see within it: the political work of an aesthetic quality such as humour thus needs to be understood not as a site of dominance or resistance whose function is determined in advance, but as a cultural terrain whose aesthetic contours determine its multiple possible political trajectories. The purpose of the current analysis is therefore to consider what the ideological and epistemological consequences might be when humour in general, and contemporary trends in humour in particular, become culturally ascendant: what shifts in a society when one of its main cultural concerns becomes the cultivation and appreciation of laughter? How might the logic of humour impinge upon other spheres and ways of thought? And how might this tie into contemporary political notions of liberalism, authority and dissent? Such questions lead us to consider how the formal operations and representational strategies of emergent modes of humour could be thought to shape our understanding of the world: to assume, implicate, prevent, privilege and allow certain ways of thinking about the world and thereby recalibrate ways of perceiving the problems and possibilities of contemporary politics.

A political aesthetic approach maps well onto a study of humour, which is a prime example of how an aesthetic category might engage political notions of the world: acting to complicate and inflect textual meanings, social interactions and the world they produce. There are long-standing connections between the study of aesthetics and that of humour: many of the prominent historic philosophers of humour

investigated humour from an aesthetic perspective, or as an addendum to the work on aesthetics. Yet the theoretical tools we have for making sense of humour as an aesthetic are limited at best, and for the most part premised upon social and philosophical precepts rooted in the nineteenth century (if not earlier) with limited relevance to the postmodern, globalised, neoliberal culture of the twenty-first century. Thus, although there exists a rapidly increasing and evolving literature on humour as a cultural, communicative and political phenomenon, the underlying theoretical models that inform that literature have remained largely static. As a consequence while humour, and with it the cultural politics of humour, is increasingly recognised as a viable and important area of study, the political consideration of humour tends to take second place to detailed investigation of what humour qua humour *is* or *does*. Concordantly, the potential politics of humour considered first and foremost as an aesthetic phenomenon has received relatively little focus, with more attention paid to the "what" or "why" of humour than to any consideration of the ways in which the often overlooked "how" of humour can also be understood as a site of a potential politics. Concerns with the politics of humour have largely sought to account for how it might enact a consistent politics as a cultural category, rather than consider how different modes and manifestations of humour might do different things in different moments and contexts. Considering humour through such an analytic lens opens up the possibility of drawing general conclusions about the operation of specific modes of humour while still grounding those conclusions in particular textual details, thereby articulating a connection between the details of particular texts, wider sets of aesthetic operations held in common by a set of texts, and broader ideological observations regarding the relation between the mass culture and political imagination in the current moment.

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

a wider sociological perspective to an aesthetic reading that attends to the formal qualities of texts and the political opportunities afforded in their production and interpretation. This theoretical synthesis provides the foundation for a sociologically inflected aesthetics: one that is not completely caught up with out-dated and conservative notions of beauty and the civilising power of art, nor reduced to a Bourdieusian game of position and social struggle, where art is a tactic in a struggle for status and power, rather than a carrier of cultural meanings. The central concern of this project is to consider how the contemporary manifestation of the humour aesthetic might be thought to have a bearing upon the political context of the moment—a question which I regard as of critical importance—while also addressing the broader question of how an aesthetic category might be thought to function in a political manner. The purpose here is therefore not to say what humour is, but rather what it does or can do.

Emergent Modes of Humour: Political Contexts and Comic Texts

In its exploration of the political aesthetics of contemporary humour, *Humour as Politics* comprises three sections: the first interrogates existing attitudes towards humour as a form of liberatory politics; the second problematises those attitudes through a formal analysis of the production and communication of novel forms of humour in a range of popular comic texts from the 1990s and 2000s; and the third takes those analyses as the basis for a critical theory of contemporary humour as an aesthetic category premised on logics of doubt, dissent and disruption. Bringing together Jacques Rancière and Dave Chappelle, Theodor Adorno and *Borat*, and Fredric Jameson and *The Simpsons*, *Humour as Politics* argues that humour is central to the constitution and understanding of contemporary society and declares that if we are to intervene effectively in the power struggles of the twenty-first century mediascape, it is necessary that we appreciate both the potential and limitations of humour as a cultural form as it emerges at this particular location and time.

This first section of this book maps and interrogates claims regarding the liberatory political function of humour. To this end, the second chapter opens with a consideration of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert's "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," as an illustration of

how humour is often understood to operate in alignment with liberal discourses of freedom. Tracing this understanding of humour through a range of recent humour theory, I argue that the widespread assumption that humour operates as a form of dissent is both ascendant and reductive, and overdetermines the political work of humour without sufficient attention to the actual aesthetic manifestation of humour and the politics thereof. Building on the theoretical discussion of the prior chapter, the third chapter challenges celebratory accounts of humour as a form of liberatory political practice through formal analysis of several comic texts that directly address the political sphere: *The Daily Show*, *The Thick of It*, *Veep*, and *The Onion*. In doing so, I argue that the political valence attributed to the humour of these texts is misplaced and that the majority of the humour of these texts relies upon mockery of individual failings and the policing of middle-class social mores, rather than the subversion or critique of political institutions and processes, let alone structures of power. Consequently, I suggest that the political work of most humour is frequently overstated or misunderstood and that, even in texts that explicitly address questions of governance, the use of humour often remains clearly distinct from political questions and concerns. In order to properly account for the political possibilities and limits of different manifestations of humour, I therefore argue for a need to attend to the details of the formal operation of humour as the basis of a more sophisticated model of humour.

This necessary formal analysis is the subject of the second section of *Humour as Politics* which addresses the three key modes of contemporary humour—discomfort, provocation and absurdity—across three chapters. Each mode is explored through key illustrative examples, chosen both for the way that they crystallise those aesthetic features under consideration and their popularity or resonance within wider media culture. The textual analysis of these chapters serves as an important rejoinder to the generalising tendency of much humour theory, as it allows one to assess the actual function and form by which specific texts generate humour. Humour is a charged formal register that inflects its subject material with a certain politics, but that politics, whether repressive or liberatory, cannot be determined in advance. Though humour is an abstract aesthetic and affective category, it only emerges through specific examples: one is therefore forced to engage with humour at its own level: as it manifests within individual texts, and, indeed, with the forms of individual gags, jests, stunts, put-downs, wry asides, wisecracks, ironic

remarks, non sequiturs and other basic units of comic meaning. In particular, this analysis is concerned with instances of humour rather than the wider themes, narratives, and ideological assumptions of the texts in which they appear, with the necessary caveat that the wider text is a key component that establishes the conditions for that humour. Such an approach clearly relies upon an analytic abstraction: humour texts cannot be reduced to *just* humour because no matter how focused upon the production of humour, such texts involve non-comic aspects that are essential to the pleasures, motivations and interpretations of these texts. However, with that reservation in mind, this analytic abstraction does allow for a focus upon the defining attribute of these texts—their humour—across and between texts and within the context of the wider social and political moment.

Chapter four opens this aesthetic analysis with an investigation of the humour of discomfort as it manifests in *The Office* (BBC 2001–2003), *Jackass* (MTV 2000–2001) and *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Charles 2006). Despite the marked differences between these examples they share a common orientation towards the documentary form by which they appeal to the reality of the situations represented and their connection to the lived existence of the audience. Lingering upon moments of bodily injury, extreme affective states and social failure, these comic texts refuse to contain or resolve the possibility of discomfort, which is instead escalated in a manner that implicates the audience in the humiliation and suffering of those on-screen in a manner that thereby complicates the experience of humour. Continuing the political aesthetic focus, chapter five examines the taboo-breaking humour of *Chappelle's Show* (Comedy Central 2003–2006), *The Sarah Silverman Programme* (Comedy Central 2007–2010), and *Four Lions* (Morris 2010). With particular attention to the different ways in which these texts clearly define and then breach social boundaries and proscriptions for the purpose of humour, this chapter considers how provocative humour intentionally and tastelessly intervenes in socially charged conversations in a manner that is explicitly coded as insensitive and quite possibly offensive to a hypothetical audience. Concluding this second section, chapter six focuses on absurd humour through an analysis of *The Simpsons* (Fox 1989–present), *Family Guy* (Fox 1999–present), and *South Park* (Comedy Central 1997–present). Absurd humour is a form of the comic premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning and does not therefore adhere to the expected system

of rules and logics that structure any given system. I argue that the expanding logic of comic absurdity seen in these texts promotes a mode of reading that is extremely tolerant with regards to formal deviation, uncertainty and ambiguity and accepting of contradiction and inconsistency as sources of pleasure rather than anxiety.

The third section of *Humour as Politics* builds upon the case studies of the previous section as the basis for political aesthetic theory of contemporary humour, with a particular focus upon the limitations and oversights of the currently dominant accounts of humour and politics identified in the first section. Drawing on the critical aesthetic tradition of Cultural Marxism in conjunction with the aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière, chapter seven presents a political aesthetic theory of humour understood as a terrain of potential politics that cannot be reduced to a triumphal form of disruption and dissent. Instead I suggest that the commonalities between the different modes of contemporary humour explored in the previous chapters can be understood in terms of the production of radical politics that undermines the obviousness and clarity of systems of knowledge and meaning. An aesthetic expression of critique without limits or purpose, the emergent modes of contemporary humour premised in discomfort, provocation and absurdity are compatible with dominant liberal politics only to a limited extent beyond which they act to undermine the stable codes and rules that constitute a social and political order. For this reason, in the concluding chapter I classify humour as an aesthetic of ever-expanding doubt that acts as form of "epistemic acid" that brings all certainty into question. To understand humour in these terms is neither to celebrate nor condemn it as a cultural form, but rather to acknowledge the possibilities and problems that the cultural ascendance of humour might bring about.

A Quick Note on Terminology

Finally, prior to beginning my argument proper, an explanation is necessary regarding the terminology of humour. While terms such as humour, laughter and comedy have been used interchangeably up till this point in the introduction, more rigorous discussion requires their definition and contradistinction. When engaging with the historical study of humour, one is confronted with an immense proliferation of definition and nomenclature. To complicate matters further, there exists little direct correspondence between the uses of this terminology in the work of

different writers, some of whom are at great pains to differentiate the varying concepts, while others treat them as more or less interchangeable. In the current work, humour will be distinguished as a separate phenomenon from laughter, which is a physical, physiological action that often, but not necessarily, arises in response to humour. While historically the two have been conceived interchangeably in the foundational work of Immanuel Kant (2000, 160–161), Thomas Hobbes (1994, 54), Mikhail Bakhtin (1984, 62–135) and Henri Bergson (2005, 2–4), humour need not necessarily lead to laughter, and laughter does not arise solely in response to humour (Lewis 2006, 6, 163). As argued by John Dewey, "[T]he laugh is by no means to be viewed from the standpoint of humor; its connection with humor is secondary … A very moderate degree of observation of adults will convince one that a large amount of laughter is wholly irrelevant to any joke or witticism whatever" (1971, 157). The converse is also true: humour need not induce actual laughter to be accepted as funny. Thus while Bergson understands laughter as a shared social activity that does not typically arise in isolation (Bergson 2005, 3–4, 66–68; Billig 2005, 195–199), it does not necessarily follow that humour, as distinct from laughter, is also inevitably social in this sense. Indeed, in an era when much humour is distributed via mass media, it is often experienced in isolation, a situation which may not be conducive to laughter but which in no way compromises a text's status as humorous. Humour is a quality of the text, not of the response to the text: a distinction that is crucial to the argument that follows.

We also need to distinguish between the notions of humour and funniness: humour will be treated as an aesthetic quality operative at a cultural level, whereas funniness will be used to refer to a particular subjective reaction to those texts. Humour is a textual quality whose presence can, in most instances, be agreed upon within the context of shared cultural conventions. This is not to suggest, though, that humour is any sort of timeless quality inherent in any given text: humour always arises out of particular cultural relations and practices. The identification of humour proceeds through the recognition of certain sets of generic and formal indicators that mark a text as attempting to produce a particular affect connected, but not reducible to amusement, mirth, ridiculousness or laughter. Funniness is the term for when those texts successfully produce this affective response: a judgement that can only be understood subjectively. Thus, humour is a culturally shared category, whereas funniness is an individual and subjective assessment of the success or failure

of particular instances of that category. Recent work in neuroscience has even suggested that this separation of humour and funniness, which can alternately be understood in terms of cognitive versus affective criteria, correlates to different neural effects in different brain regions, associated with the "resolution of contextual ambiguities," on the one hand, and "emotional and visceral sensation," on the other (Moran et al. 2004). One of the central consequences of this understanding of funniness is that it stands as an inviolately subjective and individual assessment, "if you think something is funny, it is. You may be (collectively) puzzled by your amusement or disapprove of it, but you cannot be wrong about it." (Limon 2000, 11). For example, while we can probably agree that *Everybody Loves Raymond* is humour, we may not all find it to be funny.

Notes

1. In this instance, Henri Bergson's theory of humour as "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (2005, 18) would seem particularly applicable. Bergson's oddly specific notion of humour understands laughter to be the result when humans act mechanically according to patterns and systems, and here Jerry, George and Newman are reduced to a robot-like entities in pursuit of soup. However, despite its relevance here, Bergson's theory is too narrow to explain the wide range of situations understood as comic that appear in *Seinfeld* and therefore is better understood as a particular instance of a more capacious theory of humour, rather than a total theory in itself.
2. However it would be a mistake to think that *Seinfeld*'s obsession with rules pertains only to codes of etiquette and best social practice. This is best seen in episodes such as "The Bizarro Jerry" or "The Opposite," where George decides to do the exact opposite of his instincts: a practice that leads him to find uncharacteristic success in romance, employment and self-respect. Meanwhile, Elaine apparently absorbs George's excess "loserness," and subsequently loses her job. "The Opposite" seems to suggest that these rules are not just social, but somehow tie into larger universal convergences and thereby suggests that not just social etiquette that may be up for grabs, but wider considerations of historical, sociological and potentially even physical laws.
3. Drawing on such examples, the humour of *Friends* adheres surprisingly well to models of humour based in the Superiority tradition, where humour is thought to arise from a sudden experience of one's superiority to another being. Whether the audience is witnessing a character put down by another or themselves, or simply observing behaviour that

is somehow coded as deficient (easier to spot in *Friends* by virtue of the laugh soundtrack), they are being invited to consider themselves superior to the subject of the humour, if only fleetingly and in relation to a particular area of life. This can arise either through identification with a particular character in the instance that they make fun of another character or through a direct relation of superiority between the audience members as themselves—the viewing subject—in relation to the fictional characters. Despite the farfetched success of these unusually good-looking young people, the text permits and encourages the audience to take pleasure in their consistent failure to flawlessly perform expected gender, race and class codes. Moreover, this humour appears as an almost textbook manifestation of Freud's theory of "tendentious jokes" (2002, 87–113) whereby aggression or prejudice deemed to be socially inappropriate can be safely presented through the psychological bribe or 'trojan-horse' of the joke-form. Indeed, *Friends* is something of a psychoanalyst's dream, because not only does much of the humour seem to revolve around the expression of repressed anger and resentment, but also because there occasionally emerge sexually motivated wisecracks.

4. I take up what might appear to be a somewhat unorthodox phrasing in comparison to the more customary evocation of Anglo-America in order to emphasise that, though the USA and to a lesser extent the UK, might constitute the central sites of English-language cultural production, they do not constitute the only sites of consumption for such texts.

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CHAPTER 2

Dissent in Jest: Humour in the Liberal Moment

On a mild Autumn afternoon on 30 October 2010, over two hundred thousand people (according to most estimates) gathered at the National Mall in Washington D.C. to attend a political rally that had received a level of national and international media attention almost unprecedented in recent years. In addition to those who directly attended, "more than 2 million people watched the live television broadcast; a live stream … attracted 570,000 views online; … [and] over 130,000 users joined the organizer's Facebook page" (Reilly and Boler 2014, 435). Promoted by its organisers as a "clarion call for rationality," the event was hailed by many as a watershed moment in the mid-term election cycle and as a potential means to revive the flagging fortunes of the incumbent Democrat party, if not the entire political process. Moreover, the involvement in, or tacit recognition of, the project by public figures ranging from Oprah Winfrey to President Barack Obama, not to mention the anxious denunciations of the rally by a host of personalities associated with the conservative media network Fox News, as well as other less openly partisan news organisations, would seem to indicate the wide level of interest in, or at least concern with, the rally across the political and social spectrum. However, as many readers are probably already aware, the guiding force behind this gathering was not a politician, or even a political commentator in the traditional sense, but the comedian and satirist, Jon Stewart, best known as the host of the late night comedy television programme, *The Daily Show*. The gathering in question was what had come to be known as "The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or

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Fear": a celebrity-infested variety show-cum-carnival-cum-demonstration that hovered uneasily between satire and earnestness.

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

> We're looking for the people who think shouting is annoying, counterproductive, and terrible for your throat; who feel that the loudest voices shouldn't be the only ones that get heard; and who believe that the only time it's appropriate to draw a Hitler mustache on someone is when that person is actually Hitler. Or Charlie Chaplin in certain roles. (Rally to Restore Sanity 2010)

Advertised as a light-hearted event with a serious message, the event was organised around a straightforward demand to purge the political sphere of tendencies, such as insanity and intolerance, that are, pretty much by definition, an anathema to the ideal conduct of contemporary state politics (Fig. 2.1). If any of the participants considered this an odd demand to be couched in terms of humour, no such doubts were on display: this was despite the possibility for comic disruption promised by the Rally to Restore Sanity's earlier amalgamation with its erstwhile pseudo-competitor, "The March to Keep Fear Alive," organised by Stewart's colleague, Stephen Colbert. The official designation of the resulting meta-rally, "The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," was frequently, perhaps intentionally, overlooked in many press accounts, which referred to the entire event by Stewart's original name, thereby emphasising the earnest pro-sanity aspects over the satirical fear aspects. While Colbert's involvement muddies the water somewhat through the introduction of additional levels of absurdity and irony, on the actual day of the event his presence was muted through his constitution as an extreme comic

Fig. 2.1 Jon Stewart addresses the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear in his patriotic fleece (Cliff [Cliff1006], 2010)

foil in the form of a comedic pantomime bogeyman (surprisingly literally when a giant papier-mâché facsimile of Colbert named "Fearzilla" took to the stage), which served to reinforce the overarching message regarding the desirability of reasonableness. Moreover, nowhere was it questioned whether humour was the best complement to reason, or the thought entertained that humour might be, on some level, unreasonable, even as Colbert's antics illustrated how unreason could prove an equally fertile soil for humour. It was instead taken for granted that humour and a progressive political praxis were obvious, mutually inclusive and reciprocating fellow travellers.

The reason that I turn to "The Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" at the opening of my argument is because it offers a near perfect illustration of the contemporary state of relations between democratic politics and humour. I am not concerned with assessing the Left political credentials of the rally or reading it as a comment upon the fortunes of political activism and involvement. Rather, what I take to be notable is the manner in which Stewart's (and to a lesser and more complicated extent,

Colbert's) rally made remarkably evident the perceived connection between humour and the Left-liberal ideal of tolerant, reasonable critique. The very fact that a comedian would publicly intercede in debates about political climate and rhetoric indicates a belief that humour is by no means alien—and may actually be central—to the concerns of twenty-first century politics. Moreover that, in doing so, Stewart was neither denounced nor ignored, but instead widely hailed as a saviour of the American political sphere—particularly on what is often identified as the Left of American politics—offers a profound comment on a broad acceptance, at least in part, of the general interrelatedness of humour and liberal politics.[1] The anxiety and interest that greeted the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" thus offer a way to begin considering the role of humour in contemporary politics: not just as an indication of the implication of humour in American liberal politics, but as a concrete manifestation of humour as a key fixture in the dominant political ideology of the Anglophone world.

In the light of this assertion, the purpose of this chapter is to consider the central discourse by which humour—in particular politicised humour—has been made sense of within the allegedly "post-ideological" and liberal democratic societies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In doing so, I will trace the political function and power attributed to humour by its advocates, commentators, theorists, philosophers, historians, practitioners and, indeed, its critics, and thereby elucidate the moral, cultural and political weight with which humour is repeatedly invested in the context of (neo)liberalism. For the most part, these attempts to expound the politics of humour can be understood in terms of two broad camps, which present humour as either inevitably trivialising or inherently subversive. Such positions structure the majority of popular and academic responses to Jon Stewart and *The Daily Show*, understood alternately as contributing to an apolitical culture of apathy (Baumgartner and Morris 2006, 361–362; Hart and Hartelius 2007, 263–266) and partisan smugness (Hitchens 2009, 101–110) or as a site of ascendant "public intellectual"-ism, where Stewart functions as a court jester or devotee of Foucauldian parrhesia (Baym 2005, 268–274; Hefflin 2006, 26–31; Jordan 2008; McKain 2005, 424–429; Warner 2010, 37–58). This first tendency reads humour as an exercise opposed to serious critical or political consideration: generally the discourse of pundits and editorialists. This school of thought has some affinity with Neil Postman's anti-entertainment thesis in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

where he asserts that our culture is "being drained by laughter" (1996, 162). More recently, Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris controversially proposed the existence of what they refer to as "The Daily Show Effect," whereby viewers of late-night comedy treat (state) political matters as a subject of jest, producing a cynical attitude towards politics and other "detrimental effects, [such as] driving down support for political institutions and leaders among those already inclined toward nonparticipation" (2006, 341).

Such accounts of humour as trivialising are relatively rare however—especially in any sustained fashion—when compared with the second competing tendency, which sees in humour a critical and liberatory political project that most often takes the form of a socially desirable dissent from authoritarian or dominating structures of power. Humour, after all, was only a passing concern for Postman, and much of the visibility of Baumgartner and Morris' thesis has been a consequence of subsequent contestation and counter-argument. This second tendency, whereby humour is celebrated as a critical and subversive strategy, does not want for adherents, and is at its most celebratory extremes in popular publications such as *The Daily Show and Philosophy* or *The Colbert Show and Philosophy*. Nor is this interpretive mode consigned to the non-academic sphere, but is also present in more scholarly works, such as the anthology *Satire TV*, which takes as a starting premise the notion that "all humor challenges social or scientific norms *at some level*" (Gray et al. 2009, 8–9, italics in original), or volumes whose titles—*Revel with a Cause* (Kercher 2006), *Laughter and Liberation* (Mindess 1971), *Rebellious Laughter* (Boskin 1997)—suggest the ways in which they seek to link humour to the pursuit of a liberal political project. Thus, though Daniel Wickberg's assertion that "those in cultural studies tell us that popular humor is a 'transgressive' or 'subversive' expression of 'resistance' to oppression" (1998, 219) may overstate the uniformity of the treatment of humour within cultural studies, he does accurately diagnose a certain tendency within the contemporary study of humour: the widespread desire to attribute to humour an inherent progressive political power.

Liberalism and the Idea of Reasonable Dissent

Often understood as a benign and desirable site of affect, humour is frequently tied to the expectations of liberal democratic society, taken up as a measure of social tolerance and self-critique, and declared an

indispensable attribute of the reasonable subject of liberal society. Accordingly, humour has been largely characterised as a positive and critical force inherently compatible with the demands of democratic politics: within the liberal moment, it has been dominantly conceived of as a site of subversion, liberation and a free play of affect wherein the self can critically appraise the political conditions of its existence. Contemporary laudatory accounts of humour have sought to tie humour to a liberatory political project that challenges authoritarian or oppressive governmental technologies by its very nature: a belief that manifests in diverse but related forms across a wide range of theoretical works addressing humour. As Michael Billig notes, very few commentators, it would seem, are willing to come out against humour or present it as anything less than a political panacea—at least in its "good" forms (as defined by those authors)—lest they be deemed an anti-laughter "misogelast" (2005, 14, 37). Even those who criticised, as distinct from critiqued, Stewart's rally, made clear that they were not against humour per se, but only against its particular partisan, poorly executed, inappropriate or arrogant form in this instance: almost all, with the notable exception of Bob Samuels of *The Huffington Post*, held out the possibility of a good, or at least entertaining while inoffensive, form of humour. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to investigate how and why such readings of humour might appear particularly attractive in the current political moment and, in particular, what it means to conceive of humour as a form of "reasonable dissent" that resonates with the political goals of currently dominant forms of liberal politics.

Such an approach prompts the question, however, of what it might mean to refer to our contemporary moment as "liberal." Liberalism is a slippery term, especially with regard to the domain of politics and to refer to liberalism is to bring a number of competing definitions and priorities into play. Following Wendy Brown's conception of liberalism as a "nonsystematic and porous doctrine subject to historical change and local variation," (1995, 141), I will argue that liberalism is thereby better understood as a flexible cultural logic empty of specific content rather than as a well-defined set of state political institutions, rights and rules. In the sense I refer to it here, liberalism is best understood, following the work of Raymond Williams, as a "structure of feeling" (Williams 1961, 48): one that is characterised by a belief in the inherently positive and desirable nature of freedom as a guiding political and social tenet. As it relates to my discussion of humour, liberalism therefore cannot be

reduced to the demands of any single political movement, but instead functions as an overarching meta-political framework which can inform competing sets of values.[2]

Understood in this manner, liberalism is more than the concern of select political agents, but rather operates as a cultural-political dominant, where the obvious desirability of freedom goes unchallenged not only by mainstream political parties, but by almost all political subjects in the Anglophone liberal democracies (though those terms may be configured in very different ways by those with divergent interests and projects). Liberalism is thus "a contemporary cultural text we inhabit, a discourse whose terms are 'ordinary' to a very contemporary 'us'" (Brown 1995, 142). This is not to say that liberalism is the only cultural-political dominant; there clearly exist competing sets of values—such as patriotism or religion, syndicalism or even fascism—by which we can express our desires and dreams. Instead, taking up another of Williams' analytic categories, liberalism is best treated as a cultural dominant (1977, 121–127) among several competing residual and emergent ideological forms, in comparison to which, however, it is frequently cast as the only *reasonable* choice. Liberalism can thus be considered properly hegemonic in the sense developed by Stuart Hall from the work of Antonio Gramsci: it is historically-specific, "multi-dimensional, multi-arena," and exercises "moral and social authority, not simply over its immediate supporters but across society as a whole" (Hall 1986, 15). Nor should my reference to liberalism as a form of rhetoric be taken as a dismissive suggestion that it operates in an illusionary manner, and as such can be swept aside through critical and careful analysis in order to reveal a true set of motives underneath. Rather, I refer to a liberalism that enacts a certain logic, a way of understanding and interpreting the world, which it expresses and provides with form and explanatory power, such that approaching the world through the lens of liberalism leads us to frame social subjects and relations, material situations, problems and their solutions as matters of freedom.

What, though, is the relevance of hegemonic liberalism to the investigation of contemporary humour? One possible suggestion could be that given the centrality of liberalism as a socio-political-cultural mode, it is a necessary aspect of all study, but my rationale is much more precise and direct. I am interested in the advent of liberalism in relation to a particular form of political logic, which I will refer to as "reasonable dissent." The desirability and perceived effectiveness of reasonable dissent—whose

applicability to the study of humour will be investigated in due course—can be understood as a consequence of twin, often competing demands on the liberal subject: first, that they be reasonable and, second, that they be free. Situated within this nexus of cultural and political priorities, the subject of liberalism is expected to believe, behave and be in certain ways. More precisely, in terms of conduct the contemporary liberal subject is expected to comport herself in a "reasonable," "decent" and "agreeable" manner: a desire which provides a weak pun on the notion of "civil society," where civil refers to both non-market citizenship and courteous conduct. To be liberal is to be well-mannered, as Toby Miller notes, "the civic cultural subject … is produced as a polite and obedient servant of etiquette, within limited definitions of accepted behaviour" (1993, 223). Central to this well-mannered subject is the exercise of reason and reasonableness: a quality of the liberal subject and political project that can be traced back as far as the foundational work of John Locke whose *Two Treatises on Government* enshrines reason and reasonableness as central aspects of his liberal political theory (cf. Locke 2003). This demand that the liberal subject be reasonable was certainly front and centre at Stewart and Colbert's "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear" where the headline rhetoric of "sanity" was far eclipsed in practice by the language of reasonableness. On the associated website, for example, the gathering was advertised as a "call to reason," while Stewart, in particular, referred to reason and reasonableness through the rally as a short-hand term for the constellation of "common-sense" political values that he sought to evoke. In this vein, Stewart implored the crowd not to bow to Colbert ("reasonable people don't bow!"), celebrated actor Sam Waterson as "the most reasonable-seeming man in America," provided an opportunity for infamous public figures to apologise for "momentary unreasonableness," awarded "medals of reasonableness" to those who had displayed civility and tolerance and opened his final, explicitly earnest speech with the question, "What is reason?" That this sustained substitution of "reasonableness" for "sanity" went unnoted by the many commentators addressing the event speaks volumes regarding not only how reasonableness quickly overtook sanity as a catch-cry for the rally, but also how central the idea of reasonableness is to the contemporary manifestation of liberalism.

Indeed, far beyond the rally, reasonableness plays a central role in liberal thought: see for example John Rawls' claim that "political liberalism does not attack or criticize any reasonable view" (1996, xxi). Yet,

the meaning of reasonableness or how we might distinguish the reasonable from the unreasonable is unclear.[3] Once, the idea of reason may have implied a coherent vision of a different and better world and, on those grounds, "reasonableness" could certainly have delineated a certain way of being and acting in the world; however, as argued by Max Horkheimer, this sense of "objective reason" has long since given way to "subjective reason" under the conditions of self-interested liberalism (2004, 12–13). Whereas objective reason was conceived as a guiding social, political and ethical principle, the subjective form of reason which is currently ascendant is reason reduced to an instrument: it is reason as a question of means, rather than ends. Re-imagined in such a way, reasonableness refers not to a clearly defined set of manners, but instead to "the adequacy of [one's] behaviour in terms of generally recognized standards. In most cases to be reasonable means not to be obstinate, which in turn points to conformity with reality as it is" (Horkheimer 2004, 5). In terms of the rally, the particular nature of those standards was made clear through the actions of the quasi-fictional character of Stephen Colbert who provided a foil against which to define the reasonable liberal subject. Familiar to regular viewers of his nightly satirical take on political punditry, *The Colbert Report*, the Colbert character is a cheerfully bigoted, manic and megalomaniacal super-patriot with a fear of difference and change who functioned in the rally as the comic champion of fear and aggressive overreaction. From denouncing Muslims and robots as agents of terror, to the cheerful presentation of alarmist media montages alongside a ten-foot papier-mâché puppet of himself, Colbert was not only a perfect example of the extremes of the unreasonable citizen, he even explicitly presented himself in such terms. For example, at one moment in the rally Colbert screamed at Stewart for "ruin[ing] things with reasonableness" following an amicable compromise ending to a train-themed battle of the bands: as such he represents a useful example of how the well-mannered liberal subject is most clearly defined when held up against its anti-social, extreme and intolerant opposite.

Understood in this way, Colbert emerges as the somewhat unlikely manifestation of what Slajov Žižek refers to as "violence," insofar as "opposi[tion to] all forms of violence, from direct physical violence (mass murder, terror) to ideological violence (racism, incitement, sexual discrimination) seems to be the main preoccupation of the tolerant liberal attitude that predominates today" (Žižek 2008, 10). In Žižek's account, violence becomes the term which names the ultimate political

wrong of liberalism—its meaning expanded beyond physical force to encompass any action that contravenes the desired behaviour of a flexible and accepting liberal attitude i.e. the behaviour satirised by the character of Colbert—and it is in opposition to violence that the liberal subject becomes able to mark herself as such through the practice of tolerance and reasonableness. Through their rejection and, indeed, their mocking of the violent subject personified in Colbert, the liberal subject becomes the reasonable subject: that subject who is accepting and respectful of difference and thereby aligned against violence in all its forms.

The other aspect of Colbert that marks him as an unreasonable subject is his obvious commitment to a worldview explicitly coded as an ideology, which leads the character to offer arguments and accounts of the world that patently conflict with empirical evidence. In his debilitating and self-compromising commitment to an often-invoked but rarely defined ideological project, Colbert is also emblematic of the other distinguishing feature of unreasonableness under liberalism: ideological commitment. As Žižek and others have noted, in liberal contexts, ideology often designates those positions which are seen to fall outside the scope of permissible political practice: "we designate as ideology that which stands out from [the] background: extreme religious zeal or dedication to a particular political orientation" (Žižek 2008, 36). In this liberal context, the ideological is therefore understood to be that which departs from the norms of common-sense and accepted practice: the ideological subject is one who holds beliefs that challenge the central assumptions of the moment on a fundamental level. In this manner, ideology is thus re-configured as dogma. In contrast to this position, the reasonable liberal subject can be understood as that subject who is non- or post-ideological, who is thought to lack any ulterior motive beyond the public attainment of the unquestionable goods of freedom and equality (whatever they might mean). From this perspective, the liberal subject is thought to be able to transcend the messy partisan extremism of the twentieth century, and work towards an equitable and free society within the absolute freedom afforded by the infinitely respectful and tolerant parameters of capitalist democracy. Stewart, with his repeated assertions of his own apoliticism (Reilly 2013, 1243), is a perfect example of this rejection of ideology. This reasonable liberal subject has no axe to grind, no "special interests" in the American parlance, no intellectual or social project other than an earnest desire to advance their rational self-interest and, where possible, to help their fellow citizens.

In this interpretation all the problems of the current moment can be understood as the consequence of ideological deviations from the common liberal consensus. This is indeed the arch-liberal message espoused by Stewart—the "hero" of the Rally—against the villainously ideological and therefore unreasonable Colbert: ideology hurts. Consequently, in the liberal moment, the reasonable subject must aspire to escape ideology and emerge into the light of a pragmatic, reasonable and tolerant world.

Freedom, Capitalism and the Desire for Dissent

Moreover, if this desire to "escape" ideology is important to the reasonable subject—and indeed to liberalism as a whole—it is in part because of its affinity for the second, and perhaps cardinal, virtue of liberalism: freedom. Freedom is marked as an ever-present reference point within the frame of our liberal moment, the contemporary function and value of which can be understood as a consequence of the ultimate negative horizon of the historical memory of totalitarianism (Žižek 2002, 1–3). However, despite its centrality, this definition of freedom works in a very similar manner to the political category of liberalism in that it lacks any single, final meaning and therefore consistently proves itself to be "historically, semiotically, and culturally protean, as well as politically elusive" (Brown 1995, 5). Freedom thus comes to function as what Jeremy Gilbert refers to as an "empty signifier," which describes "those symbols or terms shared by a community which come to mean literally nothing (or almost-nothing) because they simply signify the very idea of the community as a community" (2008b, 156). This is especially true in the current moment, where, as a consequence of its implication in the (at least ostensibly) opposed discourses of the Third Way and neoliberalism, freedom is rendered almost infinitely flexible, even as its value is constantly highlighted and underscored: freedom here becomes a "performative repetition of discourse" whose repeated performance trumps any substantive, semantic meaning (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 210–211).

Courtesy of its abstract and ephemeral nature, freedom currently serves as the rallying cry for multiple and contradictory political projects. In the current moment freedom from constraining structures is understood to be as much a concern of the Right as the Left (Brown 1995, 17). The difference between divergent political interpretations of freedom emerges in the manner they perceive and characterise those

structures from which they wish to be free: as the interference of the state or the inequality of social prejudice and entrenched poverty, in the ostensibly competing appeals to freedom in the context of the Third Way and neoliberalism, respectively. Indeed, one can be free from many things—economic dominance, government interference, religious mystification, political correctness, military oppression, racial prejudice—and free to do many things: speak, move, earn, assemble, trade, bear arms, be oneself. Thus, freedom need not hold any particular political valence, and is instead reconfigured as a matter of individual flexibility, resistance and dissent: an abstracted concept of freedom that is equally applicable across political divisions. Hence, in our liberal moment, very few would argue against the need for resistance to domination, though there is clearly some disagreement as to who is dominating whom (perhaps a general rule that could be suggested here is that we construct the dominant as that against which the struggles of our own position might seem the most heroic). As such, almost any struggle can be framed as a demand for freedom, and indeed often is in the contemporary liberal moment. Consequently, it would be the very rare political operator who would couch their project as an attempt to impose a system upon the public (at least in the English-speaking world).

I would like to suggest, then, that freedom is currently concerned above all with the ability of the liberal subject to resist and strike out against oppression in all its forms, wherever it is perceived: in some instances this takes the form of demands for "empowerment," whereas in others it is couched in terms of "resistance" (Brown 1995, 21). Yet, this call for resistance to structures of power does not always (or often) mark itself as such outside certain political and scholarly circles, but instead usually appears in more prosaic forms: as calls to be creative and original, escape tradition or convention, to express oneself, to value innovation or invention, or in the form of corporate clichés such as "think outside the box." All these examples share a common rhetoric of an individual standing up to or against wider systems of power or sets of constraining norms. Functioning at this abstracted level, the depoliticised discourse of dissent can be taken up by anyone: it is the rhetoric of recourse for both the global business elite—Richard Branson is characterised by his "lack of respect for figures of authority" (Dearlove 2010, 32)—and radical opponents of global capital—"disobedience to authority is one of the most natural and healthy acts" (Hardt and Negri 2000, 210). Nobody

seeks to be on the side of authority, and certainly no one would admit to possessing it. This is somewhat akin to Gilles Deleuze's "society of control," where increasing flexibility and complexity comes to mark both power and resistance to it: where the individual improvisation of surfing replaces the discipline and rules of "older sports" (1992, 6). Within the confines of such logic, all political and cultural actors seek to position themselves in opposition to prevailing convention. Indeed, scepticism towards authority is sometimes linked figured as a fundamental political value of democracy (Giddens 1998, 21). This becomes possible because "resistance by itself does not contain a critique, a vision, or grounds for organized collective efforts to enact either" (Brown 1995, 49). Under such conditions, cultural and political players from rock musicians to activists, financiers to academics, appeal to the desirability of chaotic Dionysian ferment, understood as action and creativity, over the stifling order of the Apollonian. This creates a cultural, political and social order wherein dissent is the desired mode, and where "the most conspicuous and pronounced feature of contemporary struggles is the desire to rebel, reject and denounce" (Touraine 2001, 50). Hence, not only is the liberal subject expected to be reasonable, they must also seek to challenge authority, demolish hierarchies and seek to declare their unique creative self against an uncaring and stifling establishment.

Thus, although some commentators and theorists have historically attempted to position the liberal impulse of dissent as inherently progressive (the unfortunate caricature constructed of John Fiske and his work serving as a rallying cry in this regard), it is difficult to deny the extent to which this abstract idea of dissent is not only compatible but formative with regards to capitalism. Whereas mid-century critiques of capitalism understood it as a "highly regulated and bureaucratic form of society" capitalism has since proven surprisingly adept at adapting to liberal demands for creativity, fluidity, flexibility and mobility (Gilbert 2008a, 37–47). This is capitalism as what Jeremy Gilbert, following Deleuze and Felix Gutarri, refers to as "a permanently self-revolutionising force, which is in some senses the external limit of every known human society" (2008a, 49). This understanding of capitalism stands opposed to Brown's account of neoliberal capital as the domain of *homo economicus*, that "reduc[es] every value and activity to its cold rationale" (2005, 44), and instead seeks to comprehend how it might not be a force of cold logic, but one of "instantaneous cruelty, … incomprehensible ferocity … fundamental immorality" (Baudrillard 1994, 15). After all, while capital

does certainly calculate, it is also the driver of the bourgeois epoch in which "all that is solid melts into air" (Marx and Engels 1987, 26): clearly a process of heating, rather than cooling, if there ever were one. Based on this difference in temperature, capitalism can be understood as an irrational, as well as rational, system, particularly insofar as contemporarily ascendant ideas such as entrepreneurism can be configured in ways that value, even encourage, dissent.

In re-emphasising this aspect of the capitalism, I follow thinkers such as Boris Groys who suggests that it "is generally known, success in the market does not depend on calculation, on coolly logical reasoning or rational reflection; instead, it requires intuition, obsessiveness, aggressiveness and killer instinct" (1992, 22). Thus while capitalism does have its rational and rationalising tendencies, to conceive of capitalism as an entirely logical process is to overlook the ideological priority afforded liberal discourses of dissent, not to mention the neoliberal feting of innovation, rule-breaking, and thinking-outside-the-box that speaks to the extent to which contemporary capitalism is not a rigid, mechanical monolith opposed to change, but is, at its heart, a dynamic and liberal system. Ideas of dissent, change, freedom and liberalism should not be considered, therefore, antithetical to capitalism, which is commonly celebrated in terms that posit a preference for the dynamic over the static, the horizontal over the hierarchy, and the spontaneous over the planned. This affinity between discourses of dissent and the prevailing system of liberal capitalism underlies Luc Boltanski's argument that it is "not an exaggeration to say that capitalism, in its most liberal or radical forms, continuously touches upon the idea of total revolution," by which Boltanski refers to the belief that liberation from social conditions will allow the "full realisation of humanity" (2002, 3–4). Within the dominant culture of liberalism, the expression of subversive, critical or anti-authoritarian perspectives comes to be seen as an essential political and cultural duty, open to and expected of all. Resistance to the status quo is no longer the sole purview of culture jammers and carnivalesque activists "whose antics and messages are often simply indistinguishable to the wider pubic from the activities of viral marketers and cutting-edge corporate publicists" (Gilbert 2008b, 102). That is to say, contemporary capitalism is in no way necessarily troubled by notions of dissent, but rather creates the conditions where dissent and affiliated notions become ideological cultural dominants: the impulse to fight against systems thereby becomes the leading prerogative of the system itself.

To be clear, to understand dissent as a ubiquitous and widely valued rhetorical and logical trope is not to call for it to be abandoned, or strip it of its usefulness as a means to unsettle structures of economic, cultural or state politics, nor is this a call to develop a means to determine good from bad dissent. I do not seek to dismiss dissent, or indeed liberalism, as entirely without merit. I am not arguing against dissent, or suggesting that it is always immediately co-opted, captured for, or produced by reactionary or exploitative forces. Rather, to make this argument is to suggest a need to be aware that virtually all political agents and forces not only employ this rhetoric, but, for all we know, may actively believe in it. This is at the heart of what I am characterising as the liberal moment, which is, overall, framed by the desirability of the freedom from domination—understood in terms of empowerment, resistance and transgression—as an organising category of political and cultural thought: this is a culture not just comfortable with dissent, but desiring of it. Under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, it therefore becomes incumbent on the liberal subject to resist their incorporation into organising systems—understood as slippery slopes towards totalitarian oppression—but, it is crucial to note, in a *reasonable* and non-violent manner. The idea of dissent is thus complicated by the notion of reasonableness developed earlier, which is not trumped as a value by dissent, but instead acts alongside it.

This confluence is what brings us the idea of reasonable dissent, which combines the imperative to challenge the status quo with a belief that this should be done in a reasonable, which is to say non-violent and non-ideological, way. Due to its fundamental operation as a means of disruption and opposition, dissent always threatens to enact ideology, even if it does not always realise this threat in any final or stable manner. For example, in any particular, context-specific incarnation, dissent can potentially take on a contingent but concrete political form (although that form is by no means tied to any pre-determined political project) and thereby be marked as unreasonable. Accordingly, even though "non-conformity is the now accepted norm of society" (Niedzviecki 2006, xvi)—especially for privileged, white, middle-class subjects (Hale 2011, 1–10)—concrete manifestations of dissent may not always meet such approval: "even in hyperliberal societies, not all practises of autonomy are equally valued—consider the indigent person resistant to being managed by social services or the teenager hanging around a street corner with nothing to do" (Brown 2006, 257, n. 38). When actually existing

subjects attempt to voice their dissent within a particular context, they risk voiding their claim to tolerance, and opening themselves up to the persuasive and possibly coercive powers of the cultural dominant and the state. Consequently, liberal dissent or resistance always walks a fine line between being hailed as "reasonable" or risking censure as an unreasonable, ideologically informed, and therefore threatening, political act. The challenge, therefore, for the good liberal subject is to square this political circle and engage in a form of "reasonable dissent" that is seen to be opposed to partisan positioning and ideological closure—to engage in a form of dissent that promises to unsettle everything while ostensibly remaining unbeholden to any particular political project or position—and which finds one of its most celebrated manifestations in our contemporary cultural context in the form of humour.

Humour as Reasonable Dissent

Historian of humour, Daniel Wickberg, argues that by the mid-twentieth century "the values that the sense of humor had come to signify—tolerance, sympathy, perspective, balance, freedom—were so closely allied with the meaning of liberal democracy that the idea of humor served as a kind of easily understood shorthand or signpost for democracy itself" (1998, 204). The alignment Wickberg perceives between humour and democracy can be considered indicative of humour's status as a form of rebellion, of subversion, of an informed and critical dissent insofar as this idea of democracy is also symptomatic of the wider liberal structure of feeling. For the majority of commentators it is a given that humour that serves a positive social and political function is subversive humour, and vice versa: in other words, humour that is thought to do positive political work is thought to do so subversively: "if laughter serves to ridicule oppressive powers or galvanize marginalized peoples, then it is judged as having been put to the service of the good. Conversely, if laughter signals social exclusion or political apathy, then it is said to have been used for malevolent ends" (Hynes and Sharpe 2010, 45). Thus, in contrast to its classical and early modern apologists, contemporary advocates of humour do not stress its potential to aid in controlling a population or reinforcing social norms, but instead imagine humour to exist as an entirely liberatory force in the aid of "the people" or as opposed to the forces that would oppress others. Yet, reasonableness and dissent need not be deemed opposing forces: as considered above, liberalism

privileges a particular notion of an abstracted, depoliticised dissent, which creates the possibility of less politically aggressive and more culturally articulated forms of resistance, which, in turn, are more likely to fit within the parameters of liberal reasonableness. Indeed, it is the ability of humour (as it is currently understood) to overcome the apparent contradiction between the competing desires for dissent and reasonableness which renders it a preferred form of permitted subversion and thus an aesthetic form uniquely desirable within the liberal moment. In a liberal context, humour comes to be valued insofar as it is thought to promote freedom and challenge oppression in a non-confrontational manner; in other words, when it is believed to serve a liberal (a)political function.

The notion of humour, or "true" humour at least, as an inherently subversive practice that challenges social norms and upsets hierarchies and traditions is prevalent in contemporary writing on the subject as has been noted and critiqued by theorists such as Michael Billig (2005) and Alenka Zupančič (2008).[4] According to this subversive model, humour is addressed as a form of dissent (the purposes and limitations of which, however, are usually left extremely vague). Such interpretations, which arise in the work of thinkers as varied as Simon Critchley, Umberto Eco, Louis Kaplan and Andrew Stott, reflect the larger social tendency to imagine humour as a desirable and productive force, which, in line with dominant liberal ideology, is here primarily conceived in terms of boundary-breaking, order-challenging, and carnivalesque freedom: what Zupančič characterises as "the humanist-romantic presentation of comedy as intellectual resistance" (2008, 4). Indeed, in the context of liberalism's demand to stand against and beyond all forms of ideology, humour can serve as a valuable mark of one's autonomy by virtue of an oft-afforded ability to "render all our legitimating ideologies and helpful utopias powerless and helpless. This may be humor's most important function: it often works as a de-ideologizing and disillusioning force" (Zijdervald, quoted in Wickberg 1998, 205). As noted by Billig, the critic who would come out against humour traces a socially dangerous path (2005, 1): under such conditions, the critic must be careful to situate and justify her opposition, most often in localised and specific terms, to avoid an unenviable reputation as a petty dictator, fanatic, egoist or snob.

From a liberal perspective, this understanding of humour informs the wide scope of contemporary politics, from democracy-as-usual to foreign revolutions. The desire to appear beyond ideology, and to harness

humour to one's cause, extends to politicians of all stripes in the current moment, such that a sense of humour has become more than a desirable personality trait, but instead is transformed into a necessary symptom of one's underlying democratic character. This is particularly true of those directly involved in the political process. Thus the public perception that one possesses a sense of humour is not a mark of light-hearted frivolity, but rather a sign of one's political fitness:

> In today's environment, it is the political leader who refuses humor and laughter that runs the risk of damaging his credibility. No politician wishes to be accused of lacking a sense of humor. The demagogue and the fanatic, the autocrat and the dogmatist, it is widely believed, are without a sense of humor. Humor is a sign of political flexibility, moderation, willingness to see both sides of a question, capacity for compromise. (Wickberg 1998, 197–198)

It should come as little surprise, then, that American presidents since Franklin Roosevelt have responded to public pressure to demonstrate their ability to take a joke, if not to deliver one (President Trump would seem, however, to reverse this demand: often "joking," but very rarely happy to be the butt of humour).[5] In his account of the relation between American state politics and late-night comedy, Russell Peterson observes that "presidential aspirants now routinely show up on late-night shows to demonstrate their comedic chops" (2008, 170). This has become almost mandatory, Peterson asserts, because "a late-night guest shot … affords a candidate the chance to demonstrate that he or she has a sense of humor, just like a regular person" (2008, 171).

Moreover, the liberal and liberalising power of humour is not limited to Anglophone politicians, but has been evoked in wildly different political contexts, such as the popular revolutions of the 2010–2011 Arab Spring and the subsequent uprising in Syria (that preceded that nation's descent into intractable and horrifying civil war). Western reporters and pundits made much of the comic placards and signs hoisted by Egyptian protesters amongst more strident and directly phrased political demands during the protests in Tahrir Square and of the protestors' use of social media to pass along jokes and quips regarding the Mubarak regime. In an article regarding the 2011 Egyptian revolution Anna Louie Sussman of *The Atlantic* declared humour to be "one of the oldest and most subversive political tools there is" (2012), while Michael Slackman of *The*

New York Times argued that "humor and sarcasm played a crucial role in [the Egyptian uprising's] coping and conquering" (2011). Slackman quotes local activists and commentators who also emphasised the role of humour as a revolutionary tool "to motivate people and bring out the crowds" and as one of the "main weapons" of the protestors (2011). In a widely-circulated story from the *Las Angeles Times*, Molly Hennessy-Fiske and Amro Hassan profiled an Egyptian social media activist who drew inspiration from Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert and *Family Guy* (2011). Nor are such claims limited to the Egyptian context. David Smith writes in *The Guardian* that "humour is the weapon of choice against the Libyan government" (2011), while in the context of the early days of the Syrian uprising, Zeina Karam of the Associated Press and journalists at France 24 charted the opposition's use of social media satire, puppetry, songs and "subversive gallows humour" as a means to critique the Assad government (2012). From Syrian street fighters to American political primary candidates, humour is understood by the Anglophone media as an aesthetic closely intertwined with a desirable political practice of freedom and flexibility: one that challenges oppressive forms of consensus and demonstrates a capacity for free-thinking. This is humour as "an escape from restraint, as an act of freedom in the face of a constrictive social order" (Wickberg 1998, 182) and as a means to attain the liberal aspiration of an ideology-free and therefore "reasonable" existence.

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

ideology: a tool by which to clear a space outside of dogmatic and distorting structures of thought (Zupančič 2008, 4). Not only is humour conceived of as a means to attain everyday and democratic freedom; it is also thought, in particular, to convey the desirable defining characteristics of democratic individuals, in particular the tolerant and flexible stance of the pragmatic post-ideological subject. Humour becomes a means to offer critique but to do so from an ostensibly utterly non-ideological position. In the broadest terms possible, this is humour as a force of freedom: not as an addendum, but as the very heart of a liberally focussed culture and politics of well-mannered and reasonable dissent.

"Against the Assault of Laughter Nothing Can Stand"

How, though, is humour imagined to carry out this disruptive political work? The precise details of the mechanism by which this subversion is thought to occur differs from theorist to theorist. Perhaps one of the "purest" accounts of humour as a liberal force for dissent can be found in the work of psychologist Harvey Mindess, who offers what he dubs the "liberation theory" of humour.[6] In the tellingly named, *Laughter and Liberation*, Mindess explicitly rejects both Incongruity and Superiority (which he refers to as "degradation") theories of humour, as too intellectual and too aggressive respectively and instead "proposes that the most fundamental, most important function of humor is its power to release us from the many inhibitions and restrictions under which we live our daily lives" (1971, 237). He thereby identifies as humour that which breaks us free from our normal constrained manner of thinking and understanding the world, and in Mindess' account we take pleasure in this operation, because being freed of constraints is regarded as fundamentally enjoyable (1971, 241). Mindess comes to this assertion through an extrapolation of his starting assumption that "thinkers simple and profound agree that the ability to see the funny side of things, to savour the ridiculous in life, and to laugh at ourselves and our troubles is an asset of the greatest magnitude" (1971, 13). Accordingly, given his unadultered embrace of humour as a force for good in the world, and his uncritical acceptance of the desirability of dominant liberal political mores, Mindess concludes that humour must serve liberal causes, or in his own oft-repeated formulation: humour "breaks us free from the ruts of our minds" (1971, 22). Humour is

here understood as a flexibility of the mind that allows an escape from convention and conformity (Mindess 1971, 30–35), and in doing so is thought to make possible a commitment to flexibility and dissent so profound that it can potentially do away with any and all ideological investments:

> Were we to take [the satirist's] message to heart, we would no longer support any cause or movement, subscribe to any political or philosophical doctrine. Neither capitalism, nor socialism, black power nor white power, women's rights nor masculine ascendancy, pragmatism nor existentialism could command our allegiance, for we would know full well that all positions are biased, all arguments meretricious, all claims exaggerated. (1971, 105)

For Mindess, humour operates as a key means by which a liberal subject might recognise and realise her own absolute autonomy. In an argument notably similar to that traced in a more critical manner by Wickberg, Mindess suggests that "the religious zealot, the righteous patriot, the racial bigot, and the black power militant are all, it is said, incapable of laughter at the particular topic about which they feel so intensely. The assertion stands to reason, for laughter would soften the single-mindedness and waylay their unswerving drive" (1971, 184). Thus, no ideology can stand before the critical force of humour, which Mindess argues liberates the individual from the intellectual oppression of contingent beliefs and oppressive structures of thought.

I begin with this dramatic and somewhat acritical articulation of humour because Mindess' argument makes explicit a series of logical steps—where the assumed desirability of both humour and liberal freedom leads to the contention that humour invariably does liberal work—that to a greater or lesser extent informs much contemporary thought on humour. And though later and more sophisticated commentators are much less upfront regarding the assumptions that inform their work, the basic moves of Mindess' arguments continue to recur in both popular and academic accounts of humour as an ostensibly critical or liberating aesthetic mode. On the more popular (or at least less rigidly academic) end of the spectrum, this understanding of humour as dissent circulates through popular culture in the form of "truisms" such as the Mark Twain quote—"against the assault of laughter nothing can stand"[7]—which opens this section, and has served as the inspiration for

the title of at least two books on American humour. In common parlance, humour understood in this manner is frequently referred to as "satiric," particularly by those who regard such humour as desirable. However, in contrast with satire's historical role as a well-defined genre and set of sub-genres—Juvelian, Horatian, Menippean, Varronian—the contemporary meaning of satire is "becoming more obscure as its fan base expands" (Marc 2009, ix) encompassing any mode of humour that is thought to contain a critical message: a category that is expanded to include not just the work of Al Franken and Michael Moore, *South Park* and George Orwell (Day 2011; Gray et al. 2009), but also the music of Eminem (Braund 2001, 410), the *Scary Movie* series (Magistrale 2005, 187), Dr. Seuss`s *Yertle the Turtle* (Freedman 2009, 102) and even Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (Dickson-Carr 2001, 182–190). Thus, though such works correspond to the broad definition of satire as "an attempt to diminish a subject through ridicule" (Abrams 1993, 188), the means of diminution operate in increasingly diffuse and indirect ways.

Rather than attempting to refute this contemporary usage as somehow incorrect with respect to a more proper, traditional definition, I believe it is more productive to take up this contemporary meaning as a means to understand better its assumptions and implications for the wider social understanding of humour. As argued by Robert Phiddian, despite frequent assumptions to the contrary, "The satirical is not a brute, formal fact about texts, but a perception of purpose speaking rhetorically through them" (2014, 46). To describe a text as satirical, is not therefore to say anything in particular about the text, beyond the fact that one thinks that behind it lurks an authorial figure who is making a point and, overwhelmingly, a point that is thought to unsettle or contest the social, cultural or political status quo. Thus, while I agree with Phiddian's point that "satire brings with it no default ideology, whether it be good, bad or indifferent" (2014, 52), I would add that given the aforementioned ideological flexibility of liberal dissent more generally, this lack of coherency is not necessarily an impediment to satire's recruitment to the equally unclear but nonetheless politically dominant project of liberalism. Consequently, satire is understood here not so much as a particular form of humour, distinguishable by formal traits or genre, but rather as a particular way of looking at humour, one that takes for granted its ability, or at least intent, to disrupt systems of meaning and power (however they may be conceived).

Indeed, even if the precise meaning of satire is somewhat hazy in these accounts, there is apparently little doubt regarding its political force. At its heart, this new notion of satire is the conflation of humour and (often, but not necessarily politicised) critique. Such a view of satire informs Jonathan Gray, Jeffrey P. Jones and Ethan Thompson's assertion that "the unique ability of satire TV to speak truth to power … is apparent around the world" (2009, 6). Peterson repeats this claim, declaring that "if 'speaking truth to power' is part of a journalist's job, it is the satirist's primary mission—a higher calling, in fact, than merely being funny" (2008, 8). The connection between truth and humour, as if humour could never not tell the truth, is a common trope in multiple accounts of humour from Michael Gelven's traditional humanistic celebration of high culture humour in *Truth and the Comedic Art* (2000) to Hub Zwart's anti-humanist Nietzschean philosophy in *Ethical Consensus and the Truth of Laughter* (1996). Nor is this simply truth—a truth supportive of its subject would be neither satire, nor likely humour at all—but a subversive, challenging truth: British Prime Minister John Major grasped this potential when he said, of satirical attacks on his person, that they are "intended to destabilise me" (quoted in Batchelor et al. 2010, 81). Yet, while such accounts may suggest that it is possible to distinguish satire as some sort of subset of humour more broadly conceived, in practice, almost all forms of contemporary humour can be, and often are, understood in terms previously reserved for satire. The force of truth need not be limited to satire alone; moving beyond his narrower concern with satire, Peterson also argues that "truth is the essence of comedy" (2008, 125). For once satire is defined as humour that uses "truth" to critique an idea, person, institution or structure of power—as humour that offers a critique of its subject—then all humour can potentially be thought to operate in a manner akin to satire: as can be seen in Mindess' account of humour as liberation. It is not then just that satire, as traditionally construed, frees one from social and political mores: but also that puns free one from rules of grammar and language (Mindess 1971, 86–88), nonsense frees one from regimes of lucid sense (Mindess 1971, 76–83), and "sick humour" frees one from moral obligations (Mindess 1971, 59–70). For Mindess and his heirs, it is not so much the particular target of humour that is important, but the very fact that there is humour, which generates the critical, liberating function.

The Laughter That Shatters: Carnival Tendencies in Contemporary Humour Theory

As noted above, the influence of this account of humour extends far beyond Mindess' writings. Indeed, an understanding of humour as liberating and critical, even in the absence of a satirical target, informs much popular and theoretical discussion on the subject. This belief in the critical power of humour underlies Steve Vanderheiden's assertion that "humor can't be disconnected from the broader social project of liberation" (2007, 206) and John Bruns' claim that "comedy's most crucial, though unacknowledged, aspect [is] its critical function" (2009, 175). This ostensible extension of satiric critique to encompass all humour is what makes it possible for Kirby Olson to assert that "comedy is … rule-breaking and iconoclastic" (2001, 14); for John Morreall to state that "humour … is a powerful force for liberation in our lives and is clearly a boon to the human race" (1983, 113); and for Sheri Klein to declare that "all humour is subversive, that is, aims to disrupt our assumptions, emotions, patterns of thinking, ways of knowing and the world as we know it" (2007, 132). Indeed, from Kenneth Burke's "comic frame" (1984, 166–168) to Louis Kaplan's treatment of comic transgression of "the confines of officialdom" (2002, 345) and Andrew Stott's interpretation of humour as a divided and doubled experience of social reality, which allows the humourist, in his words, to: "recognize the social order and comically subvert it" (2007, 11), an unquestioned understanding of humour as a productive breaching and breaking of boundaries characterises the majority of contemporary thinking about humour. Even Michel Foucault endorses the liberation of humour in the opening passage of *The Order of Things* where his "laughter that shattered," in response to oft-quoted Borges' account of the Chinese encyclopedia, sets in motion that volume's critical project (2005, xvi). Indeed, the idea is repeated so many times, in so many different contexts, that the notion of humour enacting a critical, transgressive, subversive form of politics would almost appear to become a truism.[8] From art theory to philosophy to literary theory and popular culture studies, humour (and its synonyms) has been embraced as a form that enacts a desirable, complicated, complicating, mutually-informing and constituting project of critique, transgression, dissent and truth-revealing.

To a large extent, such panglossian theorising of humour overlooks the potential harms or negative consequences of humour: a perspective

that will be considered in greater depth in the next chapter. For now, though, I wish to note how a belief in the positive power of humour manifests itself theoretically in the torturous operations some critics enter into to disavow the comic nature of those instances of humour deemed to be conservative or oppressive. Jokes that are thought to be racist or otherwise objectionable are rebranded as "untrue" or non-genuine humour (Critchley 2002, 11–12), so that the designation 'humour' may be reserved for those examples that are thought to be properly progressive. There is no substantial justification forthcoming, though, for why purportedly progressive humour might be more 'truthful' than openly scornful or abusive humour. Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai suggest that this move is simply the "illogical conflation of taste with ontology" (2017, 241–242), and while I agree with this diagnosis, I would suggest that such taste is so widespread as to operate akin to a cultural norm indicative of the deeply ideologically embedded connection between humour and desirable sociality in our liberal moment.

At the heart of such assumptions regarding humour, then, is the notion that humour either creates or allows for a moment of freedom within the otherwise oppressive political, cultural or ideological spaces of everyday life. In this belief, these accounts of humour can be thought to echo one of the more influential models of the politics of humour—Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnival—though most do not do so explicitly. For Bakhtin, the carnival, or the "carnivalesque," was a comic state of being that occurred regularly during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as a respite from official order and the everyday repression of the lower classes: a site of festivity and liberation wherein boundaries and hierarchies were inverted or overcome, rationalism and fear were revoked and seriousness was repealed, if only briefly. As an aspect of the carnival, laughter is here understood to overcome fear, limitations and authority as an anarchic force that allows the people to confront terror and class oppression (Bakhtin 1984, 90–91). Moreover, Bakhtin argues that this laughter need not be tied to any actual physical carnival, but can also be taken up in other forms, such as literature, where it "consecrate[s] freedom [and liberates] from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (1984, 34). In Bakhtin's description of carnival, we can perceive a similar range of rhetorical tropes and values to those present in contemporary, celebratory accounts of humour and laughter.

Probably the most fully developed and influential account of this Bakhtinian model of humour can be found in Simon Critchley's highly

influential *On Humour* where he claims that "humour is a form of *liberation* or *elevation*" (2002, 9, emphasis in original). Drawing on the Incongruity model of humour (discussed in the Introduction chapter), Critchley asserts that humour functions subversively by revealing the incongruities in the everyday structures of power in order to render the familiar unfamiliar and thereby produce opportunities for critique. Thus, he opens his account of humour with the declaration that:

> Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. Humour defeats our expectations by producing a novel actuality, by changing the situation in which we find ourselves. (2002, 1)

We can see here how the shift between expectation and actuality, that is to say incongruity, becomes interpreted as a critical project whereby our predictions are thwarted and change is produced. Critchley goes on to repeat and develop this point further and in a more directly political manner, asserting that "by producing a consciousness of contingency humour can change the situation in which we find ourselves, and can even have a *critical* function with respect to society" (2002, 10, emphasis in original). Indeed, this claim recurs throughout Critchley's celebratory account: humour does desirable, liberal political work whenever it operates through incongruity, whether this entails the incongruity of the animal and the human (2002, 31), of the mind and the body (2002, 41) or of stability and contingency (2002, 74–75). Regardless of its subject, incongruity is thought to shake the stability of any single understanding of the world by introducing the uncertainty of multiple possibilities of interpretation and hence the prospect of transformation and change. Critchley thus offers us a politicised and critical theory of the comic, wherein "humour effects a breakage in the bond connecting the human being to its unreflective, everyday existence" (2002, 41), and frees its subject into new critical spaces of thought and action.

Indeed, Bakhtin's account of humour as "positive, regenerating [and] creative" (1984, 71), would appear to preface a view of humour as inherently liberatory and critical; a politically optimistic understanding of humour as a political aesthetic that has proven particularly influential. For example, in their celebratory analysis of contemporary satire, Gray, Jones and Thompson approvingly cite Bakhtin to support their

assertion that "all humor challenges social or even scientific norms *at some level*" (2009, 8–9 emphasis in original): in this account, "[Bakhtin] sees the continual reflection, analysis and ridicule of social norms as enacted by humor as a necessary device for warding off the entrenchment of any norm into becoming wholly acceptable and beyond rebuke" (2009, 9–10). For these Bakhtin-influenced theorists, humour does not just function independent of political intention; it inevitably subverts any political project that would make use of it, by foregrounding the contingent nature of the project and its goals. Nor is this perspective limited to those who openly cite Bakhtin, but, as I have suggested, can be thought to inform all those previously considered accounts whereby humour is taken up as a profoundly and inherently subversive form or force. Thus—though not all interpretations of humour as subversion directly evoke the spirit of the carnival—insofar as the carnival represents the ability of (folk) humour to challenge authority and realise the contingent nature of existing structures of power, the notion of the carnival can serve as a useful metonym for the constellation of theoretical approaches that locate in humour an innate capacity for dissent or subversion.

Yet, as I've argued in this chapter, we should be cautious regarding the bold political claims of the carnivalesque model: not least because of the manner in which it aligns, rather than departs from, the contemporarily dominant liberal structure of feeling. If we were to read the "Rally to Restore Fear and/or Sanity" in these carnivalesque terms then the humour of the event could be interpreted as a challenge to authority that upsets hierarchies, transgresses boundaries and thereby reclaims power in the name of the people, who, through the medium of humour, are liberated from their daily oppression and are provided with the tools whereby they may challenge the status quo. Regardless of its potential appeal, such a reading lays bare some of the most troubling assumptions of this model. After all, the "Rally to Restore Fear and/or Sanity" did not bring the political establishment crashing down and was, in fact, supported by a wide range of figures from the political and entertainment establishment, not to mention financially underwritten by *The Daily Show*'s parent company: the Viacom media corporation. While such support does not automatically invalidate the suggestion of a radical or critical politics, it should give us pause when attributing to the Rally a politics of unstoppable anarchic dissent: the idea of humour as an unstoppable critical force may be attractive, but such an approach—such an attitude—towards humour is always in danger of overstating the power of

humour: too quickly presuming its political work in advance without enough attention to the particularities of text or context. Because the carnivalesque model decides upon the politics of humour without testing its liberatory hypothesis against a range of concrete manifestations or considering its relation to the wider political context, it risks reducing the politics of humour to an abstraction that bears no fidelity or relation to lived experience of popular humour. At its worst, then, the model of humour as dissent threatens to reduce humour and its politics to fundamentally ahistorical and universal truisms, thereby losing the ability to account for how different instances of humour might do different things or, even more importantly, how the set of formal operations and aesthetic cues that are understood to constitute humour might change over time and in different contexts.

This relation between humour and context becomes particularly pertinent in the contemporary liberal structure of feeling. Under such conditions, the invocation of humour as carnival ceases to be oppositional in any straightforward manner and instead may even come to align with the demands of the dominant political ideology. As noted earlier, the drive towards dissent frequently assigned to humour is hardly oppositional in any straightforward way in the current moment where the liberal structure of feeling encourages, almost compels, its subjects to embrace dissent as the most authentic and desirable form of political action. Understood in relation to the liberal structure of feeling, humour appears as the ultimate expression of this moment, rather than its rebellious rejection. This perhaps should not be too surprising: given the widespread success and adoption of humour as a cultural mode, it would come as something of a shock if it were ultimately oppositional towards a society that loves and embraces it. The proliferation of accounts of humour as a form of reasonable dissent thus bring it into alignment with the central assumptions and priorities of dominant liberal norms. Interpreted in the most pessimistic terms, this situation could be taken to mean the utter incorporation of any politics of humour: as Umberto Eco cautioned, over twenty-five years before the "Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," "in a world of everlasting transgression, nothing remains comic or carnivalesque, nothing can any longer become an object of parody, if not transgression itself" (Eco 1984, 7). Following such logic, the conception of humour as a form of dissent is better understood as a means of bringing it in into line, not opposition, with dominant sociopolitical ideologies premised on varied conceptions of freedom. If this

were the case, then it would perhaps make most sense to abandon the claim to any critical politics of humour: which is exactly the conclusion reached by Billig following his trenchant book-length redefinition of humour as fundamentally reactionary and cruel (241–243).

However, another way of reading this impasse is to take it not as ultimately indicative of the political limitations of humour, as such, but rather as the specific limitations of the carnivalesque model of dissent. Approached in such a manner, the reductive politics of the carnivalesque model do not constitute a reason to abandon the idea of a cultural politics of humour, but rather mark a call to reformulate our theories of humour as a cultural form in more careful and nuanced ways that are attentive to the internal variations and complexity of actual aesthetic manifestations of humour. The limitations of the humour-as-dissent model thus call on us to complicate our account of the politics of humour in ways that go beyond the reductive characterisation of humour as carnival and instead imagine new, more nuanced interpretations of the politics of humour that acknowledge that "both the world and comedy change when there's a demand for permanent carnival" (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 236). To this end, the next chapter explores where and how the formal properties of actual directly political manifestations of humour both align with and outstrip the carnivalesque model. Reading political humour alongside a model of the politics of humour provides a way to assess the wider viability and legitimacy of those celebratory models that cast humour as a cultural manifestation of reasonable dissent and thereby consider what might lie beyond the horizon of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque paradigm that has overdetermined the study of humour for too long.

Notes

1. There were, of course, dissenting voices within the mass media: television commentator David Zurawik, denounced the "postmodern mockery" and "cool smug ridicule" of Stewart and Colbert, arguing that "what we need in this country is not more satire" (2010). Similarly, writing in the *Huffington Post*, Bob Samuels argued that the rally involved the mockery of state politics and institutions, and the idealisation of the individual: the upshot of which is individual non-accountability and implicit support of the free market (2010). Samuels' argument bears a striking resemblance to that offered by Michael Billig. Taking a slightly different approach,

Timothy Noah, of the online-publication, *Slate*, argued that the rally would prove to be counter-productive because the combination of satire and political conviction would enrage the opposition, producing a higher conservative turn-out at the upcoming mid-term elections (2010). In addition, many commentators criticised the rally for its claim to non-partisan status, despite what were interpreted as clear Leftist overtones.

2. This is not to say that liberalism as discussed here should be understood as somehow separate from the political projects which it informs and that are carried out, often explicitly, in its name. Liberalism as a political philosophy has a long and storied existence stretching back to the French Revolution, but the iteration I am addressing here is specifically located within the political relations and constellations of the 1990s and 2000s. In particular, this contemporary form of liberalism emerges within the context of two related state political approaches: the Third Way and neoliberalism. The Third Way refers to that body of political thought that rejects both laissez-faire capitalism and socialism in favour of a purported third, or middle, path that seeks to use the free market to realise the goals of democratic socialism (Giddens 2000, 1–7); and neoliberalism refers to the extension of market rationality and values to all spheres of political and cultural life, while retaining the notion of the market as a distinct entity (Brown 2005, 39–40).
3. As Samuel Freeman notes, Rawls himself is silent regarding the definition of 'reasonableness' which he never addresses in any complete or final way (Freeman 2003, 31).
4. Other critiques of humour-as-dissent can be found in work such as Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering's anthology, *Beyond A Joke: The Limits of Humour*, which takes as its premise the belief that limits need to be set upon humour to prevent unethical laughter than reinforces prejudice and oppression (2009), and aspects of Paul Lewis' work also refute celebrations of humour as dissent (although often by denying any particular political function to humour).
5. At the end of his successful campaign for the presidency, Donald Trump infamously fell into one of his many feuds with *Saturday Night Live* after taking furious exception to Alec Baldwin's impersonations of him. As with many of the norms of liberal capitalist democracy, Trump appears as an exception at this moment, though he certainly conforms with the wider point that public figures wish to be seen to have a sense of humour: especially when they do not seem to actually be possessed of one.
6. Though Mindess originally published his account of humour in 1971, the perception of its continued relevance is made apparent by the decision to republish *Laughter and Liberation* in 2010 with a new introduction provided by prominent humour studies scholar, Arthur Asa Berger.

7. As Russell Peterson points out, this line is, in fact, spoken by Satan in its original context, which perhaps somewhat alters its meaning (2008, 221, n. 29). This has not, however, influenced subsequent decontextualized repetitions of the phrase.
8. The list of examples provided above only skims the surface of the amount of literature that testifies to a belief in the critical power of humour, which informs Richard Zoglin's history of comedians as rebels, avant-garde artists and "antiestablishment provocateurs" (2008, 3–5), John Leland's celebration of contemporary "tricksters" who, he argues, use humour to call social certainties into question (2004, 161–185) and Leonard Freedman's articulation of the common idea that "throughout history the jester has been allowed to speak truth to power" (2009, ix). Joanne Gilbert declares that "comics perform a unique and important social function dating back to the traditions of ancient fools—they hold a mirror to the culture, showing us our (and their) frailties and foibles, eliciting the laughter of recognition" (2004, xiii), while Danielle Jeanine Deveau nationalises her claim that "In Canada, comedy has long served as a vital form of cultural critique, by providing space for a mainstream dialogue on controversial and often overlooked issues" (2011, 133). The idea of humour-as-critique is also a common aspect of more popular writings, such as Blackwell Press' *Philosophy and Pop Culture* series and Open Court's competing *Popular Culture and Philosophy* series, which have addressed a wide range of pop culture comedy. A common line of argument in such volumes involves directly comparing comic characters—like Jerry Seinfeld (Irwin 2000, 3–14), John Stewart (Barad 2007, 69–81; MacMullan 2007, 57–68; Michels and Ventimiglia 2007, 81–92), the boys of *South Park* (Young III 2007, 10–12) and Stephen Colbert (Ralkowski 2009, 145–62)—to Socrates: using their humour to bring established truths into disrepute.

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CHAPTER 3

Telling Jokes to Power: The (A)Political Work of Humour

The enjoining of humour to politics is hardly a novel idea. If one is willing to risk the possibility of gross anachronism, we could look back at least as far as the classical playwright Aristophanes (Schutz 1977) to furnish examples of the ridicule of holders of public office. In recent times—and on somewhat more stable conceptual ground—the mediation of political satire in the twentieth century begins at least as early as satirical classics in silent cinema, such as *The Cats-Paw* (1934) with Harold Lloyd, *The Phantom President* with George Cohan and Jimmy Durante (1932) and the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1934). Indeed, the twentieth century is littered with examples of humour regarding political subjects and concerns from the editorial cartoons of David Low in the 1930s and 1940s to Gary Trudeau's *Doonesbury* (1970–present), from Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) to David Foster Wallace's posthumous *The Pale King* (2011) and Austin Grossman's *Crooked* (2015). Recent decades have been no exception to this long-standing tradition of political humour in the Anglophone mediascape, which has, if anything only increased in popularity and prominence: thus over the past thirty years, there has been a wide range of successful political comedy from the American film satire sequence of the 1990s that extends from *Bob Roberts* (1992) through *Wag the Dog* (1997) to *Election* (1999) (Nilsson 33–35); to the British televisual political satire tradition, including *The New Statesman* (1987–1994), *Spitting Image* (1984–1996), *The Day Today* (1994), *Brass Eye* (1997–2001), and *Bremner, Bird and Fortune* (1999–2010); and that's even before we

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consider the influential rise of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (1999–2015) with its broad range of imitators and international analogues. Since the turn of the century, such satirical texts have also been joined by a host of online satire on websites like *Funny or Die*, *College Humor*, and *The Onion*, that have taken advantage of the production and distribution possibilities offered by the internet. Political humour thus appears as a consistently present cultural form of the past one hundred years, and one which has, if anything, increased in quantity, reach and prominence in recent decades.

In the light of prevailing theories of humour as a form of dissent explored in the last chapter, this long-standing and successful combination of humour and politics might be expected to bring the latter into a state of instability. After all, if the aesthetics of humour enact a liberatory or subversive politics, then the introduction of such anarchic forces into the authoritative, closed and tightly defined spaces of state political narratives would threaten to undermine the firm foundations of politics as a serious practice. It is in order to prevent this cross-contamination that journalists and politicians can sometimes engage in acts of "border maintenance" by speaking out against the entry of unserious humour into political conversations and thereby maintaining a normative assumption that comedy is not a proper way to conduct politics (Jones et al. 2012, 48–53). Courtesy of its very nature, political humour's amalgamation of ostensibly serious political content and non-serious humour might be thought to threaten to enact a carnivalesque intervention that unsettles that practice of politics as usual by taking materials previously thought to be, to some extent, off limits to humour, and turning them into the raw material for the comic process. Such a perspective certainly informs the accounts of humour as an inherently liberating force, explored in the previous chapter: when humour is thought of as somehow ontologically distinct from other "serious" concerns, its combination with such matters almost inevitably appears as a radical act. Moreover, when this disruptive potential is understood as a function of the fundamental character of the comic aesthetic, the unsettling of the political might be expected to manifest itself irrespective of what any given instance of political humour actually addresses. Following this theory of humour as dissent, a Jon Stewart monologue on Presidential Primary news coverage might be thought to enact a similar form of cultural politics to a *Spitting Image* skit about Tony Blair (or maybe even a Rush Limbaugh joke at

the expense of Barack Obama): one in which any stable conception of politics comes tumbling down under the assault of laughter.

For some, this destabilisation of the political is a welcome and exciting event that promises to unsettle oppressively dominant hierarchies or create new spaces for the exercise of power and influence by previously excluded populations. From such a perspective, humour is a critical panacea that is fundamentally opposed to totalitarian, dogmatic and anti-democratic ways of thinking and governing (Lewis 2011, 217). Alternately, this disruption can be seen as potentially disastrous: the anti-political denial of the serious importance of the political sphere that fosters cynicism and apathy (Lewis 2006, 189–195; Day 2011, 83–84). However, rather than taking the critical function of humour as a given from either perspective as was considered in the previous section, this chapter addresses the manner in which humour actually manifests in specific texts and thereby assesses the different and particular ways in which the work of political humour is inflected and articulated. This form of analysis privileges humour as an aesthetic category and focuses specifically upon those formal elements of the comic text that directly work to create a sense of humour, rather than other aspects of the text. Thus, in contrast to the imposition of an abstract model upon particular examples, the goal here is to build an account of humour up from the basis of the aesthetic manifestation of humour in key examples. Drawing from the overwhelming wealth of textual options, the chapter will focus on four representative examples of successful recent political humour circulating in global Anglophone media: *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, the British political sitcom *The Thick of It*, its American adaptation *Veep*, and the online faux-newspaper *The Onion*. While it is not possible to capture the range of political humour from this period in one book, let alone one chapter, these examples will serve as an anchor for discussing the political work of what I refer to from here on as *politicised* humour.

This specificity of terminology is necessary here to clearly delineate between the idea that humour does cultural political work and the category of comedy that addresses the practice of politics. From the perspective of critical cultural studies, humour need not directly address the give-and-take of state politics of governments, parliaments, and parties to be political: that is, to intervene in those "processes whereby power relationships are implemented, maintained, challenged, or altered in any sphere of activity whatsoever" (Gilbert 2008, 8). Rather, in terms of this expanded definition, all humour can potentially play a political

role, regardless of its subject, through either the challenging or reinforcing of existing ways of understanding the world. Conversely, humour does not necessarily enact any particular form of cultural politics, and certainly does not automatically constitute a particular intervention into the practice and process of the political sphere. To mark this distinction, I will distinguish between political and politicised humour: where "political humour" refers to humour that can be understood as political in the widest sense, while humour that directly addresses the content of the political sphere—the practice of government, the courting of public sympathy, the description and delimitation of the terms of media debate—will be referred to as "politicised humour." Such a differentiation provides the conceptual basis for an investigation that seeks to account for the political work of the formal humour aesthetic as something held apart from the content of such humour. Politicised humour here, is understood as a means of articulating, engaging and even doing state politics through varying proportions of sarcasm, whimsy, absurdity and even satire and this engagement can take many forms, resulting in an odd mix of non-political jokes about politics, jokes at the expense of politics, and jokes that are political statements: forms of politicised humour can be found to varying extents at different moments in representative texts such as *The Daily Show*.

The Daily Show and the Politics of Ridicule

Running from 1999 to 2015, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (*The Daily Show*) was one of the most influential and celebrated examples of politicised humour of the early twenty-first century, particularly for those caught within the globe-spanning orbit of the American cultural and political sphere. While the broad format of *The Daily Show* had been on-air since 1996, the show was only really "politicised" in any sustained or directed fashion when Jon Stewart assumed hosting duties in 1999 (which he held till 2015, when he was succeeded by the South African comedian Trevor Noah: for the purposes of the current discussion I will focus on the tenure of Stewart). In its formal conventions, *The Daily Show* is a late-night talk show that takes up many conventions of the "fake news" genre that grew out of satirical British shows such as *That Was The Week That Was* in the 1960s, and *Not the Nine O'Clock News* in the late 1970s. However, to see *The Daily Show* as simply a purveyor of satirical news—overwhelmingly the approach taken by academic

commentators regarding the show (Amarasingham 2011; Day 2009, 84–102; Gettings 2007, 16–27)—is to overlook the wide diversity of comic forms and modes that inform its humour, which extends beyond parodic representations of news-gathering and presenting practices to include witty banter during interviews, absurd characters struck by the programme's team of "correspondents," immature and inappropriate behaviour, prop comedy, bizarre outlandish performances and impressions, and scads of out-of-place scatological, sexual and popular cultural references. In order to account for the humour of *The Daily Show* it is essential to consider this wide range of comic material, and not just the long-since compromised trappings of news parody.

Despite the broad range of *The Daily Show*'s comic stylings, there are certain key characteristics that define its humour: most notably, a consistent concern with the interplay between media, politicians and politics. As such while *The Daily Show* tends not to speak as if it were part of the news media, it certainly tends to speak of them. Much of the programme's content involves Stewart engaging in mocking analysis of news media coverage: mobilising indirect assaults on political figures and mores by way of discourse and debate about the political sphere. The basic premise of Stewart's comic media criticism is to present media imagery in such a way as to bring out incongruities and contradictions within, whether they relate to the form or content of the coverage. This is usually achieved in one of three ways: through the juxtaposition of conflicting accounts which appear foolish in their inconsistencies; through the assemblage of large amounts of different footage that repeat similar points or tropes that appear inane or ridiculous in repetition; or through Stewart's direct commentary regarding the failings of the clip in question. Often such humour takes as its butt the frame of the "networks' obsessive focus on formal devices of representation like demographics [that] obscures understanding what actually goes on in the political process" (Boyer and Yurchak 2010, 193). At other moments, the frame recedes into the backgrounds as the political figures become butts themselves. In both cases, a formal manipulation and commentary of the raw material news media footage forms the basis for the construction of humour.

Over the course of sixteen years and 2633 episodes, Stewart's mocking coverage has addressed a range of topics far too vast to be accounted for in full. To provide only the smallest of samples, in the month of June 2011 alone, in his comic monologues Stewart takes aim at topics

ranging from Mitt Romney's announcement of his presidential campaign, Republican opposition to disaster relief, John Edward's indictment on felony charges, US National debt, US airstrikes in Yemen, the beginning of the Syrian civil war, the Republic primary debates and various candidates' failing campaigns, the apparent irrelevancy of New Zealand politics, President Obama's visit to Puerto Rico and his golf game with the Republican Speaker of the House of Representatives, Marriage Equality legislation, Fox News, a failed sting on Mexican drug cartels by US authorities, austerity protests in Greece, state vegetable legislation in New York, the conviction of former Illinois governor Rob Blagojevich and multiple takes on both Sarah Palin's One Nation bus tour (including her twisted account of Paul Revere's midnight run) and the Anthony Weiner scandal: where congressman Weiner tweeted a photo of his crotch to a female follower on Twitter. This last example, which Stewart addresses on multiple episodes, is starkly indicative of how humour addressing the raw material of the political sphere does not automatically equate to actively political humour. The primary thrust of Stewart's comic treatment of the Weiner scandal plays upon the sexually charged nature of the incident, as well as the unlikely synergy of the congressman's name, in an extended series of innuendos, double entendres, explicit puns and general penis-referencing jokes. Indeed, on multiple occasions, Stewart garners laughter from the audience simply by stating the word 'penis,' or other synonyms, or by showing the leaked photo of the (clothed) penis (Fig. 3.1).

The bulk of the coverage was simply and indeed openly concerned with the taboo nature of discussing and showing pictures of a penis on television: a matter which is far removed from issues of governance (nor does Stewart's impersonation of a mentally disabled person as an illustration of the mentality of the news media during one such sequence do much to redeem the political work of such segments). While the broad contours of the piece do address matters of political concern surrounding the character of elected officials, the downfall of a rising Democratic politician and the endemic sexism and male privilege of the political sphere, the precisely comic aspects of the monologue remain premised on the comically taboo nature of genitals. The humour here is thus premised on the "naughty" contravention of bourgeois standards regarding the display of genitals, rather than on any properly critical intervention.

This last point is much clearer in the context of Stewart's treatment of opposition political figures such as Sarah Palin or Donald Trump in

Fig. 3.1 Jon Stewart discusses Anthony Weiner's penis on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* (O'Neil 2011)

the same episode. The comic mockery of such figures can be potentially figured as an intervention that works to discredit and criticise their political beliefs and policy positions. This interpretation is challenged, however, when we examine the comic basis for Stewart's ridicule. For example, when Palin visited Trump during her One Nation bus tour in 2011, Stewart offered an account of their meeting that played at length with their choice of pizza restaurant. Thus, rather than offering a critique of the political platforms or proclivities of Trump, Stewart's routine in this instance involved ridiculing Trump for the profoundly bourgeois reason that he touts the commercial "Famiglia" chain as authentic New York pizza. Consequently, the humour of this sequence does not address any distinctly political content or beliefs held by Palin and Trump, but instead primarily revolves around an apolitical mockery of Trump's (and his guest Sarah Palin's) deviation from expected norms of sophisticated metropolitan behaviour: Trump cannot identify authentic food, he is a narcissist, he does not perform correct local rituals, he is not (sub)cultured enough. Indeed, if there is anything political at work here, it is the conservative re-entrenchment of expected American bourgeois norms of behaviour: a common feature of Stewart's humour that has been noted by other commentators in relation to race (Ross and York 2007). This

aspect of Stewart's comedy is compounded by his accompanying impersonations of New York City stock characters. As with Stewart's mockery of Trump, the comedy of these performances is also premised on excessive derivations from expected behaviour patterns: the characters invoked are too loud, too declarative, and too passionate (additionally, Stewart's performance could itself be read as an intentionally hackneyed evocation of stereotypical characters: adding another layer of humour but one that is still not critical). Thus, although Stewart's ridicule could be considered politically critical—particularly from a Left perspective—because it takes a prominent right-wing politician as its butt, the actual form and content of the humour assumes, expresses and works to reinforce conventional social norms in a fundamentally conservative manner.

Such apolitical mockery is by no means a rare or intermittent occurrence, as was perhaps most evident in *The Daily Show*'s long-standing ridicule of Republican President George W. Bush—perhaps the most mocked world leader in history—who was regularly denounced as an idiot, presiding over an executive branch that was alternately incompetent and evil. Illustrative of *The Daily Show*'s treatment of Bush is a segment where Stewart riffs on the best way to present policy recommendations to the President via a cake, a comic strip, and finally a singing animatronic fish. While there is certainly some engagement with political process and priorities here, the heart of the humour in this comic sequence is a sense of ridicule towards Bush: it is this assumption of superiority that motivates and justifies the incompatible combination of policy-suggestions and cake. Without a mocking haughtiness towards Bush as a cognitive hinge, the joke would be simply nonsense, as there would be no means by which to understand the motivating rationale for the unlikely methods of communication. It is only because the audience understands the message implied within the joke—that the president is an imbecile—that they can appreciate why Stewart would suggest a policy-singing robot fish. If this implied message were not decoded, the joke would collapse into lunacy, which, while it might still provoke laughter, would do so through an entirely different means than that at work here. Consider if the same suggestion were made regarding Bush's successor, Barack Obama: because there was no widespread discourse suggesting Obama is a dim-wit or enjoys low-brow pleasures, the joke would be nigh indecipherable because it would be too incongruous with no way to resolve the conflicting ideas. Thus, a sense of superiority is here absolutely necessary for the generation of humour and contains an ordering

moral statement that acts to assert rather than dismantle a judgemental hierarchy. At the heart of the humour is not a political affirmation, nor even an engagement with issues of the political sphere, but rather a reassertion of the normative position that to be stupid is to be the subject of ridicule, and to engage with certain cultural artefacts, like an animatronic fish, is to be stupid.

Hence, while at some level we can understand Stewart's mockery as being politically motivated, the comic mockery does not in itself have much to do with the critical contestation of political norms or the concerns of the political sphere. Despite the initial prevalence of politicised subject matter, upon closer investigation, the humour of these segments revolves around apolitical comedy, while the political sphere functions predominantly as the backdrop or raw material for such humour. Given the hegemony of liberal bourgeois modes of conduct, Stewart is not therefore offering any challenge to prevailing social norms of behaviour: let alone the conduct of politics. Instead, he is reasserting a dominant code of social conduct by noting its breach. There is thus no challenge to the existing order here: there is not even a real presentation of challenge, only the reassertion of a regime of etiquette and authenticity. This is not to say, though, that the humour of *The Daily Show* is only ever apolitical or reactionary. Rather the point is less forceful, but no less important: despite the show's wider framing in terms of liberal and Left political positions, *The Daily Show* retains the potential to enact contrary politics in the specific formal construction of its humour and, indeed, frequently does exactly this. While the show certainly positions itself as offering a critical perspective on such matters, it does not immediately follow that the mobilisation of humour is central to that critique. However, this does not rule out the possibility that the critical role of the show's humour can align with its wider political framing. Indeed, such examples certainly do exist in the context of *The Daily Show* and in doing so help clarify the different political work that humour can do as an aesthetic form.

A clear illustration of such alignment between aesthetics and politics can be seen in an example like Stewart's comic critique of Republican responses to tornado disasters in Missouri, when Congress leader Eric Cantor argued that relief could only be offered on the condition of cuts elsewhere in the budget. In a strident and extended critique, Stewart ridicules Cantor's argument, suggesting that actual circus elephants are doing more to assist storm-struck communities than the Republican

Party, and declares that Cantor's rationale "sounds like good common sense until you think about it for two seconds." Building on an analogy between America and a family offered by Cantor, Stewart equates the request for funds to rebuild Missouri towns with an impoverished and unsupported American family seeking assistance from relatives who are equally impoverished due to government policy. In contrast to the ridicule of Trump, the humour of this segment arises out of the hyperbolic excesses heaped upon this hypothetical family, which in turn works to illustrate Stewart's critique of government policy and priorities: by combing absurdist statements about elephants with dismissive quips about the logic of the plan, Stewart builds a critique through humour that draws a connection between the lack of sense in his analogies and an implied lack of sense in the political actions taken. Hence, the butt of this joke is not peripheral to the political concerns, but rather the central thrust of the politicised humour of this segment: Stewart's humour thus works to unsettle the logic at the heart of this political discourse. Here the incongruity out of which the humour emerges arises directly out of inconsistencies of political position under discussion, rather than being sutured to the subject after the fact and solely for the purposes of comedy. The form of the humour is here drawn from the treatment of the politicised content, rather than being imposed upon it from outside by binding humour to politics after the fact.

The disaster relief examples thus illustrate how a concern with the particular form of humour can inform a distinction between jokes about politics and political jokes: between the reductive use of political context as material for humour, and humour that directly engages with political issues in its very form. In the context of *The Daily Show*, this second form of political politicised humour is most evident not in Stewart's work, but rather the performances of the show's team of secondary contributors and "correspondents." Throughout the programme's long run, figures like John Oliver, Samantha Bee, Wyatt Cenac, Steve Carell, Aasif Mandvi, Kristen Schaal and Larry Willmore have interacted with Stewart in the guise of pundit-experts, through faux field reports, and comical takes on journalistic investigation. Unlike Stewart, who overwhelmingly functions as a "straight-man," the correspondents have the opportunity to take on exaggerated comic personas: Oliver, for example, adopts a (at times absurdly) dry, pompous, but easily confused Britishness, Cenac plays a wide-eyed, enthusiastic, and easily excited naïf, Mandvi is

a deadpan provocateur who often feigns ignorance and agrees with his interviewees' most unlikely and upsetting points.

These comic personas allow the correspondents to do more than simply comment upon the political sphere: they are able to insert themselves into politics in a way that Stewart's straight persona prevents. For example, when Cenac travels to the Alberta Tar Sands in Canada, the character's naiveté allows him to explore the conceit that Canada is a dangerous foreign oil regime. Building on this premise, Cenac asks an oil company executive if Canada is a "blood and oil soaked rapetocracy"; "reveals" that American companies are doing business with the Canadian regime; and interviews an oil consultant while drenched in (hopefully fake) blood and wearing a "no blood for oil" sign. Cenac goes on to equate Canadian hockey-fandom with American-hating and advocates for the invasion of Canada, before he is taught that fossil fuels allow internet pornography: a fact which converts Cenac to Canadian oil, and he ends the story driving a Zamboni while joyfully mangling the Canadian national anthem. While taken individually these various actions are all vaguely ludicrous in their departure from expected behavioural norms; it is in the overall comic (il)logic of the sequence that the humour transitions from politicised to political. This is achieved through the equation of Canada—which functions discursively as a relatively responsible and socialised government, as least in comparison to the USA—with the injustice and oppression that inform governing practices in many oil-producing countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and the complicity of American corporations, governments and habits of consumption in sustaining that oppression. The politicised humour of Canada-as-petrostate thus allows a fairly detailed exposition of both the abuses perpetrated by the governments of those petrostates and the public services, such as healthcare, offered by the Canadian government (Canada here functions in a familiar role as an idealised socialist paradise for Left-leaning Americans).[1] The resolution of Cenac's segment thereby offers a complicated political point by virtue of its humour: while his newfound love of Canada could be considered a declaration of support for the status quo in relation to other petrostates, any straightforward conclusion of this sort also needs to consider the complicating effects of his comic tone. The distortions of Cenac's character—in this instance, his naïve enthusiasm—thus permit him to make comic decisions without Cenac-the-commentator advocating them, and in this instance Cenac's embrace of foreign oil may be read as an indictment of American consumers who,

like Cenac, turn a blind eye to foreign oppression implicit in petro-enabled consumption. By way of contrast, the politics of such a performance throw into stark relief the apolitical nature of the ridicule frequently offered up by Stewart himself.

The Onion and the Politics of Parody

Although it circulates in a markedly different media context, *The Onion* bears a family similarity to *The Daily Show* through its mobilisation of the formal markers of the news media. Operating across a range of formats, since its inception in the mid-1990s *The Onion* has incorporated faux-news coverage premised on the models of broadcast television and radio, newspaper reportage, opinion columns, infographics, man-in-the-street interviews. Indeed, it has been particularly successful in these endeavours and *The Onion* "has become one of the largest humour-producing institutions in America," even successfully transitioning from print to digital content in a manner that has evaded many serious publication (Waisanen 2011, 509). Unlike *The Daily Show*, however, *The Onion* remains largely faithful to the tone and conventions of its source material (Warner 2008, 7): so much so that periodically its satirical material is represented as legitimate reportage, such as when a 2012 story declaring the North Korean leader Kim Jung-un to be "the sexiest man alive" was reproduced on the official Chinese *People's Daily* English language website (Simon 2012). Thus, whereas *The Daily Show* pokes fun at news media directly, *The Onion* takes up their forms to use the typically self-serious language of the news for comic ends.

Although *The Onion* addresses a range of subjects, from standard news-fare such as sport and business to religion and family conflicts, one of its perennial concerns is the political sphere, particularly American federal politics. Typical politicised headlines throughout the years range from the absurd, "Backup Health Care Plan Involves Nation Sharing One Big Jar Of Ointment," (4 April 2012), to the pointed, "Supreme Court To Hear Cases Determining Whether Human Beings Deserve Equal Rights" (7 December 2012) and address matters from foreign affairs, "Bush Says He Still Believes Iraq War Was The Fun Thing To Do" (18 June 2008), to electoral politics: "Nation Dreading Next 6 Months Of Watching Candidates Trying To Relate To It" (20 May 2016). While they address diverse subjects through a range of comic strategies, what such examples share are a mode of humour built upon

the absurdity of deadpan slippages, misreadings and substitutions. The well-worn conventions of the Associated Press-style headline here become the implied norm from which the particular Onion examples deviate: usually as subtly as possible. The humour of such headlines is thus a product of the presentation of the ludicrous in the style of the serious, which then provides the impetus for the further exploration of the incongruous in the development of the associated satirical news story.

One particular subject that *The Onion* has explored in depth is the vice-presidency of Joe Biden. Across a number of articles over eight years, the website has engaged in the sustained construction and exploration of a particular comic persona for Biden that has taken on a logic of its own as the basis for a series of over fifty articles. The first instance of this Biden humour can be seen in a very brief item, no more than a photo and headline, from 20 January 2009 that proclaims "Joe Biden Shows Up To Inauguration With Ponytail." Over the following years, *The Onion*'s coverage of Biden has blossomed from that beginning to include 2011 video news stories, "Joe Biden Introduces Trio of Sexy Bodyguards" (14 July 2011) and "Biden Unveils New Health Initiative To Make U.S. Women Hotter" (30 April 2012) to articles in 2012 that detail Biden jumping the Vietnam memorial on a motorcycle, hitchhiking to the Democratic National Convention, and vomiting during a debate. In 2013, *The Onion* switched coverage to present Biden as a criminal and gang member in articles such as "Biden Scores 800 Feet of Copper Wire" (24 January 2013) and "Biden Has Guy Named Worm Sit In For Him At Cabinet Meeting" (25 July 2013), while from 2014 onwards, Biden was increasingly presented in the guise of a drug dealer and marijuana aficionado who "Chokes Up While Describing Hardworking Americans Who Can Only Afford Shitty Ditch Weed" (27 July 2016).

This progression demonstrates not only both the typical approach of *The Onion* and the scope of its humour, but also is indicative of how—as with *The Daily Show*—the comic treatment of political subjects need not be political. As Don J. Waisanen and Amy B. Becker argue, these comic portrayals certainly contribute to the larger public persona of Biden in ways that are "completely untethered … from the politician's life" (2015, 264). Thus, while these comic articles certainly have the potential to intercede in the public's understanding of Biden, the actual humour of these articles relies upon either the sheer unlikeliness of such attributes in a vice-president (in conjunction with the ill-defined

and underpowered role of the position in US politics), or the contrast between these personas and the gaffe-prone and folksy, but generally affable, public presentation of Biden. Such humour continues in the vein of Stewart's mockery of Trump and Palin through a common concern with the breach of correct middle-class behaviour: as Trump fails to display the cosmopolitan nous of a proper New Yorker, Biden slips ever further into a parody of white working-class Americans. However, in contrast to the mockery of Trump, this humour is, if anything, even less political, because the series is less concerned with naming and shaming comic flaws with the real Biden than it is with constructing an entirely independent self-sustaining comic persona. The humour of *The Onion*'s ongoing coverage of womanising, thrill-seeking, drug-dealing Biden is the result of a self-perpetuating internal logic of ever increasing goofiness that is constantly moving away from any engagement with the political existence of the real Biden. By the time "Biden Lines Up Sweet Summer Gig Installing Above-Ground Swimming Pools" (16 June 2016). *The Onion* has moved so far away from the original political context that despite the highly politicised nature of its subject, the joke has no grounding in the political sphere, let alone a critical politics.

As with *The Daily Show*, however, the largely apolitical register of the humour of *The Onion*'s Biden series finds its more critical counterpart in other politicised humour. A notable example is the aforementioned article, "Bush Says He Still Believes Iraq War Was The Fun Thing To Do," from 2008. The initial humour of the headline is produced by the minor substitution of the word "Fun" for the expected term in this context: "Right." The punning humour of the headline arises because of the disruptive substitution of the expected "*Right* Thing to Do" with the "Fun Thing", which is jarring not only because it alters the semantics while leaving the syntax intact—a formal operation—but also because of the socially inappropriate nature of the substituted word in the context of a controversial international conflict that has resulted in massive loss of life. This minor linguistic swap thus forms the basis for a comic critique of the invasion of Iraq through the juxtaposition of the socially inappropriate suggestion of fun against the expected and implied narrative of moral purpose usually appealed to in the (sadly frequent) justification of international military actions. In the body of the article, this conceit is pushed further as the expected language of moral justification is replaced by assertions declaring "that history will look back on Iraq as a total blast" and "that US troops would remain in the region for as

long as his administration was enjoying itself." Here, the ever-increasing ridiculousness of the article does not alter the initial premise of the joke, but instead serves to push its distorted logic further and further as the customary language of moral correctness is replaced by hedonism. If we focus on the broad incongruity of the humour, without recourse to its particular political context, the humour of the piece appears premised on the (still comic) level of the silly. After all, while there is humour in the substitution of the language of partying for that of responsible governance, at the level of basic incongruity this is the same humour that can be realised by swapping human dialogue with animal sounds or flatulence: the replacement of the expected content with something unexpected (far be it from me to declare this to be unfunny: the politics of such radical incongruity will be examined in more depth in chapter six). Not only does such a reading *not* require an understanding of the particular political context insofar as such a reading is understood to be working in political terms, it actually works to sanctify the political sphere, rather than challenge or intervene in it. This is because if humour is being generated out of a contrast between the vernacular tone and the esteemed realm of the political sphere, then the more one understands politics to be a separate and dignified space, the more incongruous it is to replace political rhetoric with other forms of language. To find the article funny in this manner, it is therefore necessary that one first regard the standard practice of politics as somehow esteemed. Just as there is more humour in the pratfall of the duke than of the pitiful wretch: it is only fun to laugh at deviations from political practice if one holds it in some esteem (however small) in the first instance.

However, this item can also be read as more than a humour of ever-increasing ridiculousness, but also an acerbic commentary on the execution of the military invasion because underpinning the joke is an implicit political critique regarding the Bush administration's preparedness and sense of responsibility as regards the situation in Iraq. It is not only comic to replace expected moral certainty with frivolous celebration, but also political and importantly those two aspects are here inseparably intertwined. The incongruity that drives the joke is thus also inherently a critical political statement exemplified in the "quoted" words of the contemporary secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice: "The best times are had when there's no preparation in place. When everything is loud and spontaneous and you just throw caution to the wind." In such an example we can see the collapse of the comic into the political, because the full comic

meaning of the text is only possible if we interpret it by way of the political critique. The humour of the substitution of "fun" for "right," and the consequent development of that central conceit, thus relies not simply upon a comedy of unexpected substitution, but upon the interpretation of the resulting incongruity by means of an alternative explanation: the criminal negligence of the Bush administration regarding the fallout of the invasion of Iraq. More than just an exercise in the anarchic substitution of an inappropriate tone, the article's rhetoric of fun and fancy free is therefore an indirect manifestation of a political critique addressing the attitude to the Bush administration. The language of "fun" is thus not a random imposition, but rather is motivated by a less expected but equally legitimate interpretive logic of critique, that operates alongside the formally signalled logic of reportage. Approached in this way, the humorous content of the article is thus resolved through recourse to a critical point about the forty-third president's lack of preparation. Notably, to reach this interpretation it is necessary not only to acknowledge the politicised subject of the satirical text, but read it *through* a particular political perspective. This is not a case of humour being employed in the service of a criticism, but rather the collapse of humour and critique into one another. Unlike *The Daily Show*, where humour arises in response to generic ridicule, in this example the humour and the critique are one and the same, and therefore occur simultaneously. Thus while the interpretation offered is clearly critical of the administration's motives for the invasion of Iraq, the comic nature of this text is not simply a matter of laughing at the Bush regime as a failure; much more so than any direct ridicule, the humour in the article emerges from the gaps between our expectations regarding the political process, and explanation afforded in *The Onion*'s satirical report.

What this means is that in the case of such an example, the audience needs to share the political and social assumptions of the satire if they are fully to interpret its comedic intent. For those who do not believe that Bush's actions in Iraq were marked by wanton carelessness, the joke is one of random substitution, rather than political critique. Hence, in contrast to *The Daily Show*, where the apolitical nature of much of its humour allows for comic interpretation even for those who have no interest or investment in the political stakes involved, *The Onion* often necessitates an understanding of the political sphere in order interpretively to resolve its humour. The humour of the text will therefore be inflected differently depending upon the particular political perspective a

reader brings to bear. For example, unless one holds her in unassailable esteem, it is possible to find humour in the mockery of Sarah Palin's lack of worldliness without being particularly invested in the politics involved (provided one holds certain normative middle-class assumptions about the desirability of worldliness): in contrast, the idea that a large jar of ointment constitutes the US health policy is silly without an engagement with the appropriate political context. Only when one places the suggestion in the historical context of the Supreme Court decision over the constitutional legitimacy of the Affordable Care Act does the more developed political point and comic potential of the parody emerge. Thus, although an opposition to Palin or Trump's (or indeed Obama or Clinton's) politics certainly makes their ridicule more enjoyable, that political opposition does not enter into the meaning or construction of the humour as it does in the case of the ointment proposal. This is even more the case with respect to the fake story about the Supreme Court deciding whether humans have equal rights: this is only recognisable as absurd to those hold the illegitimacy and undesirability of such deliberations to be a fact. Such examples from *The Onion*, from the fun of Iraq to decisions of the Supreme Court, are indicative of politicised humour premised on a conceit that can only be interpreted as comic if one enters into interpretation by way of a particular political conviction.

The Thick of It, *Veep* and the Politics of Failure

Both *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* approach the political sphere by way of engagement with actually existing governmental procedure: in the case of *The Daily Show*, the raw and real material of political practice and personalities serves as foundation for humour, whereas for *The Onion* such material serves as the implicit background against which their fictional reports are incongruously juxtaposed. Between these two we can thus begin to map a trend towards fiction that continues into the next two examples, which address actual politics by way of fictional accounts. Both *The Thick of It* and its American adaptation *Veep* are sitcoms premised on fictional comic accounts of the mechanisms and institutions of governance. As a consequence, both shows inevitably grapple with the interrelation between humour and politics and what it means to approach the political sphere by way of humour. *The Thick of It*, was originally produced by the BBC and screened for four seasons between 2005 and 2012 for a total of twenty-four episodes. Created by

Armando Iannucci, the critically acclaimed programme follows attempts to develop and implement policy at the fictional Department of Social Affairs and Citizenship. *Veep* is also produced under the creative direction of Iannucci, and began life in 2012 as an American adaptation of *The Thick of It* produced for the HBO channel. In contrast to the low-level strugglers of *The Thick of It*, *Veep* focuses upon the relatively high-profile office of the vice-president. As of 2017, *Veep* has expanded well beyond the range of its original source material and a seventh season is currently in development. Nonetheless, despite the subsequent development of *Veep* beyond a straightforward adaption of its source material, both shows share common comedy DNA, especially in terms of their engagement with the political sphere. In particular, the humour of each programme focuses upon the role of failure in the political process and makes use of their fictional settings to explore the potential for errors and setbacks that would not usually make it into the news media spotlight.

The humour of *The Thick of It* is primarily concerned with failures of communication: miscommunication, rudeness, confusion, linguistic chaos and a penchant for elaborate and excessive insults. Indeed, one of the first lines of dialogue in the pilot episode is delivered by *The Thick of It*'s central protagonist, the aggressive and foul-mouthed Director of Communications, Malcolm Tucker, who describes a soon-to-be-fired government minister "as useless as a marzipan dildo." This line is reflective of the show's pleasure in combinations of obscenity and complexity which take up scatological and sexual imagery and crass and insensitive remarks within the context of baroque sentence constructions and ornate metaphors. On a basic linguistic level, humour arises from the incongruous pairing of low-brow insults with high-brow polysyllabism, oblique references and multi-clause sentences. However, while *The Thick of It* is often characterised by, indeed even celebrated for, its virtuosic vulgarity, this focus overlooks the comedy's wider focus on all manner of forms of communication failure, excess and abnormality. In contrast to Tucker's elaborate rants, most of the show's language is substantially less artfully formed: dialogue trails off, jokes are pushed too far, points are interrupted and social cues are missed. Consequently, the audio track of *The Thick of It* is defined less by raving monologues, and more by a chaotic babble of conversation, assisted by improvised performances, where characters constantly talk across one another or engage in one-sided, context-less conversations between offices, through partitions and most

commonly on one end of a phone call. For every poetic zinger, then, there are many others that are subject to failure, which is only emphasised by the way in which the documentary-style camera lingers over the social aftermath of failed communication. Thus, although *The Thick of It* is often discussed as if it were a swearing, insulting master class, the script laughs more frequently at communication failure, than it laughs with virtuosity.

As a consequence of this focus upon failure, *The Thick of It* often takes the form of a dark and inverted comedy of errors. Contrary to the standard type, where chaos and commotion are the result of good-natured mistakes, here, they arise out of unintentional truth-telling and intentional deception. Thus, rather than the traditional comic plot where misunderstanding leads to confusion and then eventually to clarity: here, comic characters constantly attempt to obfuscate and mislead. The result is the same however: a comic gap opens up between the truth of narrative events, as the audience know them, and the beliefs and actions of the on-screen characters. Yet, there is no hero seeking truth here, only levels of minor villainy, and when characters fail, they do not fail to clarify, they fail to deceive: most explicitly in the last episode of the show's second season where Hugh Abbott, the Minister for Social Development and Citizenship, is not simply caught in a lie to a Parliamentary select committee, but in the words of one reviewer: "lies to a Parliamentary committee and has to cover his tracks, then double back, uncover his tracks, and lie about them once he realizes he's been rumbled" (Sims 2012). The awkward, stumbling nature of Abbott's retraction is emblematic of how *The Thick of It* produces humour not from grand quips, but from almost unbearable scrutiny of slowly unravelling human failures, which the show suggests lurk just below the surface of conventional political performance. Fixated on failure, individual episodes tend not towards clarity from disorder, but rather towards ever greater states of confusion and deception, and usually conclude not with resolution, but with exhaustion by way of a punchline (the uncomfortable aspects of such humour will be considered in more detail in the next chapter in term of shows like *The Office*).

In contrast, the lack of such comic confusion in *Veep* is one of the most striking differences between the adaptation and the original. While *Veep* shares many similarities of form and content with *The Thick of It*—including improvised performances, the absence of a laugh track, and vérité-style camera-work—the American counterpart is markedly less

concerned with exploring the many forms of failure that might arise out of political practice. Even *Veep*'s shaky camera is noticeably less shaky, with smoother tracking shots and more adherence to traditional continuity editing, which is broadly emblematic of *Veep*'s relation to *The Thick of It*. In comparison to its source material, *Veep* is a much more tightly conceived and crafted comic work that is markedly less concerned with a comedy of confusion and disruption: a point which applies as equally to the snappy dialogue and structured narrative arcs, as it does to the steady camera. In contrast to *The Thick of It*, the characters in *Veep* do not usually speak over one another and though this might seem a relatively minor point, it is telling in terms of the programme's production of humour. For whereas *The Thick of It* thrives on the awkward silences and failed jokes that pepper unstructured speech, *Veep* ensures that quips and insults arise repeatedly and that each is given the conversational space to be properly appreciated. In contrast to the uneven rhythms of empty apoplectic rage in *The Thick of It*, the characters of *Veep* are presented as articulate and even witty speakers who trade in a steady stream of well-formed thrusts at one another's expense. Where *The Thick of It* has ranting, *Veep* has repartee: emerging as the insult master class that *The Thick of It* is not. The artistry of these gibes is symptomatic of how, in contrast to that of *The Thick of It*, the humour of *Veep* is much more developed as its own separate and self-contained entity: one which could potentially be abstracted and reproduced in different comic contexts. These varying comic tones, in turn, have a bearing on the politics of the two texts.

This difference in political humour can be illustrated by means of a sequence that occurs in the fifth episode of both shows' first seasons, where it is discovered that the minister's and the vice-president's office respectively have not been invited to key political briefings, and the staff attempt to keep this fact from the minister/vice-president in order to spare their feelings. In *The Thick of It*, this becomes a major secondary plot in the episode, where a secretary is encouraged to go to a park to hide that fact she no longer attends the said meetings. During a formal reception, a journalist reveals the situation to the minister, who then has a private expletive-studded argument with the chief advisor responsible for the deception. In *Veep*, however, the scene plays out in a much more concise and dramatic manner. The tension surrounding the deception does not build up throughout the episode, but instead is revealed suddenly following a chance remark. Consequently, contrary to *The Thick of It*, there is no inequality of information between audience and

Fig. 3.2 Selina Meyer of *Veep* charges through the halls of power (Shapeero 2012)

characters: both learn about the political snub at the same time. Even more significant is the vice-president's response: she briefly screams abuse at her advisor, throws off her high-heels and takes off running for the meeting, pursued by her personal assistant and a team of confused secret service agents.

Thus, while in *The Thick of It* the humour is tied to an examination of the minister's face following a moment of institutional and emotional betrayal, in *Veep* the scene plays out as an elaborate sight gag as the vice-president and her retinue engage in an impromptu team run through the streets of Washington D.C (Fig. 3.2). The slapstick nature of this sequence is capped by a final visual punchline of the vice-president carefully slipping back into her heels before casually walking into the meeting. These different comic interpretations of the same narrative point are representative of wider differences, whereby *Veep* incorporates a broader range of humour than is seen in the *The Thick of It*, including visual and even physical humour (notably in episode two, where several characters become violently ill with a "gastric bug"). However given the long-standing hierarchy of the verbal over the visual, I wish to be clear that this is not to dismiss *Veep* as less political on grounds that it is somehow more low-brow. Rather, the distinction here is premised on formal

difference, not a value judgement. As noted, *Veep* makes use of a broader set of comic styles and tools than are seen in *The Thick of It*, and it uses those tools in a more regular fashion: the show delivers gags and jokes almost constantly. Counter-intuitively, however, this is because *Veep* takes the political system more seriously than *The Thick of It*. Unlike the latter programme, in *Veep* the political problems and conflicts at stake are represented as actually worthwhile: throughout the first season, for example, the vice-president drives filibuster reform and environmental protection laws. Consequently, the politics and policy itself here is not therefore the subject of humour, rather it is the processes and even more so the people around them that are lampooned. The humour of *Veep* is thus the humour of funny people engaging in comic situation which also happen to related to the business of governance. Approaching the political sphere in this manner means that despite appearances to the contrary, it is not politics that is rendered comic, but rather the attendant flaws and quips of the people who happen to be involved in it. *The Thick of It* is different though, because in that show, the political sphere does emerge as a site that, by virtue of its internal logic and priorities, is humorous. For several commentators this transformation of politics into comedy has been linked to *The Thick of It*'s potential to foster cynicism regarding the political process (Bailey 2011, 282). Yet, such a reading is too quick to equate laughter with contempt: a sort of re-imagination of the humour as a liberation thesis with a more pejorative valence. In contrast to such a conclusion—and in keeping with this chapter's project of examining the particular details of the humour of politics—I wish to suggest instead that *The Thick of It* finds humour not so much in the demystification of the political sphere as in the operations and details of an already demystified political sphere.

To make humour out of the demystification of the political sphere is to find comedy in the gap between the ideal of political sphere and its sordid particulars: to point out that for all its appeals to higher callings, the practice of politics involves the failures of human beings. This is much more *Veep*'s domain. In contrast, *The Thick of It* refutes, from almost its first scene, any idea of the political sphere as a privileged social zone: as a previous minister worries about providing coffee and fruit before being summarily fired for murky reasons. The comedy of this sequence is not that of particular people sullying the political process through their inevitable human failures, but arises out of a lack of distinction between concern over breakfast and the fate of a government

minister. The minister's distraction over fruit is not an incongruous diversion, because it is a concern on the same level and addressed in the same manner as the end of a politician's career. For *The Thick of It* both are fundamentally equivalent: grist to the mill of the comic human condition. In doing so, the show disavows the humour of any gap between ideal and particular. Instead, *The Thick of It* takes the human nature of the political sphere as given, and the humour is therefore not that humans fail to enact politics correctly, but that the demands of the political sphere inevitably chew up and destroy people. This is not a nice or liberating humour: it takes pleasure in the destruction of people, or at least, characters. However, at the same time, this humour does not see those people as flawed; rather it presents politics, or the practice of politics, as the source of the problem.

Although both *The Thick of It* and *Veep* draw on much of the same material as their basis, their humour manifests itself in aesthetically distinct ways. *Veep*'s humour retains an assumption of the political sphere as a privileged social space, and indeed plays off that privilege for the purposes of humour. Primarily the humour arises as the actual practice of politics is contrasted with the grand titles, historical institutions and aspirational expectations of an idealised political sphere: the failure of the characters to act accordingly escalates the comic stakes when an advisor lies about having a dog as a means to escape the office or the vice-president attempts to keep a relationship secret. In a sense, this is an exploration of the vice-president as if they were the stock wacky neighbour or incompetent boss of sitcom lore. In contrast, *The Thick of It*, draws its humour from a picture of people who happen to be politicians and political workers trapped in a messy, obfuscating system which, in large part because of their own actions, they cannot understand, let alone control. These are not odd people who happen to be in the political sphere: they are people who have been broken by their involvement with it. On the one hand, then, to laugh at *The Thick of It* is to find humour in the failure of politics as a process, but a failure that might potentially open up the political sphere as a site amenable to human intervention. On the other hand, to laugh at *Veep* is to find humour in the foibles of people, who happen to be involved in the political process, but who have no control or influence over that larger process. The humour of *The Thick of It* is concerned with the politics of the political sphere, whereas that of *Veep* arises out of the mismatch between the reality of the political sphere and the ideal of politics.

The Political Limitations of Politicised Humour

As we have seen with these four examples, the political aesthetic consequences of addressing politicised content by way of humour are far from uniform. While there is certainly the potential for humour to align with critique, the combination of humour and political concerns can also lead to jokes about political figures that are only broadly political insofar as they reinforce middle-class norms, or work to reinforce the political sphere as a sanctified space against which the feuds and concerns of people appear as comically incongruous. Thus, when Stewart ridicules Trump's lack of sub-cultural capital or Bush's stupidity, or when *Veep* "reveals" the petty motivations that lurk below the surface of electioneering, the humour produced may not be considered political in any larger, critical sense. These are not political jokes; they are jokes about politics. Consequently, any political valence attributed to such instances of humour is misplaced when they rely upon mockery of individual failings and the policing of middle-class social mores, rather than the subversion or critique of political institutions and processes, let alone structures of power. After all, suggesting that the American president is an idiot says more about the social construction of intelligence, than it reveals about the processes of politics, especially when that president is figured as a political opponent (Lewis 2006, 185–189). Nor is the "revelation" that politicians and advisors are actually everyday people—such as we see in *Veep*—any more critical: such a comic operation is what Alenka Zupančič refers to as a "false comedy," because it leaves universal categories (here the idea of the "political") "fundamentally untouched in their abstract purity" (2008, 31). Such comedy relies upon the clichéd revelation that abstract symbolic realms are also material and physical—the lofty ideas must also live down in the dirt—and in doing so asserts a clear distinction between the two domains aligned against one another. Thus, in our case, politics and the political sphere are revealed through humour to be also possessed of regular human flaws. Opposed to such humour, Zupančič posits the category of "true comedy" which does not present the abstract and material as coincidental coexistents, but instead is premised upon the abstract as existing only and utterly through the physical (2008, 31–32). When the category of politics is found to be comic on the basis of its co-existence with everyday human subjects—the vice-president suffers the consequences of a gastric bug—then we remain in Zupančič's realm of "false comedy": because the ideal vision

of politics remains inviolate and is even reinforced in its abstract, inhuman perfection: even as we laugh at the humans who fail to perform to its standard. In such instances, then, the address of political content by way of humour in no way necessarily constitutes the inherent subversion or transgression of the political process, or any particular intervention within it. As a consequence, it is difficult to offer any blanket pronouncement regarding the political work of humour or the manner in which humour interacts with politics, let alone any straightforward equation of humour with a Left liberal or critical politics.

However, as we have also seen, the fact that politicised humour is not always immediately political does not mean that such humour is inherently apolitical either: as discussed above, the humour of Cenac's comic misrecognition of Canada is almost intrinsically critical as is *The Onion*'s assertion that the "Iraq War Was The Fun Thing To Do." In both of these examples, the central premise of the humour is built upon engagement with questions of knowledge, power and judgements about the ethical status of real-world behaviours. Not only is the comic status of such examples premised upon a consideration of the politics of their politicsed humour, but they also present the possibility that humour can actively intervene in political discourse in ways that go beyond the ridicule of one's opponents. It is not simply the case that one will only "get" the humour of these examples if one shares their underlying political perspective, but also that in "getting" this humour—correctly interpreting it—the audience might become aware, or even convinced, of the political issues at stake. These examples can thus be considered "true comedies" in Zupančič's terms, because they explore rather than denigrate the abstract ideal of politics. Rather than locating humour in the mismatch between the ideal universal category of politics and the flawed subjects who inhabit and enact that category, humour here arises from fidelity between the actions of subjects and the demands of the wider system. Here politicised subjects are funny not because they fail or misunderstand their situation, but because they succeed and thereby reveal the true horror of their circumstances. It is not failure that is comic, but success. Thus, Cenac's report is comic insofar as it illuminates the actual conditions and repercussions of the international oil industry: *The Onion* story insofar as it furnishes what feels (for a particular audience) like a more correct and internally consistent explanation for the invasion of Iraq. An even more apt example is furnished with *The Thick of It*, the humour of which arises not from the failure of its characters to be proper

politicians, but because they are absolutely successful in their endeavour and consequently become embroiled in networks of baroque confusion and deception. In Zupančič's Hegelian language, these examples might be understood as "the movement in which the universal becomes concrete, and becomes the subject" (2008, 37), but for our more modest purposes it is sufficient to note that failure here is as much a product of the political system as the people who inhabit that system. While potentially not an earth-shattering revelation, such a point is indicative of how humour can be political in ways that exceed the carnivalesque or the mockery of opponents: this is an example of how humour can carry a particular political message by way of the particular formal craft of the comic.

What a closer analysis of a handful of contemporary politicised humour texts thus reveals is that, despite their common commitment to investigate politics by way of humour, they are markedly uneven in their political outcomes. Addressing a given subject by way of humour does not produce the same political perspective every time as if humour were a mathematical operation to be applied; such that a subject plus humour equals the anarchic deconstruction of that subject. Instead, we see that, depending on the particular way in which a comic text is constructed, humour can both reinforce and unsettle domination ideological assumptions. What follows, then, is that it is analytically insufficient to note that a text is comic and then read of the political consequences as given, because not all examples of politicised humour function in the same way. Instead, when considering the political work of humour it is imperative that we approach its status as humour not as a pre-given fact about a text, but as the result of a particular set of formal operations that constitute the text. For example, while *The Daily Show* and *The Onion* may have ostensibly similar motives and methods of humour, any understanding of the attendant politics is dependent not only upon their designation as humour, but upon the actual execution of the comic. Thus, while advocates of the humour-as-dissent model might seek to resolve this plurality of outcomes by questioning the comic status of those less-than-critical examples—dispatching the mockery of Trump and Bush to the category of lesser or non-humour as in the case of Zupančič's true and false comedy distinction—a more careful (and therefore potentially more compelling) answer is that this inconsistency of consequences is indicative of the limitations of any broad brush theory of humour and politics. Hence rather than posit a distinction between good or true

forms of humour that do critical political work and bad or false forms that do not, the conclusion that should be drawn from such a range of outcomes is that humour is too complex a cultural and aesthetic category for its political work to be summarised in a singular manner. To declare that all humour unsettles its subject in an automatically anarchic and radical manner is both to overstate and prematurely reduce the political work of humour, which is much more complex and much more interesting than the reduction of the comic to a brute fact of carnivalesque liberation.

Thus, if humour can offer a critique or do political work, it does so not simply by virtue of its nature as humour. As the analyses of this chapter have demonstrated, any critique by way of humour emerges in particular terms: through the specific contours of aesthetic elements, to which we must therefore be attentive. Such an approach compels us to consider the politics of humour in their specificity, rather than as a singular monolith. Yet, at the same time, this account is not a call to abandon any claim to a wider model of the politics of humour. To reject a "unidimensional approach" does not mean we are left with radical multiplicity as is argued by Paul Lewis (2006, 112): just because the aesthetic category of humour does not have one political function, does not mean that that cultural aspects of humour have no political bearing and that the politics of any given comic text are entirely divorced from cultural politics. In Lewis' account, the rejection of an inherently positive and liberatory model of humour leads to the assertion that it is the "appropriateness of the butt… and the potential for negative social impact" which determine the politics of humour (2006, 113). Therefore politically liberatory humour arises when humour is incorporated into struggles that are deemed to be sufficiently progressive and is employed in such a dogged and unambiguously manner that the butt is brought into unquestionable disrepute. In terms of such a model of political humour, the method and purpose of humour operate independently, because it does not manner what or how the humour involved is constructed: the proper politics of humour becomes simply a function of attacking the correct target.

However, as demonstrated in considerations of texts such as *The Daily Show* and *Veep*, just because one is ridiculing a powerful or Right-wing politician, does not mean that one is enacting a fundamentally Left-wing politics, because the grounds and execution of that ridicule can just as easily be grounded in the enforcement of conservative ideas around

questions of behaviour or comportment, or a reinstatement of the hallowed sanctity of political ideals. The choice of target can therefore not be the determining factor when considering the politics of humour because there is an important distinction between ridiculing George W. Bush as an idiot, and thereby reinforcing privileged ideas around intelligence, social capability and political contribution, or riffing on the suggestion that Bush would refer to the Iraq war as "fun" and thereby prising open a textual space in which to examine the power of rote discourse in shaping perception in contemporary mediated politics. The first takes part in the competitive binary back-and-forth that defines the US political sphere, while the second begins to pick at the logic that defines that form of political conduct (while also still taking part in that process to some extent). There are thus important political distinctions to be made in terms of the formal construction of humour as well as the choice of butt and what such examples demonstrate is that it is not the subject of the humour that renders it political, but rather the manner in which the humour is formed. To reduce examples such as "Bush Says He Still Believes Iraq War Was the Fun Thing to Do" to a comic critique of the Bush administration is to miss the wider and more fundamental political critique that is implicit in the construction of this humour.

Thus, while declaring that all humour enacts a liberatory politics is clearly an unhelpful overreach when considered against actual examples, a turn to either the victim or specific engagement with the political sphere does not resolve this problem. Indeed, focusing primarily on the butt presents us with an opposite but equally unsatisfactory dilemma: whereas accounts of humour as dissent overstate the political work of humour qua humour, a concentration on the target reduces the political function of humour to a point-scoring tactic and an ornamental tick in the existing antagonisms of the political sphere. In this latter model, humour becomes a rhetorical tool with which to do politics, rather than a category which could contain its own politics. As the examples considered above indicate, in order to speak to the politics of a given instance of politicised humour it is not enough to know that a given fits the category of humour or who it takes as its subjects: it is also necessary to attend to actual aesthetic operations of different manifestations of humour. To do otherwise is to fail to appreciate how function is not entirely determined by intention to fail thereby to account for how humour actually works in practice. Indeed, a consideration of the formal granularity of particular examples shows that, like other cultural

categories, humour is not one thing and can manifest a range of political meanings independent of its subject. At the same time, this is not to endorse an anti-theoretical or anti-formal attitude towards humour: to declare that the politics of humour arise always and only out of the details of any given text or its choice of subject. Rather, this is an indication that if we are to understand the politics of humour, then we need to develop a more rigorous and refined model of humour as an aesthetic category. Aesthetics are never a function of a singular text, but rather draw our attention to formal conventions that develop between and across different comic texts. A political aesthetic analysis is not therefore a case of each and every comic text containing its own politics that can only be unpacked in a singular sense. Instead, as the examples considered above indicate, it is necessary to attend to actual aesthetic operations of different manifestations of humour in order to consider whether a particular instance of the comic is critical and how that critique operates. With this aim in mind, the project of the next three chapters will be to take up the analysis of particular comic examples and tendencies as the basis for a political aesthetic model of contemporary humour: one that addresses the politics of humour itself and therefore seeks to articulate the political work that humour can do in its own name and by its own logic.

Note

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

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CHAPTER 4

Humour Without Anaesthetic: The Discomfort of Reality Comedy

A young man attempts to jump a small but highly-polluted concrete canal on a pair of roller skates; he fails and has to be rescued by his friends before being taken to hospital with a suspected broken ankle; a smug and domineering authority figure conducts a "practical joke" at the expense of one of his employees whom he pretends to fire, she then breaks down in tears, and when he reveals his jest, she calls him a "sad little man;" a foreign guest enthusiastically recounts a story about how his mentally-disabled brother raped his sister. These are scenarios not typically regarded as humorous. Indeed, they would more often be understood as horrifying or, in more theoretically laden terms, *abject*. In this sense, these examples from three different texts—*Jackass* (2002), *The Office* (2001–2003), and *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) (hereafter *Borat*)—all illustrate what has been referred to as the "comedy of the horribly awkward" (Page 2008, 7), and which I will discuss in terms of "uncomfortable humour": a mode of humour that holds particular powers to discomfort even sympathetic viewers. These texts also share in common an orientation towards the real—whether it be the formal adoption of documentary conventions, the extra-textual assurance of non-fiction status or a broader orientation towards the lifeworld that exceeds and frames the text (Middleton 2014, 141)—that I will argue is no coincidence but marks one of the dominant tendencies in contemporary humour: one marked by a unlikely confluence of reality, discomfort and comedy.

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Such uncomfortably real humour certainly has its historical antecedents: in the 1960s and 1970s, an aggressive engagement with the comic potential of the real was central to edgier forms of stand-up performed by people like Lenny Bruce, Richard Pryor and George Carlin while early parodic news programmes took advantage of television news' status as a privileged site for thinking through the relation between the textual and the real. In the 1980s, the mockumentaries of Christopher Guest, such as *This is Spinal Tap* (1984), and television programmes like *America's Funniest Home Videos* (1989–present) were indicative of the increasing prevalence of a distinctively awkward form of reality humour, which then emerged as a major and celebrated aspect of popular humour during the 1990s and 2000s as it moved from the "avant-garde, alternative or extreme [to rest] comfortably within the mainstream" (Page 2008, 7). Accordingly, in more recent decades, humour characterised by an uncomfortable engagement with reality manifests to a greater or lesser extent in multiple texts across the popular media of the Anglosphere, including but by no means limited to American television shows such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000–present), *Arrested Development* (2003–2013) and *Nathan for You* (2013–present), the Canadian *Trailer Park Boys* (2001–2008), various projects of Canadian comedian Tom Green and the Australian provocateur John Safran, British shows such *Little Britain* (2003–2007), *Peepshow* (2003–2015) and the various iterations of *Alan Partridge*, Australia's *Kath and Kim* (2002–2007), *The Games* (2000–2001) and *The Castle* (1997) and New Zealand's *Back of the Y Masterpiece Television* (2001–2008). Beyond film and television, this mode of comedy is almost de rigueur in much of contemporary stand-up comedy. I have chosen to consider uncomfortable humour through the lens of the three diverse texts evoked earlier—*Jackass*, *The Office* and *Borat*– both in order to speak to the wide range of uncomfortable humour and because these texts can be considered seminal texts of uncomfortable humour which historically and textually delineate the parameters of most contemporary manifestations. In staking out the initial grounds of uncomfortable humour, these examples have achieved not only considerable popular success but also a degree of cultural resonance and notoriety such that they are likely to be familiar even to those who have not seen them.

The Comedy of Pain and Suffering

While the three texts under consideration address a range of contexts and content, they share a common concern with the comic potential of suffering. In the case of *Jackass*, comic pain is physically embodied and visceral: characterised by broken bodies and fearful tears. *The Office*, in contrast, is deceptively quiet in its induction of social forms of pain which emerge out of the sustained and unreflexive breach of social behavioural norms and are therefore much more emotional, and internal, but nonetheless no less excruciating, forms of suffering. Finally, *Borat* draws upon and combines multiple aspects of comic pain present in those other texts, including the intentional breach of social custom and restraint, the occasional grotesque physical stunt and the ambiguous humiliation of unsuspecting members of the public. Thus, in all these instances, the amusement—if such a term still makes sense in this context—of uncomfortable humour is bound up with threats to established boundaries of taste, morals and proper behaviour that in turn offer up the potential of anxiety, awkwardness and empathetic suffering on the part of the audience. Uncomfortable humour draws upon a promise of actual bodies or deeply recognisable situations, places and social conventions as material for its disquieting humour: it lingers on quietly terrible moments that are not allowed to pass quickly, but are instead studied and meditated on in ways that reconfigure not just the affective valence of humour, but the very bounds of what can be interpreted as comic.

Fundamentally, then, these instances of uncomfortable humour are not just instances of suffering existing alongside humour, but suffering utterly entangled with it: not the interplay or juxtaposition of the painful and the comic in an either/or manner, but rather the simultaneous expression of both. As a consequence of their proximity to these sites of social awkwardness and tension, moments of uncomfortable humour do not function as simple forms of amusement. Instead, they confront the audience with that which is calculated to unsettle by exceeding the regular social and aesthetic rules of good and proper sense. The suffering is therefore not only experienced on-screen: the audience is also called upon to suffer in a form of unlikely sympathy. This painful sympathy can occur to different extents and be experienced in different ways by different audience members: after all, "the sensation of embarrassment is highly influenced by the personal outline of each individual exposed

to this phenomenon" (Schwind 2015, 4). However, what is common regardless of the individual interpretation and reaction is the formal comic aspects of the text that act as the stimulus for these responses. Thus, in the analysis that follows the uncomfortable cringe will be treated as indissociable from the aesthetic operation of humour which thereby comprises an alternate inflection of traditional 'merriment.' In short, the uncomfortableness and humour are not opposed in these instances, but rather are deeply interconnected.

To a greater degree than other forms of comedy, then, the uncomfortable humour of the texts addressed here is premised upon direct engagement between the world of the text and the lived experience of the audience—sometimes quietly and creepingly, sometimes aggressively and brazenly—in ways that ground not only the codes and commandments that constitute the represented social order and reality, but also the breach thereof, in the material of everyday life. Refusing to stay safely ensconced with its diegetic boundaries, the humour of these texts reaches out to embrace the audience and their world. In this sense, uncomfortable humour is a "body genre," as the term is developed by Linda Williams, because it does not only function on a textual, intellectual level but is defined by particular bodily reactions that it induces in the audience (1991, 3–5). We might even go so far as to declare the humour of discomfort a "body subgenre"—to re-purpose Williams' term—because it produces two sets of embodied reactions at once: those associated with amusement (often identified with, but far from limited to, laughter) and those associated with apprehension, fear and embarrassment (i.e. a cringe). The co-existence of both reactions in the bodies of the audience here stands as indicative of the co-mingling of amusement and discomfort in the text.

Between them, the texts assembled in this chapter demonstrate the wildly divergent means by which uncomfortable humour might arise: in the one instance, bodily and excessive, in the other, understated and dry. They thereby illustrate markedly different manifestations of the uncomfortable mode of reality humour and the broad possibilities of this comic mode which, contrary to Henri Bergson's foundational work on the form and function of humour, are not marked by an "absence of feeling" (2005, 2). Instead, the manner in which audiences squirm and cower before texts like *Jackass* and *The Office* suggests that they are experiencing some form of attachment, of sympathy, for the figures and situations on-screen. Audiences respond to the humour and humiliation of

the figures on-screen not as Bergson's detached intellects, but as empathetic beings: simultaneously amused by the incongruity and attendant to the human aspects of suffering. Thus, if most humour does involve "a momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (Bergson 2005, 3), it would seem that in the case of the discomfort of reality humour, the anaesthetic wears off somewhat prematurely: leaving the audience exposed, suffering and laughing on the surgery table of the reality comic aesthetic.

Jackass and the Comedy of Physical Suffering

None of the examples under consideration here deal as directly with the bodies' potential for both amusement and discomfort as *Jackass*: a multimedia franchise that officially encompasses three seasons on MTV (2000–2002), four feature-length films in 2002, 2006, 2010 and 2014, a poorly-received video game (2007), a live touring show, and a number of spin-off series and international imitators. The original *Jackass* television programme is the exemplar of "extreme stunt reality television" (Lindgren and Lélièvre 2009, 393): a form premised upon the documentary recording of a variety of physical stunts, gross-out routines and pranks, including such activities as "urban kayaking" in skate parks and public fountains; reciting the Gettysburg Address while wearing an Abraham Lincoln-esque beard of leeches; renting a car, entering it in a demolition derby, then attempting to reclaim the damage deposit when returning it; numerous variations on engaging with animals such as bulls, bison and alligators while blindfolded, naked, walking on a tightrope or wearing roller skates; and gallon milk-drinking competitions, snorting wasabi and eating a "yellow snow" cone, all of which end in the same predictable regurgitative manner.[1] Through excess and unpredictability, *Jackass* produces humour out of a range of risky, self-destructive and potentially anti-social actions. In their qualitative analysis of 576 such scenes across fourteen hours, from the television series and first two *Jackass* films, Simon Lindgren and Maxime Lélièvre break the show down into the telling constitutive categories of "(1) bodily experimentation, (2) sports experimentation, (3) social experimentation, (4) the enjoyment of risk taking, (5) laughter, (6) animal domination, (7) phallocentrism, and (8) the symbolic annihilation of subordinate masculinity" (2009, 399–400). Such a list is indicative of how *Jackass* defies expected social codes of behaviour in a loud, immediate and obvious way, a blatant form of excess which has earned the show multiple

denunciations as a faux-carnivalesque mobilisation of "the disgusting and the absurd … [in order] to do nothing more than draw the eyeballs of a coveted marketing demographic to advertisers" (Martin and Renegar 2007, 303), the latest incarnation of "a tradition of inane, risqué, and blatantly lowbrow programming" (Sweeny 2008, 137) or a "twilight zone of mindless suffering" (Lewis 2006, 60).

What is often overlooked in such critical dismissals, though, is the way in which *Jackass* does not just celebrate its pain and suffering in a detached manner. This is evident in the way the camera frequently lingers over moments of pain following the excessive spectacle of a stunt gone right or wrong and is made abundantly clear in those sequences which are solely focused upon the unorthodox infliction of pain upon the self and other willing participants. In such instances, humour does not simply arise in the aftermath of a failed stunt, or the demonstration of counter-intuitive behaviour, but rather through a sustained focus upon the moments and consequences that follow such behaviour: a strategy that simultaneously emphasises both the physical suffering and the comic context of these sequences. In one scene from the first *Jackass* film, a baby alligator is encouraged to bite down on performer Johnny Knoxville's nipple. The alligator is attached to Knoxville's nipple for roughly forty seconds, during which time the hand-held camera moves from a close-up of the alligator's jaws to Knoxville's distressed open-mouthed expression and back again, as he cries out in pain. Though this representational strategy, the text draws attention to both the visceral nature of the animal bite and affective consequences for Knoxville. Nor is this a lone example, multiple scenes in the film involve comparable camera-work that incorporates close-ups, sustained reaction shots, and lingering representations of damaged bodies that similarly serve to emphasise the agony of crew members as they willingly submit to paper cuts between their toes and fingers, stage a roller disco in the back of a moving truck, and attach electric muscle stimulators to various body parts, including cheeks, palms, chest, perineum and scrotum. The manner in which the participants writhe, shriek and complain clearly establishes that these are incredibly painful experiences and in another context, such sequences could (and have been) considered akin to masochistic performance art (Sweeny 2008, 140–143).

So far then *Jackass* might be thought to conform to the reading offered by Paul Lewis: that the humour of such material is necessarily predicated upon a jettisoning of empathy and indeed, a straightforward

reading of this example might suggest that, in *Jackass*, pain is straightforwardly humorous (2006, 24–5). Such an analysis certainly underpins many of the dismissals of the show. However, in practice this situation is more complex, in part because such an interpretation would seem to assume that *Jackass* somehow has the ability to mark any subject, even pain, as humorous in a straightforward manner and that it can do so seemingly against both dominant social norms and the prior attitudes of its audience, where one might assume a connection between pain and humour would not be immediately salient. After all, as noted by Louise Peacock, "comedy and pain should surely be uneasy bedfellows" (2014, 1). A simple reading of *Jackass* as a comedy of pain is complicated, then, by *Jackass*' documentary mode: this is clearly not cartoon violence or Chaplinesque slapstick because these figures are marked as real bodies which suffer real damage. At the heart of the uncomfortable humour of these sequences is a failure of the camera to provide relief for the audience by cutting away as might be expected. Instead the viewer is confronted with documentary representations of pain, damaged bodies and fear, which forces her to confront the lived horror and damage of these stunts—and to do so in terms of comedy proffered by the text. Humour here arises from, or at least amidst, both the promise and the realisation of consequences unforeseen or repressed as they emerge, often erupt, across the human body.

Importantly, then, while there is certainly discomfort on-screen, such sequences also work to engender discomfort in the viewer who bears witness to suffering inflicted on these avowedly real bodies. The focus upon both the bodily and emotional consequences of these stunts and pranks acts to construct an affective rapport with the performers, to the extent that the audience is no longer safely laughing at someone distant and distinct, but instead is being asked to make a sympathetic investment with the pain and fear of those on-screen, and then laugh anyway (just as many of those on-screen do). In particular, in the case of *Jackass*, this sympathetic investment is tied up with the white, male bodies of the participants. Indeed, so prevalent is the whiteness and the masculinity of the show, that many commentators interpret the show as a representation of white masculinity (cf. Brayton 2007; Sweeny 2008; Lindgren and Lélièvre 2009). However, rather than read the show as just a barometer of white male attitudes and behaviour, we can also note how the white male body is here made available for display and damage where other bodies may not be. Non-white and female bodies are more limited in this

context, particularly in the prevailing context of liberalism, where histories of oppression render both humour and discomfort more fraught. Indeed, the damage and ridicule inflicted the *Jackass* performers (and also on a character like David Brent in *The Office*) can be understood as an aspect of privilege, born of the fact that the abjection of these particular comic subjects does not call to mind historical abuses or continuing systematic injustice. The discomfort of those performers and characters can be grounds for humour, because their embodied and social selves are allowed to speak only for themselves, rather than bringing to mind wider issues of sexism or racism that threaten to render the discomfort of humour to uncomfortable for it to widely interpreted as such.

Yet, although the damage inflicted on the *Jackass* performers is safely isolated from the cultural and social meanings that adhere to the injury of other types of bodies, this does not mean that this pain is without consequence. Unlike classic slapstick figures, it is quite clear that Knoxville both feels and fears the damage that might be done to his body: *Jackass*' documentary aesthetic transforms the stunt sequences from abstract exercises in unwise behaviour to intense encounters with real human bodies. This is made most abundantly clear in a sequence like the "Riot Control Test" where Knoxville is to be shot with "less lethal" ammunition. While, in the end, the act of shooting Knoxville itself takes only ten seconds, the sequence as a whole lasts nearly three minutes: most of which is concerned with emphasising Knoxville's terror and discomfort in stark contrast to his regular jovial, sophomoric behaviour (Fig. 4.1). Amidst a series of shots of a pensive Knoxville—standing still and straight, arms nervously swinging back—he asks is "that [ammunition] considered lethal?" When the sales rep explains "it's considered less lethal," Knoxville fixes the camera with an imploring, deadpan stare. In a subsequent longshot, which suggests that he is unaware that he is being filmed, Knoxville stands dejected, head hanging down. His expression is then emphasised in a close-up shot, where Knoxville shakes his head, closes his eyes and lets his head slump after witnessing a practice shot. When the shot finally comes—two minutes into a three minute sequence—the escalating tension is only compounded by the utter silence of the soundtrack: in contrast to other sequences, there is no background laughter from his fellow performances and onlookers. What these formal aspects establish, even prior to the actual stunt, is that in *Jackass* pain in itself is not funny, or at least not *just* funny: it is also terrifying.

Fig. 4.1 Johnny Knoxville of *Jackass* is unenthusiastic about being shot with less-than-lethal ammunition (Tremaine 2002)

The key reason that pain in *Jackass* is terrifying is because of the emphasis upon the reality of the proceedings. The discomfort, and subsequently much of the humour, of *Jackass* is contingent on the acceptance that the action presented on-screen is indeed actually happening (or has happened). This promise of reality has the consequence of raising the stakes and indeed without its veracity, *Jackass* would be contrived and largely pointless because the humour and coherence of the text are premised upon the assumed truth factor at work (which perhaps points towards the reasons why the video game adaptation did not find favourable reviews: without the promise of actuality, *Jackass* would just be simulated stunts without narrative, context or consequence). The importance of documentary reality to *Jackass* can be seen in the extent to which the show goes to both mark its fragile proximity to the everyday through the use of disclaimers—"the following show features stunts performed either by professionals or under the supervision of professionals. Accordingly MTV and the producers must insist that no one attempt to recreate or re-enact any stunt or activity performed on this show"—that assert the show's proximity to reality by implying that viewers could recreate the show if they so wished. Indeed, without the implicit promise that everything depicted is really occurring, *Jackass* would void its claim to not

only textual consistency, but also its discomfort and particular form of humour. As such, any suggestion that the pain, terror and damage on display are feigned would threaten to compromise both the premise and comedy of *Jackass*, or as least alter its humour to an older, more traditional register of slapstick. Consequently, the show does not and cannot permit any gloss of unreality or fiction to form over its antics, but instead reminds the viewer again and again that these events actually occurred. For these reasons, the formal composition of *Jackass* is marked by a "purposely amateur aesthetic" (Lagerwey 2004, 86): the near constant intrusion of production personnel and equipment like boom mikes and cameras into shot, addresses to camera, documentation of the set-up and construction that precedes stunts and the injury that follows (sometimes several days later) and general back-stage and making-of footage. The revelation of *Jackass*' inner workings functions to regularly and repeatedly reassure viewers of the text's documentary reality.

The key consequence of this focus on the reality underpinning the text is the inescapable recognition of real pain of real people that outstrips the empathy afforded to fictional characters. In other textual contexts, a viewer may be implicated in the emotions of a fictional character—they may cry for them or be horrified by their injury—but such reactions are usually moderated by the viewer's awareness of the fictional nature of the situation. In contrast, the damaged bodies of the *Jackass* performers promise that the affect here is not simulated, but rather has an indexical relation to real pain, which thereby overwhelms not only the characters on-screen, but also the viewer. Moreover, because the promise of reality is also intrinsic to the humour, pain and humour become intertwined such that without an awareness that the pain on display is real pain, there would be no humour. The audience is thus asked to find humour not only in the representation of discomfort, but also amidst their own discomfort. In reference to the aforementioned paper cut sequence, Scott Richmond refers to this feeling as "a mixture of pleasure and aversion—or better yet … my aversion as the occasion for pleasure" (2011, 1): the intensity of the pain witnessed overcoming and "undo[ing]" his own body in resonance with those on-screen (2011, 4). Yet, although the show goes to great pains through the use of extensive behind-the-scenes footage of setups and consequences, as well as the show's opening disclaimer, to encode the on-screen action as real, there is also a sense in which the televisual and cinematic logics at work act to undercut the lived and visceral reality of the on-screen action. The

humour of *Jackass* plays upon this grey area between reality and aesthetic space: the text encodes the on-screen action so as to emphasise the real documentary nature of the social breaches on display, while also providing on-screen permission for the audience to interpret this as humour, through the distancing role of filmic logics of representation, as well as the laughter of on-screen participants. The discomfort arises from the confirmation of actuality, the humour from the plausible textuality afforded by distance of the screen, but neither would be possible without the other: the two aspects are mutually constitutive.

The very fact that *Jackass* is recognisable as humour at all—that a troupe of young men engaging in masochistic events could be regarded as unproblematically comic by large portions of the population—is indicative of how the show constantly wavers across the boundary of the simulated and the real. The show speaks to the ways in which contemporary cultural conditions make it possible to interpret the blatantly and resolutely true as fictional, or at least *as if* fictional, and therefore as the correct space of socially permissible, non-antisocial humour. It is this aesthetic-epistemological complexity that critics of *Jackass*, who read the show as symptomatic of the decline of civilisation, overlook, or more likely choose to ignore, when branding the show as a sign of sociopathic deviancy: they see only a mindless revelry in pain, and not a complicating and contrasting movement between the intertwined logic of mediated distance and documentary realism. However, focussing on either the documentary or fictional elements almost inevitably leads to a flawed and limited reading of the text: one that fails to account for the uncomfortable entirety of *Jackass*' particular brand of body humour.

The Office and the Comedy of Social Failure

In apparently stark contrast, the banal anxiety of the BBC sitcom *The Office* might seem a world apart from the provocations of *Jackass*. Originally screened in the UK across two seasons and two Christmas specials in 2001 and 2003 (and subsequently adapted for French, German, Chilean, Israeli, Québécois, Swedish and most famously American contexts), *The Office* is a faux docusoap addressing the Slough branch of Wernham Hogg, a paper goods supplier. While the programme features an ensemble cast, the particular focus of much of its awkward humour is the egotistical and insecure regional manager, David Brent, who considers himself "a friend first, boss second, probably entertainer third."

Prone to offensive jokes and mangled punchlines, Brent frequently fails to perform social scripts correctly, such as joke-telling and entertaining, in a manner that offends and upsets his employees. The majority of comic moments in *The Office* stem from Brent's failures of social behaviour. Moreover, in contrast with traditional situation comedies, *The Office* makes use of "docusoap"-style camera-work, storytelling conventions and performances in ways that challenge not only formal conventions of the sitcom genre, but also the mode of humour employed and perhaps even the associated politics (Mills 2004, 68–75). Hence, while many sitcoms prior and since have addressed the politics and interactions of the workplace, *The Office* distinguishes itself through both its careful character studies of recognisable, unsettling personality types, and its use of the mockumentary format to subtly emphasise the awkwardness and unease of slightly-off human interactions.

As has been pointed out in multiple instances, *The Office* is uncomfortable to watch, especially in comparison to a traditional sitcom: "conspicuously banal in its setting, [*The Office*] offered nothing in the way of elaborate plotting or farcical mishap, punchlines or catchphrases. Even its own characters were stultified with boredom, when they weren't cringing in embarrassment" (Walters 2005, 1). Laughter with (or at) *The Office* is thus almost always inseparable from a simultaneous cringe (Tyler and Cohen 2008, 124). Indeed, embarrassment is central to *The Office*'s comedy of unease where humour is primarily a function of characters' failures to respond correctly to social cues or situations. Concerned with minor, everyday interactions, *The Office*'s exploration of the contemporary workspace offers both a quieter and more familiar (for many) scenario than *Jackass*. However, despite their clear differences, both texts can be considered manifestations of the humour of discomfort, insofar as they both traffic in a mode of humour that implicates the viewer in quasi-sympathetic relation with unbearable situations. As with *Jackass*, the humour of *The Office* arises out of the repeated breach of social norms, but does so in a manner that demonstrates how deviation from expected behaviour need not always be spectacular to elicit discomfort.

Perhaps the most extreme manifestation of these failed moments are Brent's failures to live up to his self-proclaimed identity as a comedian, such as in "Merger," the first episode of the second season, where we not only witness Brent attempting to clumsily ingratiate himself at after-work drinks through the repetition and then explanation of laddish jokes—awkwardly delivered to the backs of uninterested

co-workers—but also endure his delivery of "a welcome speech that is full of inappropriate humour and facile attempts to secure recognition of his status in a scene that evokes simultaneous empathy and repulsion" (Tyler and Cohen 2008, 123). Having set up his public speaking genius through both conversation with employees and direct-to-camera accounts of his past experience, Brent fails to garner any laughter with his rambling, incomprehensible and often offensive speech. Increasingly desperate, he then abandons all pretence of formal coherence, launching into impressions of people his audience does not know, and finally falls to the level of referring to sequences from popular television comedy shows. In this near perfect example of comic failure that lasts an excruciating two and a half minutes, Brent demonstrates no sense of timing or set-up, and angrily blames his audience for his failure. Yet, as awkward as they are, such moments are not, contrary to Tara Brabazon's argument, "beyond humour" (2005, 102). After all, not only do they operate within the "comic impetus" of the paratextual framing of the sitcom genre (Schwind 2015, 4), but as audience engagement studies have indicated, real viewers do indeed find the awkward moments of *The Office* funny (Bore 2009, 36–38). While it may be excruciatingly painful to watch, Brent's failure is undeniably coded as comic by its formal presentation in the text.

Neither the awkwardness nor the comedy of the sequence, though, can be explained only with reference to what Brent says and does: we also need to take into account the way the camera captures and shapes the interpretation of the characters' actions. *Jackass* is not the only text where the lingering camera plays up the uncomfortably painful aspects of humour; in the case of *The Office*, however, social failure is substituted for bodily damage. As a general rule, these are not the large character flaws or social faux pas of traditional sitcoms (which are however a much more prominent aspect of the American adaptation) but instead small everyday failures—jokes that fall flat, inappropriate comments, petty social conflicts, transparent attempts at self-aggrandisement, small reprimands and miscommunications—captured in great detail, and thereby blown up to uncomfortable proportions (Schwind 2015, 10). Of particular importance in relation to Brent's failed speech is the way that the camera lingers intently on Brent, cutting away only to acknowledge the blank faces of his audiences. This concentration makes visible the small pauses and doubts that play across his face, the gaps and failures in his performance. That these are only small disruptions, not the exaggerated

Fig. 4.2 David Brent of *The Office* attempts to ingratiate himself with his new employees (Gervais and Merchant 2002)

absurdities of traditional sitcoms, makes such failures more real, more personal and more relatable, and therefore all the harder to take.

Such a scene demonstrates how *The Office* generates humour through an unflinching representation of failure and embarrassment. Just as *Jackass* lingers over the pain and terror of broken bodies, *The Office* refuses to cut away from social failure, instead forcing confrontations with the deadening silence of the office space, and the blank or disgusted faces of Brent's employees. As Mills observes "[*The Office*] plays on the notion of embarrassment by incorporating many shots of Brent's employees looking aghast at what he says and does; that is their response is as vital to the comedy as the events themselves are" (2004, 69). Such cut-away shots compound both the humour and the awkwardness of the scene by providing the spectators with confirmation of the uncomfortable confusion of the performance (Fig. 4.2). Similarly, Frances Gray draws attention to the manner in which the camera itself can appear to convey embarrassment in *The Office*, not only capturing the judgement of Brent's employees, but conveying discomfort through the recording apparatus itself (2009, 160). Where a traditional sitcom, such as *Friends*, would fill the empty space with a laugh soundtrack, quick rejoinders and comic chatter, or quickly cut away following the delivery of a one-liner, *The Office*, by virtue of its docusoap format, instead remains

behind to assess the fallout of social failure and public humiliation: picking up the silences that follow faux pas and compelling the viewer to bear unexpected and uncomfortably extended witness. Absent the cathartic permission of a laugh soundtrack, the uncomfortable humour is compounded by an aesthetic strategy that denies generic expectations (Walters 2005, 110). Such formal aspects of the text act both to reinforce the interpretation of social failure, and extend its temporal experience, creating an almost unbearable cultural claustrophobia of social failure.

Consequently, in the case of *The Office*, one of the central difficulties of reconciliation arises from the awkward tension between docusoap and comic modes frames of reference: as noted earlier, with the exception of the situations noted above, characters' flaws and gaffes are not broad enough, and the camera too lingering and sympathetic to allow detachment sufficient to take easily the side of an abstract code of social behaviour over that of the characters. Likewise, while Brent is constructed as a despicable character, his despicableness is slight enough almost to prohibit its identification as significantly deviant. There is a conflict here, then, between an easy interpretation of Brent's broad breaches of social decorum and respect as comic, and an acute awareness of the social damage done by Brent, as well as his own foibles and vulnerabilities. The feigned documentary format hence provides an aesthetic excuse to hold off the employment of the customary techniques by which an instance of humour is noted and a clear interpretation permitted. In doing so, *The Office* places the burden of final judgement onto the audience: never signing off once and for all on the idea that Brent is a comic fool who both deserves to be ridiculed and can easily and quickly recover from such ridicule (as, for example, the characters of *Friends* can: their sense of self-worth must be unflappable).

The Office's production of sympathy, in conjunction with the implication of the audience in the passing of comic judgement, interrupts any easy comic resolution. Consequently, Brent's failures hang uneasily between humour and non-humour, an interpretive question mark only emphasised by the blank horror of his co-workers and employees. In this way, then, *The Office* renders its own status as humour open to doubt by placing aesthetic and affective obstacles in the way of a quick interpretation. And while this doubt is partially resolved by means of extra-textual coding and through the inclusion of more obviously comic moments, such as Tim's pranks, Brent's Christmas dance and Gareth's

general gormlessness,[2] the text nonetheless remains defined by the manner in which it frequently holds open possibilities of humour by refusing to permit any easy and final interpretation of its comedy. *The Office* thus prolongs and intensifies the lack the closure in its humour, by refusing to provide sufficient formal cues by which a straightforward comic interpretation might be made possible and thereby engenders an uncomfortable doubt as to the expected relation of viewer and text. Thus, although members of the audience do not create these comic deviations, they do have to take some responsibility for their location and interpretation, and thereby become implicated through their interpretative participation in the uncomfortable operation of the humour.

Brent is not simply humiliated before his peers while we watch; he is humiliated before *us*, and therefore to read *The Office* as humour we must first read it ourselves as humiliation, which gives rise to a particularly uncomfortable affect. As Walters so succinctly puts it: "To see a man labouring through an endeavour whose failure is obvious to everyone else is embarrassing; when that endeavour is the provocation of laughter it becomes mortifying; when one is directly implicated in the situation it can be almost unbearable" (2005, 2). *The Office* creates a world which the audience is encouraged to recognise as real, but not so real as to feel bound by conventions of accepted social solidarity with respect to its characters. The experience of the text is therefore about more than the "embarrassment of fictional characters," but also works on a second level: "the actual embarrassment experienced by the audience watching the series, effecting [sic] each viewer's moral judgement and personal feelings of empathy" (Schwind 2015, 4). The spectators are placed in a position where they are allowed to laugh more freely than if faced with the immediate reality of subtle social failure, but still must feel bad about doing so. This is because they must almost consciously apply Bergson's comic anaesthetic, because the text refuses to do so for them. Instead, even as the audience laughs—in fact, *because* they laugh—they become "an unwitting part of … 'school bully' culture, and we have to decide what to do about it" (Gray 2009, 161). Even as *The Office* creates the conditions for the viewers' laughter, it refuses to provide full sanction for the humour and thereby leaves them stranded in the awkwardness of an ethical gray zone. The uncomfortable humour of *The Office* is rooted in the implication of the audience as active interpretative participants in Brent's (and other characters') humiliation.

As with *Jackass*, the cringe humour of *The Office* is therefore implicated in its claims to represent some form of reality even though that

text is obviously not actually a true documentary like *Jackass*. Rather, *The Office* creates its strong sense of realism through the use of a documentary aesthetic and through its lack of obvious artifice or stylisation with respect to characterisation, narrative or setting (Walters 2005, 23–25). The docusoap format means that the text refuses the formal conventions by which moments of humour are usually marked and foregrounded: the absence of a laugh track, editing conventions that linger on moments of social failure, and a commitment to narrative naturalism ensures that none of the characters is "big" or wacky enough to distinguish themselves clearly from lived reality. The characters of the office are not caricatures (with the possible exception of Gareth), but disarmingly realistic people, whom members of the audience are encouraged to consider themselves alongside, rather than against: even Brent can appear sympathetic in his (usually fleeting) moments of shame, sadness and self-realisation. Lacking the generic codes of the traditional sitcom, the humour of *The Office* is never experienced as extreme or broad and therefore clear and final enough to provide guaranteed relief. Consequently, the deviations from expected behaviour are not blatant or foregrounded, which ensures that the viewer has to locate them themselves. This is what makes *The Office*, and in particular the character of Brent, so unbearable: the failure correctly to perform sociality is minor and the mistakes are small, which renders the consequent humour fragile and passing. It is frequently not signalled whether a given moment *should* be interpreted as humour, which prevents any easy attribution of humour, while the consequent irresolution of the text's humour in turn prevents the realisation of catharsis.

Borat and the Comedy of Public Humiliation

Borat (or *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* to re-invoke the film's full name) occupies the distinctly unusual middle-ground between *Jackass* and *The Office*. Neither completely documentary nor mockumentary, the film is premised upon the interpenetration of a fictional character into real spaces in ways that directly contribute to the production of awkward humour. *Borat* ostensibly charts the attempts by Kazakh journalist, Borat Sagdiyev, to produce a documentary about the USA for the edification and education of the Kazakhstani nation. In actuality, the film features the British comic actor and impersonator Sacha Baron Cohen performing as Borat with the goal

of goading Americans from different walks of life into engaging with the offensive and ridiculous beliefs of the Borat character. Widely lauded in the critical press, *Borat* was praised as one of the funniest comedies of the decade (Hirschon 2006; Strauss 2006) in large part due to its unconventional and largely unheralded blurring of the lines between fiction and reality. The quasi-fictional nature of *Borat* was certainly central to the hype and furore that surrounded its international theatrical release in 2006: in publicity appearances, the film's star would only appear in character as Borat and never dropped the conceit that the film was an earnest attempt by the government of Kazakhstan to learn more about the USA (this, despite the fact that the film's documentary narrative is derailed early on by Borat's infatuation with Pamela Anderson and his journey to California to "make her [his] wife"). This uneasy movement between the real and the fake—what Lewis MacLeod refers to as the film's "bizarre ontological position" (2011, 111)—is central to both film's humour and the discomfort that so frequently accompanies it.

Following its faux post-Soviet opening credits, *Borat* begins in full mockumentary mode: a fake ethnography of Borat's (fictional) hometown of Kuzcek introduces the bizarre depravities of his fictional Kazakhstan via the formal conventions associated with the documentary genre (Torchin 2008, 526–528). Here we meet figures such as Urkin, the "town rapist" and Borat's neighbour Nursultan Tulyakbay, with whom he competes for material goods in a manner evocative of sitcom clichés, as well as witness Borat partake in leisure activities such as "sunbathing" in a neon-green "mankini" alongside a dirty river under heavily clouded skies. Contained entirely within the fictional space of Borat's Kazakhstan, the humour of this introductory section (and other similar segments that occur throughout the film) does not fit the model of reality humour examined so far in this chapter, because in its broad and shocking representations it effectively announces its own artificiality to all but the most profoundly ignorant viewer. Such humour signals its unreality through its excess, and therefore is less likely to produce the discomfort of the real discussed in relation to the prior examples: these are simply comic scenarios presented for our amusement with little bearing on lived reality.

However, once Borat leaves his faux-Kazakhstan and sets foot in New York's JFK airport, the tenor, formal presentation, and epistemological claims of the text shift dramatically. Gone are the well-composed shots and classical editing that characterise the Kazakhstan segment: instead,

the light-balance shifts and non-diegetic music gives way to ambient background sound, as Borat and his producer, Azamat Bagatov, tentatively make their way down an escalator in a long-shot punctuated by a shaky, uneven zoom. The shift to the cinema vérité mode thus marks a textual transition that MacLeod describes as a "movement out of the fictional mode of the mockumentary and into the borderlands of documentary" (2011, 115). Whereas the mockumentary sequences capture fictional events and people in a formal style customarily associated with non-fiction film, *Borat*'s move into the real world inverts that operation: the camera now captures real subjects in contexts that are framed and motivated by fictional characters. It is this ambiguous encounter between the true and false, mockumentary and documentary, that has led to anxious attempts to determine the truth of the film (Torchin 2008, 536), and which is also the key to understanding *Borat*'s uncomfortable humour.

At turns shocked, appalled and sometimes surprisingly gracious, the real people of America respond to the fictional Borat in a variety of ways. When he first arrives in New York in the early sequences of the film, Borat is overwhelmingly met with anger, outrage and ridicule. When his suitcase spills open on the subway and a live chicken escapes, people curse and threaten him. When Borat defecates in a public park or masturbates to lingerie-clad store mannequins, we witness the gaping, giggling and gasping of on-lookers. All these different responses share a similarity in that they constitute disavowals of Borat's actions: a recognition that his behaviour is not acceptable and therefore that he should be reprimanded, rather than humoured or accommodated. As a consequence, while these moments are clearly comic, they are not particularly awkward, because the third-party censure acts to delineate and defang the potential threat of Borat's indelicate actions by directly marking them as aberrant. By dismissing Borat, such observers effectively provide a punchline for these actions: bringing his clownish transgressions to a comic close before they begin to draw real participations into his anarchic fiction. In contrast, however, many of the other people whom Borat encounters in his journey across America will not be so immediately judgemental and will thereby open themselves up to prolonged and fraught engagement with Borat's fictional world, and the consequences thereof.

For example, "humour coach" Pat Haggerty encounters Borat in the context of a session where he has been invited to educate Borat in

the ways of American humour. Trapped in a formal professional context, Haggerty does not have the luxury of dismissing Borat's provocations. He is thus a real person locked into what MacLeod characterises as a "sincere and … un-ironic exchange with a 'pretend' narrative construction": a situation that provides the conditions for the development of awkward humour by virtue of the unequal exposure of the two parties to social scrutiny (2011, 112). As a fictional character, Borat has no existence and limited responsibilities beyond the edge of the text: as a documentary subject, Haggerty both carries the norms of social conduct into the encounter and remains culpable for his actions after the fact. Thus, when Borat opens the conversation by stating that he has had sex with his mother-in-law (but lacks a mother-in-law joke), professional courtesy requires that a visibly flustered Haggerty must play along on camera. Even when Borat backs up his claims regarding the hilarity of "retardation" with a story about how his brother Bilo, who has a "very funny retardation," escaped from his cage and raped his sister; Haggerty retains his polite composure and nods along, even acquiescing to Borat's proffered high-five (before explaining that such a story is inappropriate and would not be considered humorous in America).[3] Unlike the anonymous people of New York, Haggerty feels the need to play along with Borat and thereby allow his insensitive and inappropriate conversation to continue unabated. The humour here is therefore not just that of Borat's horrifying impropriety, which remains (somewhat) safely ensconced within the borders of that character's fictional world, but also that of watching a real person, Haggerty, navigate what is effectively an impossible social situation. If Haggerty were to censure Borat, the gag would be resolved having reached its effective punchline and endpoint; however, due to the social obligation that requires him to exhibit tolerance towards his guest, no such resolution is forthcoming. Humour here thus arises out of the discomfort of Haggerty, who is caught between two competing ethical demands: on the one hand, politeness towards his guest and client; on the other hand, the requirement to censure offensive hate speech. Unable to resolve this ethical incongruity, Haggerty nods and averts his eyes: micro-gestures that give minimal expression to his unresolvable internal quandary as it plays across his face and body. The humour of this scene is thus as much a matter of Haggerty's quiet anguish as Borat's excessive, taboo-busting anecdote. We find amusement here to the extent that we identify with Haggerty's unenviable social plight.

Fig. 4.3 Borat presents a parcel of faeces to his host during a meeting of an American dining society (Charles 2006)

Haggerty is far from the only victim of Borat's fictionally-derived assault upon the forbearance and social graces of everyday people. Michael Psenicska—a driving instructor who takes Borat out for a lesson—encapsulates the general hospitality and amicability of many of Borat's victims when he tells him, in response to a double cheek kiss: "Well I'm not used to that, but that's fine." Such an attitude informs the reactions of many of Borat's encounters, from former Georgia Congressman, Bob Barr, who is told that the cheese he has just eaten is made from Borat's wife's breast milk; through the team at 16 WAPT News in Jackson, Mississippi, who tolerate Borat's seeming inability to grasp when he is on air, and subsequent wanderings around the station into other newscasts; and to a dinner club in Alabama, where Borat insults the appearance of one of his hosts, returns from the bathroom with his faeces in a bag, and finally invites a sex-worker to join the meal as his companion (Fig. 4.3). Rather than respond in anger, in all these instances the injured parties react to Borat's transgressions with generosity and good grace: tacitly forgiving Borat for his indiscretions (with the important exception of the final faux pas when Borat invites an escort to the dinner club, which proves to be a bridge too far, and is he summarily expelled from the party). Thus, Congressman Barr swallows the

cheese and attempts to hide his disgust; the presenters and crew at 16 WAPT repeatedly and gently steer Borat back to where he is supposed to be; and the dinner hostess takes Borat's unwelcome copral parcel from him and explains the function of a toilet. While possibly in part motivated by condescension, these encounters are also in "equal measure kind" (Torchin 2008, 530): it is somewhat perverse, then, that it is out of this kindness that the discomfort, and particularly the uncomfortable humour, of *Borat* eventuates.

Central to the awkwardness of these encounters is the fact that, in extending their kindness, these participants are making a vital category mistake. If Borat were a real person, such kindness would probably eventually lead to amicable relations; however, as the audience knows, but the participants cannot know—are actively prevented from knowing—Borat is not real, and therefore each act of tolerant acceptance only raises the stakes for the next impropriety. Thus, in extending their desperate courtesies, these "contortions of politesse," Borat's interlocutors create the conditions that perpetuate the character's indecent behaviour, and thereby extend their own suffering: as MacLeod notes, as these people, caught up in Borat's fictional world, are "trying to be nice to him," they are actually working to prolong their own suffering, humiliation and pain (2011, 125–127). The humour of such sequences thus relies upon the audience's knowledge that even as the participants attempt to defuse social conflict, they are actually creating the conditions for future escalation and embarrassment. Like a character in a traditional sitcom or farce, those caught up in Borat's orbit are not just ignorant as to how they might achieve their desired ends; they end up actively working against their own interests. Yet these are not fictional characters, but rather real people whom the text actively positions as actual documentary subjects. As if the awkwardness of Brent's fictional social failures in *The Office* were not painful enough, here the co-mingling of empathy and laughter is extended to encompass the suffering of real people: finding humour in the breakdown of social niceties in a context that is not almost real (as in *The Office*), but which the documentary mode of the film actively presents as unmistakably and actually real.

The uncomfortable humour of *Borat* is thus premised upon the provocation of real people—who must appear as themselves and live with their actions—by a performer in the guise of a fictional character, who can therefore disavow his own excessive statements and actions. Not only, then, is this humour deeply rooted in the on-screen suffering

of those caught up within Borat's machinations, but the discomfort is only accentuated by the sense that the requisite setups are "a little bit unfair" given the unclear line between fiction and reality that defines *Borat* (MacLeod 2011, 116). Unlike the audience, those on-screen have absolutely no way of knowing that they are being played. Indeed, if those implicated were to know their situation—if the audience were to believe that they were in on the joke as it were—then much of the humour would be sacrificed. Given this knowledge-imbalance between the audience and those involved, the awkwardness of the humour is thus also premised upon an alliance between the character of Borat and the audience: as he is a menace, so is the audience a menace by implication. Secured behind the safety of the screen, the spectators can find humour in the agony and embarrassment of those who engage with Borat, but in a manner that means that the audience is effectively aligned with the film and the character against those caught up in *Borat*'s setups. The discomfort of the viewer is thus not only a matter of empathy for the confused victims, but also because the audience is party to their deception and thereby implicated in their comic suffering: those on-screen suffer for the audience's pleasure. The audience is thereby aligned with Borat against the victims by virtue of their privileged knowledge about what is true and false, documentary and mockumentary, right and wrong. The documentary mode of *Borat*, the text, thus sets up the conditions for humour; but the fictional kernel of Borat, the character, means that the humour bears the ethical complications of a practical joke, in which those involved are punished for kindness, and in which members of the audience are bound up as willing voyeurs.

Uncomfortable Humour and the Aesthetic Implication of the Audience

Uncomfortable humour is closely tied up with the negotiation and contestation of social norms of taste, decency and etiquette: it is a mode of humour that confronts its audiences with the consequences of failure and deviancy. Sometimes this is done quietly, as in the case of *The Office*, sometimes it is loud and obvious, as with *Jackass*. The representation of such behaviour becomes interpretable as humour when the audience can both recognise the represented behaviour as aberrant, but understand that conduct in terms of particular motivations and characters. Yet,

described in this sense, uncomfortable humour is not particularly distinctive: the above characterisation could just as easily be applied to less uncomfortable examples, such as *Friends* or even *The Big Bang Theory*. Indeed, like those more traditional forms of situation comedy humour, uncomfortable humour is fundamentally premised upon the simple thwarting of social codes. What makes uncomfortable humour distinctive, though, is the way in which the formal construction of the humour complicates interpretation and prevents any straightforward comic resolution.

On the one hand, in a text like *Friends*, social deviations are clearly marked as comic through the use of blatant formal devices such as a laugh soundtrack and more subtle techniques such as the rhythm of joke delivery and intercharacter reaction, by which the text flags and then resolves the incongruity of the humour. In such cases the deviation from norms is formally marked as a breach of expectations and thereby held up against correct social behaviour and expectations. Importantly, this sense of correct expectations is not defined in the text itself, at least not in any sustained manner; instead, the audience is assumed to have access to this social code as part of their own everyday experiences. The deviant behaviour illustrated in such standard comic texts is thus implicitly compared to an unspoken social code in such a way as to emphasise the gap between them. The discrepancy between the two is then addressed with the aid of the formal comic markers that demarcate the on-screen action as aberrant and the incompatibility between the two registers is thereby resolved in favour of dominant sociality. On the other hand, in the case of uncomfortable humour, the text does not or cannot so easily resolve the incongruous contrast between the accepted norm and the alternate behaviour on display. This is because unlike more traditional modes of humour, uncomfortable humour repeatedly refuses to permit either of the frames of reference—not the accepted norm nor its breach—to emerge as a dominant and correct interpretive and thereby resolve the incongruity. Instead, unconformable humour sets up conflicts between different registers and frames of reference which prove extremely difficult to reconcile for a variety of reasons premised largely upon an emphasis of the potentially non-comic aspects of the gag. In contrast to more traditional modes of humour, which present and then almost immediately resolve incongruity, uncomfortable forms thus hold competing frames of reference in tension, prolonging the conflict by allowing no single interpretation to emerge as immediately correct and dominant. It is therefore not just the breaching of social rules that renders this humour

uncomfortable, but rather the prevention of easy or rapid closure following these breaches which also acts to intensify the political operation of doubt and thus the affective experience of discomfort.

Thus, while the comic frame can mute the discomfort to some extent, in contrast to other comic forms like slapstick or the insult comedy of *Friends*, the formal features of the humour also work to encourage affective reactions rather than play them down. In this manner, uncomfortable humour can be thought both to extend and complicate the historical Relief Theory of humour, closely associated with the work of Freud and Herbert Spencer, which suggests that laughter is a means of expelling pent-up nervous energy. A humorous text is thus understood as one which causes its audience feelings of anxiety, horror or expectation which lead to a build-up of psychic stress which cannot find a proper outlet. In order to dispel this energy, the body laughs (Billig 2005, 99). However, unlike the traditional examples of relief humour, uncomfortable humour does not often provide relief: instead there is an escalation of pain or shame, only assuaged by the eventual cutting away of the camera without resolution. If there is any relief here it is that created by the members of the audience themselves when, unable to bear any more the stresses created by the text, they spontaneously and unprovoked break into laughter, or a smile or at least a titter, and thereby resolve the tension which had been built up by the scene, but for which no clear resolution was provided. In this instance then, the uncomfortable humorous text has gone from an entity that creates and then partially resolves tension, to an aesthetic technique of increasing tension without any internal means of subsequently releasing it.

The audience of uncomfortable humour is thus no longer just laughing at these antics in a completely detached manner, because it is now implicated in the action: the "reality" effect of these texts—be it documentary, mockumentary or direct address—prevents detachment, hence the humour is uneasy and uncomfortable. The potential for fictional embarrassment to spill across textual boundaries (Gray 2009, 147) is thus amplified in these texts by the uncomfortable mode of humour's direct appeal to the real that creates a direct connection between the events on-screen and the lived existence of the audience. The alignment of documentary mode with discomfort is thus no coincidence: it is the implied or actual reality of the humour which exacerbates the discomfort, by suggesting that the failure, the incongruity on display, is real. This, then, is the key difference between *Jackass* and traditional slapstick comedy, *The Office* and

a traditional sitcom, or *Borat* and mockumentary, because with *Jackass*, *The Office* and *Borat* the audience is allowed, even encouraged, to consider the on-screen action as real and actually occurring across real bodies. The comic aesthetic is thereby complicated and rendered more difficult to interpret in any final manner by the emphasis on the fear and bodily damage that accompanies these failures. The constantly-referenced reality of the text thus directly prevents closure; intensifying the stakes of social deviance on display by assuring the viewers that these are not merely hypothetical or fictional breaches, but actually occurring deviations, while also undercutting any easy sense of detachment that one might feel watching slapstick or a cartoon. Because *Jackass* and *Borat* promise that what they represent actually happened, this renders them both potentially more comic and more difficult to interpret easily as comic, due to the weight of reality and the accompanying sight of real people in peril, panic and pain. In a similar manner, the faux docusoap format of *The Office* produces (though not to the same extent as the documentary texts) the impression of realism, and likewise prevents a complete affective detachment from the uncomfortable situations onscreen. Caught between comic detachment and empathy with real, the audience of uncomfortable mode of humour is called upon both to laugh and sympathise.

It can be seen, then, that in these examples, the production of discomfort is premised upon an intentional failure to resolve the humorous incongruity within the bounds of the text and thereby provide immediate interpretive closure, which results in a direct appeal to the audience and the extra-textual world as the final arbiters of interpretation. Uncomfortable humour shifts the resolution of humour beyond the relatively clearly defined conventions of the aesthetic space and into the messy social codes of reality, where it is not as simple to determine whether a given instance of social breach can be so easily understood or excused. In its own peculiar way, uncomfortable humour hereby restages what Rancière refers to as the "antinomy of modernism" (2009, 87–88), wherein art is political by virtue of its "self-sufficiency" and separation from the everyday, which it must overcome if it is to have any political bearing on the world (2009, 40–42). Art so-conceived is thus both autonomous, insofar as it transcends or transgresses the world to propose new unsullied alternatives, and heteronomous, insofar as it is bound to everyday life by its desire to intrude upon and influence a world beyond itself. Rancière suggests that this contradiction encapsulates the political promise of modernist (conceptions of) art, which

produces a state of tense agitation and "dissensual common sense" through the simultaneous mobilisation of sensory appeal and its discrete autonomous separation (2009, 98): the antinomy of modernity suggests the possibility of a break with existing regimes of sense and experience even as art remains inescapably entangled in the material world.

Similarly, with uncomfortable humour we can not maintain a distinction between the internal, autonomous logic of the aesthetic—in this instance, the unresolved comic logic of the text—and the lived political and ethical logics of everyday life. Uncomfortable humour pushes this tension ever further through the presentation of an internal aesthetic logic of humour which it then fails to resolve internally, instead placing the burden of resolution upon the audiences and their access to extra-textual codes of social judgement. Hence, not only does uncomfortable humour make evident the tension between the autonomous and heteronomous nature of the comic cultural work, it also goes a step further by calling upon the audience to recognise their own implication within the aesthetic logics. Texts like *Jackass* achieve the implication of the audience in this uncomfortable aesthetic logic by leaving their incongruities unresolved and unfinished. Consequently, if viewers wish to complete the comic aesthetic operation of these texts, they must recognise their own capacity to enact those comic logics: they must implicate themselves within the aesthetic of humour and thereby tacitly acknowledge their own implication in the anti-social aggression that lurks within humour. The discomfort of such humour and the humour of the discomfort thus arises from the tension between the unresolved text and the possibility for external interpretative resolution.

Uncomfortable humour thus produces discomfort and humour in equal parts through a form of perverted intimacy that demands that the audience affectively implicate themselves within the aesthetic operation of humour. In doing so, they are called upon to recognise the continuity between the text's breach of social decorum and their own ability to interpret and understand the same: the audience must suffer the discomfort of the text in order to successfully interpret it as humour. By undercutting and complicating any final and easy comic resolution within the text, uncomfortable humour demands the question of whether it is correct to interpret these texts as humour at all. If they are to address this intellectual, aesthetic doubt viewers must implicate themselves within the affective experience of social and bodily discomfort. Thus in the case of uncomfortable humour we find a proliferation of doubt: doubt as to

the obligation of the viewer to police social boundaries by providing or withholding laughter; doubt as to the final borders between the real and the fictional; and doubt regarding the lines between the comic and non-comic and the correct and proper spaces and subjects of humour. Uncomfortable humour multiplies doubt and it is the encounter with such doubt that produces simultaneous experiences of humour and discomfort in an engagement with such texts. In this way, the uncomfortable mode brings into question clear distinctions between aesthetic and affective categories and gives rise to an impure affective aesthetics—simultaneously both jovial and disgusted—that complicates interpretations of humour as either inherently detached or aggressive. Contrary to the work of Bergson, then, the new mode of uncomfortable humour can and does involve suffering on the part of the audience, as the pain of those on-screen reaches out to induce empathy as well as amusement.

Notes

1. This excess is not always marked as uncomfortable; *Jackass* also traffics in alternate, more established modes of humour, such as the ridiculous, the grotesque or the representation of folly. As has been noted by multiple commentators, *Jackass* bears more than a passing resemblance to Bakhtin's carnival (cf. Brayton 2007; Karimova 2010; Palmer 2010)—a form of humour that, while excessive, spectacular and overwhelmingly low-brow, is not premised solely upon discomfort, but instead can be interpreted in more familiar terms of incongruity or the unexpected.
2. Not all the humour of *The Office* is uncomfortably awkward. Broader and more easily recognisably comic moments also occur, most often in relation to the characters, Tim and Dawn: the closest *The Office* gets to having sympathetic protagonists. Tim and Dawn often entertain themselves and viewers by making fun of Brent's childishly aggressive assistant, Gareth, by playing pranks on him, such as hiding his belongings, gluing his phone together or fooling him into engaging in a conversation rife with homosexual innuendo. While still notably cruel—and the complicity of most audiences in this mockery raises questions about *The Office*'s relation to the social power of humour—these moments of humour are less excruciating in their presentation, and therefore operate and are resolved at a detached distance from the audience (it is ironic, though, that Frances Gray celebrates this humour as laudable and "creative" in her wider discussion of "bullying humour" in *The Office* [2009, 160]). Such moments of humour are important both thematically and structurally for the show, because they both compound the show's thematic concern with the implication of

humour as a form of social interaction and power and also act to confirm for the audience that this is indeed a comic text through the presentation of easier and more obvious forms of humour. These moments of more traditional humour—mostly tied to the more broadly drawn comic character of Gareth—help confirm the show's overall comic alignment towards comedy.

3. While Borat's comments regarding the humour of retardation are here clearly intended to be beyond the pale, they actually bear a surprising similarity to comments offered by Henri Bergson in his foundational and highly influential theory of humour. Attempting to distinguish between the comic and the simply ugly, Bergson asks "the reader to think of a number of deformities, and then to divide them into two groups: on the one hand, those whose nature has been directed towards the ridiculous; and on the other, those which absolutely diverge from it" (Bergson 2005, 11). Thus, while Borat's assertions about the existence of a "very funny retardation" probably strike many humour scholars as potentially offensive, they nonetheless retain a strong resemblance to ideas that are often overlooked in one of the principal models for contemporary humour theory.

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CHAPTER 5

Humour Without Pity: The Scandal of Provocative Humour

The comic mode of provocative humour bears a strong similarity to the humour of discomfort, but the two can be distinguished in terms of speed, or at least the aesthetic implication of speed. On the one hand, uncomfortable humour creeps and lingers: it turns up too early and hangs around too long, and thereby reveals the silent twisting and hollow dread of those entangled in an emotional field where sentiments not normally associated with humour become utterly bound up within it. In contrast, provocative humour, as characterised here, has a tendency to strike quickly and violently: explosively (as we will see sometimes literally) revealing the horror that lurks beneath the banal; erupting suddenly to leave its audience stunned and wondering whether what they witnessed could actually have happened, could have ever been allowed to happen. There is nothing subtle about provocative humour, which is the second of the three tendencies by which I seek to characterise the shifting status of media humour during the 1990s and 2000s. To this end, I will be drawing on three representative texts—*Chappelle's Show* (2003–2006), *The Sarah Silverman Program* (2007–2010), and Chris Morris' *Four Lions* (2010)—to map out the formal and political aesthetic features of this comic mode. Whereas the uncomfortable humour of texts such as *Jackass*, *The Office* and *Borat* speaks to unspoken codes of embodiment and behaviour, the scandalous nature of provocative humour engages with much more explicit cultural fault lines and controversial topics—such as white privilege, terrorism, disability, and the Holocaust—and does so in a much more direct manner. Thus, whereas the previous

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discussion focused upon a mode of humour liable to make an audience uncomfortable in vague and nebulous ways, the material examined here is more likely to offend obviously and immediately.

As with the humour of discomfort, provocative humour did not arise fully-formed out of the aesthetic-historical record during the period being studied. Instead, it developed across a range of comic contexts before a sharp increase in its prevalence and visibility near the end of the twentieth century. Stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce—arrested multiple times in the 1960s on charges of obscenity—could certainly be considered a forerunner of the style of comedy being discussed here, as might Richard Pryor with his stark comic discussions of race (that might be considered an inspiration for the work of David Chappelle, discussed later in this chapter). In less progressive company, the unapologetically racist and sexist stand-up comedy exemplified by British comedians like Jim Davidson and Roy "Chubby" Brown, (and which persists to some extent as a residual form) also fits the description of provocative humour with its intentional broaching of social taboo. However, despite the long-standing tradition of such humour in both alternate and alternative venues and forms, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that it began to assume a place in mainsteam media channels. Particularly prominently, in the early 1980s, *The Young Ones* (1982–1984) brought the "alternative comedy" movement to the wider public with its brash, anarchic sweep, while in a very different and less cerebral vein, *Married with Children* (1987–1997) anchored the intentionally obnoxious tone of the early Fox television network with its embrace of crude sexism and casual misogyny. From these early beginnings, humour of shock and offence proliferated in the media of the Anglosphere with British television programmes such as *Bottom* (1991–1995), *Monkey Dust* (2003–2005) and *Little Britain* (2003–2007), Peter Jackson's *Meet the Feebles* (1989) in New Zealand, provocative animated programming in the USA—including *Ren and Stimpy* (1991–1995), early seasons of *South Park* (1997–), and *Drawn Together* (2004–2007)—and gross-out films such as *There's Something About Mary* (1998) and other work of the Farrelly Brothers.

What such examples hold in common is that they all mobilise a mode of humour that explicitly demands, even dares, the audience to find humour in sites of horror and social conflict. In contrast to the humour of discomfort, texts like *The Sarah Silverman Program* and *Chappelle's Show* are not premised upon any quasi-sympathetic engagement with social or physical failure, but rather generate humour through brutally

direct engagement with clearly articulated and explicitly taboo concerns. *Chappelle's Show* predominantly engages with different inflections of racial tension in contemporary America, while across its two seasons, *The Sarah Silverman Program* addressed a wide variety of uncomfortable topics, such as race relations, abortion, AIDS, the Holocaust, disability, child abduction, and homelessness. In a similar fashion, Chris Morris has built a career in the UK tackling sensitive social issues of the day through an intentionally blunt form of comedy exemplified in the terrorism farce *Four Lions*. What these texts share in common is a mode of humour that does not shy away from contentious and offensive topics, nor wink quietly and subtly to knowing members of the audience about double meanings. Instead, the texts examined in this chapter place their potential to shock and offend front and centre in ways that are unmistakably and intentionally designed to provoke anger, indignation and outrage. As such they stand as both key exemplars and influential manifestations of the provocative mode of humour that plays an increasingly prominent role in media humour from the 1990s onwards.

Comic Violation and the Aesthetics of Offence

Given not only the lack of subtlety in such humour but the outright rejection of compassion or sensitivity, it is perhaps unsurprising that for many progressive critics provocative humour is understood as reprehensible and politically regressive. Such sentiment is expressed particularly strongly in the work of Paul Lewis, who coins the term, "killing jokes," to describe comic material that locates amusement in insensitive or even cruel broaching of sensitive topics, often in conjunction with violence, or which causes emotional pain to disenfranchised or disempowered groups (2006, 24–25). For Lewis, such humour leads to indefensible intellectual and empathetic detachment (2006, 158–159): a point he makes explicitly in the case of *The Sarah Silverman Program* whose "contempt for empathy risks causing real pain" (2007). According to this approach, provocative humour trivialises important concerns, excuses inexcusable behaviour and attitudes, and encourages audiences to find enjoyment regarding situations and setups which they should rightfully regard as worthy of concern and corrective political action rather than laughter. From Lewis' perspective, therefore, provocative humour is not just offensive: it is also harmful. In reaching such a conclusion, Lewis articulates a critical perspective on humour at odds with the dominant

liberatory model and more in line with the more pessimistic account often attributed to Michael Billig: the affiliation between humour and unapologetically aggressive displays of provocative material here taken as demonstrative the disciplinary and repressive force of humour that complicates any straightforward affiliation between progressive politics and comedy (Billig 2005, 231–235, 240–243).

Lewis' objection to such humour should give us particular pause insofar as it signals the potential for humour to hurt others, and the manner in which humour can be aligned with callous or cruel treatment of particular groups. Such cautions are pertinent when considering the political and social work of provocative humour. However, there is a limitation with his analysis, one that sets up the potential for possible objections and complications: in offering his verdict, Lewis emphasises the content of comedy independent of other elements such as form and context. His category of killing jokes is a broad tent that includes a range of diverse comic texts that operate in markedly different cultural spheres for markedly different purposes. Thus, while initially based around the combination of comedy and representations of violence in movies like *Nightmare on Elm Street* and in terms of characters like the Batman villain, the Joker (it is an infamous story involving this character that provides the inspiration of Lewis' nomenclature), he eventually expands the category of killing jokes to include tasteless joke cycles, *Jackass*, action movie quips and the political commentary of Rush Limbaugh. What binds this wide assortment of comic examples together for Lewis is not any formal convention or even family resemblance: rather, they operate as a category to the extent that they "violate norms against decency and kindness and … draw much of their power from their outrageousness" (2006, 44). That is to say what sits at the heart of Lewis' category building and consequent critique is the orientation of such humour towards a set of norms and standards that he unreflexively regards as unquestionably desirable, dominant, and, above all, normal.

The limitation of such an approach to provocative humour arises as a consequence of its disregard of the specificity of the texts under consideration and the subsequent elevation of the analyst as the sole measure of offence. As a consequence, Lewis' approach too quickly collapses the analytic distinction between different manifestations and contexts of humour—offered by "comedians" such as Rush Limbaugh, on the one hand, and the texts to be addressed here, on the other—on the basis of their disrespectability in the eyes of the analyst. However, the forms of

provocative humour under examination in this chapter not only situate themselves in very different (a)political contexts from those offered by Limbaugh and, in so doing, appeal to different potential audiences, but also, and more importantly for the current analysis, operate in different aesthetic and affective registers. The killing humour of someone like Limbaugh addresses itself to an audience's pre-held beliefs and assumptions about which groups and figures are unworthy of respect: there is no reverence paid to the subject, and no acknowledgement that the butt is anything other than what the humour has declared it to be. Such dismissive quips function to express scorn and disdain for their victims and no aspect of the text suggests that the audience should think otherwise. We might say that such humour takes an active stand against what it perceives as "political correctness" in a manner that presumes its own rectitude. Such humour therefore does not concern itself with offence so much as it seeks to enact a "tough" stance with regards to the complaints and sensitivities of others: it is not the audience who are intended to be offended, but rather an "oversensitive" and "aggrieved" third party who thereby function as a sort of secondary target.

In contrast, as I will address, the humour of *Chappelle's Show*, *The Sarah Silverman Program* and *Four Lions* acts simultaneously not simply to undermine but also to highlight the social sanctity of the subject. The transgressive nature of the humour on display here does not arise from the demolishing of social taboos, but rather arises out of a contradictory balancing act between respect and disrespect, rather than simply through the mockery of an agreed upon scapegoat. It is not a hypothetical third party which is here offended, but rather the primary audience: the same viewers who laugh are simultaneously those who are offended. Therefore, as I will illustrate, the humour of *The Sarah Silverman Program* or *Four Lions* does not attempt to downplay the sensitive nature of its subject—if anything it seeks to amplify it—so that when such taboos are encountered they seem all the more profound. In neglecting this distinction—between humour that steamrollers niceties and humour that becomes entangled within them—Lewis overlooks the subtle aesthetic distinctions and demands upon the spectators that can be productively understood in terms of the mobilisation of provocative humour. It is this paradoxical, perhaps even hypocritical, engagement with taboos that crucially informs the mode of provocative humour that will be examined here.

"The N-Word Family": *Chappelle's Show* and Linguistic Taboos

The comedic output of Dave Chappelle cannot be reduced to the Comedy Central television programme, *Chappelle's Show*, which he produced, wrote and starred in from 2003 to 2006. Indeed, Chappelle enjoyed a successful stand-up comedy career both before and after the success of the programme, and successfully practised his brand of controversial humour in other contexts, including feature films. However, *Chappelle's Show* marks not only a stable and easily accessible archive, but also a site at which Chappelle retained creative control while still adapting his particular form of provocative humour for a general and relatively broad viewership. In the opening monologue of show's first episode, Chappelle underlines this point when he declares: "I'm serious when I say this is my show, this is my show, I can show you all whatever I want." *Chappelle's Show* therefore serves as a pertinent example through which to investigate the media manifestation of Chappelle's race-centred controversial comedy. The show ran for two and a half seasons, during which time its basic format would remain stable: Chappelle would deliver a monologue to a live-recorded audience interspersed with skits and musical performances. While it certainly addresses a range of social issues and popular culture reference points, at its core *Chappelle's Show* is a programme premised upon engagement with social taboos and edicts surrounding the (American) experience and understanding of race. Lauded as "one of the funniest and most incendiary series of American television in the early 2000s" (Haggins 2006, 206) and "a milestone to our culture (sic)" (Wisniewski 2009, 1), *Chappelle's Show* has thus been celebrated for its fearless comic engagement with the racial politics and prejudices of contemporary American life.[1]

In particular, the humour of *Chappelle's Show* consistently revolves around the acknowledgement or performance of stereotypes, most frequently of African Americans, but also other racial categories of contemporary America. This engagement with race takes place in the context of comic sketches built around fantastical scenarios or pop cultural references, where the stereotypes in question are parodied, exaggerated, implicated in incongruous situations or sometimes simply serving as a backdrop for pop-cultural references and the spoofing of celebrities. The potential provocativeness of *Chappelle's Show* can thus be at least partially understood as a particular manifestation of a widespread social anxiety

regarding structures and vocabularies of racial and racist representation, especially where they are employed in an ostensibly casual and cavalier fashion.

One of the key, and most contested, sites at which *Chappelle's Show* explores racial prejudice is in relation to the taboo comedy of racial slurs. This can be seen, for example, in one of the more challenging and subversive instances of *Chappelle's Show*'s comic articulation of race, the "Frontline: Clayton Bigsby" sketch, which closed the first episode of the show and which is flagged in the DVD commentary by Chappelle and his co-writer, Neil Brennan, as a statement of comic direction and purpose for *Chappelle's Show*. In the monologue that sets up the sketch, Chappelle describes it as "the wildest thing I've ever done in my career," and a fake disclaimer adds that: "For viewers sensitive to issues or face, be advised that the following piece contains gratuitous use of the 'N' word. And by the 'N' word, I mean Nigger. There, I said it." The sketch takes the form of a fake current affairs report about a blind white supremacist, Clayton Bigsby, played by Chappelle, who is unaware that he himself is black. During the nine-minute sketch, Bigsby rails against non-white groups to a reporter; ventures out into the world where he is confronted by a group of white supremacists, who attempt to intimidate Bigsby and are confused when he joins in their racist jibes; racially abuses white youth listening to hip-hop; and then addresses a white supremacist meeting dressed in KKK-esque robes and hood. When Bigsby eventually unmasks at the request of the crowd, one of the attendees' heads literally explodes in a shower of comic gore. The central conceit of the sketch is thus the incongruity of a black man acting as a white supremacist: a comic contradiction that drives the central narrative of the sketch. However, there is also another key site of both humour and offence in this sketch—the centrality of which is flagged by the warning disclaimer—a stream of racist invective and particularly hideous racial slurs, primarily, but not only, directed at African-Americans.

In her discussion of the Bigsby sketch, Bambi Haggins suggests that it is uncomfortable for a white audience, because Bigsby's inhabitation of an "authentic" albeit unsavoury white identity reveals the performed nature of their racial whiteness (2006, 222–224). However, in offering this interpretation, Haggins underplays what she herself singles out as remarkable about the sketch—its strikingly prolific use of usually forbidden racial epithets, where "over the course of the nine-minute sketch, the word *nigger* and other racial epithets against African Americans

(including 'coon,' 'jungle-bunny,' and 'nigras') are uttered twenty times—which must be some sort of record for broadcast television" (2006, 224). In her reading, however, this singularly provocative language is only a source of discomfort insofar as it contributes to the making visible of "whiteness as a cultural construct" (2006, 221). Haggins' reading thus prioritises a high-level conceptual model of identity as the site of viewer engagement over the immediate affective shock that can accompany racist language, particularly the culturally taboo "n-word." Thus, while Haggins' analysis offers a plausible interpretation, it overestimates the importance of identity over what the sketch itself flags at the beginning as its most contentious element: the shock of linguistic taboos that precede and even enable both the humour and the critique of identity. As Richard Gray II and Michael Putnam argue, the n-word operates in this sketch as a "linguistic taboo," which they suggest Chappelle exploits to comic effect (2009, 20). The simple uttering of the n-word, particularly in a comic context, can be understood as an unexpected, shocking, and thereby potentially (offensive) humorous gesture. This interpretation is only reinforced in the commentary where Chappelle and Brennan reflect at some length on the role of language taboos in the sketch. It is therefore not the straightforward unveiling of whiteness that creates the grounds for potential offence and discomfort, but the repeated evocation of racial stereotypes widely considered offensive. This (liberal) discomfort enables the humour of the sketch, where humour is premised upon the treatment of sensitive topics through intentionally inappropriate means that contravene normal standards of sufficient respect. Hence, while Haggins' reading would have potential offence arise as the result of a cognitive exercise of interpretation, offence—and especially offence tied to humour—may also be understood as a more immediate and affective response in reaction to the public broaching of taboo topics: what Haggins refers to elsewhere as the "oh, no he didn't" component of humour (2006, 187).

This line of reasoning can be developed further in light of a second example from the second season of *Chappelle's Show*—"The Niggar Family"—a sketch whose basic premise is a fictional *Leave it to Beaver*-esque sitcom that features a white family whose last name is "Niggar." This conceit sets up multiple moments of incongruity between the exaggerated white blandness of the televised family and the frequent and inadvertent attribution to the family of racist stereotypes: a baby is said to have "Niggar lips," the "Niggar boy" is described as "a talented

athlete and so well spoken." This central incongruity is pushed further, but also disrupted, by the introduction of Chappelle into the sketch as the family's "coloured" milkman, who serves to not only emphasise but also intensify the racial and racist incongruity at work in the sketch. In the first instance, Chappelle achieves this through doubling-down on the basic premise of the sketch, referring in almost every sentence to the family as "niggars" (and once referring to the father character as "Mr. N-word") while also pushing the conceit to breaking point when he suggests that he "doesn't want to get between a niggar and their pork," and that he "knows how forgetful you niggars are when it comes to paying bills." As provocative as such material might be, the apex of the sketch arises when Chappelle, having exited the scene, pops back into shot, stares right at the camera, and yells loudly and without context "Niggars!" The addition of this moment works to shatter the comic conceit of the previous material by openly acknowledging to the camera that the humour of the sketch is not based (or not simply based) upon the incongruity of whitebread sitcom and contemporary taboo, but rather upon the repeated utterance of the linguistic taboo, which Chappelle returns to here in an exaggerated manner (Fig. 5.1).

The importance of Chappelle's remark, which makes no sense within the diegetic conceit of the sketch, is that it intentionally overplays the central gag and, in doing so, unsettles the comedic work of the preceding incongruities. Chappelle's out-of-context exclamation thus dramatically shifts the immediate interpretation offered by the sketch by emphasising the comic offence potential of the n-word in itself, rather than as the exploration of an incongruous scenario: expressed in terms of Freudian joke theory, Chappelle rips away any pretensions to "joke-work" and instead revels in the tendentious, uncomfortable comic taboo of the n-word (2002, 128–130). In this moment, then, Chappelle clues us into the extent that it is not the interrogation of racial categories which is the source of discomfort in *Chappelle's Show*, but rather the means by which that interrogation is performed: the direct representation of racial stereotypes in a manner calculated to push against social niceties and expectations, especially when this is realised in conjunction with the frequent use of taboo racial epithets. Thus, though certainly not the only means by which the programme engages with issues of race and racism, *Chappelle's Show*'s prolific use of the n-word in sketches such as Clayton Bigsby, the Niggar family and others stands out as one of its clearest and most immediate provocations towards shock.

Fig. 5.1 Dave Chappelle crashes a scene in the "Niggar Family" (sic) sketch to yell a racial slur directly at the camera (Chappelle and Brennan 2003)

Moreover, with his fourth-wall shattering declaration, Chappelle also draws our attention to a crucial feature of provocative humour more generally: if it is to produce scandal, humour cannot remain safely anchored within the text. Rather, provocative humour almost inevitably strays beyond the immediate bounds of the text through the mobilisation of comic tropes so potentially provocative that they negate boundaries between the fictional and non-fictional and thereby make a claim on the lived existence of its audience. Just as here Chappelle's character stares directly into the camera to address the audience beyond the text, so is provocative humour more generally directed explicitly outwards in a self-aware fashion. In this instance, such self-awareness manifests itself in the reflexivity of Chappelle's performance as his direct address to the camera that projects the slur beyond the bounds of the fictional space. Through his disruption of the apparently self-contained text, Chappelle directly confronts the viewer with the scandal of the racist term. The

formal aspects of the text are crucial here because rather than minimising or down-playing the potential offensive nature of these remarks, the meta-textual form of the sketch directly flags them as operating at or across the edge of acceptability. *Chappelle's Show* thus demonstrates how provocative humour performs textual double-duty: both overtly establishing the limits of what may be said or presented, and then crossing them. The offence is not therefore simply the question of a text breaching expected social and cultural standards, but violating norms which the text itself establishes as legitimate and worthwhile. Expressions of provocative humour as seen in *Chappelle's Show* are thus premised on a complex operation whereby the text calls on the audience to respect the social boundaries at play and then joyfully disregards that advice.

The unstable nature of such humour—both flagging and thwarting accepted conduct—can be invoked as a partial explanation of Chappelle's infamous and abrupt departure during the filming of the show's third season in 2006: an incident that can be read as an illustration of the political complexities of such humour. Speaking some time afterwards, Chappelle explained his sudden exit in terms of his own increasing discomfort with the racial politics and reception of the show's humour, and his own inability clearly to determine whether his work was challenging or reaffirming racist stereotypes (Haggins 2009, 233–234). As is recounted many times in different contexts, Chappelle's narrative of the event revolves around the filming of a sketch entitled "The Stereotype Pixies," which involved Chappelle playing the part of racially coded "pixies" who, decked out in stereotypical garb, would appear to a range of men and encourage them to act in a manner in accordance with racial stereotypes: for example, Chappelle dressed in a Matador costume encouraged a Chicano man to purchase faux leopard skin car seat covers. During the filming of the African-American Pixie segment, Chappelle was "clad in the costuming of minstrelsy"—what he would later described as "the visual personification of the N-word"—and became uncomfortable when confronted with the laughter of a white crew member, whom he felt was finding pleasure in the racist stereotype on display, rather than the critique intended by the sketch (Haggins 2006, 229). This event precipitated Chappelle's exit from the show and the breach of his fifty million dollar contract with Comedy Central.

Thinking through the event in terms of the wider political aesthetics of provocative humour, Chappelle's reaction can be understood as an implicit recognition of the delicate balance of such material, which

requires the audience both to respect a set of standards and to find their disruption to be comic. Too much respect and the material is offensive to the audience without being comic. Not enough respect, and the humour becomes enjoyment at the uttering of racial slurs and the breaching of linguistic taboo. It is this second scenario that may be thought to inform Chappelle's stated fears that audiences, in particular white audiences, were not sufficiently scandalised when confronted with stereotypes and taboo language: that their laughter was no longer caught up with a sense of shame when confronted with the legacies of oppressive histories, but instead predicated on amusement at the deficiencies and deviations attributed to racial groups through those stereotypes. The taboo-busting provocative humour of *Chappelle's Show*, and Chappelle's subsequent recognition and renunciation of the interpretive pitfalls of such humour, thus speak directly to the ways in which provocative humour always operates uneasily between the simultaneous building up and tearing down of social expectations.

"Holocaust Memorial Smackdown": *The Sarah Silverman Program* and Moral Taboo

The comic career of Sarah Silverman has followed a similar trajectory to that of Dave Chappelle: both comedians work in a style of provocative humour bound up with the evocation and undermining of socially sensitive subjects, and both have consequently experienced chequered and controversial forays into mainstream comedy. Moreover, as with Chappelle's experience with *Chappelle's Show*, Silverman created, wrote and starred in a Comedy Central production, the similarly eponymously-named, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, which also lasted for three seasons. *The Sarah Silverman Program* takes the form of traditional situation comedy with a steady cast of characters, regular locations and twenty-two minute explorations of particular comic scenarios as a venue in which to explore Silverman's unruly, offensive and "overtly hostile" comedy, which is characterised by "ruthless ridicul[e]" and scatological subjects (Shouse and Oppliger 2012, 207–210). Thus, although broadly similar to the more sedate *Seinfeld*, insofar as it is a sitcom about "nothing" (Mizejewski 2014, 95) where the central character is ostensibly a representation of the titular actor, *The Sarah Silverman Program* is in practice a much different and more disruptive comic beast, anchored

by an exaggerated persona who consistently behaves in grossly inappropriate ways as a consequence of her profoundly naïve and self-obsessed worldview. *The Sarah Silverman Program* builds on this basic premise as a means to engage with a broad range of provocative content that integrates puerile humour with politically and culturally delicate subject matters. Thus, whereas *Chappelle's Show* may be considered a focused critique of particular issues of race and racism (with some questionable engagement with questions of gender) via the means of provocative humour, *The Sarah Silverman Program*'s indiscriminate taboo-busting is much more catholic, and arguably more scattershot, in its approach to social conventions and sensitives which thereby complicates attempts to infer any immediate political purpose to the show's comic offence.

The broad range of *The Sarah Silverman Program*'s provocative humour can be illustrated through a quick consideration of subjects treated in a comic fashion during the show's brief first season. Across only six episodes, Silverman: welcomes a homeless man into her home to prove she is more of a humanitarian than her sister's boyfriend (which ends in a fight sequence, after Silverman drives the homeless man murderously insane by publically ridiculing him); takes an HIV test because she wants to hear some good news, becomes convinced she has AIDS, and sets up a self-involved and ill-informed support charity-cum-cult, which she abandons upon receiving her negative test results; delivers an Anne Frank monologue, while wearing a frilly pink dress, at a beauty pageant for children, before adopting and training an orphan to compete in her place (who abandons her after winning); decides she is a lesbian on a whim and becomes rapidly and aggressively over-invested in policing identity borders; and engages in a series of rapidly escalating offensive scenarios while seeking to buy batteries that culminates in a one-night stand with God that ends awkwardly when she tries to turf him out. In later seasons the offensive ante only increases as *The Sarah Silverman Program* features "surreal stories about wetting the bed, marrying a dog, and swallowing a dried-up hermaphrodite baby penis" (Mizejewski 2014, 95). Through the comic exploration of such consistently blasphemous, distasteful and intentionally objectionable material, *The Sarah Silverman Program* brands itself through a mode of humour calculated to mangle the most solemn and serious beliefs of liberal, tolerant twenty-first century society.

In addition, while these storylines certainly demonstrate a repeated lack of concern for sensitivity and decorum, the potential for comic

offence is only heightened though the calculated juxtaposition of such topics with the vulgar minutiae of *The Sarah Silverman Program*. Alongside amoral explorations of sensitive topics, *The Sarah Silverman Program* presents a constant stream of childish insults, casual profanity, non sequitur conversations, and puerile humour concerned with bodily functions: one episode opens with a faux-content warning which states in voice-over that, "*The Sarah Silverman Program* is not for sensitive viewers, if you are such a viewer, now might be the time to go make yourself a nice B[owel] M[ovement]," while in another the secondary story involves Silverman's friend inadvertently provoking a terror raid after farting in a police car. That the episode's extended examination of flatulence through the lens of what, in another context, could be a dark satire of American surveillance paranoia is symptomatic of *The Sarah Silverman Program*'s commitment to undercut any potential gravitas or claims to seriousness that might otherwise be read into the text. As Linda Mizejewski notes in her study of Silverman as a feminist comedian, the show thus builds on a largely male-dominated tradition of combining "gross-out humour and the comedy of political incorrectness … affronts to good taste and middlebrow manners, gross-out and politically incorrect comedy incorrectness overlap in these texts, which likewise defy respect for race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and religion" (2014, 94–95). Such juxtapositions serve to escalate the provocative stakes of the aforementioned scenarios even further by refusing openly to affirm such taboo-busting as scandalous or incisive commentary, but instead to insistently situate such provocative material within an aggressively low-brow context.

The mobilisation of body and political taboos that define *The Sarah Silverman Program* are broadly representative of her larger comic persona which combines outrageous insensitivity with "girl-next-door prettiness" (Mizejewski 2014, 93). The disruptive incongruity of her material is thus further emphasised by a cultivated presentation which is "outwardly non-threatening, in terms of her voice and physical appearance" (Shouse and Oppliger 2012, 207). Drawing on this central contradiction—between ideological norms of traditional femininity and the disruptive vulgarity of her comic material—feminist commentators argue that Silverman's humour of shock and offence may therefore be understood as a critical assault upon both culturally dominant ideas of women's and men's humour (Shouse and Oppliger 2012, 207–208, 212–213) and larger questions about the idealised status of women's

bodies through the "hybridity of appeal and repulsion" (Mizejewski 2014, 107). Silverman indeed has been known to actively address and play with the political potential of this friction as, for example, when, in response to anger following a controversial remark on network television, she asks in a stand-up routine "what kind of world do we live in where a totally cute white girl can't say 'Chink' on network television?" (quoted by Mizejewski 2014, 93). Such a remark crystallises many of the central aspects of Silverman's comedy: not only drawing attention to the conflict between her appearance and behaviour, but doing so in the guise of tone-deaf narcissism and sense of self-entitlement in the face of the struggles of others. By emphasising her performance of "gender expectations of pleasantness and politeness," while also enthusiastically engaging in behaviour and speech utterly contrary to such expectations, she shines a (potentially) critical light on gender conventions even as she embodies them in an ostensibly enthusiastic and unaffected manner. Silverman's engagement with gender is thus indicative of her particular approach to comic offence, where norms, forms and traditions are rendered strikingly visible through their simultaneous emphatic embrace and blunt contravention. In terms of gender, her performance works to disrupt particular ideas of femininity as demure and polite by way of an excessive performance that illuminates the tacit assumptions at play even as it reveals the artificiality of such expectations.

Such a spirit of gleefully destructive self-consciousness is only extended in the context of *The Sarah Silverman Program*, which applies the general formula of Silverman's anarchic deconstruction to the sitcom format itself. As mentioned already, *The Sarah Silverman Program* adheres to many of the expectations of traditional sitcoms, but does so a manner that upends and inverts those classic tropes. Thus, although there is a musically and visually standardised opening sequence, the expository material varies wildly between episodes, contains pointedly irrelevant information and usually ends with Silverman questioning its purpose or losing interest in her narration; while there is a stable cast of affable supporting characters, these prominently include Silverman's explicitly gay but extraordinarily platonic neighbours, Brian and Steve (who frequently demonstrate their mutual attraction through fist-bumps); and while episodes do tend to conclude with reflection upon lessons learnt, these lessons tend to be highly specific and often amoral if not wildly immoral. For example, in the first episode, Silverman learns that:

> Orange cough syrup can make your car fly … [her sister,] Laura needs a man in her life to feel good about herself … Whether, you're gay or bisexual it doesn't matter, y'know, because at the end of the day they're both gross, but mostly [she] learned that elderly black women are wise beyond their years, but that young black woman are prostitutes.

Concluding statements of this kind—delivered to the accompaniment of a cyclic, tinkling xylophone melody, which emphasises the purported innocence of these sequences—appear in every episode as a staple of the show's denouements: their fey tone serving to highlight the monstrosity of Silverman's warped conclusions. These twisted parodies of moral lessons are indicative of the wider tone and structure of *The Sarah Silverman Program*: both tightly bound to, and absolutely dismissive of, the typical conventions of the genre, which it absorbs, distorts and perverts as a matter of course. *The Sarah Silverman Program* adheres slavishly to genre expectations as a means through which to deliver politically incorrect and vulgar humour.

What such aspects of *The Sarah Silverman Program* demonstrate is that—as with Silverman's intentionally hypocritical embrace of gender norms—the provocative humour of the text arises out of not just resistance, but resistance inextricably bound up with the simultaneous reaffirmation of that which is resisted. This double movement of comedy—by which *The Sarah Silverman Program* simultaneously affirms and rejects both its subjects and its form—is most politically complex when considered in the light of the frequent engagement with sensitive material such as abortion, homelessness, Islamophobia and rape. Never is this starker than when the show addresses one of, if not, the ethical horizon of Western thought: the Holocaust: perhaps *the* most taboo subject for humour in contemporary Western discourse. Flippant references to the Holocaust are not uncommon in the show (for example, in the second episode, Silverman chides a ghost who bothers her in the bathroom: "interrupting a Jewish person while they're urinating is like saying the Holocaust never happened"), but nowhere is this so pronounced than in the final episode of the show's final season: "Wowschwitz." In the episode, Silverman takes her sister Laura's plan to build a Holocaust memorial as a challenge and sets out to build a competing memorial. From the slapstick of bumbling Nazi pensioners, to a llama that serves as a "reminder of the holocaust and the suffering of the Jews," the episode repeatedly foregrounds the fact that it is treating the Holocaust—which

Sarah describes in the closing denouement as, "like, the worst thing that's ever happened in the history of ever"—in a tasteless manner and is thereby directly courting controversy and offence. Although there are many candidates, this tastelessness arguably finds its culmination in one of the show's final ever gags which is premised on the combination of the Holocaust with a Muppets reference.

By way of setup, earlier in the episode, Silverman's neighbours, Brian and Steve, have become enamoured with the song "Mah Nà Mah Nà" most widely known as a comedy song number from the first episode of *The Muppet Show* in 1975[2] and which is here emblematic of the couple's goofy mentality. Following a complex series of events, Steve finds himself crawling through a building's air vents in the episode's third act: he is therefore absent during the final confrontation with the Nazi pensioners, however when, as part of a larger conversation, his husband, Brian, yells "the Holocaust," Steve pops out from a ceiling panel to sing the refrain to "Mah Nà Mah Nà": "do doo, do do do," and all the assembled characters laugh at his joke. The comedy of the set piece is difficult to convey in writing, but is premised on the substitution of "the Holocaust" for the nonsense words "Mah Nà Mah Nà" that are the lyrics in the original song. The gag thus reduces "the Holocaust" to a pure signified without meaning and then inserts the words into a nonsense song for what are unreservedly silly narrative reasons. The humour of the gag thus arises from the incongruous juxtaposition of the Holocaust with an intertextual song reference to a puppet variety show, which itself is emblematic of nonsense and levity. In this manner, one of the most secularly sacred historical moments of the twentieth century is "dishonoured," as it were, by a flippant popular cultural reference, and this is only compounded by the fact that the joke—in a manner almost unseen elsewhere in the show—is affirmed on-screen by the laughter that follows.

Although the characters and situations of *The Sarah Silverman Program* are clearly fictional, the social issues addressed, and the offence thereby produced, resonate beyond the text: it is not the character of Silverman who is here offended, but rather the show itself. It is this excess of comic disrespect which characterises *The Sarah Silverman Program*'s particular brand of provocative humour and which belies any attempt to interpret the show in the service of any easily laudable political project by constantly positioning the text within wider (inappropriate) cultural conversations. It is important, then, to note that *The Sarah Silverman Program* does not just trivialise the Holocaust, but instead

relies upon it remaining a serious, sacrosanct and indeed taboo subject in order for the juxtaposition to be as unexpected and jarring as possible. The dialectic between respect and disrespect is thus built into the formal operation of the humour which plays with the wide and socially significant gap between the Muppets and the Holocaust to engender provocative humour. Such humour only works if the butt is held in high esteem and therefore while the show might appear to be undermining the sanctity of the Holocaust, the text nonetheless relies on the high status of its subject in order to be read as comic. Such humour is not simply undermining, but also simultaneously working to sanctify, such material. Thus, while this final joke unquestionably enacts an excessive and intentional tastelessness that complicates any easy liberal-political redemption of *The Sarah Silverman Program*, such a gag does not only render the Holocaust trivial or profane, but also reproduces its morally taboo status as a key aspect of the production of provocative humour. The show's comic treatment of the Holocaust is thus indicative of the political complexity of the humour of *The Sarah Silverman Program* which, while certainly not respectful, retains a sense of reverence towards its sensitive subjects and therefore cannot be fully subsumed and explained through recourse to a carnivalesque model.

The Pratfall of Death: *Four Lions* and Political Taboos

Like Silverman and Chappelle, Chris Morris is a controversial figure, especially in his native Britain. Though responsible for a number of comedic texts on both radio and television since the late 1980s, Morris came to particular attention for his provocative faux-current events programme, *Brass Eye*, which originally aired in the late 1990s to critical acclaim and public outrage. Premised on the deadpan presentation of absurdist stories about controversial subjects, the humour of *Brass Eye* served as an introduction to the dark humour of Chris Morris and his penchant for pitch black provocation. Morris' more recent project, the 2010 feature film *Four Lions*, treads similarly controversial ground recounting the comic misadventures of four British-born Islamic terrorists—Omar, Waj, Faisal, and Barry (they are later joined by a fifth member, Hassan)—who attempt to bomb the London Marathon. The humour of the film is largely character-based and is premised on the squabbling of the would-be jihadis: while Omar serves the role of the hero-protagonist, the other four are all broadly comic characters.

For example, Waj is particularly stupid: he gets into a quarrel at a Mujahedeen training camp in Pakistan, because he cannot comprehend the relative direction of Mecca. Faisal is similarly dim, albeit quieter—in one scene he disguises himself as a woman by covering his beard—while the white convert Barry is ridiculously gung-ho and paranoid in combination with a demonstrably patchy knowledge of Islam (in a manner reminiscent of the politics of Rick from *The Young Ones*). Much of the humour of the film is thus driven by the conflicts between these characters as they bicker over bomb-making, target selection and anti-surveillance techniques. Complementing such character comedy, the film also contains slapstick set pieces, such as when Omar and Waj misfire a surface-and-air missile at the Mujahedeen camp—missing an American drone and killing Osama Bin Laden—or when a choking Barry is killed in the final act by a helpful passer-by who accidently detonates his explosive belt by performing the Heimlich manoeuvre.

Consequently, although less bluntly aggressive in its humour than Morris' earlier work, *Four Lions* nonetheless continues in his distinctive brand of potentially provocative humour characterised by the deadpan combination of comedy and sensitive media-political narratives. Although Morris himself has characterised the film as a "farce" (quoted in Roberts 2009), the humour of the film is much more complicated than the pratfalls and mistaken identities such a description might bring to mind. Indeed, much of the humour of *Four Lions* emerges out of the mismatch between the political identities of the central characters as religious terrorists—the bogeymen of the early twenty-first century—and the realities of their quotidian lives. The implication of concrete and comically fallible human figures within the framework of politically charged discourses acts to politicise the otherwise apolitical physical and farcical comedy of the film, by bringing those discourses into disruptive contact with their actual enactment. However, what is even more important is that these comic moments of farce never entirely eclipse the existence of these characters as terrorists. Hence, while the film certainly has its share of terrorists-as-idiots—in particular as expressed through the character of Barry, or the aforementioned missile sequence—the humour of such moments may be understand as more than a series of comic encounters and events that befall would-be suicide bombers. Rather, through the comic terrorism of Omar, Waj, Faisal, Hassan and Barry the politically saturated notion of the terrorist is brought into confrontation

with the materiality of its participants in a manner that appears as necessary and inevitable.

The comic materiality of the *Four Lions*' protagonists is made particularly clear in one of the film's key sequences where the gang, fearing the authorities are closing in, transport their bomb-making equipment between safe houses. The humour of these scenes is primarily premised upon the volatile nature of the explosives: Barry drives aggressively over speed bumps, while his passengers grimace in expectant horror; Hassan screams in terror when a friendly passer-by throws him a bag that he has left behind; in order to cushion possible jostling of the explosives, the gang run through the streets in a comic "squat jogging" position. All this material is build-up, however, for the culmination of this comic sequence: Barry, Waj and Hassan have assembled at the new safe house, and catch sight of the dim Faisal, apparently lost, in an open field a few sections away. Propelled by his momentum, legs kicking wildly, bags held aloft to keep the explosives stable, Faisal is running in an exaggerated comic style down a gentle slope. The others call out to him with teasing encouragement, and as Faisal re-orientates his awkward gait towards their voices they laugh at his ineptitude as, captured in a long shot, he leaps a low stone wall, and lands lightly but unevenly amidst a flock of sheep. However, even as he rights himself, Faisal slowly begins to topple over in a classic slapstick pratfall that is punctuated—as he hits the ground—by a sudden explosion. With a sudden and violent burst of flames and sod, the explosion obliterates Faisal (and a sheep), and thereby distinguishes Faisal's fall, and *Four Lions* more generally, as a different and more serious matter than the usual slapstick of farce.

In the wider context of the film, this explosion acts to remind the audience of the deadly serious stakes that underpin this comedy of errors and thereby undercuts any reading of Faisal as simply a comic fool: rather, he is a comic fool who is committed to terroristic violence. Faisal's accident reveals the comic potential when the highly abstract and politicised category of the menacing terrorist is manifest in particular concrete bodies that cannot ever fully materialise the infinite threat of terrorist violence. In this comic accident, we thus have an abstract category—terrorism—rendered concrete through its particular human manifestation—the fatally clumsy Faisal—which illustrates how the humour of *Four Lions* is not just a consequence of terrorists who happen to be idiots, but rather represents a politicised humour wherein abstract narratives of terrorism and terroristic violence are rendered comic through

representation in particular, material forms. In this manner, *Four Lions* begins to dismantle the otherworldly nature of the terrorist: not as simply enemies or fools, but as the comingling of discursive regimes of terror and everyday folk. Moreover, Faisal's fall may also be read as more widely indicative of the conflict between the threatening discursive spectre of terrorism and the material reality of contemporary England that structures the wider incongruity of *Four Lions*. Without the epic tone of the action narrative on display in traditional surveillance-spy dramas like *24* or *Spooks*, terrorism begins to seem out of place amongst mundane rituals and popular cultural touchstones; subsequently, ideas that in other circumstances could very easily be the subject of a real media panic, appear incongruous and ludicrous.

The comic confluence of terrorism and the everyday thus operates as a central tenet of *Four Lions*' humour. For example, when the group make use of an online children's social media platform, Puffin Party, for covert communication, the mechanics inherent to such a system almost immediately render any terrorist activities incongruously out of place. Thus, following a dispute with the other members, Omar tries to make amends via Puffin Party, the visuals of which involve two cartoon puffins, one wearing a top hat and a monocle, conversing through speech bubbles. When Omar's wife asks what he is doing, the gag builds to a climax as Omar describes how the others' puffins won't speak to him, and "Barry's puffin's turned all red and is hiding under the pirate hat." Forced to exist in the real world, actually to use a children's game to communicate, rather than lurk metaphorically in the shadows, these terrorists are rendered absurd through the restrictions and expressions of the child's play they have co-opted. Nothing menacing could occur via Puffin Party without simultaneously being rendered comic. Such a structure—where Manichean violence collides with the commonplace—recurs constantly throughout *Four Lions*, from Waj's poignant belief that the afterlife will be like the English theme park Alton Towers, to the recurring use of Toploader's chart-topping 1999 cover of "Dancing in the Moonlight," (most notably playing in the van while the group are on their way to conduct their attacks on the London Marathon), the film demonstrates the ridiculousness that arises when the hypothetical actions of would-be terrorists are situated within those moments of quotidian, explicitly British, mundanity, which are usually absent from news media and serious fictional accounts of terrorism. *Four Lions* not only works to re-entrench and illuminate incongruities, hypocrisies, and discrepancies

within political discourses through absurd performance, but, in this instance, reveals how apparently serious ideologies operate through the excision of the inevitable comedy of material incarnation.

There is still, however, one more step to the politicised humour of *Four Lions*; one which is endemic to the film itself and arises out of the lack of fit between the subject of Islamic terrorism—possibly the perfect mix of state politics, death and religion in the current moment to ensure straight faces all round—and the narrative and aesthetic priorities of humour. The ultimate politicised humour of *Four Lions* is produced out of the mis-fit between the subject matter and the logic of the contemporary comedy film. This is most evident in moments that adhere diligently to the demands of the generic comedy text, such as when Omar's family provides him with the emotional strength to carry on in his moment of doubt at the end of the second act: the saccharine nature of this scene is uncomfortably compromised by the fact that his son is encouraging his father to go through with his plan as a suicide bomber. Though this powerful conflict between the ostensible seriousness of subject and the non-seriousness of humour is evident throughout the film in every gag and one-liner, it emerges most strongly at moments when the film jokes knowingly and directly about loss of life. Near the film's climax, the group, who are on their way to attend the London Marathon disguised as wildly costumed runners for charity, are stopped by a policeman, who tells them "you're going to die in that gear lads." Barely missing a beat, Omar replies, "Yeah, quite likely. It's all for a good cause though." Finding humour in the double meaning of this quip, the audience is confronted with the implication of mass death within this one-liner: to appreciate the humour, one must accept that these characters plan to detonate themselves in a crowd (Fig. 5.2). The comic logic of this humour is pushed further and further as we approach the end of the film and it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid the realisation that these characters intend to kill themselves and dozens of others: a happy ending is all but impossible, because if the characters succeed in their madcap underdog scheme they will perpetrate a terrorist act that most viewers of the film would have a very difficult time countenancing. Thus the provocative humour of *Four Lions* not only takes up a charged issue as the fodder for laughs, but in so doing acts to cast the stability of that issue's moral co-ordinates and one's relation to them severely into doubt.

Fig. 5.2 The protagonists of *Four Lions* are stopped by a police officer while preparing to infiltrate the London marathon in fancy-dress (Morris 2010)

Provocative Humour and Self-Reflexive Offence

As we have explored through the examples of *The Sarah Silverman Program*, *Chappelle's Show* and *Four Lions*, provocative humour highlights controversial social topics, aggravates existing tensions and unsettles fragile social consensus. This mode of humour does so by reaching beyond the bounds of the text, and addressing the audience as if it were conducting a direct intervention into factual conversations. Not just a vehicle for working through social or political messages within the text, in the case of provocative humour it is as if characters interact with and offend against the real sanctified categories themselves. Thus, though concerned with obviously and unmistakably fictional scenarios (which distinguishes provocative from uncomfortable humour in this instance), provocative humour intervenes in social, ethical and political issues in such a way as to render the imaginary status of the comic text irrelevant. No longer simply exemplars or allegories, the comic consequences of the

humour radiate out beyond the safe bounds of the text. In contrast to uncomfortable humour where the experience of the comic is intertwined with an empathic engagement with characters within the text, here it is audiences themselves who are discomforted by the frivolous and flippant address of social taboos that directly intercedes in the expected, and indeed the desired, social order of decorum and respect. The viewership is not witnessing offence in any straightforward sense; they are experiencing it themselves as the improper address of controversial topics produces a form of anxiety that exceeds the immediate reality of the show. One of the consequences of this extra-textual reach is the comic work of provocative humour tends to be discussed directly in terms of texts and authors: flattening out the complexity and depth of the textual plane, such that the worlds, scenarios, characters and relationships are experienced as simply a delivery system for the humour. This is not to advocate such an interpretive approach to these texts—because as has been explored in detail those actual textual details are essential to making sense of how such humour is produced and mobilised—but only to note that whereas uncomfortable humour becomes bound up in the empathetic engagement with the diegetic world behind the joke, here the textual details of that world are always at risk of collapsing beneath the shock of comic offence. Provocative humour reaches beyond the bounds of its own invented territory to speak directly to the audience: to scandalise them not on behalf of a character or with respect to the rules of that imaginary world, but through the mobilisation of ethical or political humour that is calculated to breach the fictional-real distinction.

One of the key features of this comic encounter is how these provocative texts negotiate their comic genres and their common status as works of comedy. For example, as discussed earlier, in its formal construction and reflective exposition, *The Sarah Silverman Program* embraces many of the standard aspects of the situation comedy format, such as narrative structure as well as character and relationship archetypes. Like a classic sitcom protagonist, regardless of Silverman's (horrible) behaviour and (damaging) incompetence, everyone always forgives her and everything works out for the best: no central character ever calls her out for her weird or anti-social behaviour. Thus, not only does the text correspond to many of the expected formal features of a sitcom, but the diagetic world of the show seems generally inured to Silverman's antics: it is only the audience, then, who are cued to the horribleness of her actions. Similarly, *Four Lions* may be understood as a series of escalating

incongruities not just between the characters' identities as terrorists and members of the general public, but also between the film's explicit formal coding as humour and its subject matter of terrorism. *Four Lions* prises open a gap between the fictional world and that of the audience: on the one hand, the familiar formal structures of the buddy comedy (such as *Some Like it Hot*, *Dumb and Dumber* or *The Hangover*) encourage viewers to root for the protagonists as they recognise the three-act structure and narrative signposts of conflict, overcoming and triumph, whereas the ever-present subject matter of terrorism complicates such a reaction for any watchers who identify with the dominant anti-violence liberal framework of contemporary society. Finally, although *Chappelle's Show* operates within the more formally flexible genre of the sketch show, the show nonetheless also manages to overwhelm even those elastic textual boundaries, by way of excessive self-reflexivity. Thus, in "The Niggar Family" scene we have Chappelle's gratuitous, diegesis-breaking shout of "Niggars!": a stark acknowledgement that it is not just the presence of internal puns, punchlines and incongruities that are primarily responsible for the humour of the routine, but rather the repeated evocation of the central taboo. The use of forbidden language reaches beyond any single gag and instead situates the very fact of the text's existence as a joke that overflows the bounds of the text and situates itself directly in wider social controversies for the purpose of humour. Such manifestations of provocative humour work not only to generate humour within texts but also to render the very treatment of such topics ironically comic: generating humour at the idea that topics such as terrorism, the Holocaust and racism could be, and indeed are being, addressed in an amusing fashion.

This self-reflexive self-mockery complicates any attempt to assign a straightforward political aesthetics to provocative humour, which undercuts its own relevance and suitability to act as a forum for sensitive topics even as it enacts it. For example, while Mizejewski is absolutely correct when she observes that "The plots of *The Sarah Silverman Program* are worth noting because they so fiercely resist both sitcom and gender clichés about suitable stories for the perfectly adorable white girl" (2014, 102), at the same time she overlooks how in the same comic movement the text also commits to and affirms so many of those clichés. After all, while to resist conventions and clichés would be potentially transgressive or subversive, it is in no way necessarily comic: while such resistance may offend some, it does not correspond to what would be understood as humour. Instead, what makes such humour both comic and provocative,

is that rather than defy expectations, it both reaffirms and contravenes them simultaneously: adhering strictly to the letter of the sitcom law, as it were, while brazenly defying its spirit. Thus, as with Silverman's gender performance, the humour of these provocative breaches of ideological expectations in *The Sarah Silverman Program* may not be read as a product of resistance in any straightforward sense: rather, the humour arises through resistance operating alongside, and in seeming tandem with, excessive embrace. Such an explanation is even more apt when considering the provocative nature of Silverman's treatment of the Holocaust and other sensitive topics: for this to be comically incongruent, the text must work against itself by being both sacralising and blasphemous. This is what distinguishes Silverman's comic treatment of the Holocaust from the humour of a show like *Hogan's Heroes*: unlike *Hogan's Heroes*, *The Sarah Silverman Program* does not play down either the horror or the historical sanctity of the Holocaust. Indeed, the text actively works to signal its own deviation from an acceptable standard as a key aspect of its humour.

The contradictory nature of such comic operations means that it is difficult to read any final ethical or political statement from provocative humour, which both reinforces and transgresses ethical and political boundaries. This lack of clarity can be perceived even more clearly in the case of *Four Lions* and *Chappelle's Show*. *Four Lions* is far from the straightforward critique of terrorism, which it was hailed as in some reviews (Byrge 2010), because while the film certainly presents humour at the expense of its would-be-jihadi protagonists, it does not do so in a manner that presents their terrorist ambitions as ridiculous. Indeed, for much of the film when characters discuss their grievances and felt oppressions as part of globalised Western society, their complaints are presented as understandable if not entirely legitimate variations on general counter-capitalist and anti-imperial critique. As such, when it is operating in comic mode, the film addresses idiots who happen to be terrorists, rather than idiots because they are terrorists: in comic terms at least, their idiocy has no causal relation to their identity or purpose as suicide bombers. Instead the humour of the film is a product of the encounter between the abstract and fearsome myth of the terrorist and the material bodies of the hapless anti-heroes. Indeed, if there is any criticism of terrorism in *Four Lions* it does not emerge through humour, but rather in the (rare) sincere moments of emotion in the film. It is not in comic explosions, but the sadder and more personal moments—such as when in the final

sequence Omar regrets convincing the dim Waj to go through with the suicide bombing—that the film presents a humanist criticism of terrorism. Thus, while the confused and craven structural incompetence of the British police certainly becomes a target for ridicule, the condemnation of global terror—as opposed to five men from Sheffield who happen to be idiots—is only realised in fleeting moments of sincerity. A more accurate account of *Four Lions* is therefore that offered by another reviewer, who characterised the film as a failed satire of terrorism (Kay 2010). For indeed, if assessed in terms of satire the film is definitely unsuccessful. However, such a reading that privileges satires as the sole political work of humour also absolutely misses the point as to how the humour of *Four Lions* operates. The film falls short as a satire, because this is not humour as a critique, but rather humour as the consequence of the encounter between the farcical lives of the comic protagonists and the larger social myths of fearsome terrorism and terrorists.

As in *The Sarah Silverman Program* it is the encounter between the trappings of the traditional sitcom and the emotional subject matter of a made-for-TV movie that generates humour, so in *Four Lions* it is the gap between the buddy film and the alarming spectre of global terror that produces the wider comic tone. If it is to be comic, the film must therefore shore up that myth, rather than dismantle it. Even as *Four Lions* presents terrorists as bumbling halfwits, it also perpetuates the fear of terrorism in order to retain its comic counterpoint. Finally, then, it should also be hopefully somewhat clear as this stage how *Chappelle's Show* continues this pattern. Just as *Four Lions* needs to bolster a fear of terrorism to retain its humour, so is the provocative humour of *Chappelle's Show* premised upon the continued power of social prohibitions, such as those against the n-word. If such language were deemed acceptable, then the mode of humour in sketches like Clayton Bigsby would shift dramatically away from a self-consciously inappropriate expression of the forbidden to a glorification of abuse and prejudice as the subject of fun. In order for Chappelle's sketches about race to be comic, they therefore need to sustain the power of racial taboos even as they break them. Indeed this is exactly what we see with Chappelle's exit from his show: a fear that his humour is no longer provocative in this manner, such that the taboo breaking is gone and all that remains is humour for those who enjoy racial slurs and prejudice.

What we see in these examples, then, is that the treatment of racial taboos in *Chappelle's Show*, fearful anxiety regarding terrorism in *Four*

Lions, and Holocaust sensitivity in *The Sarah Silverman Programme*, all follow a similar pattern. Provocative humour does not shy away from confrontation; indeed it actively seeks it and foregrounds its own lack of respect. However to do so, provocative humour texts must maintain that the moral code that is transgressed is important and valuable. They require that the text work to shore up the importance of social prohibitions, even as they demolish them. Neither fully disrespectful nor reverential, provocative humour is premised upon the audience retaining a sense of anxiety regarding the permissibility of the humour they are engaging with and can therefore neither affirm nor run roughshod over its subjects. The provocation of this particular mode of humour arises out of a fraught interpretive space, where the extreme breach of social taboo is presented in the context of comedy, but also knowingly cued as a breach that marks itself as beyond the social pale: a tendency made only more apparent by the ways in which the texts on occasion break, or at least nearly break, the fourth wall to deliver these quips. Rather than containing the potential social fallout of the improper remarks by attributing them to a particular character, these shows emphasise their awareness of their social breaches and thus claim uncomfortable ownership over them.

Notes

1. Of all the examples addressed in this book, Chappelle probably comes the closest to defying the structuring assumption of a common Anglophone media culture because of the manner in which its concerns are both explicitly and implicitly addressed to specific US anxieties regarding race and histories of slavery. However, given the wide distribution of American media, the social issues addressed by Chappelle may be considered broadly recognisable—if not immediately affectively resonant—as far afield as the UK, New Zealand and Australia. Moreover, local analogues do exist however: such as the work of 1980s New Zealand Maori comedian, Billy T James. In his exaggerated performance of his own "Maoriness" (and his problematic portrayals of other racial groups) James could be considered an earlier practitioner of the same critical-comic impulse that informs the work of Chappelle.
2. Though the song is frequently discussed in terms of the Muppets, who are the most likely candidate for the subject of this intertextual reference, "Mah Nà Mah Nà" has a long history beyond those particular puppets, who were not even the first Jim Henson creations to sing the tune. That honour goes to *Sesame Street* where the ditty was performed in 1969, and subsequently encored on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Piero Umiliani originally

recorded the tune in 1968 as "Viva la Sauna Svedese," to fairly significant international success, and it has been covered by a wide range of non-puppets, including Henri Salvador, Skin, Cake and a variety of advertisers.

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CHAPTER 6

Humour Without Reason: The Nonsense of Absurd Humour

In contrast to uncomfortable and offensive humour, what I am referring to as absurd humour is not often difficult to watch in any immediately affective sense. Instead, absurdist humour operates in a different register: it is a mode of humour premised in the abandonment of everyday regimes of sense and meaning, rather than decorum and behaviour. Absurd humour is concerned with what *is* rather than what *ought* to be, and therefore does not challenge the emotional or moral boundaries that criss-cross the terrain of lived experience. Rather, absurd humour is the abandonment of less tightly held but more stringently obeyed laws of science and nature, drama and form, deduction and inference. Absurd humour is the humour of unreality: it collects those texts that can be described in terms of nonsense, the wacky, screwball, ridiculous, silly, weird and zany. This, then, is the humour of that which does not make sense, or, in other words, the humour of that which does not adhere to the expected system of rules and logics that structure any given system. Thus, in contrast to the previous two modes of humour, absurdity breaks from rules and logics that are typically understood to be true and immutable, rather than moral and potentially under threat: the breaking of such rules therefore offends sense, rather than sensibilities. In its purest form, absurd humour contravenes physical laws, as demonstrated by Wiley E. Coyote when he walks over the cliff into open space, but does not fall, at least not until he has had a chance to look down and assess the gravity of his situation. However, absurdity as I'm working with it here can be understood beyond the comic fate of a hapless desert

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predator: as hinted at above, it arises in the breach of common understandings of logical behaviour and probability, social function and good sense, and even aesthetic form and narrative consistency.

Recent absurd humour takes many forms, from *The Mighty Boosh* (2003–2007), *Scrubs* (2001–2010), *Community* (2009–2015) and *Flight of the Conchords* (2007–2009), as well as the continued circulation and popularity of pioneering earlier texts, such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969–1974), *The Muppet Show*(1976–1981) and the BBC series, *The Young Ones* (1982–1984). Even further back, *The Ernie Kovacs Show* (1952–1956), *The Soupy Sales Show* (1959–1962) and *The Gong Show* (1976–1978) might be considered particularly early ancestors of the form (Greene 2008). In the current context I have decided to focus upon three highly influential texts, which may also be considered some of the purest examples of absurd humour: *The Simpsons* (1989–present), *South Park* (1997–present) and *Family Guy* (1999–present). It should not come as too much of a surprise that all three of these exemplary texts are animated. Much of the contemporary emergence of absurd humour is animated—from *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991–1996) to *Rick and Morty* (2013–present) via *Futurama* (1999–2013), *bro'Town* (2004–2009) and the Adult Swim programming block—and this is no coincidence, but rather the expression of a fundamental flexibility and mutability in the animated form that is absent in live-action humour (this is not to suggest that all animated programming is absurdist or only absurdist; shows such as *King of the Hill* (1997–2010) are realist in their aesthetic and humour). This tendency towards ontological dynamism is apparent not only in the aforementioned 1940s and 1950s Looney Tunes shorts of Wiley E. Coyote (as well as Bugs Bunny et al.), and contemporaneous work, in particular that of Tex Avery, but also to a lesser extent in early animated sitcoms such as *The Flintstones* (1960–1966) and *The Jetsons* (1962–1963). Not only is it much easier to bend and break the laws of represented physical space within the context of a cartoon, but the inherently anti-realist artifice of the animated text also creates a textual site where the regular conventions of both diegetic reality and narrative hold less force, and are thereby more open to subversion and disruption (Wells 2003, 16). The cartoon is almost always obviously a cartoon, and therefore obviously a text with an author, rather than a straightforward capture and representation of an existing external reality: a point well illustrated by the famous Warner Cartoon "Duck Amuck" (1953), in which Daffy Duck tangles with the paintbrush of

an omnipotent and interfering author (later revealed as Bugs Bunny). Unable to aspire to realist representation, the cartoon uses its own artifice to its advantage to create free licence for formal play. In this manner, animated comedy not only provides a forum where reality-defying humour is easily (and cheaply) executed, but also sets up an aesthetic space where physical and narrative, as well as potentially moral and ideological, disruptions are more easily entertained and interpreted (Wells 2003, 21–22). This fact is only compounded by the historical understanding of animation as a children's medium (Mittell 2003, 33–44), where nonsense and whimsy are historically more permitted than in adult programming.

From the wealth of contemporary animation, I have chosen *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *South Park* because together they form the backbone of the resurgence of animated programming during the 1990s and 2000s, while each in its own way has demonstrated and then destroyed the apparent limits of cultural tolerance for absurdity. Thus, while animation is not the be-all and end-all of absurd humour, the animated nature of these particular shows allows them to realise absurdity in new and formative ways that have had profound influence upon not only the mediated practice of humour, but also the practice of everyday humour, if the take-up on *Simpsons* references into commonplace conversation is any measure. Moreover, by demonstrating that animated programming can achieve widespread popular success, these texts—*The Simpsons* in particular—made possible the boom in animated content that created a demand for further absurdism, encouraging the propagation of absurdist humour beyond animated programming and thereby leading to its increased resonance during the 1990s and 2000s. As a general rule the shows I'm dealing with in this section are massive and ongoing: even more so than the examples explored in previous chapters. It would not therefore be possible to account for even one of them in its entirety. My intention in addressing these texts is consequently much more modest—to present selected representative instances of each as examples of the aesthetic details of the modes of humour that I herein address. These three texts demonstrate the range of comic strategies that can underpin absurdist humour and the different ways in which such humour re-interprets life, politics and art. Together, then, *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *South Park* have established the widely accepted parameters of what it means to live an absurd life at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The Simpsons and Everyday Absurdity

It might seem a foolish idea (one could even say 'absurd') to attempt to write anything new about *The Simpsons*, which is aptly described in *Planet Simpson* as "by far the most important cultural institution of its time: the equal of any single body of work to emerge from our pop-culture stew in the last century in *any* medium" (Turner 2004, 5). You could no doubt fill an entire book with a review of existing academic literature offering similar assessments of *The Simpsons* as a satirical masterpiece; "a critical view of mainstream social and cultural norms" (Todd 2002, 63); "a stealthy subversive bomb sitting in the middle of prime time" (Turner 2004, 9), or a "challenge [to] mainstream cultural and political assumptions, offering a dissenting perspective that seeks to influence the democratic dialogue" (Foy 2010, 2). Moreover, screening its twenty-eighth season in 2017, *The Simpsons* is also the longest-running scripted American television series with widely noted and much criticised shifts in tone throughout its run. Yet despite these complications any attempt to explain the absurd humour of the 1990s and 2000s would be incomplete without some account, however partial, of the adventures of Homer, Marge, Lisa, Bart and Maggie: a manifestation of the ostensibly average American family, living in the small town of Springfield, which is occupied by a host of unusual characters in addition to the family. Thus, I follow Jonathan Gray's assertion that "one could study the program from any number of angles and still only scratch the surface of its cultural resonance" (2006, 9), because I am happy to only scratch in order to examine *The Simpsons* from the particular angle of the mode of absurd humour. This is not to suggest that *The Simpsons* is entirely absurd—it is also largely premised upon satire and intertextuality (J. Gray 2006; Todd 2002, 63)—but absurdity does function as a central operating principle of much the show's exaggerated and unrealistic humour. Thus, I will focus upon a few choice instances picked from episodes that are considered particularly indicative of this mode of humour, and use these examples to speak more broadly about the absurdity of *The Simpsons*.

The basic premise of *The Simpsons*—a show about a contemporary small-town family—is not absurd. Nor, for the first two seasons, were the details of individual episodes, which typically followed well-worn if slightly skewed family sitcom plots of misbehaviour and family conflict. However, in what has been dubbed the show's "Golden Age" (from early 1992

to mid-1997) (Turner 2004, 4) *The Simpsons* dabbled in increasingly absurd stories—Springfield builds a monorail, Homer becomes leader of a secret society, a billionaire hunts for his childhood teddy bear—alongside the merely unlikely: Homer buys a snow-plough or becomes a union leader (this trend was only compounded in the "more surrealistic, less sitcom-based plotlines" of the show's later seasons [Turner 2004, 56]). In one episode alone, the union-based "Last Exit from Springfield" we encounter a broad assortment of bizarre moments that push the limits of credibility: in a flashback to the turn-of-the-century, an unfairly punished young worker proves absurdly prescient when he predicts the economic rise of Japan; top-of-the-line braces periodically release a perfume entitled "Calvin Klein's Obsession… for Teeth"; the power plant owner, Mr. Burns, has a penguin in his tropical aviary and a thousand monkeys working at a thousand typewriters; in a joyful montage, Mr. Burns and his assistant attempt to run the plant without the workers, and end up unleashing vengeful robots. All of these incidents, some of which are explicit, others very subtle, may be considered examples of absurdist humour that generate humour through defiance of the credulity of the viewer. Moreover, they do so against the backdrop of what several commentators have called the show's "realism," rooted in its non-cartoon physics, emotional resonance and non-idealistic portrayal of contemporary life (Gournelos 2008; Mittell 2001, 23–24; Turner 2004, 31–32, 52–53). It is in contrast to this realist baseline that the humour of *The Simpsons* as absurd—rather than simply incongruous—humour is pushed ever closer towards nonsense: that which literally makes no sense. What this means in practice is that the diegetic reality of the show—while retaining the recognisable prejudice and priorities of the contemporary world—stretches the bounds of coincidence, probability and behaviour in ways that constantly threaten to invalidate the show's diegetic and textual consistency, but never quite do so. *The Simpsons* is a world of the highly unlikely, but never the impossible.[1]

At its most extreme, these passing moments of absurdity can expand beyond the role of throwaway gags to serve as central points of plot advancement, exposition and denouement. This brand of absurdist humour can be seen in the episodes "Marge vs. the Monorail" (1993) and "Homer at the Bat" (1992), which are both regularly included in critics' top ten *Simpsons* lists and showcase different aspects of absurdity. In the first example, "Marge vs. the Monorail", the absurdist high-point of the episode is reached at the end of the first act, featuring a

town meeting where the citizens debate how to make best use of a cash windfall. Following a series of pedestrian suggestions ("we could use the money to hire firemen finally to put out that blaze on the East side of town"), a smooth salesman named Lyle Lanley (whose appearance and modus operandi echoes that of conman Harold Hill in the stage musical and film adaptation of *The Music Man*) convinces the town to invest the money in a monorail public transit system. He does not, however, do so through reasoned argument, but rather in a way that would come to be seen as distinctly Simpsonesque: through song. Lanley's sales pitch takes the form of a jaunty musical number where the townsfolk participate in a call-and-response pattern, which eventually gives way to a mass dance that breaks out onto the steps of the town hall (in a manner, again, reminiscent of *The Music Man* and particularly the "Trouble" number). Clearly here we are in the realm of the absurd: this is a broad deviation from expected behaviour that strains the limits of credibility and sense, but is played as straight within the show's diegetic world. Thus, the Monorail song is neither a utopic escape from the narrative—à la Richard Dyer's influential analysis of Hollywood musicals (2002, 28–31)—nor properly justified within the cause-and-effect of social behaviour. Rather, the song exists within the narrative as a (pseudo)utopian communal act without justification or explanation, which is to say as a doubly absurd act: both in its highly unlikely nature and the contrast between the song's utopian exuberance and mock-utopian subject matter of public transit.

Similarly, while the episode "Homer at the Bat" contains many one-off instances of humour, it can also be read, in its entirety, as the setup for a single instance of absurd humour: perhaps the best illustration of how "often [*Simpsons*'] endings sacrifice logic and ask for considerable suspension of disbelief, and a favourite strategy is to take such illogicality to absurd extremes" (Gray 2006, 51). "Homer at the Bat" revolves around a wager placed on a beer league softball final between Mr. Burns' power plant and a rival: to ensure victory, Burns recruits a team's worth of Major League Baseball players as ringers. The night before the game, Burns crows that his victory is assured and that,

> There's no way I can lose this bet unless, of course, my nine all-stars fall victim to nine separate misfortunes and are unable to play tomorrow but that will never happen. Three misfortunes: that's possible. Seven misfortunes: there's an outside chance. But nine misfortunes? I'd like to see that.

With these remarks Burns sets up and foregrounds the absurdity of what is to come: as, in one of the most celebrated montages of *Simpsons*' history, we are privy to eight discreet and random accidents that befall his players: Mike Scioscia, for example, is diagnosed with radiation poisoning contracted from his work at the plant; Ken Griffey Jr. comes down with gigantism after drinking too much "nerve tonic;" and Jose Conseco spends the night rescuing the entire contents of a burning house.[2] This sequence operates as an apex of Simpsonian absurdity: not only are the individual incidents that befall many of the players absurd in and of themselves, but together they culminate in a massively unlikely coincidence, whose absurdity is directly pre-empted in the text (Fig. 6.1). This, then, is a tour-de-force of *The Simpsons*' absurd rendering of ordinary life, where convention gives way to coincidence, the mundane to the bizarre, and logic to non sequiturs, all while maintaining a fractured and bent commitment to realism. Such a sequence is indicative of how, by

Fig. 6.1 The assembled cast of Major League baseball players (and their particular ailments) from "Homer at the Bat" (Reardon 1992)

giving form to the unusual and unbelievable within the context of a realist world, *The Simpsons* pushes the limits of the believability of the text, but, crucially, does so in a way that does not completely compromise the diegetic world of the text. The absurd humour of *The Simpsons* thus blossoms through the suturing of the madcap to a stretched, but still sturdily realist, context.

South Park and Constitutive Absurdity

The Simpsons thus marks a first iteration of absurd humour, the next step of which can be found in *South Park*: a show that is frequently taken up with respect to *The Simpsons* as an example of the more radical and unhinged possibilities of animated primetime programming. *South Park* follows the adventures of a group of young boys—usually, but now always, revolving around the central cast of Stan Marsh, Kyle Broflovski, Eric Cartman, Kenny McCormick and later Leopold "Butters" Stotch—who become implicated in the bizarre and fantastical happenings of the Colorado town of South Park. Over its twenty (and counting) seasons, *South Park* has engaged in a number of political interventions regarding a diverse range of topics including global warming, disability rights and awareness, racism (on numerous occasions), the War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq, AIDS, factory farming, the BP Oil Spill, child abuse, consumerism, illegal immigration and homelessness—to name only a fraction. Consequently, in conjunction with its intentionally basic animation style and excess of scatological and grotesquely sexual humour, *South Park*'s willingness to take up sensitive and politically charged topics in an absurd and frequently offensive manner has earned the show the analytic sobriquet, "carnivalesque," several times over (cf. Greene 2011; Halsall 2008; Karimova 2010; Larsen 2001; Thompson 2009). However, in contrast to the theoretical limits of such an approach (discussed in Chapter Two) the concepts of absurdity provide a more nuanced lens through which to address the potential political aesthetics of *South Park*'s humour.

In terms of absurdity *South Park* is arguably much more focused, albeit more abrasive, than *The Simpsons*. While *The Simpsons* usually remains anchored to an idea of normality or reality, *South Park* "abandons claims to coherent or believable reality while simultaneously presenting issues, characters, and character traits that are recognizable from either everyday life or from contemporary events" (Gournelos 2008).

Hence, whereas absurdity intrudes upon the reality of *The Simpsons*, it radically disrupts the world of *South Park*. While *The Simpsons* uses absurdity for its own sake, *South Park* implicates other forms within it, and thereby functions as a catalytic vector of absurdity: one that consistently functions to render absurd any forms, events and ideas with which it comes into contact. The crucial distinction here is that, on the one hand, in *The Simpsons* absurdity is ever-present but usually tangential to the central narrative and moral-political concern of a given episode, and therefore scattered in its purpose. As characterised by Ted Gournelos, *South Park* is concerned with "specific … sets of allusion to (and destabilisations of) cultural norms and popular culture," in contrast to the "random sets" of *The Simpsons* (2009, 147). Even the culminating absurdities of "Homer at the Bat" are best considered a collection of associated but inherently distinct illogical incidents and, although several episodes of *The Simpsons* revolve around unlikely premises, these almost always serve as a setup for absurd hijinks, which while unusual or odd, are not examples of humour as such. On the other hand, the premises of any given *South Park* episode are frequently fundamentally absurd in themselves—for example, oil drilling in the Gulf of Mexico unleashes H.P. Lovecraft's dark god Cthulhu—and hence the premise of an episode frequently serves as the central source of absurd humour, which is revisited and rehashed throughout the episode. This is particularly true from the fifth series onwards, after which *South Park*'s absurdity (when not scatological) focuses primarily upon a single issue or idea per episode, the consequence of which is a constant compounding of absurdity with respect to a focused target which is revisited multiple times. With each revisiting the inherent illogic of that absurdity is pushed further and further, with the result that most episodes culminate in what, in the continuity of most television shows—including *The Simpsons*—would be utterly irredeemable nonsense often involving large scale altercations, the wholesale transformation of the town of South Park, violent death and mass property destruction. Thus, whereas the premise of any given *Simpsons* episode may be considered a setup for absurdity, the premise of any given *South Park* episode *is* absurd, and thus functions as an instance of humour in its own right.

This distinction—drawing an unlikely analogy from electrical circuits—can be characterised in terms of a model of parallel versus serial absurdity. Parallel absurdity refers to a text where instances of absurdity happen alongside but independently of one another; serial absurdity

when later absurdities build upon the logic of earlier ones, in such a manner that they compound themselves. *The Simpsons* is an example of parallel absurdities, for while it often incorporates absurdity in its humour addressing political and social realities, it does not do so in a manner that presents those realities as absurd—for example, the prescient young unionist from "Last Exit to Springfield" is absurd in the extent and detail of his foresight, but his unionism is not presented as absurd and neither is the union-busting capitalism of his employer, Mr. Burns, much to the disgust of at least one commentator (Greene 2011, 202). *The Simpsons* thus mobilises absurdity *around* social and political issues, without presenting those issues as absurd in themselves. This is parallel absurdity: a collection of absurdities that accompany and riff upon a central narrative, but do not compound one another. In contrast, the serial absurdity of *South Park* much more frequently addresses such issues *as* directly absurd.[3] This becomes apparent in episodes such as "Go God Go" and "Go God Go XII", where the narrative revolves around representations of both creative design advocates and patronising atheists as fundamentally absurd, and which is then taken to the N^{th} degree in an imagined science fiction future riven by schismatic conflicts between doctrinaire atheist factions (one of whom consists of anthropomorphic otters) (Gournelos 2008).

Through the bizarre culmination of its absurd logics, *South Park* thus realises internally complex forms of absurdity that move far beyond the possibilities afforded by the diegetic world of *The Simpsons*. Instead, *South Park* draws closer to the historical-philosophical meaning of the absurd as a radical disavowal of all meaning in the universe given form through the absolute triumph of meaninglessness (Earnshaw 2005, 95–97). The world of *South Park* is a bizarre, vicious and disordered place where the concerns and conflicts, fears and desires that give life meaning are revealed to be at their root irrational and meaningless. In some instances this worldview arises out of the sheer absurdity of an episode's basic premise followed through to what appears to be its ultimate conclusion—this is evident in the example cited above of the boy's efforts to save an orca by launching it to the moon in "Free Willzy," or an episode like "Towelie," where the boys become embroiled in a convoluted plot centred around a genetically engineered super-weapon that takes the form of a (substance-abusing) towel. On one level, these two episodes can be considered exercises in extended genre and textual pastiche (*Free Willy*, and a number of 1980s children's adventures films,

respectively), which also take time to launch affiliated critiques of animal-rights, the military-industrial complex and merchandising.[4] Yet, despite these ostensibly narrower conceptual frameworks, these episodes can also be conceived as absurdist morality tales, where the boys are at first openly resistant to the absurd nature of their world and the demands its makes upon them, but eventually triumph by accepting the apparently impossible (or at least highly illogical), and meeting it on its own terms.

Such a mode of absurd morality is evident in any number of *South Park* episodes, but one example will suffice here: "Something Wall-Mart this Way Comes," an episode premised upon the arrival of a new big box store, Wall-Mart (a *very* thinly veiled reference to Wal-Mart) in the town of South Park. Though the local people are at first excited about finally becoming "a real town," the store begins to exert a hypnotic effect over them. Soon, the residents of South Park are shopping all hours of the day and night: Stan's father, Randy, hears the store calling to him in the night. After proving unable to sustain a voluntary boycott, the residents burn down the Wall-Mart, but it is rebuilt the next day, and its reign of horror continues as the townsfolk abandon their old jobs to work at the Wall-Mart. Seeking a solution, the boys travel to Bentonville, Arkansas, the home of Wall-Mart, where they learn that if they destroy the "heart of the Wall-Mart… somewhere near the television department" they can "reverse the process." Returning home, the boys—despite the betrayal of Cartman and the best efforts of the apparently living store ("The Wall-Mart is lowering its prices to try and stop us!")—manage to reach the heart of the Wall-Mart, which is revealed to be a mirror: "that is the heart of Wall-Mart—you, the consumer." The quasi-mythical narrative of the plot thus gives way to a critical metaphor about the implication of consumers in capitalist processes (Fig. 6.2). The boys, however, ignore the metaphor and destroy the mirror, which is proven to be the Achilles' heel of the Wall-Mart, which collapses around them before finally imploding. What this sequence illustrates is that while the episode ostensibly produces a critique of consumerism and a moral of self-restraint, this reading is invalidated, however by the final endorsement of the mythic structure: when the boys ignore the metaphor and satirical meaning, and instead pursue the absurd logic of the Wall-Mart as a living, evil entity to its illogical conclusion by destroying the mirror and in doing so save the day. The apparent anti-consumerist lesson of the episode is therefore invalidated by the absurdist logic of the show's humour which takes clear precedence in the development and resolution of the

Fig. 6.2 Stan and Kyle of *South Park* brave the collapsing Wall-Mart in "Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes" (Parker 2004)

narrative: the mirror is not a metaphor; it is the heart of a malicious supernatural force. Hence, in the last instance *South Park* undercuts its own satirical message, by privileging the mythical narrative structures. In the absence of any "heart" in real existing Wal-Marts, there is little message to take away from this text beyond the observation that while the inhabitants of South Park are able to solve their consumerist crisis through recourse to mythically absurd and absurdly mythical means, no such option is available to the viewer. *South Park* doesn't so much critique Wal-Mart and consumerism, as recast the political debates around those topics in terms of absurdity.

The absurd conclusion of "Something Wall-Mart this Way Comes" is far from unique in *South Park*. Indeed, any number of other examples could be furnished from the show if space and time permitted. Such endings demonstrate that while *South Park* certainly engages with social and political issues, it never does so at the expense of its underlying absurdity.

Rather, the humour of *South Park* works to implicate those social and political issues within the excesses of its own absurdity: undermining and undercutting both the normal lines and positions of dialogue that shape those discussions, as well as the potential of any recourse to non-absurd, that is to say sensible, logic to resolve those issues. This, then, is why the notion of the carnival is not sufficient to account for *South Park*—in addition to the objections raised with regard to the overuse and abuse of the theoretical notion of the carnival in the second chapter—because Bakhtin's notion relies upon the retention of a social order of order and chaos, which is simply inverted. In contrast, in *South Park* this distinction between the two is obliterated as both the improper and the serious alike are revealed to be fundamentally meaningless. While *South Park* certainly does contain grotesque carnivalesque aspects, particularly in relation to scatological and sexual content, these are arguably not as central to the show's humour as its exercise in extreme absurdity, which undercuts the potential of any system of meaning to account for existence in what the show presents as a pointless world. The absurd excess of *South Park* works at least partly to neutralise the political challenge some critics see within the show, because the humour on display positions the logic of those transgressions outside the realms of potential sense and meaning and thereby robs them of wider explanatory or critical power. *South Park* is therefore less about a euphoric stepping outside of the rules of ordinary life, as it is about a worried chuckle that accompanies a dismissal of the central sense-making tenets of one's social and political worlds. Or, as the creators of *South Park*, Matt Parker and Trey Stone, have declared "Once you start thinking you're the rational one, the one who's right, and everyone around you is irrational or wrong, that makes you the stupid one. We say, the 'truth is everyone's stupid, hooray'" (quoted in Teeman 2011, A22).

Family Guy and Formal Absurdity

If a consideration of *South Park* is understood to follow from *The Simpsons*, then the next logical step in this progression would almost undoubtedly have to be *Family Guy*: an anarchic animated comedy that first aired in 1999 and which in 2017 is screening its sixteenth season. Hailed by some as the second coming of animated primetime, and disdained by others as a tasteless act of plagiarism, *Family Guy* closely resembles a more intentionally offensive and aggressive iteration of *The*

Simpsons, with the addition of Stewie the maniacal criminal baby, and Brian, the alcoholic, Left-leaning talking dog to the conventional two-child nuclear family setup of the father, Peter, the mother, Lois and the teenage children, Meg and Chris. However, while it is the crass, uncouth, and downright cruel aspects of the show's humour—what sympathetic viewers might call outrageous, while more critical viewers might deem unacceptable—that have garnered most of the media attention, such humour, while certainly an important contributor to *Family Guy*'s intermingled notoriety and success, is arguably not even the most distinctive or definitive mode of comedy associated with the programme. Instead, what has come to define the humour of *Family Guy* is a particular comic technique that is most commonly known as the "cut-away gag."

The basic formula of a cut-away gag involves a passing reference by one of the characters, most frequently the father figure, Peter, to an unusual situation or juxtaposition, frequently involving a combination of various historical, popular cultural or topical elements: the 'camera' then cuts to a visual representation of that scene, whose internal logic is then played out to comic effect (*The Simpsons* and *South Park* also feature cut-away gags, but they do so in a much more limited and sparing fashion).[5] While it is impossible to account for the sheer scale and diversity of these gags—whose limits are effectively bound only by the imaginations of the show's creators—a few examples will hopefully suffice to provide some sense of the types of humour here on offer: the Lindbergh baby flushes itself down a toilet; Brian dreams that he and Snoopy are in the 1970s science fiction film *Logan's Run*; Peter's ancestor invents golf and racist exclusion from golf courses; Stephen King half-heartedly pitches a book about lamp monsters; the devil checks a list of things Peter has sold his soul for; Brian appears in a psychedelic Warhol-style music video; Bing Crosby teaches Peter parenting techniques and beats him with a belt; Robert Mapplethorpe draws sexually explicit street caricatures; inner city street toughs solve math problems. This list could fill pages.

These cut-away gags operate as visual non sequiturs that are effectively autonomous with respect to the plot of the episode they appear within, and as such do not respect any traditional narrative logic; in their execution, they constitute an absurdist breach of the conventions of sit-com form and narrative. Not only are these cut-away gags absurd in their premises, equivalent to miniature *South Park* episodes, but they are also absurdist in their relation to the overall plot structure, which is to say

that they are absurd in form as well as in content, in that they constitute a deviation from the expected path and progression of logical narrative. Even when the content is utterly banal or uninterpretable—as is indeed sometimes the case, especially in later seasons of *Family Guy*, where cut-away gags have been in Russian or even represented as "missing" or mis-cued, to the fourth-wall-breaking disgust of the show's characters—the cut-away still represents an instance of humour by virtue of its incongruous break with expected narrative convention. The cut-away is therefore not only an opportunity to represent an absurd situation, but also as a device whose break from the plot itself comprises a form of comically absurdist interruption of formal narrative conventions. In *Family Guy*, form itself becomes grounds for absurdist humour.

However, while such cut-away gags are the most prominent symptom of *Family Guy*'s comic experimentation, they are not the only means by which the show breaks with the narrative and formal conventions of television comedy. Absurdity also lies at the heart of the show's penchant more sustained and disruptive comic spectacles. Three such examples—the Shipoopi song from "Patriot Games," Peter's fall in "Wasted Talent," and the chicken fight, originally appearing in "Das Boom," but eventually extending across multiple episodes—will serve here as an illustration of the lengths to which formal absurdity is taken in *Family Guy*. The first of these, the "Shipoopi" song occurs in the episode "Patriot Games," where Peter is hired to play for the NFL team, the New England Patriots. After scoring a touchdown, Peter performs an elaborate victory song-and-dance routine, which involves the support of the entire stadium joining him in a rendition of "Shipoopi" from the 1957 musical, *The Music Man*. Although arguably more narratively justified than *The Simpsons* musical number, "The Monorail Song," discussed above (which shares a common point of origin in *The Music Man*), this mass performance of "Shipoopi" is even more absurd in several different ways: in the exuberant excess of the performance; in the relative obscurity of the song and the nonsensical nature of its lyrics (Shipoopi is a nonsense term coined by the song's composer that refers to a "girl that's hard to get"); and in the implicit proposition that the crowd is not only familiar with the song, but will eagerly and spontaneously take part in a flawless mass performance. However, what is even more absurd in this instance is the song's position and role within the formal progression of the episode. Clocking in at two and a half minutes, this number constitutes roughly ten percent of the episode's total length while doing very little to

advance the plot beyond providing a context for Peter's subsequent dismissal from the team. Within the context of a musical film, such as *The Music Man*, such a number wouldn't constitute a deviation, being both expected within the genre and much less intrusive in terms of overall running time. However, within the constraints of a twenty-two minute sitcom, two-and-a-half minutes of singing needs to be understood as a significant breach of generic expectations which is only compounded by the song's lack of relevance to the episode's progression. Although musical numbers are fairly frequent in all three of the animated shows here discussed, there is an expectation regarding such songs in *The Simpsons* and *South Park* that they will advance the plot, serve as a framework in which to offer jokes through lyrics, or do both. "Shipoopi" defies these expectations—unlike "Marge vs. the Monorail" it does not advance the narrative, nor does it contain any gags expressed through song—and instead is more akin to a straight traditional musical number: a grandiose rendition of an obscure show tune presented wildly out of generic or narrative context and which is therefore best understood as a joke upon the narrative form and expectations of *Family Guy*.

A similar (lack of) logic informs "Peter's fall," a non-cut-away gag that first appears in the episode "Wasted Talent," and recurs in various iterations in later episodes. The joke first appears in the context of a sequence parodying the 1971 film, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Mimicking the character of Charlie in the original film, Peter hurries home through the streets of his town to share some good news with his family in a shot-for-shot reconstruction of the film. However, roughly twenty seconds into the running sequence, Peter trips and falls. At this point, the music abruptly stops as Peter sits on the ground, clasping his knee, wincing and making sharp inhalations of pain for just under thirty seconds as the animation and audio track loops until the scene cuts to black (signalling an advertisement in the original broadcast). For half a minute, then, the scene consists of nothing more than an animated figure clutching his leg and groaning. This gag can be understood in similar terms to "Shipoopi," where the humour of this instance is a consequence of the breach of narrative rules regarding pacing and repetition. Thus, although when Peter first falls, the humour appears as a moment of parody of the original film—as Peter-as-Charlie's joyful run gives way to the painful reality of an uneven pavement—the humour of this scene is then transformed again by the refusal to cut away. Indeed, this instance

would seem to risk annoying and alienating the viewer in its unexplained and disruptive disinclination to adhere to expected narrative progression, instead holding on a single repetitive image for what appears—within the context of a fast-paced animated show—an eon. The extent to which the episode persists with this unlikely scene heightens the absurdity of the situation: both in terms of Peter's unbecoming behaviour and the breach of narrative logic, where the gag neither progresses nor ends, but simply continues to exist in an absurd extension of narrative space and time beyond the accepted and expected limits of the genre. Moreover, this disruption returns in those instances when *Family Guy* sees fit to repeat the gag on multiple occasions, such as when in later episodes a British version of Peter, Peter pretending to be in *The A-Team,* a *Star Wars* AT-AT walker, and the character of Lois Griffin all reprise the sequence. Through repetition, the alienating effect of the original gag echoes back, further extending absurd rejection of narrative exceptions in the original sequence.

The final example of *Family Guy*'s formal absurdity is also probably its most famous, due both to its sheer gratuitousness and repetition across multiple episodes: the chicken fight sequence. In the episode "Da Boom," Peter mentions in passing how he once came to blows with a giant (anthropomorphic) chicken, which sets the scene for a cut-away gag illustrating that scene (Fig. 6.3). However, while at first this appears as a regular brief cut-away sequence, the chicken fight does not rapidly cut back to the main plot. Rather, the (surprisingly graphically violent) fight sequence lasts two minutes as Peter and the giant chicken act out many action movie tropes: fighting atop a moving truck, hanging from a helicopter, busting into an office block, and finally plunging out of a high-storey window. Nor is the enmity between Peter and the giant chicken restricted to this episode. As with the fall gag, the chicken fight recurs across multiple seasons as Peter and the giant chicken continue their perennial brawl on several other narrative-disrupting occasions, most notably in the episodes "No Chris Left Behind" and "Internal Affairs" where in both instances the fight sequence lasts a whopping five minutes—nearly a quarter of an entire episode.[6] In their sheer length, these chicken fights can be understood as the ultimate expression of *Family Guy*'s absurd narrative digressions, whereby the very form of the text is bent and distorted to comic effect. This is no longer just the absurdity of representing what cannot be, but representation in manner

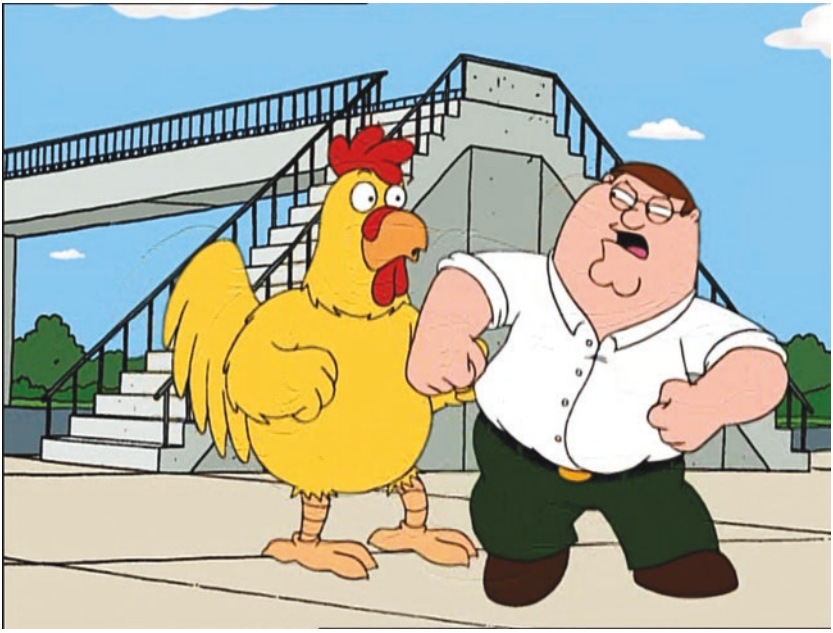

Fig. 6.3 Peter Griffin of *Family Guy* fights a giant chicken for the first time in "Da Boom," (Jacques 1999)

that similarly refuses to adhere to the conventions of narrative. Absurdity is not simply something that *Family Guy* presents, but rather a fundamental aesthetic strategy of the text.

Absurd Humour and the Aesthetic Limits of Interpretation and Understanding

As I have discussed with reference to *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*, absurd humour is that which stretches the boundary of credulity, comprehension and coherence. It is the humour of that which is not expected to happen, indeed *should* not happen (in a formal rather than ethical sense) but does so regardless. As a consequence, it is thus always faced with the threat of disintegrating into nonsense—that which literally makes no sense and is therefore beyond meaningful interpretation—by virtue of its defiance of basic, shared social codes of

understanding. Indeed, absurdity often verges close to what could be thought of as 'silliness' and there is always the chance with the absurd mode of humour that—when faced with what can appear as unintelligible juxtapositions and random digressions—some members of the audience will reject the text as meaningless, rather than as comic. This threat of meaninglessness ensures that this mode of humour works in a different manner from uncomfortable or offensive humour. It operates on a more deeply ideological level that addresses not codes of behaviour, but base assumptions about the structural conditions of cultural meaning (and maybe even physical nature of the world).[7] As a consequence, such humour involves much greater demands upon the audience to commit to a text's particular internal comic-aesthetic logics and fluid sense of causality by which such texts construct their comic meaning. At the same time, however, absurdist humour also has to ensure that it does not completely undercut the profoundly unexpected and unlikely nature of its deviations by too successfully accustoming the audience to its diegetic logics: becoming too obvious in its "randomness." The consequences of which would involve either predictable humour that is logically unlikely but aesthetically obvious (yesterday's absurdity is today's banality), or humourless lyricism. The internal (il)logic of absurdist humour must therefore seek to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the absurd but obvious, and, on the other, uninterpretable nonsense.

This limit-case of the absurd can be productively characterised by way of Edmund Husserl's theory of the absurd and the nonsensical. For Husserl, nonsense refers to that which cannot be interpreted, while absurdity refers to that which can be interpreted but not in a way that corresponds to existing frames of knowledge. As an example of absurdity, he provides the phrase, "a round square," where meaning is possible but it does not refer to any actually existing thing: in contrast, nonsense is illustrated by a "a round or [sic]": a statement that is grammatically incoherent and where meaning is therefore absolutely absent (1970, 516–517). However, whereas for him the distinction between these two realms of absurdity and nonsense is easy to locate—rooted as it is in the clear rules of a domain such as grammar—the same may not be said of the messy and dynamic systems of social logic and meaning that define the relation between absurdity and nonsense with regards to humour. Unlike in the case of formal language, the rules of visual humour, social convention and narrative form are not delineated clearly enough to say for certain that any given instance of absurd humour is not or will not be

perceived as nonsense, or "silliness." Thus, although Husserl provides a useful example of how to characterise the difference between absurdity and sheer nonsense, when applying these categories to the examples of humour, we need to be aware of the constant possibility of movement between nonsense and absurdity.

In addition to the difficulty of defining any given instance of humour, once and for all, either as absurd or nonsensical, there is also the added complication that the boundary between those two categories might be shifted by the texts themselves. Thus, not only can a text move between categories depending on who is watching and when, but in doing so, these texts can also act to shift those boundaries of sense and meaning. What this means is that once a certain unlikely combination or event has been presented on a show like *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, then its repetition appears as the re-articulation of the show's established systems of humour, rather than as the straightforward absence of sense. Repetition of nonsense can thus establish the conditions for new forms of sense, which becomes located in the specific comic logic of the individual show. As a consequence, any given incident of humour will "lose" its absurdity as it is absorbed into the narrative conventions and expectations of established absurd humour. This tendency creates something like a law of diminishing absurdity which leads to ever more extreme and baroque departures from the diegetic and formal expectations of absurd texts.[8]

Though all three texts—*Family Guy*, *South Park*, *The Simpsons*—a times skirt the edge of nonsense, it is *Family Guy* that pushes this tendency to the limits and thereby furnishes perhaps the clearest example of the extreme gaps between accepted convention and comic deviation offered by absurd humour. Whereas the absurdity of *The Simpsons* and *South Park* draws upon the fragile realism of those shows as the stable frame of reference from which it deviates—and therefore these texts peddle absurdity in relation to the basic expectations of everyday life—in contrast, *Family Guy* constantly builds its absurdity in reaction to itself, or at least its own prior self.

Thus, on the one hand, we have *The Simpsons*, which offers absurd deviations from a world almost like our own, hence the highly improbable incapacitation of a team of softball players in separate instances, or a town meeting spontaneously conducted through song, both of which are highly unlikely and unpredictable deviations from usual expectations. Similarly, *South Park* offers a host of absurdities that are on, one level, actually quite likely within their diegetic world, such as a talking towel

or a shopping centre as a cosmically evil force, but which are patently absurd in relation to the viewer's world, and become even more so as any given episode of *South Park* pushes the internal (il)logic of a given situation to its extreme conclusion.

On the other hand, there is *Family Guy*, which lacks a consistent emotional or narrative baseline against which the show's absurdity might be consistently measured. In the absence of any stable site of realist investment, the absurdity of the show has nothing to recalibrate against except its own prior excesses. This free-floating textuality results in a process whereby the absurdity of the text is constantly 'ratcheting up' to ever more extreme self-referential and textually unstable levels (no doubt, *The Simpsons* and *South Park* also evolve in this way, though they do so at a slower pace which can be explained by their more defined grounding in a conventional formal narrative structure and to a [however shaky] form of realism.). This can be seen in the evolution of the cut-away gags, from pop-culture pastiche to increasingly baroque and self-referential commentary on the show itself, or in macro-digressions such as the "chicken fight" sequences, which expand in length and gratuity as a means to constantly defy adapting viewer expectation. Therefore whereas *The Simpsons* and *South Park* generate absurdity with reference to their own realist baselines, *Family Guy* operates as a self-perpetuating absurdity machine freed from any restraint.

Through its unrelenting opposition to social, cultural and formal norms, the absurd form of humour can thus function to undermine any sense of textual stability: it transforms both formal conventions and diegetic expectations from rigorous rules to optional guidelines. This process occurs because the deviation from the formal and narrative rules that define absurdity occurs at the level of the text, rather than the level of character. Consequently, there is no space from which the text can reprehend this deviation, without breaking the fourth wall: a formal device that *The Simpsons* and *South Park* have largely resisted. As this absurd deviation from the norm goes unnoted and unpunished in the text, this then has the effect of altering the apparent sanctity of the textual frame of reference, which thereby appears increasingly open to manipulation and defiance without censure. Subsequently, any sense of fundamental textual normality can come to be increasingly flexible and ductile. The absurd mode of humour makes the stability and certainty of textual normality appear fragile and, through force of sheer repetition, absurdity can introduce doubt into the dominant logics of causality and

narrative. This process works to stretch the foreseeable limits of comic doubt, such that audiences become more able and willing to interpret more and more extreme deviations from cultural norms as possible sites of humour rather than nonsense. This constantly shifting, autophagic movement of absurdity illustrates how humour can act as an ever-expanding and evolving aesthetic logic that constantly pushes against the audience's capacity and desire to make sense of scenarios and narratives that push existing limits of sense: which is to say, absurdity thereby trains audiences to find comic meaning in nonsense which is thereby reinterpreted as absurd humour.

There are three major consequences of this expansion of absurd doubt. The first relates to the means by which an absurdist text works to secure a meaningful comic interpretation, rather than silliness or nonsense. As suggested earlier, it is necessary that an absurd text secure the acquiescence of the audience to its comic (il)logics, otherwise it will appear as completely meaningless. What this process involves is the text cultivating a trusting relationship with the audience, so that they will regard a text's extreme deviations from epistemological normality as somehow motivated and comic, rather than as nonsense. Under the conditions of such a relationship, the audience is called upon to place more trust in the explanatory power of the aesthetic of humour than they are placing in the stable existence of logics of causality and probability derived from outside the text. In this instance, trust in the text allows doubt in the conditions of reality, reversing what might be thought the typical arrangement where an audience assesses a text based on their knowledge of reality, and which often requires what is referred to as the "suspension of disbelief." Moreover, this suspension differs from that associated with other texts, such as science fiction or the superhuman exploits of action heroes, because in the instance of absurd humour, the audience is not just withholding judgement, but instead actively anticipating deviation from the expected. Suspension of disbelief typically involves the establishment of a hermetically sealed alternate set of narrative beliefs, but with absurdity the audience is encouraged instead to read deviation from the norm as contravention of the expected. In effect, the viewers are not so much anticipating an alternate set of social and physical rules as the unmotivated disruption of existing rules. As such, they are called upon to place their faith in the aesthetic logic of humour above their faith in their experience of reality and thereby cultivate what may be figured as a "desire for disbelief."

This is not to say that the audience completely abandon their desire for stable reality on the advice of a cartoon, but it does mean that the utmost sanctity of the metaphysical real may develop some hairline cracks under a constant barrage of absurdity. This possibility then ties into the second consequence of the expansion of absurd doubt, whereby the shifting (il)logic of epistemological uncertainty makes it increasingly easy to perceive and entertain the possibility of unpredictable events. In this manner, absurd humour has the potential to make an intervention into the popular "risk imaginary," by which fears and narratives of risks are interpreted and judged to be credible or not (Salter 2008, 235–236, 243–244).The introduction of absurd doubt into epistemological uncertainty does not mean the end of a common metaphysical frame of reference, but it can work to foster an attitude that sees the potential for gaps and slippages all around. In one sense this can lead to scepticism as regards the sanctity and obviousness of political and ethical discourses, which come under heavy critique in *South Park*. Moreover, it is not that *South Park* simply ridicules claims to justice or narratives of freedom, exploitation or duty, but that it pushes and warps those narratives until they appear absurd by virtue of their own internal inconsistencies and assumptions. In so doing the text undercuts those explanations of the world which would seek to construct themselves as complete and inviolate, and instead raises the possibility that absurd and unforeseen outcomes may lurk deep within their assumptions. However, this consequence of absurdity may also be understood to work on a wider register, beyond particular explanations of the world, to undercut any sense of certainty at all. To this extent, absurdity can be regarded as part of a larger sociocultural shift, characterised by Ulrich Beck among many others, as a "risk society," which self-reflexively assesses the potential for unforeseen elements to emerge out of metaphorical blue skies (1997, 27–29). This mode of humour is not therefore just the disruption of existing risk imaginaries, as suggested by Mark Salter, but instead can also potentially produce an aesthetic mode more conducive to the perception and perhaps acceptance of ever-greater and "unlikely" sources and motivations of the unexpected (2008, 244–246). To think absurdly is to conceive of the notion that that which is unforeseen, which openly and blatantly contravenes the most fundamental rules one accepts for one's physical world and society, may still happen and that events, programmes, projects and texts might not unfold as predicted.

A third consequence of absurdity follows on from the second, and acts as something of a corrective to the suggestion that absurd humour might propagate some form of existentialist and overarching feeling of uncertainty. After all, absurd humour requires more than just the intrusion of an utterly unexpected occurrence: the other essential ingredient is a means to make sense of the deviation and to read it as more than nonsense. Simply put, absurd *humour* is more than just the unexpected; it is the unexpected that can be understood through indirect and unimmediate logics of explanation. Of course, for the most part, when encountering stark deviations from expected scenarios in everyday and political situations, we actually already have an interpretive logic at hand: the mere fact that a thing is seen to have *really* occurred provides a form of explanation couched in the brute positivism of sensory experience. Yet, absurd (il)logic also has a role to play here, for it posits another way in which to interpret deviation from expectation that is not mutually exclusive with reality-based explanations. Rather, the absurd mode if humour provides an aesthetic means by which to interpret actual material occurrences as absurdity. This interpretive strategy does not focus on the need to recalibrate one's expectation of the world to achieve correct understanding, but instead fixates on the moment of deviation as the proposition of two contradictory frames of reference. This focus on the contradiction—rather than on the desire to achieve a correct perspective—is symptomatic of an absurd perspective that regards the world through multiple lenses of contradictory explanatory frameworks, rather than seeking to establish one correct and final worldview. This does not mean seeing the world as any less a site of risk and the unexpected, or "correcting" the perception of risk: in fact, the absurd view is arguably even more motivated to see the world in terms of deviations from the expected and slippages between systems of rules. However, rather than being seen as threatening, these deviations and slippages are seen as comic. The absurd perspective is not after a universally correct way of seeing the world, but rather acknowledges multiple unresolvable viewpoints, whose differences are a site of pleasure, rather than anxiety. The aesthetic logic of absurd humour can thus be thought to cultivate a way of being in the world that is prepared to locate common logics of explanation across widely diverse frames of reference, that is more open to the possibility of unexpected breakdowns in the expected metaphysical, social and political order, and that is able to interpret those breakdowns in a manner that does not try to resolve them away.

On these grounds, absurd humour almost begins to bear a family resemblance to the much more serious and severe tradition of the "theatre of the absurd:" both make use of representationally and formally unconventional forms to challenge existing regimes of sense and meaning. However, in contrast to the claims of some that "[*South Park*] is an exemplary incarnation of an older literary tradition, Theater of the Absurd" (Fallows 2008, 67), contemporary absurdist animation cannot be considered to enact a similar existentialist logic to that earlier tradition. On the one hand, the theatre of the absurd offers a relatively bleak perspective on absurdity as the essential and ineradicable nature of the human condition:

> the human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end, as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. (Abrams 1993, 1)

On the other hand, absurd humour offers a much more upbeat and narrowly defined vision of chaos and meaninglessness. Likewise, whereas, the theatre of the absurd abandoned relatable, sympathetic characters and socially attuned stories to speak to the grotesque, unmotivated nature of the universe (Esslin 2001, 400–403), absurd animation retains recognisable figures with hopes, dreams and desires that structure our encounters with their unpredictable worlds. Consequently, absurd humour focuses upon the lack of sense that informs everyday social rules and norms, political positions and discussions, and perhaps first and foremost the conventions of television in general, and humour in particular. Absurd humour does not however extrapolate from a local lack of meaning any clear sense of universal isolation and alienation. This can probably be attributed, at least in part, to the localised, irreverent context of absurd humour as opposed to the universalising, serious modernism in which the theatre of the absurd finds its roots. The chief consequence of this distinction is that absurd humour may be considered a less challenging, and more conservative, but also more popularly palatable manifestation of social, political and formal absurdity that constantly maps and remaps, draws and erases, the dividing lines between sense and nonsense, nonsense and absurdity, that shape the popular epistemologies of humour in the contemporary moment.

Notes

1. The exception to this rule are the annual "Treehouse of Horror" episodes, which traffic in supernatural and science fiction themes, and the vignette episodes which are increasingly common in latter seasons, and revolve around the *Simpson*-ised retellings of myths, popular narratives and historical tales within frame narratives.
2. Of the other players, Wade Boggs is knocked unconscious in a bar room fight over the greatest British prime minister (he advocated Pitt the Elder, while town drunk Barney is in favour of Lord Palmerston); New York City resident, Steve Sax is arrested by the local police due to what is best described as "municipal profiling;" Ozzie Smith disappears into a void in time and space at the Springfield "Mystery Spot;" Don Mattingly is thrown off the team for refusing to shave his (non-existent) sideburns; and Roger Clemens believes he is a chicken following a sports-hypnotist mishap. Only Daryl Strawberry, the ninth ringer who plays in Homer's position, makes it to the game.
3. This is a not a hard and fast distinction, however: *Simpsons* has also presented certain social and political issues, in particular religion, as absurd, especially in later seasons following the advent of more edgy competitors such as *South Park* and *Family Guy*. However, despite these developments, this brand of aggressive absurd comedy is much more a signature of *South Park* than *The Simpsons*.
4. On several occasions, the creators of *South Park*, Trey Parker and Matt Stone, have referred to Towelie as an explicit exercise in anti-marketing in response to the over-marketing of the show following its initial success. Intentionally conceived as the "worst character ever," he is even referred to as such by Cartman. Towelie has made several reappearances in *South Park* and gone on to achieve almost inevitable ironic success as a marketing icon.
5. This form of humour was the subject of extensive derision in the *South Park* episodes, "Cartoon Wars" part one and two, where it is revealed that the writers of *Family Guy* are a team of manatees who assemble jokes by choosing balls with random nouns, verbs and popular cultural references on them. It is commonly reported online, though impossible to verify easily in any acceptable scholarly manner, that the staff of *Family Guy* have taken up this terminology themselves, and now refer to cut-away gags as "manatee jokes."
6. Given the extent to which it takes up substantial time in the episodes where it appears, the chicken fight (and the other examples discussed) can also be understood in terms of the relative labour required of writers and animators. Both the chicken fight and the Shipoopi sequences free up writers from having to come up with material to fill the episode, but do so at the expense of animators who are required to produce elaborate sequences. Such practices are not uncommon in the production of animated comedies under time constraints.

7. Unlike social cues and codes of behaviour, such systems are not normally considered for debate outside their respective domains of physical science and artistic experimentation. This does not mean, however, that the positing of alternatives to such frames of reference is a scandalous and socially charged comic move. More often, absurd humour is received as much less controversial than uncomfortable humour, because although the frames of reference being challenged are more fundamental to basic understandings of the world and of cultural communication, these epistemological codes and structures are more tied to intellectual, rather than affective, meanings. Very few are outraged when a character defies gravity (though more are when they survive an explosion).
8. The law of diminishing absurdity should not be mistaken for the similar form of the running gag, where a line or event becomes comic upon its improbable and overdrawn repetition. In fact the two are actually opposed, because the running gag relies upon the improbability of repetition within the bounds of expected narrative rules for its humour—the running gag becomes more absurd and therefore potentially funnier on each repetition. The repetition of absurdity, however, diminishes in comic potential to the extent that it appears as stale recycling rather than provocative defiance of narrative and/or comic expectations.

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CHAPTER 7

All that is Solid Collapses into Giggles: Examining the Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Humour

What, then, does *Jackass* tell us about the world we live in? How does *Family Guy* reflect current thinking about globalisation and neoliberalism, or *The Sarah Silverman Program* address shifts in the critical possibility of popular culture? Contemporary humour is a complex, wondrous and many-splendoured thing—operating in and across registers of discomfort, absurdity, provocation—but its immediate connection to the more pressing political and cultural questions of the day may sometimes seem remote to those not already pre-inclined to perceive the world in such a way. At moments ironically meta-textual and at others alarmingly and immediately visceral, the political and cultural status of the emergent forms of contemporary humour that have been examined in the previous chapters can seem uncertain: even as they ostensibly upset existing hierarchies and structures of knowledge, they also come to define hugely successful and influential media franchises closely bound to the priorities of transnational corporations. Thus, having spent considerable time and energy mapping out the particular aesthetic means by which this range of contemporary texts mark themselves in terms of humour and convey humorous meanings, the most pressing task, now, is to address whether and how the prevalence and prominence of such humour acts to shape our shared media culture and larger world. Given the central role of humour in our popular media, what does the emergence of new modes of humour over the last decades say about the manner in which we imagine our social and cultural world, and in particular its political possibilities and problems?

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With that question in mind, the prior chapters of this book have sought to interrogate the politics of humour in terms of "political aesthetics:" an approach to cultural texts that treats them first and foremost as aesthetic objects possessed of particular forms, shapes, arrangements, narratives and logics, but which, in contrast to traditional aesthetic theories, understands those aesthetic qualities to be embedded in political structures of meaning and power. Rather than assessing humour in terms of the choice of butt, construction of comic characters and characteristics, or as a statement of indirect political allegories, humour has instead been understood as an aesthetic operation or set of aesthetic operations that have potential political and even epistemological consequences. In particular I have sought to identify the aesthetic tendencies that emerge in the ascendant and emergent modes of contemporary humour considered in depth in the previous chapters: those recently emergent modes of humour—emergent in the sense outlined by Williams of pertaining to new cultural forms that are potentially, but not necessarily, aligned against the cultural dominant (1977, 123–125)—that are quickly assuming a dominant role in the contemporary Anglophone mediascape. More experimental, more reflexive, more prepared to shock, offend, and confuse, these new iterations of humour mark a transformation of historical notions of the bounds and roles of humour, and a mutation in the aesthetic logic by which humour is produced, consumed and recognised as such. Such transformations only emphasise the necessity of addressing humour as an aesthetic category, because in their explicit confrontations with their own formal and textual limits—by means of chaotic absurdity, provocative inappropriateness or even the uncomfortable encounter with the unclear boundary between real and fictional—contemporary humour texts not only push against the bounds of what is considered humour, but also foreground their own existence as aesthetic artefacts. Even in the case of texts such as *The Office* and *Jackass* which adopt quasi-realist modes of presentation, humour is not simply the naturalistic presentation of comic tableaus, but a self-conscious encounter with the real via the medium of the text that is consistent with larger tendencies towards formal experimentation and play in contemporary humour.

"Laughter Is a Sickness": Political Aesthetics and Popular Humour

The central assumption of political aesthetics—that aesthetics does political work—can be considered at some level a variation on an old, somewhat naïve and somewhat clichéd, belief: that art can change the world. The viability of this belief, of course, depends not only on what you mean by "art," but also on what you mean by "change" and "world," and many might be primed for scepticism with regards to the claim that objects of the cultural sphere can have anything more than a fleeting and superficial bearing on the serious ways of the serious world. Depending on one's schooling and social position, this may be even truer with regards to popular culture vis-à-vis the storied accomplishments of the great works of whatever canon in which one finds solace and meaning. In support of this view, the political and the aesthetic are customarily considered to be clearly distinct entities: the first concerned with the distribution, contestation and negotiation of power, and the second with the sensual properties of objects and the appreciation thereof. In the context of the contemporary humanities, especially cultural studies and associated disciplines, the importance of "politics" has been taken as self-evident and tied to a progressive programme of social equality, while, in contrast, concerns with "aesthetics," especially in the post-*Distinction* era, have been frequently dismissed as misguided and mystifying at best, suspicious and potentially oppressive at worst. *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu's opus on the sociology of art and culture, proved instrumental in articulating the relation between how not just art, but an "aesthetic disposition" towards the world, acts to naturalise social hierarchies, and thereby serves as a proxy and justification for the social power of the dominant classes (1984, 28–58). Such a warning should not be discounted by those who seek to turn an aesthetic gaze on the world, especially when this is done in the pursuit of political investigation, but neither should it serve as the final word on culture transformed into an indirect expression of social privilege.

When considering the political aesthetics of a comic text one thus enters into long-standing debates and discussions within cultural studies and art theory, whether one wishes to or not—not least arguments as to what aesthetics and art even mean, and whether they should be thought of as political. The idea of politically engaged art itself stands in contrast to the dominant notion of "mere art" or "mere aesthetics,"

where art is thought to operate as a kind of ornamentation upon life: a detached mode of being that can offer beauty, fulfilment and even transcendence, but which does not have any real bearing upon the struggles of day-to-day existence. A variation of this tradition also informs conceptions of humour as a simple source of pleasure and nothing more: as in the phrase "just a joke." However, imagining the role of the aesthetic as a possible shaper of social and political worlds is not without precedent: political aesthetics by other names was a shared dream of both the twentieth-century avant-garde and the cultural critics of Western Marxism, who took the ability of art to transform the world as a starting assumption, an aspiration or a philosophical conundrum, with varying results. Debates about the ability of art to shape world views and the correct aesthetic strategies by which to foster revolutionary consciousness were central to the work of earlier thinkers, such as György Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, through Raymond Williams' notion of the "structure of feeling," Fredric Jameson's discussion of cultural logics and more recent scholarship by theorists such as Jacques Rancière and his work on the politics of aesthetics. Art is, in this understanding, a form of politics, and aesthetics a site to be taken up in the name of political struggles and the revelation of exploitative reality. The particular development of a politically minded aesthetic theory no doubt owes some debt to Marxist hermeneutical practice, which was sensitive to the existence of political meaning where it was not immediately apparent (what Rancière refers to as a "meta-politics" [1999, 82–85]), as well as post-Gramscian attempts to explain the failure of revolution whose inevitable success was predicted by the economically deterministic model of history.

One of the immediate difficulties, however, of turning to Western Marxism and Cultural Materialism as a means for unpacking the political work of contemporary humour is the well-documented hostility of the critical aesthetic tradition to popular commodity culture in general, and a less-well-documented but even more pertinent disdain towards humour and laughter. For example, Rancière lists the "joke" as one of the four forms by which the dissensual potential of art has been political neutered: a form by which the dialectical tension of art is recast as a harmless "game" (2009b, 46). Humour thus becomes a way to redirect critical potential towards amusement rather than intervention in the conditions of contemporary thought, what Adorno elsewhere decries as humour's role in reconciling us to the repulsive conditions of

contemporary existence (1997, 64), or confirming "deformed consciousness" (1997, 313). Perhaps even more damning, though probably not particularly surprising, in their foundational study of the "culture industry," Max Horkheimer and Adorno align laughter and humour with the most egregious abuses of that system:

> The triumph over beauty is completed by humor, the malicious pleasure elicited by any successful deprivation. There is laughter because there is nothing to laugh about … laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality. Laughter about something is always laughter at it. (1972, 112)

Such a position is indicative of the tendencies of approaches derived from Cultural Marxism, and the Frankfurt School in particular, to interpret instances of non-serious culture as inherently coterminous with the dominant and dominating impulses of the capitalist culture industry (such a perspective is thankfully not entirely dominant in the critical tradition; in his own discussion of mass capitalist communication, Williams lauds the "genuinely popular scepticism of some comedians" [1989, 134]). The explicit hostility of theorists like Rancière and Adorno towards humour, and indeed non-serious culture more generally, presents a possible problem in the application of critical aesthetic theory to the comic output of the contemporary corporate-controlled media industry.

Nonetheless, despite the tenor and indeed the pedigree of these denunciations of the political aesthetic role of humour, it is necessary to insist upon a political aesthetics of popular—that is to say "mass"—culture. Writing in their own specific historical and cultural contexts, earlier authors conceived of mass culture as an inevitable site of depredation, because this was the dominant interpretation open to them given the cultural hierarchies and structures in which they existed. However, in our current moment, when the critical promise of art seems all but squandered by its widely noted implication within the institutions and markets of contemporary capitalist patronage and logics of performance (Baudrillard 1994, 127–129; Bürger 1984, 52–53; Groys 1992, 14), it seems increasingly necessary to seek critical potential in other overlooked sites. This is the moment of cultural studies when, having lost the notion of art as the sole point of enlightenment, political aesthetics must now "dirty its hands" and contend with an ironic, expedient, hugely complicated and apparently always already co-opted media culture. Once it

might have made sense to stand against mass culture as completely full of capitalism: back when it was believed that there were still pure sites outside the reach of capitalism, lurking in the unconscious or a problematically conceived "third world" (Jameson 1988, 180–181). Now that such sites are gone or critically compromised, it seems essential to go back and re-assess the situation, and return to those areas once overlooked in periods of apparently radical political abundance. At the heart of this is an argument that the non-art texts of quotidian cultural consumption may be considered as aesthetic and therefore political sites, regardless of origin or intended application. Thus, while the origins of these texts as cultural artefacts, produced and circulated within a market of culture fuelled largely by commodification and advertising should not be forgotten, the relative autonomy of the aesthetic allows for a consideration of their cultural meaning in a manner not always over-determined by capitalism. What this approach demands, then, is an engagement with everyday popular and media forms, through the lens of political aesthetics previously reserved for the more refined spheres of "art."

In proposing this mode of analysis I seek to follow Jameson's argument, first offered in a much earlier moment, that one of the overlooked consequences of complete commodification is that "everything in consumer society has taken on an aesthetic dimension" (1979, 132). Jameson thereby asserts that critical theory must abandon Modernism's search for an ultimate pure aesthetic dimension as manifest in the more Kantian moments of the avant-garde, and instead approach the politics of aesthetics as those of a historical, social and thus always compromised phenomenon (1979, 133–134). Following Jameson, then, aesthetics may be considered a vital, yet compromised, site of politics: one which constructs a worldview in a given time and space, rather than aspiring towards complete scientific or transcendent truth. In approaching humour through this lens, I am thus refuting an often overlooked minor but very important detail in Kant's account of humour—or more correctly laughter—as a matter of bodily gratification, rather than the proper pleasure of aesthetic judgement (2000, 207–210). Concerned primarily with the physical affect of laughter conceived as pleasurable oscillation of the organs, Kant reduces humour (and music) to a gratifying bodily sensation, rather than an aesthetic work worthy of an act of true judgement. However, as developed in the prior chapters, the aesthetic aspects of contemporary humour are markedly more complicated than can be accounted for with Kant's proto-theory of incongruity and jiggling

organs. Therefore even if the humour of Kant's eighteenth-century Prussia were sufficiently straightforward to be accounted for in terms of basic incongruity (a subject on which I am insufficiently knowledgeable to offer useful comment), the aesthetic complexity of media humour at the beginning of the twenty-first century is such that in the present context it can and should be understood as a form of the aesthetic proper and therefore a suitable subject for political aesthetic analysis.

Laughing with Adorno and Rancière: Towards a Political Aesthetic Model of Humour

The political promise of aesthetics as a site of both oppression and liberation finds one of its most developed and nuanced treatments in the work of Adorno. While commonly understood in cultural studies to represent the notion of popular aesthetics as a site of inevitable damnation, he is distinct among most of his Marxist peers in his advocacy for the political power of an autonomous art, rather than calling for an aesthetic in the service of politics. Indeed, at times it seems as if he has more faith in art as a site of revolutionary praxis than in any political potential of the proletariat. In opposition to the didactic Marxist criticism of art for art's sake as bourgeois decadence, he rejects such concerns as irrelevant, arguing that art, by its very inalienable nature, is an artificial construction, and therefore is a break from the world that gives rise to it (1997, 5). Whether the artist seeks to comment upon the world or not, by virtue of its being "made," art is not just another part of the world, but a part that has been shaped in a way to differentiate it from its surroundings: the work of art draws its content from the world but also rejects the world through the process of its fashioning. Moreover, in being differentiated from the world, a work of art cannot remain neutral in relation to it: by virtue of its distinction from the world, art necessarily takes a position in relation to it, and thereby can be thought inescapably and often inadvertently to comment on the conditions of its own production. Due to its fundamental artificiality, art for Adorno is therefore incapable of offering any direct representation of reality, and attempts to directly represent reality within art may be considered akin to the state of confusion between art and the real (1991, 64). It is the moment of the artefact's production, its shaping and separation from the natural world, which imbues it with form and meaning. Hence, despite its origin or intended

application, the aesthetic aspect of any cultural artefact can work to inflect, influence, disrupt, confirm and transform existing knowledges of the world.

One of the key corollaries of such an understanding of art (or humour) is that it leads to a refusal to circumscribe the exact nature of art's political contribution in advance. Thus, although he suggests that "artworks tend a priori towards affirmation" by virtue of their detachment and inherent opposition to the empirical, he also cautions that "art can no more be reduced to a general formula of consolation than to its opposite" (1997, 2). What we have in Adorno then—in stark contrast to a common-sensical model of disinterested art—is the argument that art is *always* political and these politics are always up for grabs due to the changing historical nature of art. This too speaks clearly to our earlier consideration of the politics of humour, which many treat as if they were universal, static and fixed, but which upon closer inspection seem liable to shift in relation to different examples and at different moments. Furthermore, as is the case with Adorno's art, humour has also been taken by many philosophers and theorists to tend a priori towards affirmation, here understood on multiple levels, and likewise, it seems increasingly clear that humour is not necessarily always an act of assertion, however much some may wish it to be, and even mistake it for. Integrating these two insights—that, first, art (alongside which, or perhaps within, we can possibly place humour) always contains some form of comment on the world and, second, that the comment of art can never be ascertained automatically in advance as either favourable or critical—we can thus build up an idea of art as that category of objects which always does some political work, either confirming or rejecting the conditions of the empirical world, by virtue of its non-arbitrary artefactual status, by which art is set apart from regular objects of mundane life. Hence, in his conception we have two broad structuring conceptions of the role of art: either art works to sublimate the problems of society and thereby facilitates repressive integration, or it refuses society's demands, rejects the conditions of its creation and through its negativity works to illuminate the gap between happiness and praxis (1997, 13–15).

However, it is not just a matter of determining which category any given example of culture fits into and ticking the appropriate box for repression or opposition. Writing with regards to mass culture, Adorno derides any attempt to understand art as simply the realisation of any crudely or directly political intention, the imposition of which robs art

of its transcendence and thereby reduces it to expedient pseudo-poetry (1991, 61–62). From his perspective, we can therefore not just read off the politics of a text through a consideration of what it declares its politics to be, because such a method overlooks the complicating interactions that arise out of the work's specific relation to its own materiality and mediated existence, which is to say, its form. Even the most purportedly "sublime" and autonomous work of art retains a connection to the material conditions from which it arises: the way in which the work of art grapples with questions of form is an expression of the "sedimentations or imprintings" of historical and political content (1997, 6). From this perspective, an analytical privileging of content over form is inherently misguided because "the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of *form*. This, not the insertion of objective elements, defines the relation of art to society" (italics added, 1997, 7). Thus, what Adorno offers us is a way of thinking through the politics of humour as a direct question of form; we have here an argument for the primacy of form as the site at which that which remains unthought and unresolved emerges within a text. His concentration on form, as opposed to content or ideological thematics, thereby can animate an investigation of aesthetics as a key site of the political in-and-of-itself. In contrast to a humour as an ornament or delivery system—where the comic form exists only to realise direct and correct political content—he proffers instead a model where form is instead understood as the site of potential political liberation (or repression) through its radical and formal rejection of existing conditions of existence. We therefore find in Adorno a model of aesthetics that directs our attention beyond any immediate representation of content, and instead asks us to consider the formal construction of art (and humour) operating in terms of a particular historical and political space.

What is left undeveloped in such a model of political aesthetics, however, is a sense of the actual means by which the aesthetic aspects of contemporary humour might intervene in the political sphere. It is in order to furnish a model that can serve such a purpose that I now turn to the aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière, who offers a contemporary reinterpretation of political aesthetics based on the notion of the "distribution of the sensible."

The fundamental premise of this mode of political aesthetics is that aesthetics constitute a "system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience" (2008, 13) or, in other words, "the way

in which the practices and forms of the visibility of art… distribute spaces and times, subjects and objects, the common and the singular" (2009a, 25). Aesthetics is thereby thought of as a delimitation of the possibilities of what and who may be heard, seen and understood. This aesthetic distribution of the sensible not only determines what is perceived as art, and how it is thereby understood, but also gives rise to the very possibility of politics, in that it traces the boundaries of the community and its membership (2008, 13–14). Therefore, contrary to understandings of aesthetics and politics as fundamentally opposed, here they are fundamentally conjoined, with the very possibility of politics argued to arise out of the particular distribution of the aesthetic (2009a, 30). Aesthetics are thus defined as a fiction that allows the real to be thought through, a proposition which opens up the possibility that aesthetic interventions might re-calibrate and fracture existing political sensibilities (2008, 38–39). This is not a directly didactic or pedagogic cultural politics, and even less a search for "beauty." Rather this is a conception of aesthetics as an indirect politics of epistemologies and form, concerned with the relations between shapes on the page and the shaping of the mind, the priorities of the text and the priorities of change in the social, and the manner in which value is attributed and awarded as a function of political power.

In Rancière's political aesthetics, then, aesthetics are considered to do political work when they disrupt the existing distribution of the sensible: when they function as an intervention into the sensory co-ordinates of the status quo which effects a re-distribution and re-apportioning of identities, subjects, spaces and times. He even goes so far as to declare that "aesthetics is the thought of the new disorder" (2009a, 13). The politics of aesthetics are thus tied to the potential of cultural works to disrupt stable forms of sensory community experience, a potential that he theorises in terms of "free appearance" and "free play" (2009a, 27). Understood in such terms, the aesthetic promises the possibility of a sensory revolution—more profound than any political revolution—which "appears as the germ of a new humanity, of a new form of individual and collective life" (2009a, 32). This focus on disruption can be considered a consequence of Rancière's idiosyncratic definition of the political, which, in his system, is concerned only with disruption and never, as Oliver Davis points out, with the maintenance of power: an "almost exclusive emphasis on the moment [that comes] at the expense of the process by which that interruptive political moment is reabsorbed into the police

order and reconfigures it" (Davis 2011, 94). As has been noted by critics of Rancière, in particular Slajov Žižek, this emphasis on political aesthetic disruption means that the aesthetic is sheltered from the shock of ever having "to endure the conversion of the subversive undermining of the existing System into the principle of a new positive Order" (2002, 238). What this means is that the aesthetic proper gets to remain, within Rancière's schema, entirely a site of disruption and opposition, and art, or proper aesthetic art at least, is spared the indignity of working in the service of power and the existing order. Concordantly, power is thought never to make use of aesthetics in the maintenance and legitimation of its own existence.

However, as suggested above, this particular approach will not do if we wish to discuss mass media humour in terms of aesthetics: to do so in the current terms would be to presume the oppositional and radical function of such texts in advance, and the middle of an analysis is no place to assume the innate potential of, say, *The Sarah Silverman Programme* to bring about the revolution. Given Rancière's broad, and oddly sociological, definition of art as those cultural objects which disjoin themselves from the practical regimes of that which is not art (Rancière 2009a, 72–75), if art did indeed lead directly to aesthetics and hence to dissensus, then citizens of the postmodern consumerist world, in which culture is now everywhere, would be subject to constant destabilising dissensus. Gallery patrons, literature devotees and film festival attendees at the very least, and potentially video-gamers, television viewers and smartphone users would have constantly to adapt to an ever-shifting, profoundly Protean and probably deeply unnerving way of being in the world. Thus, the political aesthetic strategy advocated here needs to be understood as a modified version of Rancière's system, one which is equally attentive to the ways in which the aesthetic can buttress as well as disrupt existing understandings of the world. In this account, it becomes necessary to privilege the Rancière of *The Politics of Aesthetics*—where the narrative form of Virginia Woolf "makes it possible to think through the forms of political dissensuality" in ways that Emile Zola's work does not (2008, 65)—over the more radical claims advanced by the Rancière of *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, where all art is declared to contain political dissensus by virtue of the free play central to aesthetics (2009a, 98–99). If this framework is to be useful then it has to have the room and the ability to distinguish between the ways in which different modes of humour can be political to greater or lesser extents, rather

than operating in a binary system of either, on the one hand, entirely aesthetic and therefore entirely political or, other hand, neither aesthetic nor political. It is in terms of this second understanding of the political possibilities of aesthetics—wherein cultural works do different political work dependent upon the relation of their aesthetic features to the existing distribution of the sensible—that the current discussion takes place. The notion of the distribution of the sensible offers a means to think of humour as neither an oppressive bourgeois fancy, nor an always already political, critical and effective strategy, but as a terrain of potential politics which must be approached and assessed in-and-of-itself in terms of its *capacity* for sensible dissensus. It is with this interpretation in mind that I seek to take up Rancière's theoretical framework as a means to assess the political role of humour as a particularly aesthetic concern.

The political aesthetic task here, then, is to attend to the way in which the precise aesthetic manifestation of humour—as a feature of form that emerges when a cultural artefact is made and therefore separated from the world—enables particular interactions with the cultural conditions of its production, opening up and closing down possible interpretations of the content they portray, and thereby articulating and interrogating how the political function of humour is thus a factor of its aesthetic configuration. The guiding notion of this analysis is therefore that aesthetics in general, and humour in particular, are central sites of meaning creation and propagation that inflect their subject material with a certain politics. However, following Adorno, the politics of a particular aesthetic object, whether repressive or liberatory, cannot be determined in advance. It is therefore not necessary that a cultural artefact be first considered art in order to be thought to have a politics and to be considered political. Rather, I am here arguing that popular media humour is political as an aspect of everyday, media aesthetics, wherein it suggests new calibrations, perceptions and interpretations of the world. The goal here is to assess how the particular modes of humour herein examined can be thought to model certain ways of understanding and approaching our social, cultural and political world. Drawing on the analyses of the prior chapters, I will consider how new emergent modes of humour reflect and produce the dominant liberal democratic interpretation of the political order, while also potentially offering the possibility of new forms of politics that exceed the current limitations of apathy and disengagement. By way of political aesthetics, we can therefore come to understand and appreciate how an apparently innocuous cultural category, such as humour, can in

itself have meaningful political and social consequences that bear on our ideological assumptions regarding our political, economic, social, cultural, spiritual and everyday existence.

The Comic Logic of Late Capitalism

At the heart of this political aesthetic model is the fundamental operation of humour: contemporary manifestations of humour do not depart from the historically dominant textual and formal strategies of the form in ways that would fundamentally invalidate their interpretability as humour. However, they do take up the aesthetic logics of humour in new directions and into rapidly expanding new contexts and applications. Before turning in more depth to those contexts and applications, though, it will be useful to review the aesthetic operation of humour as it has been discussed throughout this analysis. As it emerges in the preceding analyses and discussions, the central aesthetic logic of humour involves the simultaneous operation of multiple frames of social, cultural or epistemological reference. These frames can take the form of extradiegetic social norms, good sense, common-sense, the behaviour and personality of characters, laws of nature, laws of narrative, and affective or tonal registers. I have thus been using the idea of the frame very broadly here: it refers to the unspoken and explicit social conventions and assumptions of behaviour, physical logic, narrative logic, genre, and serious practice that form the background of all humour, from *Friends* through *Jackass*, *Family Guy* and *Four Lions*. In addition, frames also refer to the particular deviations from those conventions and assumptions that arise in comic texts—frames thus also refer to the images, ideas, tableaux and worldviews that arise out of and are implied by trivial yet masochistic behaviour, foul-mouthed children, a coyote running in thin air, a squirrel wearing a hat and a political pundit grilling the cookie monster over his eating habits.

These multiple frames can relate in a number of ways: frames may appear as rules, norms, conventions or laws; often there may be only two frames, but there can also be more; one may be understood as normal, and the other as deviation; both may be understood as conceits; the disjunction between them might be subtle or blatant. However, what is constant is that in humour there exists a plurality of frames that share points of common understanding while also conflicting at other points. Humour is an aesthetic mode that calls upon the audience to entertain

at least two conflicting frames simultaneously.[1] When these frames come into conflict with one another—a character defies social norms, the fourth-wall is broken, a text presents an inappropriate stereotype—the audience is presented with a situation they can interpret as funny. This is the textual operation we recognise as humour. The subsequent perception of funniness therefore relies upon three textual aspects: the content of the frames themselves, the formal relation of their connection and the separation between them. If no connection is perceived, then the incongruity will appear too weird; if no separation is perceived, then it just is. If the interpreter objects to either frame of reference—if she has a strong aesthetic, ethical, political reaction to them—then odds are she won't find the humour to be funny, but that does not make the juxtaposition unhumorous. We can also not like the proposed relation between the two, on the grounds that it may be too extreme or profane.

The three modes of contemporary humour examined in this book can all certainly be considered examples of the different ways in which formal, cultural and political frames interact and conflict, but they do so in ways that complicate the relatively straightforward model presented above. In the most dominant and widespread modes of humour, the relation between the multiple frames is such that one will always rapidly emerge as the dominant or correct frame against which any others can be seen as deviations. In determining which frame is correct, the audience ascertains the difference between the dominant and subordinate frames, finds in favour of the former and thereby resolves the humour. However, whereas traditional modes of humour are premised on noting or enacting a deviation from a norm—such as Jon Stewart's mockery of Bush for his stupidity or Trump's lack of class, or *The Onion*'s substitution of unexpected terms in otherwise conventional headlines—the uncomfortable, provocative and absurd modes of humour not only bring multiple frames of reference into conversation, but they do so in ways that leave the stability of frames or the distinctions between those frames unclear. Uncomfortable humour, as explored through *The Office*, *Jackass*, and *Borat*, not only deviates from formal conventions of comic texts in order to play upon the competing affective claims of the real and the fictional, but in doing so brings into conflict contradictory affective claims towards amusement or embarrassment. Provocative humour such as *Chappelle's Show*, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, and *Four Lions* addresses controversial and sensitive topics through what is presented as the inappropriate textual forms of sketch comedy, situation comedy and filmic farce. By

emphasising both adherence to the comic form and the sacrosanct nature of its subjects, such texts use a first level of conventional comedy as the basis on which to construct a second level of humour premised on their own denial of ethical, social and political norms. Finally, absurd humour in *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and *Family Guy* is premised on the presentation of ever more alien frames of probability, causality and narrative logic that cascade over one another, such that every new unlikely statement is in turn eclipsed by another level of unexpected narrative causality and comic deviation. Such modes of humour do not therefore constitute clear statements of incongruity or deviance: they also constantly pose the question of their status as humour by refusing to resolve in favour of any particular frame of reference.

Thus, whereas more conventional modes of humour operate through the presentation of aberrations and inconsistencies—that can be recognised as such against the background of another more stable and more correct frame of reference—the modes of humour explored here threaten to prolong their unstable, multi-frame state that consists of two or more competing forms of explanation. These can take the form of empathy for real subjects held in tension with amusement at fictional blunders and bloopers; the aghast apprehension of that which is deeply offensive presented in through the form of the non-threatening and comical; or simply never-ending waves of absurdity, each of which reacts against that which came before, sparking off in a new antithetical direction with the sole goal of being different from that which came before. In their formal refusal to commit to any one frame of reference as final and correct, such modes of humour take on a resemblance to the concept of doubt, as it is developed in the work of Vilém Flusser. In his account, doubt is a "polyvalent state of thought" that is premised on the co-existence of multiple frames of reference (Finger et al. 2011, 31). Refusing to countenance one perspective over another, doubt always entertains the search for more possibilities and in doing so destroys or replaces existing faith in any given frame. Similarly, when it works through the prolonged maintenance of multiple frames of reference, rather than quick juxtaposition followed by swift resolution, humour reflects the critical potential of this conception of doubt. This, then, is what sets the emergent modes of humour considered here apart from the traditional, more dominant modes that I earlier aligned with shows like *Friends*. Such older forms traffic in a humour of certainty rather than doubt, where comedy emerges through the clear breach of customs and rules presented as

obvious and legitimate. In such instances, the dominance of one frame over another is clearly signalled and asserted. In contrast, the critical logic of comic doubt always shies away from anointing any frame as correct in a final or confident manner.

This logic can be seen in a text like *Seinfeld*, where doubt not only emerges in the overlapping and competing frames of reference, but is pre-emptively assimilated into the individual frames of reference. Even before they are juxtaposed with interpretations that produce instances of humour, the rule-based frames of reference that structure the world of *Seinfeld*, such as formal and romantic etiquette, are subject to sustained enquiry and exposition in a manner that makes them seem unstable and contingent. Thus, just as for Flusser, doubt serves as a means to unsettle the world—one of the ways in which to cast off the "cotton blanket" of habit that dulls perception (2002, 101)—humour can also be thought to have a common origin in the comparison of two perspectives that are similar, but not equivalent and, as such, can be thought to have a similar epistemological function in the unsettling of certainty. The difference, though, is that in the case of humour this undermining of certainty occurs indirectly, almost absent-mindedly, in the service of an aesthetic category coded as innately and inherently desirable. Hence, whereas the direct articulation of doubt can be threatening or upsetting, humour offers a much quieter form of epistemological instability. Humour sneaks in doubt: it is doubtful almost as an afterthought, though the conflict of multiple perspectives is central to its aesthetic logic. Beyond any sense of ridicule, humiliation or liberation, it is this unsettling of categories that emerges as the political meaning of the aesthetic logic of contemporary humour, and which thereby renders it a political aesthetic form, regardless of what occurs at the level of content. The foremost political consequence of this aesthetic process is an epistemology of uncertainty with consequences beyond any short-lived amusement or laughter. The dominance of humour within contemporary mass media in tandem with the intensification of this internal aesthetic logic of instability in contemporary humour contributes to a wider sense of instability, especially in terms of the social role and expectations around cultural texts.

This suggestion that contemporary modes of humour act to unsettle clear categories of thought and affect brings it into line with an older account of the relation between aesthetics and politics, one which has faded from view in the context of many critical conversations: Fredric Jameson's temporal category of "postmodernism," which he

characterised as the manifestation of "the cultural logic of late capitalism" (1991, 1). Though often ill-defined and frequently overburdened in its long life as a critical term, postmodernism nonetheless can do particularly pertinent theoretical work in terms of the political aesthetics of contemporary humour as a site of openness, imprecision and reflexivity in relation to formal conventions. Aware of the extent to which the reach and dominance of postmodernism have been overstated in the past, I wish to make clear that I am evoking postmodernism as *a* cultural dominant, not *the* dominant, and that I do so primarily in direct relation to humour. The categorisation of contemporary modes of humour as postmodern is partially justified by the fact that the historical era of the texts under analysis roughly corresponds to that period of history beginning in the late 1980s or early 1990s sometimes referred to as postmodernity. However, this connection is not merely one of concurrency, but also of a deeper structural connection between postmodernism and the political work of postmodern humour. Accordingly, the term "postmodern humour" can serve as useful shorthand for distinguishing emergent modes from more traditional modes of humour that persist in the current moment.[2] Postmodern humour is far from the only mode operative during the period studied, and it is certainly not dominant: rather there exists an especially strong strain of residual modes of comedy, particularly within the bounds of the sitcom and late-night formats, where shows such as *Home Improvement*, *Two and a Half Men*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Late Show with David Letterman* and *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* draw upon styles of humour with longer, more continuous and unbroken traditions and continue to enjoy wide popular, if not critical, success.

In evoking the concept of "postmodern humour," I am consciously drawing upon the classic theoretical accounts offered by commentators such as Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Fredric Jameson, where postmodernism emerges as an attitude marked by a constant awareness and suspicion of boundaries and structure, and which is articulated in different contexts as a situation of "hyperreality" wherein the distinction between reality and appearance collapses (Baudrillard 1994, 1–3) or as an "incredulity towards metanarratives," produced by the flight of "metaphysical, religious and political certainties" (Lyotard 1984, xxiv, 77). Though largely out of favour following the 'importantisation' of cultural studies and other humanities disciplines following the 2001 New York attacks and the subsequent shifts in the global political landscape, the cultural situation described by postmodernism, in terms of

surface and simulation, eclecticism and confusion, remains and, indeed, underpins much of the contemporary debate about politics, media and ideology. We have not done away with what Baudrillard refers to as the "panic stricken production of real and referent" (1994, 6), nor have we reversed those perceptual and social mutations that make it increasingly difficult to account for the complicated network of global power, or even space itself (Jameson 1991, 39–44, 50–53). Encountering the world as one might encounter a text, and encountering a text as if one might encounter the world, need not only lead to confusion, anxiety, and reactionary politics. It can also lead, and indeed often does lead, to humour.

In this manner, the political aesthetics of contemporary humour are tightly bound up with the transformations wrought by postmodernism, where a world conceived, at least in part, in aesthetic terms creates increased conditions for the construction and perception of the emergent modes of postmodern humour. The contemporary modes of humour under discussion both draw upon and perpetuate this postmodern aestheticisation of the world. They do so by drawing upon the diminishing gap between virtual and actual as a setup for incongruity, and in the process further complicate and obscure any clear sense of that distinction. Once the world can be understood in the same terms as a text, it becomes possible to deviate and play with the rules and systems of the everyday and their possibly incongruous relations to fictional worlds in a number of ways. These include but are not limited to: the interpretation of the actual world as if it were a fictional world, with the sense of emotional distance such an interpretation might allow; the interpretation of the fictional world as if it were the actual world, with the acute sense of boundaries such an interpretation might allow; and the accompanying sense that anything is now "up for grabs"—that is, anything now is fair game for the defamiliarising and unstable aesthetic logics of humour. Postmodern humour is not, therefore, a clean break that occasions a wholesale replacement of a prior mode of humour with another, but instead operates as a recalibrating of existing tropes and techniques, such that some become more common and popular at the expense of others. Postmodern humour is not a revolutionary aesthetic, but a gradual change that occurs in fits and starts in relation to the structures it employs, the targets (or butts) that it takes, and the audience it presumes.

What this means is that rather than simply introduce humour into a situation as if it emerged naturally within that diegetic frame,

postmodern modes will frequently foreground the primacy of humour to the formation of the text, drawing attention to the structured and constructed nature of humour. In extreme cases, postmodern humour can even directly threaten the stability of the narrative, generic or formal frame of the text. Such an aesthetic tactic often takes the form of a knowing and reflexive approach towards humour, whereby a text's acknowledgement of its own fictional status and function—be it *Seinfeld*'s sitcom within a sitcom storyline in the fourth season, *The Colbert Show*'s unstable sense of its own conceit or *Family Guy*'s more baroque cut-away sequences—allows postmodern humour to subject its own formal aesthetic logics and conventions to comic interrogation. The complexity implicit in such reflexivity indicates how emergent modes of humour consciously and actively circulate in a saturated media culture, where there exists an assumption of advanced prior knowledge on the part of the audience. More than just jokes, such humour offers jokes about jokes, deconstructed jokes, blank jokes, anti-jokes and non-jokes. What these different comic operations speak to, then, is how postmodern humour operates freely across any dividing line between the actual lived and aesthetic realms of everyday life: dragging them into one another, confusing them for one another, grabbing from either realm in order to subject any aspect of either to the unsettling logic of humour that increasingly transcends any attempted barrier to its function. Regardless of whether this distinction was ever actual or imaginary, these modes of humour act to undermine further any sense of this separation's apparent sanctity and correctness. Moreover, as it scrambles this material-aesthetic distinction, such humour contributes to the sense that the world exists in an increasingly malleable state, where things are not always where they should be or related to one another as they are expected to in conventional structures of understanding and order.

This displacement of elements across and between different aesthetic and material registers gives rise to unstructured, disrupted and potentially disruptive expressions of the comic. In instances of offensive and uncomfortable humour, these disruptions take place in terms of the gap between textual spaces and the world as texts both announce themselves as apart from the world through the mobilisation of self-referential comedy and call upon the viewer's sympathy or sense of decorum and propriety. In the case of absurd humour, this comic (il)logic of eclecticism is brought to bear not only on represented content and ideology, but also in terms of narrative and formal structures. These modes of

contemporary humour thus intermingle the aesthetic logics of humour with the real: calling into doubt any potential for the stable register of meaning in either the aesthetic or material realms. Like the logic of the postmodern, this extended logic of humour stands opposed to any sense of purity, which it almost always seeks to compromise and undercut. Purity is not usually considered amenable to humour, except as a butt or an inevitably compromised aspect of an incongruous juxtaposition. Instead, postmodern humour acts as a vector by which codes of behaviour and being may traverse the gap between aesthetics and actual living. Under the aesthetic conditions of postmodern humour, pure and singular sets of meaning are abandoned in favour of plural interacting and contradicting systems of knowledge and reference, which undercut and contradict one another. In short, everything becomes eclectic and all meaning becomes comically unclear.

Moreover, in one final turn of the screw, these disruptive, eclectic manifestations of humour are not static. Rather, they operate according to an internal aesthetic logic of expansion that is given impetus by a constant process of obsolescence, whereby humour constantly invalidates its own previous expression. Indeed, most instances of humour are not as funny the second time around. This is because once an absurdist incongruity or breach of the actual-aesthetic distinction has been produced, then it becomes increasingly predictable: the particular incongruity or disruption at play becomes, if not an aesthetic trope or rule, then at least an example that has existed before. The first time, then, an example is the breach of a frame of reference or rule, the second time it is the codification of that breach into a new aesthetic code. This process is analogous to modernism's search for the new, now re-situated in the context of the rapid production of contemporary broadcast and electronic media. Thus, humour is not experienced as a comic disruption when it is re-encountered, but instead as the repetition of the previous disruption: this is what drives the earlier noted push to ever increasing absurdity, which can also be applied to expansion of postmodern humour more broadly. The consequence of this aesthetic transformation of material subject to the logic of humour from unexpected to anticipated is a constant movement outwards: what is scandalous or unexpected in the first moment is conservative and obvious in the second. In a show like *The Sarah Silverman Program* this march of comic obsolescence manifests in the "progression" of comic treatments of homelessness through disability to the Holocaust, *Jackass* graduates from backyard stunts to elaborate

setups involving industrial equipment and exotic animals, and *South Park* becomes ever more precise and directly confrontational in its portrayal of real life celebrities and political conflicts. Thus we see not just mounting absurdity, but an increasing familiarity with discomfort and offence in the spaces of popular media, alongside ever increasingly extreme forms of discomfort, such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and offence, such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *Tosh.0*. These new modes of humour thus demonstrate a tendency towards constant expansion that engenders a need to colonise new cultural and social ground as a function of its internal logic. As a result, these modes of humour extends their reach, bringing with them a fractious relation to any coherent separation of actual and aesthetic, or indeed any pure frame of epistemic reference, which can be considered both a consequence of the wider postmodern shift, but also works itself to confirm and extend the cultural logic of postmodernism. In this sense, these emergent modes of humour work as an ever-expanding avant-garde of the postmodern coalface, constantly driven by its own self-compromising aesthetic logic to re-inflect existing systems and relations of sense and proper order as a means to generate sufficiently new and unexpected incongruities.

Laugh like no One's Watching: Liberal Drives in the Society of Humour

The various manifestations of contemporary humour all act in different ways to enact a politics of postmodern doubt. In their way, the three modes of contemporary humour explored here could all therefore be seen to support the belief—interrogated and largely rejected in the first chapter—that humour operates as an inevitably liberating and dissenting force that undermines given and oppressive structures of understanding and order. However, there is an important difference in the account offered here in comparison with the orthodox dissent model of humour. Rather than understanding all humour as possessed of an inalienable political drive, the current conclusions are based upon a close consideration of the aesthetic and textual strategies at work in particular representative texts. It is not all humour that is freedom, but only particular forms and iterations: the traditional humour of texts such as *Friends* continues to reinforce norms and mock their deviations, through the ridicule of easily resolved social incongruities. Nor can postmodern

modes of humour be seen as straightforwardly liberating: my characterisation of postmodern humour in terms of a politics of doubt should not be understood as a return to the model where humour invariably equals liberal dissent. Rather, I am arguing for a conception of humour as a complex aesthetic field possessed of its own political priorities, assumptions and consequences. The three modes of uncomfortable, provocative and absurd humour can be implicated within the wider narratives of liberal politics, but they cannot be entirely defined or captured by that particular political logic. For such humour does not so much tear down boundaries and borders as much as build them up, so that it may breach them, unsettle them, and upset them for the entire world to see. Thus, these contemporary modes of humour are not just the manifestation of an impulse towards equality, freedom, tolerance and reasoned dissent, which seeks to define and celebrate proper reasoning and critical subjects; they are also an attack. They are not just an opening up, they are also an unravelling. They are not just dissent, they are also doubt.

Postmodern humour's politics of doubt therefore overlap, but also exceed, the political practices and desires of the liberal projects outlined according to that term in Chapter Two. This is because these emergent modes of humour not only engage in an aesthetic logic of questioning and disruption, but also consistently expands this logic ever outwards: constantly pushing at existing limits of meaningful and stable interpretation. In a sense, then, the political aesthetic logics of postmodern humour can even be considered more liberal than liberalism itself as they consistently and doggedly pursue the internal logic and priorities of liberalism—freedom, dissent, and hostility to determining structures—past the limits of existing liberal institutions and discussions themselves. Beyond particular iterations of the liberal impulse in terms of Left or Right politics, these particular forms of postmodern humour emphatically disrupt and disruptively emphasise all stable social, cultural, economic and epistemological structures. This is not a secondary feature of this humour or an attribute of a particular manifestation; as has been argued, such disruptive work is fundamental to the operation of this aesthetic. It is on these grounds that humour, and postmodern forms in particular, increasingly come to serve as the dominant aesthetic mode of liberal society insofar as they enact logics of incessant question and challenge, while also working to exceed and unsettle the boundaries of liberal politics.

At the heart of this disruption of liberal politics is the aesthetic nature of the politics of comic doubt, which permits the almost unencumbered pursuit of its central driving logic. This is a consequence of the contemporary dominance of what Rancière refers to as the "aesthetic regime of the arts" (2008, 22), under which art and aesthetic practice come to be understood as a distinct sphere of creative play that is free from the rules of everyday life and social interaction. Under such conditions, cultural production is not expected simply to serve a social function, such as conveying meaning, generating of profit or assisting in the accomplishment of a defined task, but is instead permitted, indeed required, to provide affective and intellectual experiences by virtue of its aesthetic form. Thus, postmodern humour texts are able to carry the logics and priorities of liberalism further than liberal politics itself, because as an aesthetic category humour is not usually expected to be bound by social rules and demands. Rather, driven above all else by a central comic impulse, the imperative for the aesthetic of postmodern humour is to follow an internal logic of aesthetic development and experimentation: the aesthetic of humour therefore constantly shifts to encompass new, unfamiliar frames of reference once older joke forms and references have become predictable. These modes of humour enact a self-repeating and self-informing logic of constant interrogation and disputation that proceeds unimpeded due to its aesthetic nature. The tendency of this humour aesthetic is therefore constantly to push towards more unlikely and unexpected comic forms, the upshot of which is that humour is sometimes permitted to breach the bounds of social rules and expectations in ways that other aesthetic forms might not, because its internal logic is tied directly to that breaching. Moreover, the other consequence of this aesthetic logic is a predilection towards constant expansion into new areas to avoid the ossification and stagnation that defines a static comic routine, or one which challenges frames of reference which lack social power or resonance, and which therefore is unlikely to find an appreciative audience.

Borne along by its own internal aesthetic logic, such modes of humour come to occupy a distinctive space within the contemporary mediascape, where they simultaneously enact an aesthetic form of doubt and disruption, while also challenging the constraints that liberal society places upon itself. In other words, such humour operates as both the expression of the liberal community—in that it draws upon shared assumptions of how the world is and enacts the political and cultural assumptions of that community in aesthetic forms—and also

breaches that community, because its internal aesthetic logic means that it will never be satisfied with any state of stability. Accordingly, postmodern modes of humour can be understood to enact an aesthetics of potentially unlimited dissent insofar as dissent remains almost invariably undefined, and as such can be understood as dissent from anything and everything. In this manner, these emergent modes of humour reveal the uncomfortable consequences of an (aesthetic) politics grounded in dissent: the aesthetic of humour is, in effect, content-less, and therefore lacks defined goals. This is not dissent for the purpose of establishing a new, better (more equitable, more fair) order, but dissent for the sake of dissent, which may be considered analogous to what Boltanski calls "alienated critique," that form which "seek[s] satisfaction in the critical gesture itself, and not in what it makes possible to attain" (2011, 114). In its purest forms, where the production of humour is shaped less by obvious external priorities than by the desire to generate laughter through prerequisite aesthetic means, postmodern humour corresponds to a powerful and socially resonant political aesthetic tactic that is not going anywhere in particular. In such instances, humour can thus be understood as an extremely powerful political tactic that operates through an aesthetic form: the pleasurable cultural manifestation of Boltanski's alienated critique. By this I mean that, rather than having a defined endpoint in sight, the politics of postmodern humour are instead driven by an opposition to stability or stasis: they are committed to ever-questioning change. However, this is a tactic that operates in the absence of any particularly defined political programme—which is to say that the politics of these politics are not defined in advance—and insofar as those politics of humour are not decided in advance, they are always up for grabs. To this extent, the politics of postmodern humour are profoundly liberal: concerned only with a doubtful and dissentful opposition to any existing structures.

From a sympathetic perspective, then, the politics of such humour might seem to be unquestionably desirable in their consistent opposition to any form of potentially oppressive structure. And indeed this is true to an extent, and can perhaps be cited as one reason that humour is so often celebrated as a form of aesthetically-realised resistance, especially under authoritarian state political conditions (Herzog 2011; Lewis 2008) or by those who regard the cultural possibilities for dissent to be increasingly limited in "post-9/11" state politics of the USA (Gournelos 2009, 206). Yet the difficulty with such a position emerges

when considered in the light of particular instances of the postmodern aesthetic of humour: in terms of politicised humour, challenging restrictive narratives and established positions can certainly be argued to be doing some good, but also has the potential to lead to confusion and disconnection. This becomes even more apparent when considered in terms of uncomfortable, offensive, and especially absurd humour. It is certainly true that standards of behaviour, comportment and correct speech have been, and continue to be, used as repressive political instruments that oppress groups who do not correspond to narrow ideas of correct subjecthood, or whose opinions depart from orthodoxy. However, it is also arguable that such structures can serve valuable social roles and act to protect as well as oppress marginal or vulnerable groups, or serve as the basis to enact desirable social change (Boltanski 2011, 157). To oppose all ordered structures as part of the same monolith is to ignore the broad details of political structures that make everyday life different under the conditions of, say, American republicanism or historical Australasian social democracy, not to mention Western capitalism or Soviet communism. Hence, in terms of absurdity for example, while a sense of epistemological uncertainty may lend itself to the establishment of radical political positions, undermining a sense of quotidian stability can also lead to fear, confusion, anxiety and a nihilistic rejection of all common grounds of debate and understanding. Thus, when the political work of humour is directed against oppressive cultural and social structures, the politics of these anarchic modes of humour can be seen as inherently beneficial. However, very few social and political structures simply oppress. Rather, political and social structures do just what it says on the box: they provide structure, in that that they give rise to sets of categories and logics by which it becomes possible to lead a meaningful life. These structural categories and logics can certainly be oppressive and invariably will be to some extent, but they can also provide useful and even necessary ways to engage with the world. Humour is the aesthetic that will act against these existing structures, for better or worse.

Moreover, in slightly different, but by no means divergent, terms, we can also understand these emergent modes of humour as both the breach and proposed new beginnings of "distributions of the sensible" to return to Rancièrian terminology. This language better conveys the extent to which the aesthetic logic of humour does not just work in some autonomous aesthetic realm, but can have ramifications for the way in which the world and society are lived and encountered. As a political aesthetic

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

In its commitment to the constant interrogation of the culturally and politically given, the novel modes of uncomfortable, provocative and absurd humour can thus be interpreted as dialectically aesthetic expressions of both the chaotic and constructive aspects of liberalism. Indeed, these modes of humour are the cultural manifestation of dissensual liberalism, which both retrenches liberalism and pushes it into and past its own limits by virtue of its internal autonomous aesthetic logic. In its chaotic motion, humour acts as an aesthetic agent of potentially endless disturbance premised in an utter devotion to freedom. In practice both humour and liberalism have the potential to overemphasise disruption, leading to a fetishisation of the process of change and challenge as

somehow desirable in itself. In the instance of liberalism, this can form the common bond between the apparently opposed discourses of certain aspects of radical anti-capitalism and market fundamentalism, both of which celebrate the endless possibility of dynamic change and mutability as a means to better living. In the instance of humour, this can give rise to texts where the impulse to diverge from expectations is an increasingly dominant aspect of the comic logic, which in turn produces the postmodern excesses of contemporary humour. Postmodern humour thus reflects both the liberating promise and the threatening nihilism of a political project built around critique without the promise of any stable end point or aspiration for a better life. From one angle, postmodern humour is symptomatic of a desirable political tendency to question the world around us: to understand the lack of distinctions between apparently separate spheres of reference and thereby perceive the role of the self as an essential and implicated element of wider structures, to exist within unpredictable and utterly incongruous multiple frames of reference, and to question the self-contained validity of apparently proper and complete political and social narratives. However, at its most provocative or absurd extremes, humour models a fundamental disregard for the ways in which structures of understanding and interpretation might enrich life, as well as oppress. In this sense, postmodern humour both contributes to the aesthetic underpinning of current political life, and provides a widely available form of training on how to make sense of that life, because while it is the aesthetic of dissent, humour nonetheless always requires a way for that dissent to be understood and executed. Postmodern humour is the cultural form of the liberal dissensual moment. However, this does not mean that humour is entirely captured by that moment: as an aesthetic category, postmodern humour maintains a level of autonomy from prevailing political mores and, as such, retains the potential to continue to shape and reshape cultural conversations and narratives in ways that aggressively imagine new ridiculous worlds, where we might all live together in funny, uncomfortable, absurd and unsure ways.

Notes

1. Conceived in terms of multiple, conflicting points of view, postmodern humour might appear similar to either parody or irony, especially as theorised by Hutcheon (2000, 26–28; 1994, 63–64). However, as Hutcheon

herself is at pains to point out, humour, parody and irony are distinct categories (2000, 51–52; 1994, 26). Humour has a different (though often overlapping) set of affective and aesthetic co-ordinates, perhaps most clearly seen in the examples of *Jackass* and *Family Guy*, which are examples of postmodern humour, but certainly not of irony or parody in any simple sense, at least as I have been discussing them. Irony and parody are certainly important to contemporary humour, but contemporary humour cannot be reduced to those categories (or vice versa).

2. This formulation is not meant to suggest that the modes of humour that immediately precede the current examples, and continue to co-exist alongside, may be considered "modern;" that term carries too much aesthetic and intellectual baggage to helpfully illuminate Archie Bunker, Bill Cosby and *The Flintstones*.

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CHAPTER 8

Conclusion: The Last Laugh

Humour is never just a joke. It is a complex and complicated aesthetic mode that plays a central role in the mediated cultural life of contemporary subjects. This is especially true of those subjects who inhabit the rich group of Anglophone nations whose historic orientation towards freedom as a determining political category plays a central role in the circulation and interpretation of humour. Humour, then, is also more than just an aesthetic mode: it is an expression of political assumptions and priorities through a structuring aesthetic logic built around doubt, difference and dissent.

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

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much about *how* we are shown and told as *what* we are shown and told. Through reference to my specific set of comic examples, I have thus argued that the aesthetic logics of interpretation and meaning that structure our encounters with popular texts have important ramifications for how we understand our wider world as a political and cultural space. Aesthetics cannot therefore be reduced to ornamentation or bourgeois mystification, but instead constitutes a central aspect of any cultural artefact through which epistemology and politics are communicated and negotiated.

My second goal has been to attend to the role of humour specifically, as more than just a convenient example, but as a cultural category that demands further study due to the massive economic, affective and aesthetic role it plays in contemporary Anglophone society. One cannot understand and explain our world, particularly its mediated existence, without accommodating humour. Yet, while scholarly attention to humour texts has increased exponentially over the last ten years—and I have sought to engage and account for that scholarship as widely as possible—so much of that work continues to approach those texts without first theorising humour in a manner attentive to the internal variation that is contained within that cultural category. Consequently, it is common to find critics and commentators either privileging overly simplistic one-size-fits-all models of how humour operates as a social and cultural force or adopting a wealth of other interpretive frameworks, from irony to parody to the politics of representation, with only a cursory nod to the specific aesthetic forms of those works. No doubt irony and parody are related to humour, but they do not replace it, or even account for it. I have sought, therefore, to model a necessarily narrow analysis of what I have argued are central strands of the contemporary manifestation of humour, as it exists between and across popular texts, as a way to bring the study of humour texts back to the humour aesthetic itself. Though it may sound absurdly redundant, humour is a central aspect of humour texts, and when we overlook that tautological fact we are liable to miss the complexities of meaning those texts contain. In the preceding analyses, I have thus sought to articulate exactly what it is about those texts that makes them recognisable and interpretable in terms of humour, and to thereby suggest how humour manifests as a definable cultural category.

However, I acknowledge that to some extent such an interpretive analysis is always haunted by the inevitability of its own failure to

completely account for the total meaning of its textual examples. This is especially true in the case of a complicated and contentious cultural category like humour where it is not always immediately evident whether any given text can or should even be interpreted in those terms. By couching my analyses in terms of aesthetics, I have located the burden of meaning almost entirely within the texts, and in doing so largely occluded my own role as a subject in creating and determining those meanings. However, this does not imply that my interpretation is necessarily subjective in any straightforward sense. Not only is the comic nature of these texts massively over-determined by their circulation within cultural spaces where they are marked time and time again as belonging to the broad category of humour, but I also contend that humour is a distinctively closed aesthetic form by virtue of the precise and tightly orchestrated formal balance between sense and nonsense. Therefore, while humour is often figured as constitutively ambiguous, as it has been approached here, humour is actually an incredibly precise formal category because in order to read a given text as comic one must be alert to carefully calibrated forms of deviation, overlap and incongruity. With reference to Umberto Eco's model of open and closed texts, humour is therefore overwhelmingly closed, because it requires readers to interpret a text in the way intended by authors if they are to find it humorous (however, as argued in the previous chapter this is a tightly controlled closeness that then leads to unpredictable openness of radical doubt) (1989). Given the fine balance of comic cues, if an audience interprets a comic text differently from the way in which it was intended then they are unlikely to read it as comic (unless of course they read it in an exceedingly aberrant way and such responses are near impossible to account for in a rigorous way). Thus, contrary to accounts that present humour as particularly open and ambiguous, in practice humour is carefully tightly crafted and operates through sometimes vanishingly small and precisely attuned textual cues. Such tight formal construction is further reinforced by the web of meta-textual and para-textual coding that usually accompanies comic texts: from advertising, television listings, reviews and word-of-mouth to markers ranging from on-screen laughter to the medium of animation to the recognisable internal logics of humour that I have considered at some length.

However, despite the over-determined nature of humour's textuality, it would be remiss to assume, therefore, that the particular identity of the audience is somehow irrelevant to the political aesthetic operation of

humour. In this regard, there is the inescapable fact of my own social position as a (relatively) young, white, middle-class male, which structures my own reading practices and preferences in terms of my tendency to condone and seek out certain modes of humour, to understand and interpret certain texts, and my overall assessment of the importance of humour as a cultural trope. The relevance of this viewing position is brought home by a 2012 study commissioned by Comedy Central—the cable channel behind the original production and US distribution of *South Park*, *The Sarah Silverman Programme*, *The Chappelle Show*, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*—that identified their target audience as the coveted and difficult-to-reach demographic of young men aged between eighteen and thirty-four. In the context of the study, representatives of Comedy Central's parent corporation, MTV Networks (responsible for *Jackass*) refer to such viewers, including myself, in slightly worrying post-colonial terms as "Comedy Natives" who are "comfortable with uncomfortable truths" and for whom "irony has been replaced with absurdity" (Carter 2012): all of which both confirms the categories of my preceding analyses and worries me that I have too easily fallen back into industrially determined categories. Moreover, as the specifically targeted demographic of these texts, my interpretation is no doubt more likely to reflect the intended ideological message of its producers: in the terminology of Stuart Hall, there is a strong correlation between my "decoding" of these contemporary humour texts, and the "encoding" of those texts at the moment of production, such that I am more likely to produce a "dominant-hegemonic," rather than resistant or negotiated, reading therein (1996, 131–137).

As a result of this alignment between my own identity and the targeted audience for these texts, I cannot summarily dismiss the concern that I have acted as the equivalent of those cultural studies strawmen who celebrated the subversive potential of Madonna in the 1980s, and who Thomas Frank decries as "gaping academics [who] uncritically [reaffirm] the mass media's favorite myths about itself" (1997, 153–154). Yet, in contrast to such a dismissive, biographising interpretation I would note that I have not attempted to celebrate postmodern humour as a site of incipient revolutionary politics. I have not sought to present these examples as somehow surprisingly radical and progressive. Rather, my goal in this study has been to articulate how the postmodern humour aesthetic may be considered both reflective and productive of current epistemological trends in politics and culture more broadly. In its

celebration of dissent and doubt, postmodern humour is the aesthetic of the (neo)liberal moment, and as such represents both the problems and promises of that worldview. Furthermore, my goal here has not been to read these texts against the grain, but rather to read very carefully with the grain—charting the particular assumptions and evasions that structure the contemporary mode of humour—in order to determine thereby the particular political contours manifest at the level of the aesthetic. In doing so, I have not aimed, therefore, directly to challenge the dominant through the production of alternative readings, but instead carefully to map how the dominant understands the world and thereby to draw connections between the cultural aesthetic and political social levels of our textually-informed everyday lives.

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

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

Thus, to be "aesthetic" is not to be automatically on the side of freedom, dissensus, socialism or radical political change, but rather different aesthetic organisations can be linked to different epistemological and political modes of thought in relation to their cultural contexts. As I have noted, this definition both builds on and contradicts that of Rancière, who defines the aesthetic as a space of free play that is seemingly intractably linked to a progressive politics of dissensus. Contra Rancière, I have suggested that the aesthetic can also work in the service of power through the repetition and re-entrenchment of existing cultural, social and political logics, which in the instance of humour most obviously manifests itself as the ridicule of those who clearly and cleanly depart from norms of behaviour. The burden of illustrating this form of humour has fallen unfairly on *Friends*, which, though its humour might be overwhelmingly aggressive and normative, is a more complex text than I have given it space to demonstrate. A necessary future study would involve a much more thorough, careful and sympathetic engagement with not just *Friends*, but the other sitcoms I have also identified as part of this traditional mode of humour: from *Everybody Loves Raymond* through *Two and a Half Men* and *Frasier* to *The Big Bang Theory* and beyond. However, it is also essential to note that although it does so in a different way and from different "angles," the postmodern humour of discomfort, absurdity and politicisation also often works to buttress existing logics of power, which are just as often concerned with the upsetting of certain aspects of the status quo as they are with preserving it. In seeking to account for humour and to articulate how it operates in terms of politics, we must therefore carefully attend to the specificities of its textual manifestation and the aesthetic logic that inform its manifestations in relation to their wider cultural contexts. The politics of humour are neither singular nor infinite: they are determined by and tied up with the fundamental aesthetic operations of that cultural category, but that category can and does manifest itself in different modes and forms.

Humour's apparent freedom to stand for, against, or most often somewhere confusingly in-between, the political demands of our contemporary society speak to the ability of the aesthetic to overcome and

transform the conditions of its own circulation. In comparison with many of the rules and regulations which hang heavy upon our daily life and which always already structure our inclinations, dispositions, and behaviours, the realm of the aesthetic offers what is perhaps the most potentially fruitful space for the development of different ways of thinking that might form the basis of future politics. This is why aesthetic logics and tendencies, such as humour, matter; because they shape the way we encounter the rest of the world. Rancière asserts that "man is a political animal because he is a literary animal" (2008, 39), and while I agree, I would wish to add that man is also a political animal insofar as he is a mediated animal. To go even further, perhaps he is political to the extent that he is a laughing animal: a claim which can be traced back to Aristotle. However, contra Aristotle, laughter and humour cannot be considered one thing with one meaning now and forever. Like all aesthetic categories, humour shifts over time. This does not suggest that humour or the aesthetic are unimportant; rather, it is central, and in its shifting and transforming nature we can begin to understand how it is the rest of the world also shifts and transforms over time and across space. Humour, aesthetics and indeed culture in general may not be left aside when interpreting the world, no matter how much some may want to get beyond these ideas into what is apparently self-evidently serious and important. This is the point of cultural studies and cultural critique more generally, to point towards those aspects of our world which are absolutely crucial and often overlooked but which, through the expression of telling absurdity or glib one-liner, have the potential to shape and change our society, for ill or for good.

Like punch lines, humorous answers—those both regarding and employing humour—often appear at first not to be answers at all, but rather distractions from the immediate issues at hand. In this spirit, we can consider E.B. White's often repeated epigram comparing the analysis of humour to the dissection of a frog, "the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind" (1977, 243). To this we might add that anyone found persistently and publicly engaging in such an act is liable to receive censure for daring to engage in such a frivolous task when seemingly much more important demands might be made upon their time. Frogs and humour do not press upon the social consciousness as heavily as other issues—social justice, violence, trauma, inequality, economic and political oppression—might. However, just as an investigation of the frog might reveal not only the

mysteries of physiology and anatomy, but also clues about genetics and environmental health, I would like to propose that the study of humour can lead us back (or perhaps forwards) in powerfully productive ways to the wider cultural, social and philosophical issues that such an analysis, on the surface, might appear to eschew. To extend the metaphor beyond the bounds of all possible taste and patience, I am also sceptical as to whether the particular frogs that I have dissected in this book can ever actually die. Instead, I envision these new modes of emergent humour as akin to the seemingly immortal second-tier Loony Tunes character, Michigan J. Frog, who always escaped attempts on his life while continuing to belt out various ragtime hits: those who attempt to use such a frog for their own purposes will find that in the end it serves no end other than its own.

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