APRIL 2010: **THE HUMOUR ISSUE**

MM Media Magazine

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Eminem – hip-hop's Lord of Misrule?
Comedy timeline
Suits you sir – the sketch show
Postmodernism – can it be funny?
Laughing all over the world
The appeals of cult comedy

MM

English & Media Centre

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editorial

Here's a little ray of sunshine to light your way through to the exams with our special humour issue.

Comedy is a peculiar and subjective phenomenon; and we've been fascinated by the range of texts you've unearthed, from the unexpected humour to be found in Eminem and Lily Allen, through the superheroics of *The Misfits*, to the postmodern ironies of the *Inbetweeners*, *Boosh*, and *Nathan Barley*. It's intriguing to see how TV sitcom works – and what flops – on either side of the Atlantic, and to explore a case study of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, a US comedy that should have worked but didn't. For budding comedy writers, Ian Pike describes the art of sketch-writing.

Of course, some of the most interesting humour often has a disturbing edge, as highlighted in articles on the mysogyny of Borat and Bruno, and the potential impact of the representations of body image used for entertainment. To provide a broader context, Jerome Monahan's comedy timeline explores the different origins of humour and their emergence in Western cinema, while Roy Stafford offers us a glimpse of very different traditions and their appeal for global audiences. And if you're a subscriber there's more on the website – Woody Allen, new online humour, *Outnumbered*, and a scathing critique of recent comedy films.

We know the exams won't be a bundle of laughs, but we hope this might cheer you up. Good luck!

Coming soon to MediaMagazine

Looking ahead to life after the exams, take note of the themes for our next four issues: all C words, with masses of opportunities to write to your own interests. Just mail **jenny@englishandmedia.co.uk** with your ideas. We've got some suggestions (see below) but we hope you'll have more.

MM 33 – Creativity (Copy deadline: 14th May 2010)

• what does creativity mean? • 'creatives' in the industry • which are the texts and who are the people you think are creative? • creative production work • can analysis be creative? • technology – is it killing or resuscitating creativity? • creativity vs technical skills • creativity and originality

MM 34 – Change (Copy deadline: 13th September)

• changing technologies • changing genres • changing Media Studies 1.0 to 3.0 • Media changes in your own lifetime • changes in media industries • changing style • changes in audiences and consumption • changing place of media industry in the economy • the changing global media world • the ups and downs of change (e.g. demise of print vs rise of online?) • changing icons • changing values and perceptions

MM 35 – Culture (Copy deadline: 8th November)

• what is culture? • high v low culture? Still a live debate? • other cultures (media and art-forms from non-Western traditions) • the cultures of media industries • culture and class in the media • street culture and the media • sub-cultures • cultural capital • Cultural Studies

MM 36 – Collaboration (Copy deadline: 10th January 2011)

• co-productions • indies and big corporations • mixed media • partnerships (e.g. Astaire and Rogers, Scorsese and de Niro, Katie and Peter/Alex, Mitchell and Webb – the list is endless!) • collaboration v competition • technologies for sharing – Opensource software • 'evil' collaborations (e.g. ads on Facebook) • sponsorship • producers and audiences – interactivity/user-generated material – and more…

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contents

Front Page News

BBC 6 Music and Asian Network face closure

The BBC is threatening to take two of its digital radio stations, 6 Music and Asian Network, off the air, as part of a major shake-up of its services. A strategy review recommended that the corporation drop some niche services in order to concentrate resources into more mainstream programming. Also facing the axe are teen services Switch and Blast, and half of all BBC websites.

However, the plans have drawn widespread criticism, especially in the case of 6 Music. The alternative music station has a relatively small listenership of 700,000 a week, but this is growing faster than any other BBC digital radio station. Its presenters include Steve Lamacq, Lauren Laverne and Pulp's Jarvis Cocker, and it is credited with helping acts such as Florence and the Machine break through into the mainstream.

BBC Director General Mark Thompson, speaking on the BBC News Channel, admitted 6 Music was 'distinctive' and had loyal fans, but said its closure was necessary 'from a value-for-money point of view.'

However, some people claim the BBC is motivated by fear of more severe cuts after the election. Jonathan Freedland, writing at on the ***Guardian's* Comment is Free** website, said:

The BBC is caving to a Tory media policy dictated by Rupert Murdoch.

The plans will now go to public consultation. If you want to let the BBC know your opinion, fill in their survey at **https://consultations.external.bbc.co.uk/departments/bbc/bbc-strategy-review/consultation/consult_view** or send an email to **srconsultation@bbc.co.uk** by 25th May.

Web users unwilling to pay for content

The majority of internet users would stop using their favourite site if they had to pay for it, a study has shown. The report by the Pew Research Centre suggests that people have become so accustomed to getting free online content that they are unwilling to start paying. This might cause problems with Rupert Murdoch's plans to start charging for news on his websites, including ***the Times*** and ***the Sun***.

Some websites do already charge for news, including the ***Financial Times*** in the UK and the ***Wall Street Journal*** in the US. However, these both provide specialist financial news. It will be much more difficult to persuade readers to start paying for general news, which can easily be found from a number of different sources online.

The Pew research shows that people are not loyal to a single site, with 65% percent of those who read the news online using multiple sources. A massive 82% said they would abandon their favourite sites if paywalls were introduced.

Commenters on the ***Guardian*** website emphasised the fact that many people do not see the differences between news outlets as important enough to pay for a specific one. A user known as 'bradgate' said:

Why would any rational internet user pay to access news on one website when the same information is available free of charge on another?

while 'blottoinbondi' said:

Someone will always offer free news. [If major sites start charging] it may introduce some new and interesting players.

Should airbrushed adverts carry a warning?

Airbrushed photos of models promote an unrealistic body image and should be required to carry a disclaimer to show they have been doctored, says a new government report. ***The Review into the Sexualisation of Young People***, conducted by Dr Linda Papadopoulos, says that young women in particular can suffer low self-esteem as a result of constant media exposure to pictures of slim, attractive women. In some cases, it can contribute to the development of eating disorders.

Dr Adrienne Key, from the eating disorders section of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, told the ***Daily Mail***:

What we need to do is raise people's awareness of what they are looking at. A lot of people have no idea how much manipulation goes on.

Many advertising images have been altered, not just to smooth skin and remove blemishes, but sometimes to drastically alter the model's body shape.

What else does the report say?

- Children these days are exposed to more sexual images from a younger age
- Media messages encourage girls and young women to be 'sexy', and to place value on themselves according to their looks
- Boys and young men are encouraged to be sexually aggressive and to objectify women
- These stereotypes encourage sexism, sexual harassment and violence against women
- Children and young people need more positive role models that do not conform to gender stereotypes

You can read the full report at: **http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/Sexualisation-young-people.pdf**

For more perspectives on this story, see: **http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/feb/25/lads-magazines-restricted-home-office-study** or **http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/blog/audio/2010/feb/25/guardian-daily-podcast**

Tell us what you think. Email **jenny@** or **priscilla@englishandmedia.co.uk**

Gamers object to anti-piracy plans

PC gamers have reacted angrily to the digital rights management (DRM) system on *Assassin's Creed 2*, which requires them to be connected to the internet at all times. Publisher Ubisoft plans to use the same form of DRM on all its future games. Users' identities are authenticated via the internet, in an attempt to reduce piracy, but this means any lost connection results in a player being kicked out of the game – and losing all progress since the last save point. Any problems with Ubisoft's own servers will have the same result.

An election for the digital age

As the country prepares for a General Election, what is the role of the internet and new media in the political process? In 2008, Barack Obama harnessed the power of the internet to build up a huge amount of grassroots support for his campaign to become President of the United States of America. Now it is the UK's turn, and the candidates are keen to emulate his success by increasing their online presence through websites and political blogs. There are also many independent online resources, which aim to increase political involvement and provide voters with the information they need to make an informed choice.

However, a recent report has shown that young people are not interested in the election. The survey, by the Hansard Society, found that 34% of 18-24-year-olds believe politics is a waste of time, and half of them are not even registered to vote. So can the internet help them to get more involved?

Matthew Oliver, of Vote Match, which campaigns for political awareness, said: 'The most common reason people give as to why they don't vote is that they don't know enough about where the parties stand on the issues that matter to them. However, the internet means that information is just a click away.'

BCS, The Chartered Institute of IT, and online charity YouthNet, have released a list of the best online political resources for young people, in the hope that they will get more involved in politics. Check it out at: **http://savvycitizens.bcs.org/citizenship/topten**

For more on the election and the internet, read Owen Davey's article on our website.

Coming soon on the big screen

April

- ***Whip It!***

Drew Barrymore's debut as a director is a coming-of-age tale set in the highly competitive world of roller derby. It has received great reviews in America for its emotional depth and strong female characters. The director stars, along with Ellen Page (***Juno***) and Marcia Gay Harden (***Damages***).

May

- ***Iron Man 2***

Robert Downey Jnr returns as Tony Stark and his hi-tech alter-ego in the sequel to the 2008 blockbuster. This time around, the all-star cast includes Scarlett Johansson, Samuel L Jackson, Mickey Rourke, Don Cheadle, Sam Rockwell and Paul Bettany.

- ***Robin Hood***

Director Ridley Scott teams up with his favourite actor Russell Crowe once more for this action epic, which tells how the outlaw first achieved his legendary status in the aftermath of the crusades. The trailer suggests it could be *Gladiator* all over again. And that could be no bad thing.

June

- ***Toy Story 3***

Another high-profile sequel is due to hit cinemas. The follow-up to Disney-Pixar's original computer-animated tale follows the toys' lives after their owner has grown up and headed off to university. Tom Hanks and Tim Allen return as the voices of Woody and Buzz, while new cast members include Robin Williams and Whoopi Goldberg.

Interview:
Clifford Singer on politics & the web

Clifford Singer is the editor of **mydavidcameron.com**, a website that allows users to upload their own versions of recent Conservative campaign posters, altered for comic effect. The site was an unexpected hit, gaining over 250,000 visitors in its first six weeks. 1,200 spoof posters were submitted by users in that time.

Clifford says that he started the site to make a political point:

When the first posters of David Cameron's face came out, a lot of people were saying it looked airbrushed, which I thought was an ideal metaphor for his politics. The site subverts the slickness of his manufactured image and I think that's why it has caught on.

Although Clifford admits to a left-wing perspective, he is not a member of any political party. The site is in the same position as many online, which have strong political views but no political affiliation. Conservative bloggers have claimed **mydavidcameron.com** is a New Labour website, but Clifford says he had a good reason for attacking Cameron in particular:

When I set up the site, Cameron wasn't being subjected to much scrutiny in the press, although that has started to change now. The timing of the site was very good, in that it helped to echo that change of mood.

He says that technology offers the potential for people to get involved in politics in new ways:

It was very important that people could start making their own posters and then send them round to their friends. The site took off because word spread via email, Twitter and Facebook.

Politicians are starting to harness that power now, and they are getting good at using it to organise their existing supporters and members. But they are struggling to mobilise the wider public, and I think that's a sign of the times. There's a lot of disillusionment with politics, and the internet alone isn't going to counter that.

Front Page News researched, written and designed by Priscilla McClay, publishing intern at the English and Media Centre.

It's claimed that great art is often the result of productive failure. But who'd want to flop – and how might it benefit your own production work? **Nick Potamitis** encourages some creative risk-taking.

Nobody likes to fail. When was the last time you heard of someone going out to celebrate failing their driving test? If nobody likes to fail, there's an awful lot of people out there who enjoy watching – and laughing at – other people failing. Just think of the amount of coverage celebrity magazines such as ***Heat*** give to the fashion mistakes of people whose only claim to fame is having failed to win ***The X-Factor***. Judging from the success of TV shows like ***You've Been Framed*** or online communities like **FailBlog.org** – a YouTube channel with over half a million subscribers – there is a huge audience for embarrassing videos of people failing at almost every possible human activity from parking in a busy supermarket car-park to airbrushing your waistline in Photoshop. Some of these videos – such as the Fox News feature in which a reporter slips and falls painfully while trying to stomp grapes at a wine festival – have travelled virally across the web, becoming internet sensations in their own right. In a postmodern twist, the **Grape Stomping Fail** became such a successful viral sensation that it was even parodied in an episode of Fox's own animated sitcom, ***Family Guy***.

Combine our understandable dislike of personal failure with a popular culture that delights in finding amusement in the failures of others and it's easy to see why, for many people, 'failure is not an option', especially when a video of your worst mistakes might end up making the rounds on the blogosphere!

Take your Media Studies production coursework as an example. At a time when many schools and colleges are sharing their students' work on the web via YouTube and Vimeo channels or Flickr photo-streams, there is now, more than ever, real pressure to produce a music video, film trailer or magazine cover that will succeed and that won't prompt negative comments online such as 'FAIL!' or, even worse, the dreaded, 'EPIC FAIL!'.

In terms of your production coursework you will probably, at some point, hear your teacher warning you and your classmates that '**failing to plan, is planning to fail**'. The message here is that successful practical work is based on scrupulous planning, and that, without being organised well in advance, prepared for potential problems, and responsive to changes in circumstances, your production work is liable to face major difficulties.

Planning for success...

Writing about video production in the first ever issue of ***MediaMagazine***, Chief Examiner Pete Fraser pointed up the importance of planning the minute details of each shoot to avoid wasting time on location; testing batteries, lighting and microphones before setting off; and planning to improvise when group members are absent:

Treat your project with professionalism and organisation and you will not go far wrong. Being creative is brilliant – but you can't beat being organised.

While no one would disagree that good planning is vital to achieving successful results in your production work, it's also important to realise that failing, making mistakes or just plain getting stuff wrong is not such a bad thing. In fact we should be encouraging failure as an important step on the way to success.

...and learning to fail

Thinking back to the earlier example of failing your driving test, it is widely acknowledged that people who pass their test second time around often make much better drivers than those who ace their test at the first attempt (there are even a number of Facebook groups dedicated to these first-time-failures). In fact, when it comes to your own production work, I would argue that you should go out of your way to get things wrong from the start. As design expert and web entrepreneur Aza Raskin says:

All designers design to be wrong the first time. The first version, no matter how well conceived, won't be as good as the second, third, and fourth.

It is only by coming up with an idea and trying it out that you discover the unknown problems inherent in the idea, as well as the unknown potential that will reveal itself once you start to explore a bit more closely.

The failure behind Wikipedia

Take the example of the online collaborative encyclopedia **Wikipedia**. The project started out in 2000 when Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger began work on a website called **Nupedia** where qualified experts could submit articles on their specialist subjects which would then be reviewed

and checked by an academic editorial board before finally being made available to general readers on the web. The idea was to create an authoritative overview of the world's knowledge – a kind of exhaustive ***Encyclopedia Britannica*** available online. Except after eighteen months Nupedia consisted of only twenty-odd articles. FAIL! When, in 2001, Sanger ditched the experts and switched to using collaborative wiki-software setting up the open access website Wikipedia, interested amateurs uploaded over a thousand articles in the first month. WIN!

From Ride to Lara

Similarly, when UK video-games studio Core Designs were looking for a character to front their new 3D action-adventure game ***Tomb Raider***, their initial idea was to re-boot a character from one of their earlier 1980s' platform games, **Rick Dangerous** – an Indiana Jones-style male hero complete with fedora hat and whip. FAIL! In fact, video-game artist Toby Gard went through four or five re-designs before hitting on the WINNING idea: Lara Croft, the aristocratic, acrobatic (and pneumatic) global pop culture icon.

Both these examples show that in order to succeed it is often necessary to make mistakes – quite a costly one in Nupedia's case – and to re-consider and even abandon your first idea, no matter how much time, money or emotional energy you've invested in it.

Forget the first idea!

In media production work students often hit on what seems like a great idea very early on in the research and planning process, only to run into problems and then insist on keeping with their original idea, in the face of more and more glaringly obvious production difficulties. However, one way to avoid getting over-attached to your first thought or idea is to abandon the very idea of a 'first idea' altogether.

The post-it note process

Take, for example, the designers at IDEO, the design firm behind Apple's first mouse and the Palm V PDA. At IDEO a brainstorming session will usually involve each member of the design team initially jotting down or sketching as many thoughts and ideas as possible onto Post-It notes – however boring or bonkers these ideas might seem at first – and then sticking all those doodles and dashed-off thoughts to a huge board to see what new ideas might emerge from the mix. Over the course of the project those sticky notes will be moved around and clustered together, or re-worked with new Post-Its added as particularly interesting or innovative ideas get developed and expanded upon and connections start to form. Eventually, the ones with the most potential start to take on a life of their own.

This kind of **'design thinking'** is a long way from the typical coursework approach of coming up with one or two production ideas in your first lesson and then ploughing straight on into pitching your idea or even storyboarding it in the next.

Take time to make mistakes

In the end, if you want to produce really creative and exciting material for your practical coursework you must be prepared to do what all designers do, and that's **give yourself time to make mistakes and to learn from them**. As any successful video-game or web designer will tell you, even your media production work needs a **'beta period'**. Post-It note as many production ideas as you can and then 'beta test' them all amongst your workgroup and your classmates. Experiment quickly with as many different ideas as you can and try them out on other people. Get feedback and get it often, ditching ideas that don't work and going back to the Post-It note board to see how you can learn from your mistakes, re-combining your previous failures into more creative and more successful combinations. Fail. Fail Again. Fail Better.

Nick Potamitis is Course Leader for the Creative and Media Diploma at Long Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge.

AFRICA'S FINEST HOUR?

In the lead-up to the World Cup, **Maggie Miranda** explores the ways new South African films offer very different representations of this vibrant and dynamic country.

All eyes are on South Africa this summer (actually their winter). Hordes of people will make their way to the so-called 'dark continent'; for many it will be their first visit to Africa. Many will board their plane with a plethora of media stereotypes of Africa firmly ingrained in their minds. Last year there was much speculation in the press about whether or not the country would be ready to host the games – yet more doom and gloom reporting about Africa. Others questioned whether the state-of-the-art purpose-built football stadiums will be completed satisfactorily. The world's media will be focusing on the football but will, no doubt, be ready to report anything that may go wrong. After all, negative stories sell newspapers and make headlines. Let's be honest: there is little in the way of balance when it comes to media coverage of any African countries; and very little good news of a country such as South Africa ever reaches the rest of the world.

I travelled there myself (for the fifth time) last July. I woke up one July morning to ***big*** rain and a storm raging over the Indian Ocean. I was staying along Durban's North Shore (the posh bit) at a beach pad in Umdhloti, with a perfect view of Natal's stunning coastline. The daily drama here is watching the waves crashing against the rocks. We had driven more than 2,000 kilometres across the Free State and Kwa Zula Natal and had seen dramatic landscapes, mountains and oceans. We were attending DIFF, the Durban International Film Festival, South Africa's most established Film Festival, now in its 30th year. We stayed with a local friend. She showed me beaches where she told me she was not allowed to play as a child under the former apartheid regime: 'they were for the whites only'. Fifteen years on, South Africa is free of apartheid; but it's not free of problems yet. Everyone in her family has a story about crime. Her brother tells us he sleeps with a loaded firearm under his pillow every night. Her mum tells me that an armed gang came in to the family home to rob it. They held a knife to her daughter's throat and a gun to her head. Her aunt recalls a similar tale at the family's farm. Her uncle tells us how his 'bakkie' (workman's vehicle/truck) was carjacked. He was having a pint at his local when the gang came into the bar and demanded the keys. He told them 'take the keys, have it'. The gang shot him anyway.

All of these stories are told 'deadpan', and these residents talk about these dramas as though they are just part of life. The same approach to storytelling is taken by the South African film-makers who were profiled at the film festival. All of these issues are depicted through the South African films which were shown at DIFF; all avoided melodrama and presented the issues as they are.

Issues but no hysteria

There were films from 46 countries screened at the Festival. South Africa represented the heart of the programme and of the 77 African films screened, the majority were South African. These South African films presented the issues facing South Africa today – crime, HIV, street kids, shootings, poverty and tribalism – and explored them with an even tone. There was a distinct lack of hysteria. The hysteria about these issues comes from outside, from the international community or the South African ex-pats who have made a life elsewhere. The content of the films shown at DIFF is a far cry from the sensationalism of something like US TV show ***Cops***. Violence, crime and other social issues are not used to titillate audiences. Rather it seems that South African directors are using film as their vehicle to explore these issues and create a dialogue about them. The hope is that people can think about what they see in these films and work together to find solutions to these issues. There is drama in all of these films and the content ordinarily lends itself to creation of tension. But the treatment of these issues here is an example of intelligent and responsible film-making.


AFRICA'S
FINEST HOUR?

Isulu Lami

The opening film ***Isulu Lami*** (***My Secret Sky***) was screened at the Dubai Film Festival in 2008 and Cannes in 2009. It won the DIKALO Best Feature award at FESPACO, Burkina Faso. It has been compared to ***Slumdog Millionaire*** although its director **Madoda Ncaiyana** responds 'it's not as glamorous on poverty'. Kids from Natal's townships were cast in the film. ***Isulu Lami*** deals with many issues: HIV/Aids (Thembi and her brother Kwezi are orphaned at the beginning of the film), poverty, crime and the dissolution of family life as a family member seeks work in the big city. Thembi and Kwezi head to Durban with the hope of selling a woven traditional mat given to them by their mother.

The film centres around a group of street kids in Durban's city centre, Chilli Bite and his gang. When asked 'don't any of you guys have any parents?' one street-kid replies 'I used to but they died'. ***Isulu Lami*** exposes us to the seedy underworld of the inner city where Thembi and her brother are very vulnerable; but it does so without any gloss or sentimentality. Of course, poverty and crime are social issues prevalent in most countries worldwide. Many families everywhere find themselves in tough times, especially in the current climate.

Shirley Adams

The world premiere of ***Shirley Adams*** is another example of hard-hitting, issue-based film-making minus the melodrama. This was the debut offering of South African director **Oliver Hermanus** and comparisons were drawn between his work and that of film-makers such as **Ken Loach** and **Mike Leigh**. The film opens with a suicide attempt, immediately setting the tone of the film. Through extreme close-ups we are pulled straight in to the world of Shirley Adams, caring for her son who is partially paralysed after being shot in the neck. The film is set in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town. Hermanus employs rapid camera movement for a jarring effect on his audience. We never relax with this film and it is harrowing to watch at times. Many shots are out of focus and fuzzy, just like the details of the shooting incident. And yet Hermanus uses irony when we least expect it. Shirley Adams says 'We can watch ***Days*** [***Days of our Lives***], ***Bold***… [***The Bold and the Beautiful***], that will cheer him up'. Of course, American soap operas will not successfully distract either Shirley Adams or her son from the difficulties of their lives. Throughout the film many of the shots are from behind, and through the many over-the-shoulder shots we are reminded that we are spectators to a world that most audiences will never fully understand. Over time we develop a respect for Shirley Adams, a truly strong character. We only see her cry towards the very end of the film and Hermanus never tries to pull at the audience's heartstrings to turn this film into a tearjerker. The tension throughout the film is created through little everyday details such as the ritual of making tea, shot almost in real time. Shirley Adams represents so many women in South Africa (and indeed the world): the carers, the workers and the survivors. These are arguably the kind of spirited people who will work hard to rebuild a country like South Africa.

South African cinema and the country as a whole won't be – and shouldn't be – defined by these social dramas; it is so much more. The real drama of this dynamic country is in the wildlife, the breathtaking scenery, the energy, talent and resilience of its people. So many visitors will be heading to the 2010 Football World Cup this year. Perhaps by seeing the country with their own eyes they will achieve a more balanced view than the one that the media perpetually dishes up, seeing not only the social problems that the country faces but the more positive stories too. This may just be an opportunity for a country like South Africa to shine and to fly the flag for a luminous continent.

Maggie Miranda teaches at the International School, Dubai.

Images of South Africa by Maggie Miranda; film stills from festival and publicity sites.

A short History of Humour

Comedy timeline

Jerome Monahan plots the changing nature of humour from Plato to postmodernism.

It has been claimed that **'analysing humour is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it'** (E.B. White, author of *Charlotte's Web*). We hope the following comedy timeline will prove that such a study is entirely worthwhile and potentially fascinating. It is essentially a history of film comedy, with considerable side-reference to the roots of certain conventions and theories about laughter and also to the close relationship, since the 1970s at least, between television comedy and the big screen.

Like our previous Fantasy timeline (see *MM*31) the main unit is the decade, and in most entries we've tried to make links between broader issues in society and the comedy films that sprang up to suit changing tastes and concerns. Sometimes the influential factors are **industrial** in nature – thus visual humour is bound to predominate in a period when film technology could not capture sound. Similarly, we can explain the endurance of comedy as a genre largely in terms of its relative cheapness, especially in these special-effect dominated times. Note, for example, how the UK's most profitable films of the last two decades have mainly been comedies: ***Four Weddings and A Funeral*** (1994), ***Notting Hill*** (1999), ***Bean*** (1997) and ***The Full Monty*** (1997).

What's left out?

Sadly, there are a number of key omissions – for example, there's no room here for **animated films**. This is a significant gap, given the increasingly broad appeal of recent films such as ***Up!***, ***Toy Story I*** and ***II*** and ***Shrek***, which, by employing a great deal of sophisticated and 'knowing' humour alongside more child-friendly stuff, cater to both young and old. They have also provided employment for many of the best comic talents of the age who have lent their voices to animated characters.

Nor is there room here to set out a comprehensive analysis of **what constitutes 'comedy'** – a subject which has generated many lengthy books in its time. Suffice to say that for something to be funny it requires us to be able both to **empathise** with an unfortunate other, and also feel sufficiently distant from them that we can **enjoy** their predicament. It is just such a complex amalgam that enables an audience to laugh at Buster Keaton's escape in ***Steamboat Bill Junior*** (1928), when a house front dislodged by a hurricane narrowly misses crushing him. It is a spectacle made even richer once one realises Keaton did it *without* trick photography or the use of a stunt stand-in. (See Goom's cartoon on page 52.)

It is also a shame that there is not the space to consider **whether comedy is a force for conservatism or progress**. It is an important question. Until relatively recently black people were depicted as comic stereotypes in US films. (See Willie Best's performance as Bob Hope's manservant in the 1940 spooky comedy ***The Ghost Breakers*** for a sample of what passed for 'acceptable' representation just 70 years ago.) Similarly, the dominant comic motif in which the 'usual' is somehow inverted is potentially highly 'normative' given the way the reversed situation (be it a man being treated as a woman or a rich man being mistaken for a poor one) tends to reinforce the apparent 'naturalness' of the status quo. Then again, do look out for those satiric or harder-edged comedies that do not seem to leave things happily resolved at the end of the final reel. Even Shakespeare's comedies don't always manage to accommodate each and every character in happy companionate marriage at the end of Act V.

Does it all make sense?

A recent survey came up with the earliest known joke. It took the form of a proverb dating back to **Sumerian times (1900 BC)**:

> **Something which has never occurred since time immemorial; a young woman did not fart in her husband's lap.**

Its meaning is suitably obscure – your guess is as good as ours. But you don't have to go back nearly 4000 years to find our ancestors' humour baffling. Here's the jester Feste running rings around the foolish Sir Andrew Aguecheek in ***Twelfth Night***:

> **Feste: I did impeticos thy gratillity; for Malvolio's nose is no whipstock: my lady has a white hand, and the Myrmidons are no bottle-ale houses.**
>
> **Sir Andrew: Excellent! why, this is the best fooling, when all is done.**

The joke is probably that is it all nonsense – but that has not stopped dozens of academics attempting to work out precisely what Feste is on about. The fact that humour often does not travel far and often has a short shelf-life is our final justification for the following exercise: it is a starting point for you to attempt your own investigation of the changing face of screen comedy and humour in all its familiarity and strangeness.

Comedy Timeline

Ancient Greece: 360-347BC

Plato's ***Philebus*** sets out a philosophical dialogue examining issues of pleasure and knowledge. It provides a disparaging assessment of laughter, suggesting that it is always associated with expressions of **superiority**. Such early discussions of laughter are less bothered by the fortunate making fun of the less fortunate, but draw the line at the socially inferior mocking their betters. Thus, in Plato's ***Republic*** (380BC) it is suggested that laughter should be carefully controlled.

Ancient Rome: 217BC

The likely birth of t**he Festival of Saturnalia**, introduced as a means of cheering up the Roman population after defeat at the hands of the Carthaginians. The Festival grows in length and extent, and includes a number of interesting 'relaxations' of usual hierarchies; so, for example, slaves are allowed to mock their masters or may have food served to them by their owners.

8AD

The Roman poet Ovid completes his collection of mythological tales ***The Metamorphoses.*** He declares that one of his principal aims is to show the foolishness of both men and gods when struck by the power of love. As well as depicting the excesses of both mortals and immortals, the tales are told with a great deal of wry humour as exemplified in the way Daphne, transformed into a laurel tree by the god Apollo, shakes her branches with pleasure at hearing he intends to use her leaves as rewards for the greatest poets who submit their work to the Ancient Olympic Games.

Middle Ages and carnival

The spirit of the Saturnalia lives on in the period of licensed misbehaviour associated with the lead-up to Lent. **Carnival** involves all sorts of inversions, some parodying Catholic religious practice, such as the baptism of domestic animals, and others undermining the normal arrangement of the body – for example, the mouth speaking obscenities in a way that undermined its superiority over the anus. Such analysis owes a great deal to the Russian formalist **Mikhail Bakhtin** whose ***Rabelais and his World*** (1968) mapped 'carnivalesque' motifs in literature. Examples might include the scatological and sexual low-humour in Chaucer's ***Miller's Tale*** (c.1390s) and the grotesque excesses of **Shakespeare's Falstaff** in ***Henry IV Parts I and II*** and in the ***Merry Wives of Windsor*** (1599).

Mid-16th Century: Commedia dell'arte

This was a form of public entertainment popular in Italy and southern Europe which then spread to France. It is notable for **allowing women to play female characters** at a time when they were forbidden to perform in public elsewhere in Europe. It popularises certain standard comic characters such as the **miserly old man (Pantelone), the young lovers (Innamorati) and the trickster Harlequin**; its typical themes are adultery, jealousy, old age and love. **Pantomime and circus clowning** have their roots in Commedia. It is also considered the source of the practice of hitting people with two sticks designed to make a loud 'clack' on impact – the origins of the term **'slapstick'.**

1564-1616: Shakespeare

Shakespeare's success as a playwright did not mean he was above criticism. For writers more steeped in Ancient Greek genre definitions, Shakespeare's frequent **blending of the comic and the tragic** was a sign of an 'impure art'. To more modern sensibilities, the placing of comic scenes amidst sadness is praiseworthy. Some of the most intense parts of ***Othello*** are sandwiched between scenes featuring a perversely contrary clown; the murder of Duncan in ***Macbeth*** is followed by comic encounters with a drunk Porter; and ***King Lear*** contains a Fool who, for three acts, maintains a constant barrage of witty asides and observations.

1599

The Shoemaker's Holiday by **Thomas Dekker** is an early and well-known example of a kind of city comedy that proved hugely popular in the early modern period up until the closure of the theatres in 1642 at the start of the English Civil War. The genre broadly depicts the lives and habits of London's citizens, and plots frequently centre on marriage, infidelity and the defrauding and mocking of the foolish.

1606

Volpone by **Ben Jonson** has been described as a mixture of **city-based satire and fable,** with each of the main characters manifesting behaviour associated with the animal which gives them their name. Thus Volpone is as cunning as a fox and the foolish Englishman abroad Sir Politic Would Be is a true parrot or 'pol' in his attempts to copy Venetian behaviour. Jonson is also associated with **'humour comedies'** with roots dating back to the **classical plays of Plautus and Terence,** in which characters behave according to traits determined by their predominant 'humour'.

1640

Often regarded as the first modern attempt to analyse humour, **Thomas Hobbs'** ***Human Nature*** echoes the concerns of earlier Classical philosophers in suggesting that laughter is largely **destructive** in intent – a symptom of the **competitiveness and selfishness** Hobbs believed would dominate human relationships were it not for the existence of laws and controls to curb such individualism.

1700

The Way of the World by **William Congreve** epitomises the kind of sophisticated comedy of manners associated with the politer, indoor **Restoration theatre**. As with the Comedy of Humours, characters are often quite fixed in nature, while ridicule is heaped upon those whose disposition or stupidity excludes them from elegant displays of wit and self-control.

Late 19th century

Arguably the first humorous 'moving' images are those associated with **magic lantern shows** which become popular both as a parlour entertainment and also for public paying audiences. Slides that suggest movement are popular, in particular 'slipping slides' many of which are slapstick in nature – a man cutting up a joint of meat is then shown being attacked by the joint; a fishing sailor is menaced by a crocodile.

1890s – Music Hall

Music Hall and Vaudeville (US), already long established as highly popular live entertainment involving a succession of rapid comic and musical acts, become the training ground for the early generations of comic film talent.

1894-95

Fred Ott's *Sneeze* – film pioneer **Thomas Edison** films one of his workers sneezing. The short sequence is often cited as the first example

350 BC | Mediaeval | 16th Century | 1890s

Plato | Carnival | Commedia dell'arte | Music Hall


THE FOUR MARX BROTHERS
IN
DUCK SOUP

of true film comedy. **The Lumière Brothers** – Edison's competition – also cash in on audience's capacity to laugh at film by providing in 1895 ***L'Arroseur Arrosé*** (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*) in which a gardener investigating why there is no water coming out of the hose is blasted by water when his companion takes his foot away.

1900s

The spread of comedy film-making and emergence of comedy stars has been described as a 'broad free-for-all'. Among a long list of European stars of this period are England's **Fred Evans** (Pimple); France's **Andre Deed,** and **Max Linder** (a huge influence on the later generation of American comic cinema pioneers such as Mack Sennet and Charlie Chaplin). Such plenitude is snuffed out during the First World War (1914-18) – many performers are killed or injured in action.

1905

Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* suggests that there is a relationship between unconscious hopes and desires and the jokes people tell. While some jokes, he argues, are more gentle expressions of these inner, often suppressed and unacknowledged urges, others which are cruel in content and impact are fuller expressions of these darker instincts.

1910s

Comedy films become a staple of the earliest film production companies: they spark immediate recognition in audiences and are also relatively cheap to make – especially 'shorts' depicting the trials and tribulations of marriage and family life.

1911

Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* sets out to capture the factors that make something funny. His analysis is particularly focused on the routines perfected by **clowns** and the importance of **repetition** as a factor in comic performance.

1912

Mack Sennett founds **Keystone Pictures** in California. He gives opportunities to many of the great stars of silent film comedy including **Charlie Chaplin, Harry Langdon, Buster Keaton** and **Harold Lloyd**. The studio is also famous for its ***Keystone Kops* films** (1913-16) featuring a hapless group of policemen whose car chases always bring chaos. The films vindicate the idea that the only thing funnier than seeing a single policeman fall on his bottom is seeing *lots* of policemen falling over on their bottoms.

1920s

A $3,000 inheritance enables **Hal Roach** to set up studios in Culver City, California in 1919. His talent-spotting helps him to attract and foster the careers of many of the greatest comics of the day. He is perhaps best known for pairing **Stan Laurel** with **Oliver Hardy**. Though the joining of contrasting comedians is nothing new, Laurel and Hardy achieve enormous fame and impact playing dim but eternally optimistic and innocent characters. Their films typically feature frustrating slapstick sequences and increasingly destructive tit-for-tat fights with each other and various adversaries.

1927

The arrival of sound heralds the end of an era for many comedy stars of the silent screen (as shown later in ***Singin' in the Rain***). While the careers of Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd decline, those comedians with acts that suit the new medium survive and prosper. Into

1913 | 1920s | 1933 | 1935

Keystone Kops | Laurel and Hardy | Marx Brothers | Screwball Comedy

this category fall **Laurel and Hardy** with their catchphrases, the wise-cracking **Marx Brothers**, and later **Bob Hope** and **W.C. Fields**, with his world-weary asides.

1930s

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 plunges America and the rest of the globe into the Great Depression. One response is the rising popularity of glamorous musical comedy typified by Busby Berkeley musicals such as ***The Gold Diggers*** (1935) and the series of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films such as ***Flying Down to Rio***.

Writing in ***The Rough Guide to Comedy*** (2005) **Bob McCabe** identifies this decade as the one in which **genres begin to cross-fertilise**. This was particularly true with comedy, seeing as it did the appearance of comedy thrillers such as the Bob Hope vehicle ***The Cat and The Canary*** (1939) and comedy Westerns typified by ***Destry Rides Again*** (1939).

A number of key films appear in Europe during the 30s, which extend the definition of comedy far beyond the typical US product. **Spanish director Luis Buñuel** borrows heavily from avant garde cinema and the surrealist symbolism in his comic fantasy ***L'Âge d'Or (***1930), and, in France, director **René Clair's *A Nous La Liberte*** satirises 'the machine age', especially the madness of mechanised production-line factories. It is to be a key influence on **Charlie Chaplin** whose ***Modern Times*** (1936) borrows so clearly from Clair's film that attempts were made to sue Chaplin for breach of copyright.

1933

The Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* reflects the growing anxieties of the time, making fun of European dictatorships and earning the disapproval of the Fascist leader Benito Mussolini, who had the film banned in Italy.

1934

It Happened One Night (**director Frank Capra**) wins five Oscars and begins a trend for **screwball comedies** that will dominate the decade. The term comes from baseball jargon describing a throw that twists in unpredictable ways, and accurately sums up the **frenetic pace** of the films to which it is applied. Screwball comedies also depict a world of **sophistication**, providing more opportunities for **escapism** in a decade dominated by economic woes and the threat of war. They are also significant for the way in which their male and female protagonists are equally matched, engaging in witty and suggestive banter that manages to fly under the radar of the increasingly powerful forces of censorship in America and Britain. Other films in this vein include ***Bringing Up Baby*** (1938) and ***His Girl Friday*** (1939).

1940s and WW2

The Second World War is no laughing matter but comedy is put to use against the forces of fascism, most forcibly in ***The Great Dictator*** (1940); its iconic scene sees the **film's director and star Charlie Chaplin** impersonating Hitler and playing with a balloon-like world-globe – only to have it explode in his hands when he finally grasps it. It is controversial in its depiction of the anti-semitism then rife in Nazi-occupied Europe, but largely unacknowledged by an America reluctant to become embroiled in a second European war.

1948

Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein is the first of a post-war series of genre-busting movies featuring one of the decade's most popular double-acts paired up with the monsters created by the **Universal film studio**. The series lasts until 1955 and includes encounters with 'The Killer' **Boris Karloff**, ***The Invisible Man a***nd ***The Mummy.***

1949: Ealing Comedy

Ealing Studios, founded in 1931, becomes associated with a series of comic gems highlighting the stresses and strains experienced in post-war Britain. The year sees the release of both ***Whisky Galore!*** and ***Passport to Pimlico***, which poke fun at such things as rationing, taxation and petty officialdom. ***Kind Hearts and Coronets*** also released in 1949 marks the **darker side of Ealing Comedy** with Alec Guinness polishing off a succession of eccentric relatives in pursuit of an inheritance. These and the studio's films of the 1950s prove a showcase for British character actors such as **Peter Sellers**, **Alastair Sim**, **Sid James** and **Margaret Rutherford**.

1950s: Cold War

It is the decade in which the Cold War becomes pretty hot, with the Korean War (1950-53) and the Berlin Blockade (1948-49) and the first involvement of America in conflict in Vietnam. In the USA itself it is an era of **conformity** born of **anti-communist fear** epitomised by the investigations of Senator Joe **McCarthy's House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC)**. Against this backdrop it is perhaps predictable that the decade's comedy films are **neither subversive nor particularly challenging**. A major box-office draw proves to be a series of big screen outings for Francis the Talking Mule. Meanwhile, **Jerry Lewis** and **Dean Martin** became the new comedy duo of note in a number of knockabout comedies.

This is the decade of the **dizzy-blonde** (**epitomised by Marilyn Monroe**) and highly conservative sexual politics in films such as ***The Seven Year Itch*** (1955). Meanwhile, nothing epitomises the hypocrisies of the 50s and early 60s more than the concerted cover-up of **Rock Hudson's homosexuality** in order to maintain the fiction of the chemistry with **Doris Day,** with whom he starred in a series of sophisticated comedies starting with ***Pillow Talk*** in 1959.

1958: The dawn of the Carry On era

Carry on Sergeant marks the beginning of one of the most enduring British comedy film 'franchises'. It will last for the next twenty years and clock up a total of **29 separate features and one compilation**. Owing a great debt to the sort of **innuendo** associated with saucy seaside postcards created by **Donald McGill,** the series only runs out of steam once censorship is relaxed in mainstream film. ***Carry Ons*** made stars of a core of comic performers such as **Kenneth Williams, Sid James and Barbara Windsor** (now better known as ***EastEnders'*** Peggy Mitchell).

1959

Frequently acknowledged as the greatest comedy film of all time, Billy Wilder's ***Some Like It Hot*** (1959) marks an ambiguous end to the decade's comedies. The fact that its two leading men **Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis** spend most of the film disguised as women has its roots in a **comedy drag tradition going back to medieval times**; but it also can be seen to expose some of the culturally-determined distinctions between men and women. Note the famous final lines with Joe E. Brown's millionaire Osgood's refusal to break off his engagement to Jack Lemmon's female persona Daphne:

Jerry: But you don't understand, Osgood!
[*Pulls off wig*]
Jerry: I'm a man!
Osgood: Well, nobody's perfect!

1960s

Comedy highlights suggest on the one hand the decade's more **youthful** outlook, and on the

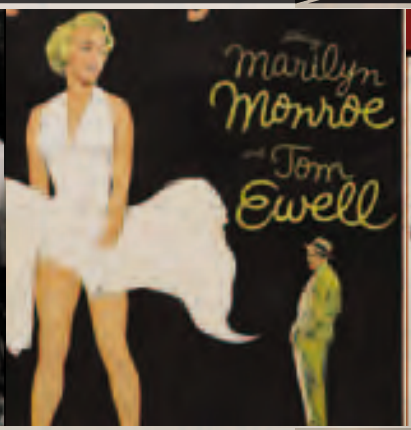
1940

Chaplin's Great Dictator

1949

Passport to Pimlico

1955



Seven Year Itch

1959

Some Like it Hot

other its grittier, cynical edge as **disaffection with the status quo turns to protest and dissent**. The contrast is suggested by California-based beach party movies and the **zany exploits of the Beatles** in films such as ***A Hard Day's Night*** (1964) on the one hand, and **satires** such as **Stanley Kubrick's *Doctor Strangelove*** (1963) and ***The Graduate*** (1967) on the other. The **James Bond** films also exert an influence, prompting a number of spoofs such as ***Our Man Flint*** (1965) and ***Casino Royale*** (1967). War-weariness born of the on-going conflict in Vietnam informs Robert Altman's ***MASH*** (1969) which is set in the Korean War but clearly points up the absurdities and inhumanity of America's contemporary military intervention.

1970s

In some ways, comedy now attempts a return to simpler times, even as the **Vietnam War and the exposure of political corruption** feeds themes of **paranoia and anxiety** in other film genres. Typifying this retro-mood is director **Peter Bogdonovich's screwball comedy *What's Up Doc?*** (1972). Mel Brooks pulls off a number of highly successful **genre parodies** including ***Blazing Saddles*** and ***Young Frankenstein*** (both 1974), and ***High Anxiety*** (1977), which parodies Hitchcock thrillers. However, if the decade belongs to anyone, it is probably **Woody Allen** who has the most consistent run of comedy hits, beginning the 70s in more slapstick vein with ***Bananas*** (1971) and ***Sleeper*** (1973) before perfecting a form of sophisticated urban adult comedy in ***Annie Hall*** (1977) and ***Manhattan*** (1979).

Meanwhile, the UK's film industry faces severe economic difficulties and can only come up with a variety of soft-core porn comedies to replace the flagging **Carry On** franchise. The importance of **TV situation comedy** that has been growing throughout the 1960s and 70s is also manifest as some of the most popular small-screen shows spawn feature-length stories for the cinema. ***Rising Damp***; ***On The Buses***; ***Steptoe and Son*** and ***Dad's Army*** are just some of the TV shows to make the leap to the big screen.

In America similar forces are underway thanks to a late-night NBC sketch show called ***Saturday Night Live*** (***SNL***) first screened in 1975. It brings a whole stable of new comedy writers and performers to the fore and soon the likes of **Dan Ackroyd**, **John and Jim Belushi**, **Chevy Chase**, and **Billy Crystal** (to name only a few) will achieve international stardom in a variety of comedy movies – many of them more anarchic than anything previously screened. Films such as ***Meatballs*** (1979) and ***Caddyshack*** (1980) receive R ratings because of their drug and sexual content.

1972

Luis Buñuel proves that he is still a force to be reckoned with, thanks to ***The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*** which makes fun of a whole range of middle-class French conventions, even reversing the social norms associated with eating (done alone in a small room) and going to the loo (done in public) and hinting at broader social crises by an ever encroaching tide of unexplained terrorist bomb blasts.

1979

The Monty Python team has already had a number of big screen successes when they embark on their most controversial project – a film parodying organised religion. ***The Life of Brian*** concerns the trials and tribulations of a character wrongly thought to be the Messiah. It proves hugely controversial in the US and UK, and was almost not made when the original money was withdrawn at the last minute – only to be saved by £4 million raised by ex-Beatle George Harrison.

1980s

As ever, US comedy dominates in most markets, and is highly reflective of the forces at work in 80s America. **Woody Allen** becomes more reflective, in films such as ***Stardust Memories*** (1980) which examines the nature of fame, while the paranoia of the newly prosperous Yuppies (young urban professionals) finds expression in films such as ***After Hours*** (1985). **Genre cross-fertilisation** is also well represented with ***Trading Places*** (1982) echoing other buddy movies and providing a vehicle for possibly the decade's most stand-out comic talent: **Eddie Murphy** – another ***SNL*** performer. And there is also Harold Ramis' ***Ghostbusters*** (1984) which manages to combine humour with the computer-generated special effects that are increasingly affecting the scale and concerns of mainstream movies. There is also more intelligent stuff to be found in films such as **Barry Levinson's *Good Morning Vietnam*** (1987) and 'dramadies' (comedy dramas) such as ***Broadcast News*** (1987).

Film comedy is not just the preserve of the US. In the UK **Bill Forsyth** lead a mini-Scottish revolution with ***Gregory's Girl*** (1980) and ***Local Hero*** (1983) both of which promote a gentler, character-driven kind of humour. **Bruce Robinson's *Withnail and I*** (1986) is not a box-office success, but subsequently becomes a cult film thanks to video and DVD. Although it concerns the plight of two out-of-work actors at the tail end of the 1960s, its near-tragic ending, with Withnail abandoned while Marwood moves on to bigger and better things, spoke eloquently about the values and strains in Thatcher's Britain.

BFI Picture Library for *Some Like It Hot* (d. Billy Wilder, 1959); Channel 4 Press Extranet for *Fargo*; Films 59/Alatriste/Uninci/The Kobal Collection for *Viridiana* (d. Luis Buñuel, 1961); Image.net for various film stills

1977 | 1979 | 1986 | 1994

Annie Hall | Monty Python | Withnail & I | Clerks

1990s

Hollywood studio comedy is pretty feeble in the early 90s as exemplified by the failure of ***The Last Action Hero*** (1993), the vast and baggy 'funny-thriller' vehicle for **Arnold Schwarzenegger**, which flops resoundingly, resulting in a $26 million loss despite worldwide takings of over $137 million. It is against the background of such bloated productions that the **90s' rise of the Indie comedy** needs to be viewed, with a new generation of off-beat directors turning in films on miniscule budgets. Leading the pack is **Kevin Smith** with ***Clerks*** (1994), but the decade probably belongs to the **Coen Brothers**, thanks to their run of success with films like ***Fargo*** (1995) and ***The Big Lebowski*** (1998) which combine humour with **noirish** – and sometimes **surreal** – storylines.

Although the 80s saw some international success for non-US comedy films and even foreign language movies such as **Pedro Aldomovar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*** (1988), the 90s truly sees the emergence of **World Cinema**. Among the top box office draws are the Australian director **Baz Luhrmann's *Strictly Ballroom*** (1992) and **Stephen Elliott's *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*** (1994). There is also quite a flowering of French comedy film thanks to **Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Delicatessen*** (1990) and Patrice Leconte's ***Monsieur Hire*** (1989). In 1997 the Italian ***Life is Beautiful*** manages to pair humour and the Holocaust, and in the process wins three Oscars, including the best actor award for the film's **director and star Roberto Benigni**.

The decade also proves box-office gold for **Hugh Grant's** upper-class self-conscious persona in a succession of films written and directed by successful TV scriptwriter **Richard Curtis**. ***Four Weddings and a Funeral*** (1994) proves to be **the most commercially successful UK film to date,** earning $240 million and establishing a form of romantic comedy that Curtis will revisit time and again. Among the factors guaranteeing these films US credibility is their ability to attract leading US female stars such as **Andie MacDowell** (***Four Weddings***) and **Julia Roberts** (***Notting Hill***, 1999).

2000

As with our last Fantasy timeline, we're leaving this last decade, the one in which you grew up, to you to make sense of. It's quite a task given the range of comedy output during the noughties. Your analysis will need to take into account the rise of **'gross-out' humour** associated with the **Farrelly Brothers**, and the development of actors such as **Adam Sandler** and **Jim Carrey**.

You'll also need to think, for example, about some of the following:

- **The impact of 9/11** or the US invasion and occupation of Iraq on US film comedy – if any?
- The **unusual crossover** from TV to big screen of a cartoon: (***The Simpsons***), and other **postmodern phenomena**.
- **Stretching the definition of cinema humour** to include the wry (though sometimes sentimental and loaded) documentaries associated with **Michael Moore** such as his telling critique of America's love affair with guns in ***Bowling for Columbine*** (2002).
- The **genre-bending** delights of the UK's zombie rom-com ***Shaun of the Dead*** (2004) or the follow-up swipe at detective buddie movies ***Hot Fuzz*** (2007).
- **The impact of online media, cross-platform and e-media marketing techniques** on the development of comedy cinema – what role do YouTube and other social media play in the development of new forms of screen humour?
- The role of film comedy, both **national** and **global,** in constructing ideas of **collective identity**.

Should be a laugh. Have fun!

Jerome Monahan is a freelance journalist and regular contributor to *MediaMag*.

Follow it up

Mikhail Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World* (1984)

Henri Bergson: *Laughter – an essay on the meaning of the comic* (2008)

Michael Billig: *Laughter and Ridicule – Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (2005)

Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves: *The Naked Jape* (2008)

Geoff King: *Film Comedy* (2002)

Bob McCabe: *The Rough Guide to Comedy Movies* (2005)

Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik: *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (1995)

Andrew Stott: *Comedy* (2005)

1994

Four Weddings

1998

The Big Lebowski

2000s

Simpsons

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT THE COMEDY FILM

Roy Stafford takes a global perspective on analysing film comedy.

What's your reaction to the idea of studying a comedy film? Do you think that at least you'll be in for an enjoyable experience? Or perhaps you have heard the popular wisdom that 'dissecting comedy' kills the joke, and that most comedians are desperately sad people? Here are two film industry facts about comedies:

– they represent **the most popular genre in most film markets**, but ...
– they **rarely win prizes** or top the critics' polls.

We don't tend to take comedy seriously – but we should.

Comedy is universal and has been around forever as a narrative form. But in Film Studies it is rarely chosen, either as a single film or as a genre case study, as often as its popularity might suggest. Comedy is difficult to deal with; but it raises challenging questions about film culture, and that's why we should study it. ***What* we laugh at, *who* we laugh at and *why* we laugh** are important signifiers about our changing cultural attitudes.

The nature of comedy

Greek theorists such as **Aristotle** recognised two modes of what they termed 'drama': 'tragedy' and 'comedy'. The difference between the two is that tragedy ends badly and comedy usually ends happily. Many people will tell you that they enjoy comedies because they make them feel good. But many comedies are **cruel**, and most are **offensive**, since jokes depend on allusions to some sort of **taboo-breaking**. Analyse a few jokes and you'll find that they are really about the important things in life – **sex, death and money**. We recognise 'dark' or 'black' comedy as a form in which the comic moments come not just from **breaking social taboos** but also from **transgressive behaviour** that has sometimes fatal consequences. Some forms of modern comedy ask us to enjoy the **embarrassment and humiliation** of others.

Comedy is also about **power**. This works both ways. Jokes are often made about people who have less power – perhaps as a kind of protective mechanism by the powerful who fear 'the others'. In Film and Media Studies we are aware that it is dangerous to make too simplistic an analysis of this, so, though we may recognise that racist and sexist jokes are damaging to society, we know too that in a healthy society, jokes need to be made about every aspect of our lives. If we try to exclude everything that might offend, we can expect some kind of backlash against new taboos.

Jokes are also made about **the powerful** – indeed comedy is one of the few tools available to the 'powerless' in their fight to get back at those who repress them. Some of the greatest comedy films are predicated on the simple aim of humiliating and 'bringing down' villains who have abused their powerful positions (or who have taken power without consent). A recent example would be the Ken Loach/Paul Laverty/Eric Cantona film ***Looking for Eric*** (UK/Fra/Bel/Spain/Italy 2008) when a local gangster is brought to his knees. A classic example would be the Charles Chaplin comedy, ***The Great Dictator*** (US 1940) in which Chaplin became the first film-maker to satirise the rise of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany. If we want to understand the ways in which comedy can help to illuminate social and political issues, it's useful to think about how comedy films work across different film cultures.

Film comedy: the global perspective

Let's first deal with getting to see comedies from around the world. It isn't straightforward. Although comedy films are universally popular, simply because it is the world's biggest (in value). A notorious example of this was the cult French film ***La Haine*** (1995) – not a comedy, but, as a youth picture, a source of frequent comic moments as three lads josh and insult each other. On a couple of occasions, they discuss comic book characters. There are quite specific references to the famous Asterix comics, but also to some less well-known characters: 'Hercule'

only American comedy films are traded internationally in large numbers – and then not all of them. There are two reasons for this:

– **verbal comedy** doesn't easily translate from one language into another
– **cultural knowledge**, on which many jokes depend, is often national or regional rather than universal.

It makes little difference whether you watch a subtitled film or a dubbed film. You won't get the delivery of the actor or the nuanced play with language; and some terms are simply untranslatable. Of course, some subtitled films are unintentionally funny because the translation goes wrong. It's worth remembering too that British English and American English are sometimes very different. Most subtitled films are translated for the North American market, and 'Pif', from a strip in a Communist Party newspaper. The American subtitler turned these into references to Snoopy and various characters from Hollywood cartoons, losing any sense of French culture, and specifically of the cultural world of the film's writers.

We can see the impact of this **preference for 'original language' films** by referring back to so-called silent cinema. Up until the coming of sound, certain comedians such as Charlie Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy were known and loved all round the world. The comedy was often physical/slapstick and the comic characters themselves were easily recognisable types (the tramp, the fat man etc.). Few film comedians today are truly world stars, unless, like Rowan Atkinson as Mr Bean, their appeal is similar to that of the silent stars.

Popular global comedies: Bollywood style

In the UK each year we get the chance to see a range of films from around the world. Many fans of global cinema will watch their favourite genres on DVD because the films aren't available in mainstream cinemas. Perhaps you are a fan of Chinese martial arts pictures or Japanese anime? The first of these offers exciting action; the second an often unique take on adolescence. But do you get the same chance to see Chinese or Japanese comedies? Probably not. **Distributors believe that comedy doesn't travel** for the reasons outlined above. However, there is one popular film culture that offers an alternative to Anglo-American ideas about comedy in the UK;

and that is **Bollywood**.

All kinds of Bollywood films are released in the UK. Like Hollywood, the Mumbai industry makes both **multi-genre films** and films more focused on just **one or two genres** (such as gangster films and thrillers). A long tradition in Hindi Cinema (the forerunner to today's Bollywood) was the presence of a broad comedian in the cast – someone who always played the same silly character with the rolling eyes and shaking head. These roles were often played by actors who specialised in such roles. Perhaps the most famous was **Johnnie Walker**, who renamed himself after the well known whisky brand. Such characters now look too broad for Western audiences – and perhaps for Indian audiences too (I'm thinking of the actor **'Johnny Lever'** playing in the big hit film of the late 1990s, ***Kuch, Kuch Hota Hai***, 1998). But as Bollywood tries to widen its appeal and to satisfy audiences in both India and the West ('Non-Resident Indians' – the NRIs – represent one of the biggest diaspora audiences in the world), it is beginning to offer much more sophisticated comedies. In the last couple of months, two major Bollywood releases have signalled this development – and the problems that the changes create.

Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year

Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year (India 2009) is the latest major film by scriptwriter **Jaideep Sahni** and stars the youngest member of the famous Kapoor clan of actors, **Ranbir Kapoor** in the title role. UK fans who turned up to see the new star may have been taken aback by the sophisticated and (by Indian standards) low-key comedy in which Ranbir's character Harpreet plays a young man with a not very good degree who has enormous self-belief and an unusually honest approach to becoming a successful salesman. Indian business dealings have long been presented on film as involving corruption, nepotism and extortion. ***Rocket Singh*** places its seemingly naïve, honest character into such a world. But, of course, he is brighter than he looks and he wins out with his approach (which in many ways replicates modern American management theory). Writer Sahni came into films without any industry background so he finds it relatively easy to dispense with conventions such as song and dance sequences and easy romance sub-plots. This means that the film is possibly too austere for even the NRI audience. But if a similar story kept some of those conventions it might well work. Just a couple of weeks after ***Rocket Singh***, ***3 Idiots*** did just that.

3 Idiots

3 Idiots is a story about three students at the most prestigious engineering college in India. A graduate with high grades from this college could walk into a top position at a multinational company in India or North America. The film's heroes play the system, defeat the villain (the college dean) and their main rival (the swot) and one of them wins the girl (the dean's daughter). The film is based on a comic novel by **the new superstar of popular Indian literature, Chethan Bhagat**. Like Jaideep Sahni, Bhagat writes about what he knows – the highly pressurised world of the technology institutes and the immensely wealthy new elite of top graduates working in the software and banking industries. ***3 Idiots*** 'softens' Bhagat's criticisms of the elite colleges and the pressures they place on students, but in adapting the book and making **it a vehicle for one of Bollywood's major stars (and a very good comic actor) Aamir Khan**, director **Rajkumar Hirani** and his scriptwriters have created the biggest Hindi film of all time around the world. This important film signals the potential for popular comedies to travel. Unfortunately, it also shows how playing down the darker moments and emphasising the more conventional story aspects pays off in winning a wider audience. If we want really to understand comedy's ability to get under the skin of the powerful, we need to look elsewhere.

Satires of repressive regimes: Spain and Iran

We've mentioned, but so far not defined, **satire**. Here is Wikipedia on satire:

> **...human or individual vices, follies, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, ideally with the intent to bring about improvement.**

Some of the greatest films ever made are satires. Studying these can be difficult, but also pleasurable and satisfying. Satirical films work in different ways. Sometimes you have to be 'in on the joke' to understand the film, but this is a bit like preaching to the converted. The most effective satires are simply puzzling – often in a faintly disturbing way. Censors are often taken in by films that they don't understand. The past master of this sort of cinema was **the surrealist Louis Buñuel**. Buñuel was a confirmed anti-cleric who had to leave Spain in 1939 when Franco and his Fascist party, the Falange, supported by the Catholic Church hierarchy, took power. When Buñuel returned in 1961 with Franco still in power, his film ***Viridiana*** was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. Eventually, the rather dense Spanish censors (and the Vatican) realised just how offensive and savage Buñuel's film was.

Viridiana

The film concerns a virtuous young woman who is persuaded to leave her convent to look after her uncle. He is a lecherous old man who owns a large estate and who uses his niece as a 'stimulus' for sexual fantasies about his dead wife. When he himself dies his niece begins her 'good works' but at one point her charity allows the local vagabonds and travellers to take over the house and stage a drunken party, which Buñuel stages as a satire on the Last Supper. Satire is often most effective when it is most offensive and you can see the climactic scene, when one of the women pretends to take a photograph, on YouTube: **http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l95_Ac49emY&NR=1** [Warning: while offensive to some Christians, for many audiences the 'shock' will induce laughter.]

Offside

Some of the best and most subtle satires have come from **Iran,** where criticising the regime has long been dangerous and liable to bans or restrictions on distribution. One of the most effective recent films is ***Offside* (2006)** by **Jafar Panahi** (See YouTube for the trailer and other clips). This comment from India (on the Internet Movie Database at **http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499537/**) makes a good introduction:

> **...an entertaining black comedy with subversive young girls subtly kicking the 'system' in its ass. It's all about football and it's funny, it's really funny.**

The film has a simple structure. A young woman is a big football fan and desperate to watch the national team playing in a World Cup qualifier against Bahrain (the film includes scenes from the actual game in 2005). The problem is that women

are not allowed to attend football matches – their presence might offend men and prevent them enjoying the freedoms of an all-male gathering. This leads to attempts by young women to infiltrate matches, dressing as boys and buying tickets from touts. Our hero smuggles herself into the national stadium but is then caught by one of the soldiers specifically looking out for such transgressions. She finds herself marched off to a 'holding pen' situated just off the main walkways into the bowl of the stadium. This is the ultimate in frustration and humiliation as she can hear the

crowd but can't see the action. She finds herself amongst a group of other women all in the same situation. What follows is an hilarious contest between the women who argue to be allowed to see the game, and their guards – in particular an earnest young man from the countryside who struggles to explain the ludicrous laws while trying not to be intimidated by the educated and sophisticated women from the city.

One of the funniest scenes sees a soldier escort a young woman into the men's toilets (since there are no facilities for women). She must be blindfolded so that she can't read the graffiti on the walls, and the men must be sent out first. Gradually, the contradictions and the stupidities of the situation in which the young women are being constrained prove too much for their captors. The power of the film is all the greater since these are non-actors playing scenes scripted directly from 'real-life experiences'. Just as truth is stranger than fiction, the idiocies of the real world are often more comic than the inventions of writers.

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Further reading/watching

http://www.opendemocracy.net/arts-Film/offside_3620.jsp

Hayward, R.: 'If There's One Film You Use ...Make it Offside' in ***Splice*** vol 1 no1 (2006)

King, Geoff: ***Film Comedy*** (2002)

McDermott, A.: 'Viridiana' in Forbes & Street (eds) ***European Cinema, An Introduction*** (2000)

Images from promotional websites for the films

GETTING SERIOUS about THE Comedy FILM

IS NESSA BAD FOR OUR HEALTH

Why is body image a source of humour? Should size matter, and what might be the impact of media representations of larger – and smaller – people? Examiner **Sara Mills** investigates the issues.

Whether you are studying **representations for AQA's MEST3** paper, looking at ***Gavin and Stacey*** for a **MEST1 cross-media study**, or **investigating sitcoms for MEST4**, the way Nessa and Smithy are represented is worth looking at.

Nessa. Is she funny because she is fat? Are fat-related comments and jokes directed at her? Is she sidelined because she is fat? Does she gain fewer narrative rewards than thin characters? Would a sitcom with Nessa and Smithy as the main characters be saleable and watchable? Having fallen in love with ***Gavin and Stacey***, it is tempting to think that we would like it as much, or even more, if the main and secondary roles were reversed.

Research on the representation of fat people on television has suggested that very few fat people are in leading roles. This can be applied to ***Gavin and Stacey***, where the two attractive 'normal' actors are the leads, each supported by a heavyweight sidekick. Secondly, the research found that many fat people are closely associated with ideas around greed and gluttony and laziness. This is certainly the case with Smithy, who is frequently seen eating huge amounts of food, and finishing other people's food for them. The research also suggested that characters' body weight was linked to narrative lines – fat people were less likely to be shown having romantic relationships and their plot lines generally had a **negative narrative outcome**, reinforcing a message that **bad things happen to fat people and good things happen to thin people**. This too might be applied to ***Gavin and Stacey***, where the two lead characters are in a largely successful and happy relationship, unlike either Nessa or Smithy.

If we accept that the media merely portray society, simply reflecting existing social structures, then fat people should be more widely represented in the media. After all, there are more fat people in society. Statistics range from the conservative to the panic-inducing, but there is no doubt that both more adults and more children are overweight than ever before. Fat people pay their TV licences just like thin people do. Fat people fall in love, get married, have kids, do everything that thin people do, so they should be equally represented. If, on the other hand, one believes that **representations are constructed** in order to fit in with **mainstream hegemonic values,** then we could assume that ideological messages around fat being bad, or fat being associated with laziness, gluttony or even poverty and lack of education, would be evident. You may, of course, think this is OK – even a good thing – if you believe the media should have the explicitly political function of controlling people's attitudes.

Thin = good, fat = bad?

In terms of children's media the research found even more stark associations. **Herbozo** and colleagues looked at the characterisation in the 25 most popular children's films. They chose the films from Amazon's top-selling 25 movies for kids. The fat characters in 64% of the films were cruel, evil, unfriendly and/or unattractive. In an even higher percentage of films (72%), thin characters were happy, attractive, kind or good. This may be partly due to the simply-drawn characters in many children's films, where characters tend to be stereotypical or archetypal (for example, the wicked step-mother), to make it easier for children to relate to and understand them. Psychologically complex or ambiguous characters are fairly uncommon. This is often similar in comedies, particularly sitcoms, where the circular narrative structure lends itself to simply drawn characters, who often follow **Propp's character types**, rather than characters which have, or are shown to develop, depth.

While we can see that such simple classifications are perhaps required in children's films, and even in sitcoms, there seems no reason why fat should so often be associated with the evil characters, and thin with the good. In both children's and adults' media, such narrative positioning of the fat and the thin tends to reinforce messages that thinness will lead to happiness, while fatness will not. This helps to bolster the thin ideal by rewarding the thin and stigmatising the fat.

Effects theories – does celebrity size matter?

Recent scaremongering media reports have claimed that viewing fat celebrities may even be bad for our health! Professor McMahon of Nuffield Health private care, said that:

The increasing profile of larger celebrities means that being overweight is now perceived as being 'normal' in the eyes of the public.

Such comments show a frequent and unquestioning belief in the power of the media. They support the **Effects model**, where we, the passive audience, absorb the messages of media, unable to think for ourselves. Seeing 'fat' celebrities means we feel OK about being fat.

This view suggests that we, the public, see the fat famous and aspire to be like them, or believe that extra bodyweight need not be a barrier to achieving fame. And, indeed, with the exception of areas such as sport or fashion where physical perfection is a requisite, there is no reason why fat people *shouldn't* achieve fame as actors, as TV 'personalities', as scientists, as musicians, as authors – and anything else which doesn't rely on a specific body shape.

Professor McMahon is concerned that fat people are receiving a more positive representation in the media, and that this representation will impact upon social norms. A further and more worrying implication is the underlying assumption that this is bad news – that accepting fatness is a bad thing for society. It is worth remembering, however, that Nuffield Private Health Care, where Professor McMahon works, is a group of private hospitals whose 'bestsellers' include cosmetic surgery and weight-loss surgery. Could it be that Professor McMahon has a financial incentive for making sure that fatness doesn't become too positively represented? After all, as long as fat is stigmatised, there will be no shortage of customers seeking gastric bands, liposuction and so on at private hospitals.

The size zero debate

Such debates are similar to the **size zero debate** – the idea that the prevalence of skinny models encourages anorexia and extreme dieting among young girls. In this case, as with most cases, the effects model is presumed to be happening to someone else: it is always other people – and usually people who we consider to be less intellectually astute than ourselves – who we believe are receiving these messages. Therefore, teenage girls are vulnerable to messages about size zero, teenage boys are vulnerable to copycat violence, and 'other people'

– perhaps the less intelligent – are vulnerable to the 'fat is fine' message perpetuated by the presence of fat celebrities.

Both the 'size zero' and the 'fat celebrities are bad for our health' debates assume the audience is unable to make distinctions based on context. Surely we know that most celebrities have unrealistic and extreme body shapes? Models are unnaturally thin, sport stars are unnaturally toned, Madonna requires constant input from a personal trainer and a personal chef and, aged 50, spends half her life in the gym to keep her figure. We know this, just as we know that seeing fat people who are also famous doesn't make obesity any healthier. However, does this mean that we aren't vulnerable to the insidious messages of the media – to a pervasive and pernicious changing of our views about what is normal? In this respect, we should encourage the presence of fat celebrities, if only as a counter-balance to all the unfeasibly thin and buff celebs.

Where does Fox's new dating competition show, ***More to Love*** fit into this? As the publicity material states:

> ***More to Love*** **follows one regular guy's search for love among a group of real women determined to prove that love comes in all shapes and sizes.**

In the tradition of such dating shows, the 'regular guy' chooses from 20 attractive women. In this case, however, the 'twist' is that both he and the 20 lovely ladies are all plus-sized.

Positive sign or freak-show?

Fox could be pandering to the 'freak-show' craze, where anyone perceived as not quite normal is held up on TV for all of the 'normals' to laugh at and joke about. They could equally be criticised for normalising obesity and encouraging a generation of Americans to believe that fat people can find love too. This could be seen as either a much-needed positive representation of plus-size people, or a dangerous precedent encouraging more people to accept being overweight. Other issues that arise include the absence of fat people on 'normal' dating shows, the assumption being that fat can't compete with thin, that thin men or women will always be chosen over their heavier competitors. In this case, Fox can either be seen as redressing the balance and providing for a **diverse and broad spectrum of positive representations**, or of **'ghettoising the fat'** as if they can't be in the same competition as thin people. Rather ironically one can find oneself caught between **two sets of political correctness**, arguing for the rights of fat women to be as equally and thoroughly objectified as thin women! Of course, Fox is a commercial channel; and whether they have cunningly identified and begun to exploit a particular audience demographic – fat people, who may arguably make up a very lucrative corner of the market – or decided to exploit the voyeurism of those who enjoy looking and sneering at the overweight is hard to tell.

Another American offering this year was ***Dance Your Ass Off*** described as 'Bringing dance and diet together' – ***Strictly*** for the heavyweights. The publicity describes it as featuring:

> **talented, full-figured contestants who will have to lose to win. Each contestant is paired with a professional dance partner who will train him or her for weekly stage performances – ranging from Hip Hop, to Ballroom and even Pole Dancing! Then they shake and rattle their rolls in front of a live studio audience and a panel of expert judges. The judges score the routines, and then the contestants weigh in to reveal their weekly weight loss. The dance score and the weight loss are combined for an overall score, which determines who is sent home each week.**

Programme makers always follow the money.

If these two programmes do well, it is possible that next year will see a rash of reality TV programmes remade with the 'fat' angle: ***Even Bigger Brother***, ***I'm a Fat Celebrity***, ***Fat Britain's Got Talent***, ***The X-L Factor***, and so on…

If this is the case, expect to see a **moral panic in the tabloids** as TV is accused of leading the fat revolution, embracing obesity and encouraging all fat people to feel as body positive as Nessa. As Nessa comes out of the changing room in her black underwear, showing herself in all her overweight glory, the assistant says:

> **Nessa, you look fabulous!**

And Nessa replies:

> **I know. I feels it.**

And somehow we all feel it too.

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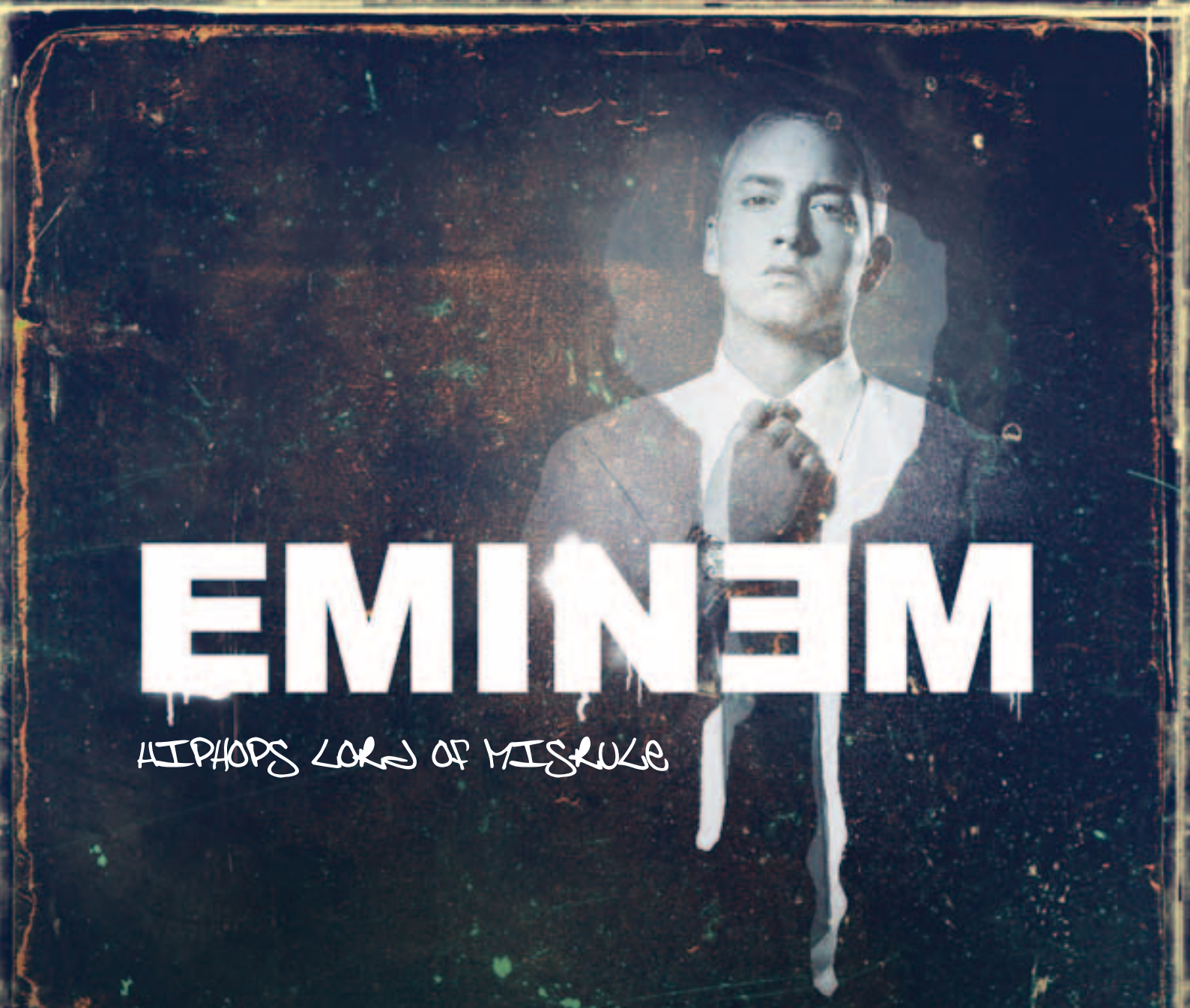

EMINEM

HIPHOPS LORD OF MISRULE

Humour is not necessarily the first term you'd associate with Eminem, but **Sarah Mitchell** suggests he fits into a long comic tradition of social satire.

Now this looks like a job for me
So everybody, just follow me
Cause we need a little, controversy
Cause it feels so empty, without me

Without Me

Wearing visors, sunglasses
And disguises
Cause my split personality
Is having an identity crisis

Low Down and Dirty

Eminem has courted controversy throughout his career. On the surface it seems ridiculous to analyse any of his work in an issue dedicated to comedy: to many, his po-faced posturing is anything but comical. One of the main charges levelled at him is his lyrical **misogyny** with many tracks seemingly oozing **patriarchal poison**. Indeed, looking at some aspects of his life and work it is almost impossible to refute these allegations; his venom-fuelled tirades against his ex-wife Kim are legendary, whilst his own mother launched a $10m lawsuit against him for using the lyrics 'my mom smokes more dope than I do' on the hit 'My Name Is'. In fact, for anyone interested in Freudian analysis, Eminem and his love-hate relationship with his mother could probably fill several books.

Nevertheless, after scratching the surface of Eminem's back catalogue it immediately becomes apparent that not everything is as it seems. Firstly, Eminem is obviously a master of disguise; like rap's answer to Hermes (the slippery, shifty messenger of the gods, and guardian of boundary-crossing) his character seems to be a mercurial mishmash of identities; trying to pinpoint any fixed sense of self in Eminem's work is futile. The so-called misogynist is actually a devoted father to his daughter Hailie, while accusations of homophobia are undermined by his close friendship with Elton John, who supposedly helped Eminem overcome some addiction problems. Instead of trying to pigeonhole or label Eminem, it seems a more fluid theoretical model is needed in order to analyse the postmodern world of hip-hop's clown prince. The theoretical models of **Mikhail Bakhtin**, a twentieth-century Russian theorist who wrote a great deal of his work imprisoned in Stalinist Russia, may prove useful in analysing Eminem.


SLIM
ON THE NATIONS FAVORITE REALITY SHOW...
AT YOGA, A WELL-KNOWN TECHNO-ARTIST IS GETTING INSPIRATION...
READY FOR ACTION!
TRUE STORY
TRUE STORY
WORD SPREAD THAT OUR HERO HAS RETURNED!
ANOTHER SHADY DISRUPTS EVERYTHING
WHEN JOINTS GO BAD
AS THE DOCTORS RUSH TO SAVE SHADY...
"I CUD HERO UP TO THE CHALLENGE BEFORE HIM"
AT A LOCAL DISCOUNT SUPERSTORE...
WHAT'S THIS? ANOTHER TROUBLED YOUTH IN DANGER? WHO WILL SAVE HIM?
A DISTRACTED MOTHER LEADS TO A CRISIS...
DUTY CALLS!
MEANWHILE, BACK AT STATELY MATHERS MANSION...

The work of Bakhtin

Some of **Bakhtin's** concepts such as **intertextuality** have become part of our recognised critical toolbox.

Bakhtin agreed individual people cannot be finalised, completely understood, known, or labelled. He saw **identity** as the 'unfinalisable self', meaning a person is never fully revealed or known. Many icons of the postmodern age change and adapt their identity and consequently can be seen in these terms: **Marilyn Manson's** manipulations of traditional binary oppositions such as male/female, beauty/grotesque; Lady Gaga's manipulations of femininity, or Madonna's consistent reinventions of herself can all be seen as examples of the **'unfinalisable self'**. Similarly, Eminem's staged identity played out through created personas can also be seen as an example of the postmodern self which can never be truly finalised: **Slim Shady** is a loud-mouthed arrogant misogynistic 'persona' created by **Eminem**, who is himself a creation of **Marshall Mathers III**, whereas **Stan** is a homicidal stalker who murders his 'baby-momma', after idolising the macho bluster of hip-hop. Many of Eminem's album names further endorse his sense of identity as a performance without end: ***Slim Shady*** (1999), ***Marshall Mathers*** (2000), ***The Eminem Show*** (2002), ***Encore*** (2004) and ***Curtain Call*** (2006).

Identity and performance

These motifs of performance support the idea of Eminem as hip-hop's court jester comically performing the rituals of rap to an eager public who wait to be entertained and shocked in equal measure. This shrewd manipulation of identity and performance helped Eminem successfully overcome the 'Vanilla Ice syndrome' to become a white rapper respected in the black-dominated world of hip-hop. In fact, Eminem's embracing and manipulation of his 'whiteness' helped him become one of hip-hop's elite. The semi-shaved head favoured by right-wing extremists is reclaimed by the white rapper, while the platinum-bleached hair and jokey attempts to play on his puniness could be read as an apparent attempt to emphasise his geeky whiteness in a world dominated by macho muscle-men such as 50 Cent.

Self-parody

In addition, anyone familiar with many of Eminem's lyrics and videos will realise that Eminem coats his so-called misogyny in comic performance, with himself as the butt of most of the absurdity. He frequently shows himself to be the laughing stock, and many of the characters he creates are the antithesis of macho misogyny: 'Without Me' shows Eminem donning a misshapen fat suit to play 'Rap-boy' who fights the moral panic surrounding the lyrics of hip-hop. Soon after, he is shown trying to seduce a beautiful woman, only to fail because he has uncontrollable flatulence. In 'We Made You' he again stages himself as the fool by performing the role of a nerdy pathetic version of ***Star Trek's*** Spock who can only impress Lieutenant Uhura by stunning her with a taser gun. Later we see him playing a goofier version of Raymond Babbit

(Dustin Hoffman's ***Rain Man*** character), while Dr Dre performs the cool Tom Cruise role. Even when performing as Bret Michaels (the lead singer of the American Glam Rock band Poison) he cannot take the role of 'babe magnet' too seriously; his long blond tresses are revealed to be a cheap wig covering a completely bald head. Even after only a rudimentary look at his videos, it is obvious that Eminem is never afraid to appear grotesque in a bid to poke fun at himself and look ridiculous.

Carnival

Eminem's use of the grotesque is not a new idea; in fact grotesque humour in popular culture dates back to the medieval period when carnivals celebrated the temporary removal of rules and boundaries. The **carnivalesque** is a term coined by **Bakhtin** when he studied Rabelais, a fifteenth-century French writer; however many of his ideas are equally useful for deconstructing many postmodern texts with their slippery ideas about truth, continuous intertextual referencing and confused notions of identity. To **Bakhtin the carnivalesque subverts and liberates the assumptions of dominant ideologies through humour and chaos**. Through the carnival and the carnivalesque the world is turned-upside-down (W.U.D.), ideas and truths are tested and challenged, and all ideas demand equal status. Often at the heart of these kinds of texts is a **'Lord of Misrule'**, a character who 'oversees' the subversion by encouraging or motivating the chaos. This role obviously fits Eminem like the proverbial glove since many of his songs use all the elements of the carnival to question contemporary culture's dominant ideologies surrounding gender, fame, racial identity and the family.

The grotesque body

One of the fundamental elements of the carnival is using imagery of **the grotesque body**. The grotesque body emphasises our **fundamental needs** (eating, drinking, defecating, urinating, and sex) to celebrate the victory of life: it is a rebellious image used to subvert the ideologies that direct us into accepted ways of looking, speaking and behaving. Eminem's videos are riddled with images of the grotesque body. In our celebrity-ruled world dominated by faces fixed into Botox rigidity, smiles that blind us with snowy white dental implants, bodies remodelled with plastic surgery and Photoshopped images of perfection, the use of the grotesque body is a refreshing reminder of our biological and animalistic selves stripped of the façade of social conformity. In Eminem's world no biological function is left without comment; as well as the recurrent grotesque sexual references in his lyrics, a glance at the videos show a character floating on a giant faeces, a superhero who suffers from having to dig his underwear out of his rear ('Without Me'), green mouldy teeth and a vomiting crew from the USS Enterprise ('We Made You'). These images satirise our culture as one that denies our corporeality, and Eminem shows us to be living in a world that has sanitised and consequently dehumanised our physicality.

Eminem's barbed commentary on our denial of our physicality is furthered by his use of grotesque female bodies. This is particularly evident in his 2009 track 'We Made You'. Here men are shown to be frightened victims of predatory post-feminist women looking to snare their next prey with hair extensions, false nails and huge surgically enhanced breasts. The characters of 'Sarah Palin' and 'Kim Kardashian' are shown with their breasts and rears respectively pulsating to the beat of the music. Here modern man is shown as running scared, succinctly symbolised by the bizarre spaceship scene where a spacecraft shaped like the male genital is swatted out of orbit by a giant female Transformer. However, rather than viewing this imagery as misogyny, it could be argued that Eminem is ridiculing them in a bid to show us how unrealistic some modern representations of femininity are: robotic, aggressively sexual and objectified.

Intertextuality

According to Bakhtin, every person is influenced by others in an inescapably intertwined way, and consequently no voice can be said to be isolated. Eminem entwines his voice with a myriad of voices from popular culture. His **intertextual links** to other voices are firmly entrenched in his work casting a shrewd eye over the banality of contemporary culture. The media obsession with female celebrities and their weight is mocked through the use of a chubby Jessica Simpson look-alike singing whilst munching on a hamburger, whereas the Sarah Palin impersonator (played by an apparently well-known porn actress) could be seen as showing us the commonly-held belief that women are only seen to be creditable if they can be sexually objectified.

In a later sequence of the 'We Made You' video 'Kim Kardashian' is shredded in a wood chipper and while this could be seen as controversially violent, it is interesting to note that she is shown to be made out of hundred dollar bills. Subsequently, this can also be seen as a comment on the cult of reality TV that gives celebrity and high status to individuals who seem to have no traditional talent or skill that warrants their fame, fortune and success.

Bakhtin rejected the idea that language could be separated from ideology and through his role as Lord of Misrule Eminem uses both music and video to probe the psyche of popular culture and thus shock us into questioning our accepted ideals and assumptions. His willingness to create controversy and his seeming need to shock mean that he is unafraid to question and ridicule ideologies often left unquestioned in a bland landscape of political correctness.

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Glossary

Here are some useful terms that could come handy if you want to add some Bakhtinian theory into your A2 critical investigation.

Carnival: a term coined by **Bakhtin** when discussing the fifteenth-century French writer Rabelais. It commonly applies to comic texts that use gross imagery to shock and entertain in equal measure.

Dialogic: A dialogic text is one that holds a **dialogue** with other texts. For example, Wes Craven's ***Scream*** holds a dialogic conversation with generations of slasher movies.

Discourse: For **Bakhtin**, language is political and intertwined with ideology. Each field of language is known as a discourse; when we interpret a text we use our knowledge of a range of discourses to interpret that text.

Grotesque body: Texts that focus on the biological functions of the human body. They are usually in a text to remind us of our corporeality and mortality.

Heteroglossia: Texts that let multiple voices or points of view be heard simultaneously.

Intertextuality: The referencing of one media text by another in such a way that all previous knowledge of the original text helps us to deconstruct the new text.

Lord of Misrule: The figurehead of a carnivalesque text who appears to conduct and motivate the chaos.

Polyphony: A text that allows multiple utterances or voices to speak at once. For example, ***The Simpsons*** uses many references to popular culture to question dominant ideologies of gender and the family.

Unfinalisable self: Bakhtin's view of identity perceives the self as fluid and infinite.

Utterance: One voice or viewpoint that is present in a text. Utterances contest one another in text to define meaning.

Lost in translation

The transatlantic travels of sitcom

Emma Louise Howard explores why some UK sitcoms succeed as US remakes, and vice versa – and why others fail.

With so many sitcoms taking transatlantic trips, why do some remakes work so well while others fail miserably?

***The IT Crowd* is a very British show in the sense that it comes from a tradition of surreal sitcom that doesn't really have an equivalent in America. The only point in a mainstream US network taking on a show like this would be to reinvent it from the ground up, using my storylines and characters merely as a jumping-off point... even the oddest US mainstream sitcom – *Seinfeld*, say – is rooted in the real world... if you really intend to do this kind of nutty show, you can't just grab the scripts and slap a few American actors on it. You need to rethink the whole thing...**

IT Crowd* creator Graham Linehan on its US remake, which piloted but was never picked up. Linehan was also responsible for *Father Ted* and the comedy sketch show *Big Train

US and UK networks have been exchanging comedy shows and sitcoms for many years. Channel Four and its Freeview entertainment sister channel, E4, have screened many popular American sitcoms such as ***Friends***, ***My Name is Earl***, ***The Big Bang Theory*** and ***How I Met Your Mother***, all in their original American format. Likewise, BBC America has broadcast classic British comedies like ***Monty Python's Flying Circus*** as well as sitcoms like ***Fawlty Towers***, ***Absolutely Fabulous***, ***The Office*** and ***The Inbetweeners***, again, all in their original form, but admittedly to rather a narrow audience.

Transatlantic remakes shown on mainstream networks in America, on the other hand, have enjoyed varying degrees of success, and sometimes abject failure.

Year	Remake	Result	
1971	***Til Death Do Us Part*** is remade in the ***US as All in the Family***.	Outspoken Alf Garnett became the less bombastic Archie Bunker; it succeeded.	✓
1972	Quintessentially British ***Steptoe and Son*** is remade for America as ***Sanford and Son***.	The plot transferred well to a Los Angeles location and the show enjoyed a ten year run.	✓
1977	UK ***Man About the House*** is remade into the US ***Three's Company***.	It became one of America's most popular sitcoms and continues to be referenced in pop culture to this day.	✓
1978	***Fawlty Towers*** was remade into ***Chateau Snavely*** for ABC in America.	The series was never produced due to the plot not adapting well from seaside hotel to highway motel.	✗
1983	The second attempt at an American ***Fawlty Towers*** remake was ***Amanda's***, noted for the gender switching of the lead roles.	It failed to pick up a sizeable audience and was dropped after ten episodes.	✗
1983	The British ***Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*** is remade for an American audience with Richard Mulligan in the title role.	It was short-lived and far less popular than the UK original was in Britain.	✗
1990	America's successful ***Who's the Boss*** was remade into ***The Upper Hand*** for the UK.	It ran successfully for six years.	✓
1991	***2 Point 4 Children*** hits British audiences but few know it's a remake of the popular American sitcom ***Roseanne***.	It enjoyed a successful nine year run on the BBC.	✓
1993	***The Golden Girls*** was adapted for the UK into ***The Brighton Belles***.	The cloned script made it feel culturally bereft, and it was cancelled.	✗
1996	***Men Behaving Badly*** was remade for America starring Rob Schneider.	Considered a failure, less than half the episodes made were broadcast.	✗
1996	Carsey-Werner buys ***One Foot in the Grave*** and drafts in Bill Cosby for the American lead role.	Remade from the ground up and re-scripted, says Werner: **We basically just used the [Meldrew] character, and then even that we abandoned.**	✓
1999	Another attempted ***Fawlty Towers*** American remake was ***Payne***.	Nine episodes were filmed and only eight aired – it was thought of as another failure.	✗
1999	For ***Days Like These***, the characters from nostalgic Wisconsin-set ***That 70s Show*** were transported to a Luton setting.	The simple copy format did not work – only ten of 13 episodes were broadcast before the US original was even screened.	✗
2003	Popular BBC sitcom ***Coupling*** was remade for American audiences.	This word-for-word clone with American actors is considered one of the biggest remake flops, with only four episodes aired..	✗
2005	Amid controversy and worried criticism, one of the biggest British hit sitcoms ***The Office*** was remade in the US with a recognisable cast including Steve Carrell and Jenna Fischer.	Despite a shaky start, the show simply utilised the original as a loose template and came into its own – its sixth season premiered in September 2009 and it has won Golden Globes and EMMYs.	✓

So what problems arise in the wake of a transatlantic traverse? Does British comedy have to be 'doctored' in order to satisfy the American appetite, and vice versa?

Sense of humour

According to Linehan, the British and American sense of humour is different. He refers to **'surrealism', 'oddities' and 'nuttiness' as being essentially British** and he may have a point. In the 1980s, following a stream of 'traditional' sitcoms, slapstick was given a surreal and nonsensical twist in the grotty student house inhabited by ***The Young Ones***. Rules of 'reality' were abandoned for a cartoon-like quality. Houses exploded, characters endured horrendous injuries (but were fully recovered in time for the next episode, see Taflinger's sixth rule below) and inanimate objects, such as toasters, spoke lines of dialogue. There were obvious influences at work here, particularly from sketch shows like the surreal ***Monty Python's Flying Circus*** and the frenzied ***Goodies***. Linehan's assertion regarding **American comedy's 'realistic roots'** and the converse **'weirdness' of British humour** relates to his own ***IT Crowd***. Characters cling to ceilings like spiders and ignore dangerous fires in the same room. But US programming isn't completely devoid of surrealism – take for example the imaginary sequences in ***Ally McBeal*** and ***Scrubs***.

So, is there such a thing as an American or a British sense of humour? Surely laughter, a reflex over which we have little control, is a universal joy?

Perhaps the best-known theoretical study of comedy comes from **Richard F. Taflinger**, who put together six 'rules' which allow a situation to be humorous. Comedy must:

1 Appeal to the intellect rather than the emotions.
2 Be mechanical.
3 Be inherently human, with the capability of reminding us of humanity.
4 Have a set of established societal norms with which the observer is familiar.
5 The situation and its component parts must be inconsistent or unsuitable to the societal norms.
6 Be perceived by the observer as harmless or painless to the participants.

For a more detailed version of Taflinger's theory, go to **http://www.wsu.edu/~taflinge/theory.html**

Philosophies of humour, however, date back to Aristotle and Plato, who outlined **'the superiority theory': laughing at the misfortunes of others.** While this may appear cruel, think about slapstick and also those 'cringeworthy' moments in British comedies like ***The Office***, ***Peep Show*** and ***The Inbetweeners*** in which the characters embarrass themselves horribly or make a social faux pas. We squirm for them, but **there's catharsis in thinking, 'Thank goodness that's not me.'** While these shows will often end at the moment in which the failure or embarrassment reaches its horrible pinnacle, which breaks Taflinger's sixth rule (such as Mark's wedding in ***Peep Show*** where following a 'will-he-won't-he' build-up, he decides to go through with the marriage only to turn to discover his new wife sobbing at the prospect of a future with him). Many American sitcoms, however, comply with Taflinger's sixth rule and utilise **an emotional feel-good factor which restores equilibrium**. In ***Friends,*** the format is simple. A situation is set up, for example a Christmas episode in which Monica makes festive candy for the neighbours. Initially, she enjoys her newfound popularity, but as demand for the candy rises she is run ragged, dealing with hordes of desperate neighbours: her misfortune

Lost in translation

amuses us. Chandler eventually 'saves' Monica by reprimanding the greedy neighbours and the feel-good factor is restored. As Taflinger states:

> **the comic action is perceived by the audience as causing the participants no actual harm: their physical, mental, and/or emotional well-being may be stretched, distorted, or crushed, but they recover quickly and by the end of the performance they are once again in their original state.**

Subverting the sixth sense

Linehan however uses the phrase, 'No hugs, no learning,' when referring to his own work. It would appear he believes that avoiding 'soppiness' and 'messages' allows the maintenance of an 'idiotic' status quo. However, while over-romanticism in sitcoms may appear to be a profoundly US phenomenon, shows like ***Frasier*** and ***Curb Your Enthusiasm*** suggest that Americans aren't afraid to tortuously humiliate their characters, and then deny them the comfort of a restoration of equilibrium. There is nothing 'warm and fuzzy' about Frasier's lengthy nervous breakdown, or brother Niles being left destitute in a dingy little apartment following his divorce (although some moral lessons are definitely learned here), while ***Curb's*** Larry suffers more embarrassment with each episode, again flouting Taflinger's sixth rule. These characters may eventually recover, but they are certainly not restored by the 'end of the performance'.

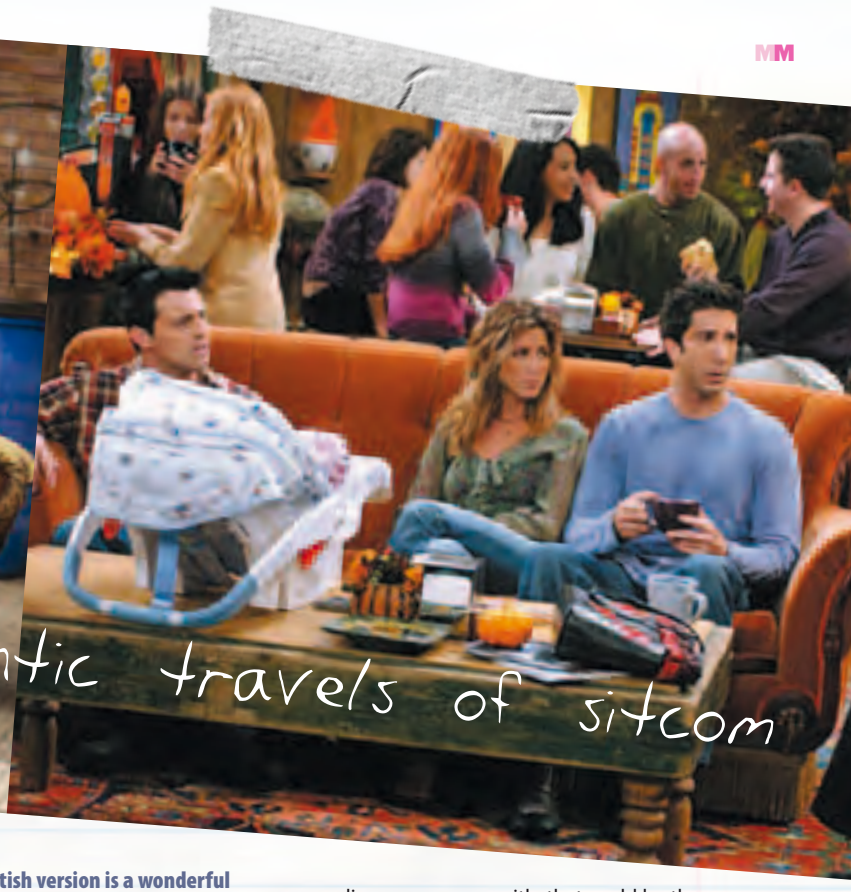
Popularised by **Immanuel Kant, the 'theory of incongruity'** (similar to Taflinger's destabilisation of clear 'societal norms') suggests that ***we laugh at behaviour that is incongruous or inappropriate*** (see Taflinger's fourth and fifth rule). In perhaps the most notorious scene in the British ***Office***, David Brent dances without music within a circle of his colleagues. At first all is well, the dancing is contextually relevant and his colleagues support his efforts; they clap rhythmically and encourage him, but it all goes terribly wrong. Brent takes it too far, his movements become more exaggerated and soon he is gyrating to complete silence except for his own grunting, as his colleagues look on, horrified. His behaviour has become inappropriate and incongruous – we laugh **cathartically** at his humiliation.

Also universal is the **'general theory of verbal humour' discussed by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo**. An example of this would be ***Peep Show's*** Mark correcting his flatmate Jeremy by hissing 'sss' twice after the latter using the phrase, 'You do the math'. We chuckle at Phoebe in ***Friends*** casually asking, 'Why isn't it Spiderm'n,' (the intonation taking the emphasis away from 'man') to which Chandler replies that he is a Spider Man and that it's not his last name, he isn't 'Phil Spiderman' for example.

The stereotypical assertion that Brits don't get 'warmth' (we're too reserved) and Americans can't grasp 'surrealism' or 'irony' is challenged by the success of some transatlantic exchanges. It is obvious that British comedy *can* tickle American 'funnybones' and vice versa. Why then are remakes so hit and miss?

Timing

One reason may simply be **timing**. Take, for example, the unsuccessful US ***Men Behaving Badly*** remake starring Rob Schneider. The American Frat Packer and the British Lager Lout may well be similar beasts, but while 90s Britain embraced the likes of Gary and Tony, America (still contextually in the 'new man' era in which culturally-aware, well-dressed, metrosexual men were prized above all others) had ***Friends*** with its three sensitive, compassionate male characters. Cinemas may now be filled with Judd Apatow movies in which the loveable drunken/stoner buddy-oriented oaf deals with relationships and responsibility (not too dissimilar to the concept



The transatlantic travels of sitcom

behind the original ***Men Behaving Badly***), but at the time of the remake perhaps American audiences were simply not ready.

Also, cultural references can be lost entirely in translation. The US carbon copy ***Red Dwarf*** remake for NBC in 1992 was never broadcast. How would Americans at that time have related to Lister's obsession with lager and curry? There might be an equivalent now, but back in the early 90s such a reference would have been lost.

Perhaps the biggest flop in transatlantic remake history was ***Coupling***. In its native Britain it ran for four seasons, but taking into account its similarity to ***Friends***, why would Americans feel the need to remake it in 2003? At the time, NBC was enjoying a spate of successful BBC show remakes such as ***Dog Eat Dog*** and ***The Weakest Link***. Yet it would seem that comedy is a much trickier proposition. The ***US Coupling*** was panned as a poor imitation of the original; an identical script and an attempt at look-alike casting meant the delivery felt stilted and culturally detached. Clearly, dropping an identical show in a new location with actors from across the pond doesn't automatically work.

Similarly 1999's ***Days Like These***, the British remake of ***That 70s Show*** for ITV's primetime Friday night slot had only ten of its 13 episodes aired (while the American original ran for eight seasons, followed by successful DVD box set sales). Replacing the fictional town Point Place, Wisconsin with Luton, Bedfordshire, the script was kept almost identical. The contextual 70s events were replaced with British equivalents (such as Prince Charles visiting the town instead of President Ford), and the character names remained similar. Following the failure, C5 aired ***That 70s Show*** and found that the original translated well to a British audience without alteration, just as many American sitcoms had done before and have since.

Of ***The Office*** remake, British writer and actor Simon Pegg stated:

> **the original British version is a wonderful and compact piece of comedy writing and performance, but I think it's bit much to expect a large scale American television audience to fully relate to the minutiae of day-to-day business life in an obscure British suburb... So, Slough [becomes] Scranton, and the office archetypes become a little more archetypal to an American audience. The spirit of the show remains intact. The performances are uniformly great and the show scores big ratings... The success of the remake is borne out by its undoubted success and appeal.**

In the US remake Michael Scott is no Brent. Interestingly, that same surrealism which Linehan claims is lost on an American audience completely envelops Steve Carrell's character. Brent is more 'rooted in reality', a slightly overweight, arrogant middle management type with a total lack of self-awareness. Scott meanwhile is more conventionally attractive but a great deal weirder as evidenced by bizarre utterances such as

> **I'm an early bird and I'm a night owl, so I'm wise and I... have worms**

or

> **Nobody likes beets, Dwight. Why don't you grow something that everybody does like. You should grow candy.**

However, both of these supercilious characters inspire a certain degree of **unexpected pathos** in the viewer, whether it's Scott crying over a broken heart or Brent quietly begging for his job back under threat of redundancy. A major difference is how other characters respond. While co-workers seem fairly happy to engage with Scott, Brent is virtually ignored, to the extent that it becomes upsetting. Americans can handle 'cringeworthy' discomfort, as the success of sitcoms ***Arrested Development*** and ***Curb Your Enthusiasm*** clearly show; it is the **level of discomfort and awkwardness** the respective audiences can cope with, that could be the stumbling block.

So what are the guidelines for a successful remake? A **name change** can be positive; the US ***Office*** added the tagline **An American Workplace** in order to differentiate itself, cementing its new cultural status. Modifying the original template can also work: who knew that ***2 Point 4 Children*** was based on ***Roseanne***? Similarly, ***The Office's*** remake might have started in a similar vein to its predecessor but it has now developed its own quintessentially American plotlines, running for far longer than the British original. Proof positive perhaps that following the original script and simply changing a few cultural references won't work (as ***Coupling*** and ***Days Like These*** learned the hard way); in order to succeed it would seem that the **content must be adapted** for its new audience across the pond.

While there may be some truth in the claim that our senses of humour are intrinsically different, British enjoyment of American sitcoms and vice versa suggests that we can – and do – appreciate each other's humour. The digital media stream is closing both the physical and cultural gap, and when it comes to comedy, it could be argued that any rigid sense of cultural identity is softening in the wake of schedules which incorporate more transatlantic trading than ever before.

Emma Louise Howard has a MA in Critical Theory, and is training as a Media Studies lecturer.

Image.net for *Peep Show*; *The Office: an American Workplace* and *The Office*; Channel 4 Press Extranet for *Friends*

Suits You Sir

the art of TV sketch shows.

Writer **Ian Pike** reflects on catchphrases, spoofs, visual gags, and micro-sitcoms.

Am I bovvered?

I cannot really claim to be an expert. There are plenty of writers out there who do nothing but spend their waking hours thinking up the potential hilarity to be had out of two Welsh miners wandering into the court of Henry VIII. I am not one of them, having spread myself too widely across a number of genres. But I do love sketches. Not just because it's where I started as a writer, but also because I really enjoy working on them when I get the chance and I love them as a viewer. As a writer it's often the most fun you will ever have when playing with characters and dialogue. It's also great to get into the mindset where any situation in life, however humiliating, can be regarded as potential for material.

I want that one

So where to start? Well, most sketch shows have **a writer's brief** attached but they usually offer up little more guidance than to try and be funnier than the last series. Or to make sure you come up with new characters, as many old ones have reached the end of their shelf life and to have been dropped. It may sound like a basic requirement but **that list of who and what still exists can be vital**, as you often end up writing the next series while the current one is being broadcast. The most useful thing to remember at this stage though is that each show has its own tone and energy. It does not necessarily follow therefore that you can recycle material; what might be great for ***Mitchell and Webb*** will not necessarily translate that well for ***Ruddy Hell it's Harry and Paul***. One piece of generic advice across most writers' briefs is that **there is often little point in trying to write sketches for the most famous and iconic characters** on the show. Whoever invented them will be watching over their babies like a protective mother, and you stand little chance of producing new ideas for them so you might be better off spending your time on new material.

How very dare you!

It's also worth remembering that **sketches are really just very short sitcoms,** and must therefore follow many of the same rules. They need **well-rounded characters**, a **clear beginning, middle and end**, and if they don't make you laugh as you are writing them, then there's little chance of the audience finding them that funny. One major difference with sketches though is that **your star turns might object to ideas** in ways unlikely to happen in a sitcom. Firstly, if you are writing for a double act then the key to success is often just a simple matter of logistics. Neither performer will particularly want to play the straight man while the other gets all the laughs, so the balance of material has to be right. Secondly a lot of sketch humour can be **visual, slapstick and therefore often involve pain and discomfort** and, as it's their show, the names in it may just flatly refuse to be hung upside down underwater in a straitjacket for comedic effect.

I'm a laydee!

So what is the key? Is there common ground between successful sketches, and, if so, how do you tap into it? Well, the thread that does seem to run through many sketches is an area of comedy that could simply be summed up as: **putting characters in a situation, time or place they would never normally find themselves in**, whether it be a turn of the century musician playing drum and bass tunes on his harpsichord, World War 2 airmen talking like street kids, or even just a cross-dressing welder with a moustache. Since time began we have always enjoyed laughing at someone feeling awkward, wearing a toga to a non-fancy dress function, or turning up at a funeral thinking it was a surprise birthday party, then having to extricate themselves with the least amount of embarrassment. Sketches often simply reflect that taste in humour. There was a well-known ***Hale and Pace*** sketch years ago about a Northern couple visiting Sweden that captures this feeling nicely. A Yorkshire man and his wife are staying

with a couple from Stockholm who invite them to join them in their sauna. As the Swedes relax in the heat, completely naked, Gareth Hale and Caroline Quentin sit dripping with sweat and awkwardness in thick jumpers and duffle coats.

This is an ex-parrot

So it's a case of taking Roman Gladiators and getting them to work in a modern day branch of Lidl is it? Or traffic wardens handing out tickets to sedan chair drivers in the court of Louis the XIV? Clearly it's not that simple; but what is the next step to getting an idea down on paper? This, I'm afraid, is the hard bit. It's now pretty much down to **gags** pure and simple. There's a fantastic sketch on ***Not the Nine O'Clock News*** where Rowan Atkinson plays a gorilla who has been captured, tamed and subsequently learned to talk. As he is interviewed in a highly unrealistic monkey costume, it becomes clear that, yes, this is a character in a situation they would not usually find themselves in – an ape on a chat show – but what makes it really funny are the quotable lines of dialogue.

When I caught Gerald he was wild.
Wild? I was livid...
Do you have a mate....?
I've got lots of mates, the professor, his son Toby, Raymond from next door....
What do you spend your TV earnings on?
Well I'm very keen on Johnny Mathis at the moment...

Proving yet again that your primary task is to make yourself laugh if your sketch is to stand any chance of being a winner.

Does my bum look big in this?

Of course, what frequently seems to be the measure of a sketch show these days is the number of **repeated catchphrases** that become a staple of public conversation over the following months. However, the worst thing you can do when approaching new material is to try and think of a potentially memorable line and build a sketch around it. The reason why Rowley Birkin QC worked so well on ***The Fast Show*** was not because he said, 'I'm afraid I was very, very drunk' at the end of each sketch. It was because **Paul Whitehouse** invested the character with a high degree of touching but funny pathos and the wordplay was so clever.

Took it off below the knee... mumble, mumble... a rather striking moustache... more mumbling... snake, snake... her husband had been entombed in ice.

Of course it really will be a bonus if the end line of these sketches becomes highly quoted for a long time afterwards; but that has to happen organically and *not* be the starting point.

I am smoking a fag!

Another classic mistake when approaching sketches is to try to pastiche and spoof existing shows or celebrities. It might be an easy route to a laugh but sketch shows are not vehicles for impersonations, and will fall flat when they try and compete with Jon Culshaw's output. Of course, there have been some brilliant sketches with a famous person as the subject matter; but their success has usually been down to the clever placing of those people out of context. In the US, ***Saturday Night Live*** did a number of great sketches where **Will Ferrell** as Neil Diamond explained how he came to write the song 'Sweet Caroline':

Gary and I had been drinking pretty heavily and we were driving...

John Goodman as the bass player:
I can't believe you're going to tell that story...

Yeah well we were driving down this dark road and I hit this kid. So we got out and sure enough he was dead. So we took off, pretty fast and two hours later I wrote this song... Sweet Caroline.

And who can forget the artist formerly known as Prince stalking jockeys in the bush on a spoof wildlife documentary on ***The Fast Show***?

Soupy twist!

Of course, sketches might be mini-films in their own right but that doesn't mean they all have to be a three-minute ***Lawrence of Arabia***. Because of the sheer amount of material needed to fill a half-hour slot, the demand for quickies, fillers and vox pops is just as important. The masters of these were Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie. Dressed as housewives, policemen, bluff ex-army majors or cab drivers they would stop to talk to camera and throw out a funny line that took seconds to say but which could still be quoted the next day:

Secret vices? Rather too fond of chocolate Hob Nobs and my wife tells me I overdo the heroin. Otherwise, not really...

Well, I was born Mary Patterson, but then I married and naturally took my husband's name, so now I'm Neil Patterson...

We had our first child on the NHS, and had to wait nine months. Can you believe it?

Whoever earns a name for being good at writing these will be highly sought-after as they are hard to do but fill in the gaps perfectly.

That's you that is

However, it's not just about clever dialogue. In a recent documentary on ***Not the Nine O'Clock News***, a silent sketch was cited as being one of the most memorable. The sketch, written by Richard Curtis, involved Rowan Atkinson walking along and slowly becoming aware that he was being filmed. As his embarrassment turned to the pleasure of realising this could be a brief moment of fame, his facial expressions changed and he forgets to look where he is going, just smiling sideways at the camera instead. Narrowly missing a lamp post he turns back to camera and smirks with relief at his narrow escape, before carrying on and falling down a manhole. John Lloyd the producer explained that he took a lot of persuading to take the sketch forward as it just didn't read as being funny on the page; but as soon as Rowan Atkinson started acting it out he knew it would be a winner.

Loadsamoney!

The beauty of that sketch is it works because it's so simple and plays on something we can relate to. It touches that nerve that comes to life when we try to run for a bus and it leaves just before we get there so we pretend we were breaking into a jog anyway. Or when we wave at someone we think we know only to discover it's a complete stranger that just happens to look like similar, so we pretend to be stretching instead. The key is **believability**. If it's treated seriously and credibly but is funny at someone else's expense, we will laugh. The other thing that works well in that Atkinson sketch is that it might be short and silent but it still has a clear beginning, middle and end. In other words it tells a good story and that, as always, is paramount whatever the length of material.

Me dear, gay dear, no dear...

So who are we writing about? Who are these people that inhabit the strange world of the **self-contained or long-running sketch**? The most useful rule of thumb when creating characters is **to treat them with the same respect as you would in a series or feature film**. There's a reason why Ted and Ralph in ***The Fast Show*** were so popular, and it's not just down to the witty lines and the situation of a country squire being in love with his estate manager. We loved them because they had back stories and aspirations. They had human frailties and Achilles' heels. We knew what they wanted out of life and what would stop them from achieving those goals. The worst way to start writing a sketch is to kick off with 'A man walks into a bar...'. If we don't know who that man is, then it's going to be really hard to find much to laugh at. At the very least he deserves a name and a personality of some sort.

Yeah but no but yeah but...

So where's the **pleasure** to be found in writing a sketch? The one thing you cannot ever expect is much **public recognition** for your efforts. **The performers will always be credited** for the invention of a successful character, catchphrase or scenario. One of the main attractions though is that the **possibilities are endless**. You could be writing a period drama, a science-fiction piece set on Mars, a spy thriller and a Restoration comedy all on the same day. You're also not really restricted in terms of age, class and accent and there's a huge breadth of variety to be had.

And it's good night from me...

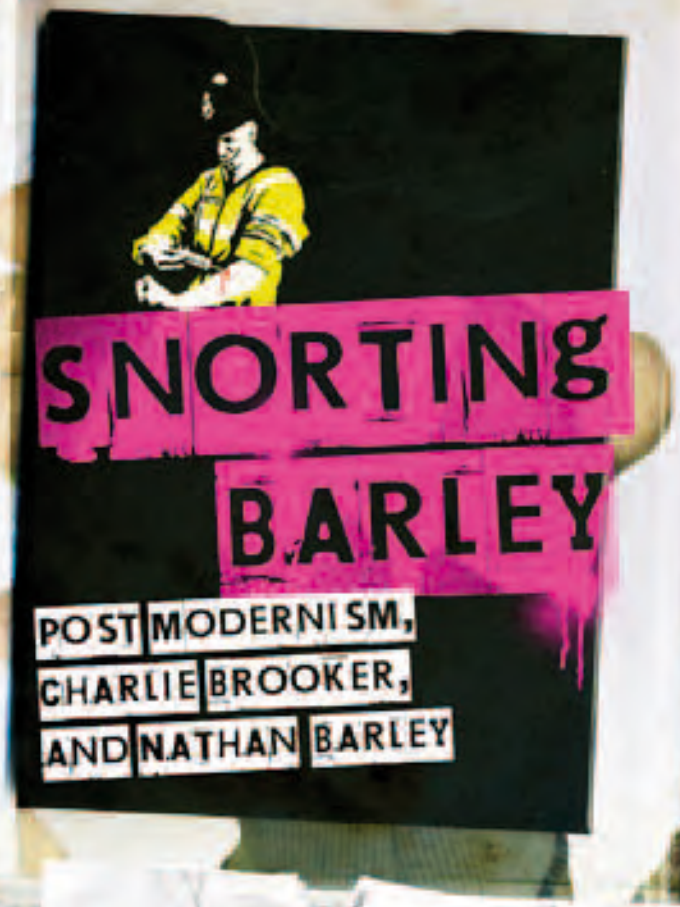
There are often articles in the media almost celebrating the demise of the sketch show; mainly because there are a fair number of bad ones. Still, you only have to look at the large audience figures and cries for the return of ***The Catherine Tate Show***, coupled with endless repeats of ***The Fast Show***, ***Big Train***, ***French and Saunders***, ***The Two Ronnies*** etc to know that there's a hunger for them. Perhaps the answer lies in accepting that the great ones live forever. Let's just hope enough good ones keep filling the schedules and that more comedy performers and writers keep the art both fresh and alive.

Ian Pike has been a comedy writer for more years than he would care to mention. Currently submitting sketches for *Armstrong and Miller* and the live sketch show *The Works*.

Online supplement

There's a fuller linguistic analysis of *Armstrong and Miller* in the special **MMM** online supplement.

Image.net for *The Catherine Tate Show*, *The Fast Show*, *The League of Gentlemen* and *Little Britain*



Mark Ramey *introduces the cult satire that takes the P out of Post-modernism*

Unless you've been walking around with your eyes nailed to your eyelids, and your head encased in a slab of tarmac you can't but have noticed **Charlie Brooker** waging righteous war on our idiotic postmodern culture. Brooker's weapon of choice is savage satire unleashed on the media using a full armoury of print, TV and web-based content. Along with occasional colleagues and kindred spirits like **Chris Morris** (***The Day Today***; ***Brass Eye***; ***Four Lions***) and **Armando Iannucci** (***The Thick of It***; ***In The Loop***), Brooker is fighting against facile postmodern surfaces and dumbed-down media practices. It is a war against an enemy secure in its profound, self-satisfied emptiness – a war against 'the idiots'.

Perhaps inevitably, he is losing. As Brooker himself notes: 'Man the life boats. The idiots are winning' (*The Guardian*, 7.4.2008). The fight he is staging is, nevertheless, a magnificently futile gesture: a Mac-hating, sofa-bound David versus a Goliath armed with a satellite dish and iPad. However, unlike Mike Tyson's flabby, pathetic cameo in Hollywood's 2009 idiot-triumph ***The Hangover***, Brooker can still deliver a punch and a line: a lethal combo that can cripple pretension and deflate egos. And 2005's ***Nathan Barley***, a six-episode C4 sitcom written by Brooker and **Chris Morris** (who also directed it), remains the moment war against the enemy was formally declared. Fans of Brooker's earlier online work and journalism may disagree; but then anything as mainstream as a 'toned-down' sitcom would always distance hardcore fans and so it proved: ***Barley*** is a cult.

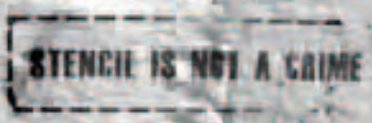
As is usual with anything touched by the hand of Brooker and Morris the satire is so sharp its victims often fail to notice the cuts until too late. ***Brass Eye*** (C4, 1997) provoked an outcry at its infamous 2001 spoof on the media-amplified moral panic surrounding paedophilia. Brooker was one of the writers of the show, which was clearly ahead of its time, as indeed was Morris's 1994 news spoof, ***The Day Today*** (BBC2).

Nathan Barley was a glorious failure because it too was ahead of the zeitgeist. The insular London-centred media world it satirised has now become our world. The **'rise of the Idiots'** that Brooker warned us about in the show's first episode has now spread beyond the radical-chic of the London-based media hubs. The idiots are everywhere.

The rise and rise of Charlie Brooker

Nathan Barley, the eponymous poisonous heart at the show's centre, describes himself in hyperbolic terms as a **'self-facilitating media node'. Brooke**r isn't a media node but he isn't far off it. After taking a Media degree he got a writing job on ***PC Zone*** magazine in the early 90s and in a recent interview for an online video-games trade magazine, ***MCV***, he agrees that he was the lucky one who escaped the ghetto that was gaming journalism:

I think it's like a nerdy stink of shame that hangs around me … the TV critic that plays games. (Oct 2009)



His passion for the New Media led him to develop an online parody of the staid TV listings magazine ***Radio Times***. Calling his guide, ***TVGoHome*** (1999 -2003) he continued in the biting satirical tradition of Chris Morris to produce listings for fake shows that were surreal, pretentious, sexually explicit, vulgar, banal and, here's the point, all quite recognisable. For example there was ***Daily Mail Island*** – a reality TV show where 'normal' people are marooned on an island and only given access to one media source, the hysteria-mongering rag, ***The Daily Mail***. Needless to say their right-wing tendencies are inflamed as the series progresses until at one point a teenager caught masturbating is sealed into a coffin filled with broken glass and dog shit, and thrown over a cliff. Brooker's satire is never subtle.

It is in the online archives of ***TVGoHome*** that we can still find Nathan Barley's first appearance, in a new fly-on-the-wall documentary series, bewitchingly titled, *C*nt*. The show is described as:

> **…following the daily life of Nathan Barley, a twenty something wannabe director living in Westbourne Grove. This week: Nathan meets Jemma for lunch at the Prince Bonaparte and receives another cheque from his parents. (14.05.99)**

Later episodes detail the Barley we will come to hate:

> **an odious twenty-something toff and media wannabe (11.6.99)**
>
> **…who finds himself writing a barely literate monthly column reviewing leftfield websites and genuinely starts to believe his endeavour makes him a worthwhile human being rather than a meaningless strutting cadaver… (25.6.99)**

In another episode we meet Nathan's peers after he lands a regular DJ spot in a venue

> **in which loud-mouthed members of London's self-appointed young media elite strut about like a pack of trainer-obsessed peacocks, ordering expensive beers and braying insincere, ignorant horseshit at one another over the sound of Nathan's utterly pedestrian mixing.**

And finally in the edition of 12.11.99, 'the Idiots' are born:

> **While visiting the office of a new media design agency run by a school friend, Nathan Barley joins a small group of upper-middle class twenty-somethings as they gather round a monitor to snigger and point at a web site displaying photographs of wolves fucking the bodies of mutilated prostitutes.**

Brooker on screen and page

In 2000 Brooker co-founded a TV and online production company, **Zeppotron**, which is now part of the mighty **Endemol** empire. Zeppotron produces most of Brooker's TV work plus the quiz shows ***8 Out of 10 Cats***; ***You Have Been Watching*** (Brooker-hosted) and the Brooker-scripted, BAFTA-nominated, ***Big Brother*** horror satire, ***Dead Set*** (E4, 2008). Brooker also began writing a TV column for the ***Guardian*** in 2000, **'Screenburn'**, which has led over the years to a number of book-length collections such as ***Dawn of the Dumb: Dispatches from the Idiotic Frontline*** (2007). Brooker's topical insights and witty cultural commentary plus a flair for presenting naturally led to TV work. Media-savvy shows like ***Screenwipe***, ***Newswipe*** and ***Gameswipe*** are anchored by his **pervert-next-door, guerrilla-style delivery** plus a deadpan deconstruction of the media's worst excesses. And just when you thought his head couldn't get any bigger, in 2009 Brooker won the British Press Awards for Columnist of the Year and The Best Newcomer at the British Comedy Awards. Arse.

The life and work of Nathan Barley

As we have seen, Nathan Barley (Nicholas Burns) is a wealthy idiot who has found like-minded idiots to interface with in the media playpens of trendy East London. He is a

> **webmaster, guerrilla filmmaker, screenwriter, DJ and so convinced that he is the epitome of urban cool that he is secretly terrified he might not be, which is why he reads the magazine style bible *Sugar Ape*. (Zeppotron biog)**

Sugar Ape's reluctant star columnist, Dan Ashcroft (**Julian Barratt of *The Mighty Boosh***), is one of Nathan's idols but Dan despises Nathan and all of his feeble-witted kind … the idiots. Episode 1 swiftly sets up the conceit that Ashcroft

has penned his greatest article to date, 'The Rise of The Idiots': unfortunately for him the very people it aims to pillory think the article is cool. Here's Ashcroft in his own words:

> **Once the idiots were just the fools gawping in through the windows. Now they've entered the building. You can hear them everywhere. They use the word 'cool'. It is their favourite word. The idiot does not think about what it is saying. Thinking is rubbish. And rubbish isn't cool. Stuff n'shit is cool. The idiots are self-regarding consumer slaves, oblivious to the paradox of their uniform individuality. They sculpt their hair to casual perfection, they wear their waistbands below their balls, they babble into hand-held twit machines about the cool email of the woman being bummed by a wolf. Their cool friend made it. He's an idiot too. Welcome to the age of stupidity. Hail to the rise of the idiots.**

Now for the fun stuff! **Postmodernity** is said to characterise our age and if you are a student of Media Studies then you have probably hit your head against the term with such ferocity that an intellectual coma has swiftly followed. Ouch!

Nathan Barley and postmodernism

For brevity's sake and without collapsing into the impenetrable mire of such theorists as **Lyotard** and **Baudrillard**, I understand **postmodernism** to describe an intellectual position typical of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The postmodern world of this period is one in which the **'grand narratives' of Marx, Freud, organised religion and the modernist impulse of scientific discovery have all run out of epistemological steam**: we have stopped believing in their deep and epic truths. One effect of this in terms of cultural products like film and TV is a **heavily ironic and detached sense of engagement with the work or text**: 'creatives' no longer see themselves as tortured souls wrestling truth from their medium; now they are 'facilitators, installation artists, entertainers or ironists'. Their purpose now is to play with truths, to break down the barriers between the text and the reader, the TV show and viewer. New **buzzwords** like **'interactive, self-referential, inter-textual and hybrid'** reflect this distrust of rational statement in favour of a **playful delight in surface meanings**. How natural then that gossip magazines, reality TV shows, celebrity culture, prankster TV, unreconstructed sexism, reflexive genre homage and infotainment (to name but a few postmodern manifestations) should now dominate our cultural lives as they did five years ago, the prescient life of Nathan Barley.

Add to this postmodern brew the **digital revolution**, increasing **globalisation** and the **triumph of consumerism** (despite the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s) and we have the possibility of mass-producing 'the idiot'. But maybe now Dan Ashcroft and his nemesis Nathan Barley can help us.

Nathan is **'a self-regarding consumer slave'**. In other words he enjoys his own image; he is a narcissist – and there's plenty of them on YouTube and Facebook. Nathan is also a punter who thinks he is free to buy, but is actually conditioned to consume. As Brooker later comments in his infamous 'I hate Macs' article (*Guardian* 5.2.2007):

> **If you truly believe you need to pick a mobile phone that 'says something' about your personality, don't bother. You don't have a personality. A mental illness, maybe – but not a personality.**

Consumption as lifestyle choice is literally and metaphorically a manufactured lie and the idea that we can ironically consume is a fantasy – wages and debt and waste are not ironic, they are real. The only irony in consumerist values is the tragedy that consumption never satisfies: fast food, fast TV, fast news, fast facts. Fast is the new black … on crack!

Ashcroft (Brooker's alter ego) also reminds us that idiots are blind to their 'uniform individuality'. Apple put the 'i' into pods, pads and phones and 'we' all bought into it. A postmodern world is meant to **blur boundaries, emphasise difference, explore hybridity and the margins;** but in fact we merely walk around in a circle and end up staring up our own sphincters or into the face of a Z-list celebrity.

In my view, modernism's utopian quest, 'to boldly go where no man has gone before,' may be flawed but it certainly isn't over. If it was, Brooker's satires wouldn't work – and they do. We recognise the banality of so much of postmodern surface culture – all sheen and self-confident noise but something which, like a Happy Meal, ultimately lacks substance. It is like one of the idiots in ***Nathan Barley*** who uses the valediction, **'Keep it foolish'**. This throwaway line reveals a depthless problem with postmodernity: it is so afraid to say anything (uncool) that it says nothing (cool) and so plays into the hands of the vacuous idiocracy.

So next time you look into a self-proclaimed, postmodernist's ironically twinkling eyes, ask yourself this question: is he or she an idiot? In a world without rules, there is only nonsense and then only the idiots make sense. Only an unfashionable critique of postmodernism's negative impact will start to arrest its influence. Fight the fight people. Brooker needs our help.

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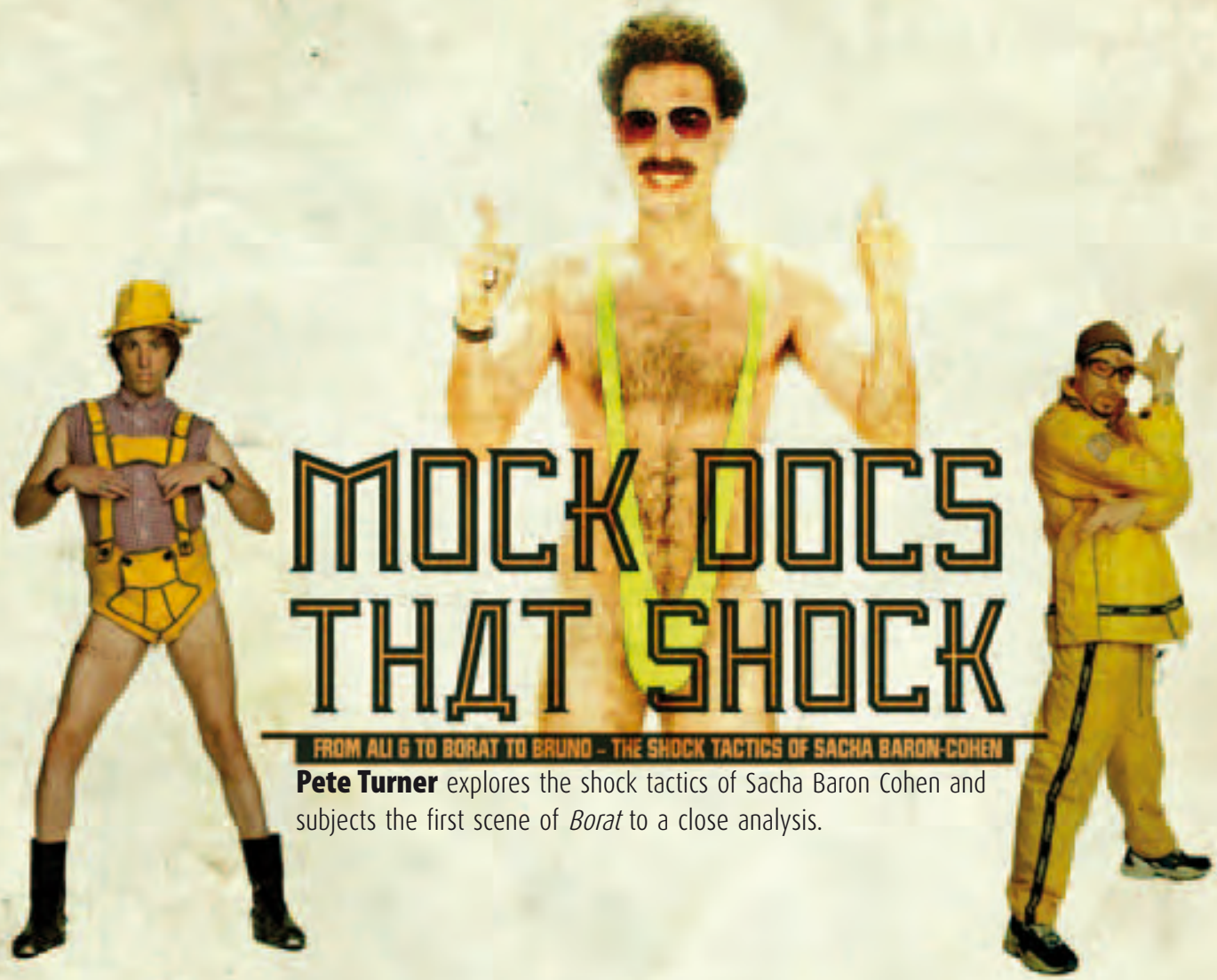

MOCK DOCS THAT SHOCK

FROM ALI G TO BORAT TO BRUNO – THE SHOCK TACTICS OF SACHA BARON-COHEN

Pete Turner explores the shock tactics of Sacha Baron Cohen and subjects the first scene of *Borat* to a close analysis.

Sacha Baron Cohen quickly gained popular and critical success after appearing on the ***11 O'Clock Show*** with his first satirical character **Ali G**. In a series of interviews Cohen explored attitudes to race and class through his representation of a young, middle-class white man as a wannabe gangster from the 'ghetto' of Staines. He developed a documentary style that would develop into two feature films with his later characters Borat and Bruno. Controversial from his earliest TV appearances on the ***11 O'Clock Show***, his three characters often shocked with their rude language, outrageous attitudes, unbelievable behaviour and ridiculing of the unsuspecting public.

The comedy of Cohen's characters has often relied on his **representations of race** and his characters' attitudes to other races. Borat is a cheap-clothed, hairy Kazakhstani journalist; Bruno an uber-camp and outrageously dressed Austrian. However, Cohen and **director Larry David** have also created representations of Americans, Jews and Palestinians in their films. In Cohen's comedy, rarely are there any positive representations.

The representation of race and religion

This is a key factor that creates shocking comedy in ***Borat*** and ***Bruno***. The opening scene of ***Borat*** is a prime example (see page 44) for its ridiculous representation of Kazakhstan and its people. The people of Kazakhstan are shown to be sexist, racist, primitive and even worse: rape, incest, prostitution and even bestiality appear to be common. Borat is shockingly anti-Semitic and exposes a great deal of anti-Semitism from American people also. A scene where Borat and his producer find themselves staying at a friendly old Jewish couple's house contains a sinister non-diegetic soundtrack. Borat is clearly terrified and talks straight to camera; a crucifix in one hand, his money in the other. His belief that the Jews are money-grabbing monsters is taken to further levels of absurdity when two cockroaches enter his room and he says that the Jews have 'shifted their shapes'. Race is also touched on when Borat meets some African American youths on the street. Their dress and speech is briefly adopted by Borat and he is escorted straight out of a fancy hotel because of this.

Similarly ***Borat*** and ***Bruno*** represent American Christians as ludicrous, homophobic and racist people. The crowd at the rodeo are described as 'simple God-fearing folk' and cheer along with Borat's 'war of terror' speech. Bruno finds and interviews Christians who claim to cure

Image.net for *Borat* and *Bruno*

homosexuality. Borat is given strength to go and pursue Pamela Anderson from a group of evangelical Christians who speak in tongues and run around their church in hysterics.

The representation of gender

The opening scene is, again, a good example of this (see page 44). Later in the film, Borat meets and falls in love with an American prostitute, holds Pamela Anderson up as the perfect woman, and the script continually makes comical references to rape. The prostitute is an overweight African-American who is represented as a sweet, fun-loving individual and ends the film married to Borat. She is also a rare example of an actual actress being used in Cohen's mockumentaries. Pamela Anderson is seen by Borat as an image of perfection with golden hair, fake breasts and 'the asshole of a seven-year-old'. Only after he fails to kidnap her using the traditional wedding sack does he choose to cease his pursuit. This is a reference to what Borat informs us is the Kazakh practice of carrying a woman against her will to gain her hand in marriage. **This theme of women denied the right to object to sex or marriage** is often used for comedy in the film. Borat jokes about his sister being raped by his retarded brother (who had escaped from a cage) and encourages the person who he tells the story to, to give him a celebratory 'high five'.

However, what is most **shocking** about the film's representation of women is the scene where Borat interviews some feminists. Borat laughs at their suggestion of sexual equality suggesting their brain size is similar to a squirrel's (a fact 'proved' by a Kazakh scientist). The film-makers then use a voiceover to drown out the sound of one feminist's voice. The voiceover has Borat calling the woman an 'old man', and allows the audience to hear how Borat is thinking about Pamela Anderson. The interview ends with Borat humiliating the feminists by asking them about Pamela Anderson and then calling one 'pussycat'. This scene is shocking for its ridicule of the feminists; in my opinion it is difficult to find it funny. What is Cohen trying to do? Mock feminists? Or is he still just trying to mock these people for taking his comedy creation seriously? Ever since Ali G, Cohen has targeted feminists for his interviews and his representations of women have been consistently dreadful from the scantily-clad women that hang around Ali G to the vacuous models that Bruno lampoons.

The representation of sexuality

The films of Cohen seem to have a slightly more positive **representation of homosexuality**. Despite both Ali G and Borat being horrified by the thought of homosexuality, they often behave in a strangely contradictory way, suggesting a latent homosexuality in their characters. Borat only kisses men when greeting people, he asks for 'hand relief' from a male masseur (in a deleted scene) and describes the people he meets at the 'Gay Pride' march as friendly (accompanied by a shot of him having his genitals held by a gay man). Whatever footage Cohen and the crew got at this march must have generally been left on the cutting-room floor. Which begs the question: why? Was it not funny enough and if so why not? If, as Cohen has stated, his characters expose the ignorance and shocking attitudes of some Americans, perhaps the gay pride marchers were not so prone to such ignorance and prejudice.

Bruno, on the other hand, is not a very nice character. He is a highly-exaggerated stereotype of a fashion-obsessed homosexual. His sex life is portrayed as an exhibition of twisted creativity and shocking acts of depravity; an exercise bike with a dildo attached, a chair that catapults his midget partner into him and various things being inserted up anuses. He is totally self-obsessed and cares only about becoming famous; he is actually more of a parody of Z-list celebrities than of homosexuals. The end of ***Bruno*** highlights Cohen's obvious position on homosexuality and attitudes towards it. The wrestling match where Bruno and his assistant end up passionately kissing in front of a jeering, psychotic, angry crowd shows the awfulness of some American attitudes to homosexuality. Typically, the scene is both extremely funny and deeply shocking, particularly as a metal chair narrowly misses our protagonists as they embrace to Celine Dion's 'My Heart Will Go On'. The final shot of the film will also help to send a positive message to the target audience with rapper 'Snoop Dogg' proclaiming 'He's gay… OK!'


SACHA BARON COHEN
BORAT
CULTURAL LEARNINGS OF AMERICA FOR MAKE BENEFIT GLORIOUS NATION OF KAZAKHSTAN

Other shocking tactics

The comedy of Cohen's characters can also be created in simpler uses of **shock tactics. Nudity, sex, toilet humour and smashing of taboos** are used throughout the films. One of the most talked about scenes in ***Borat*** was the nude fight that spilled out of a hotel room and into an elevator and finally ends in a conference hall. Borat and his grossly overweight producer fight totally naked over images of Pamela Anderson. The fight involves such shocking sights as Borat being smothered by the much larger man's bare backside and the two characters standing naked in a lift, with Borat clenching a rubber fist while a member of the public stands awkwardly in the corner. As already mentioned, there are numerous references in the films to rape, incest and bestiality (sometimes all in one joke). Cohen is not ashamed to display his characters' bodies and some of his shocking costumes include a bright green mankini for Borat, and Bruno's sexed-up Hasidic hot pants. The films also squeeze in jokes about bulimia (Bruno has his nutritionist's fingers put down his throat), drinking breast milk, 9/11 and one of the world's worst ongoing conflicts (Israeli and Palestinian representatives are duped into discussing the benefits of hummus).

The use of documentary techniques

Much of the shocking comedy in ***Borat*** and ***Bruno*** stems from the use of documentary techniques such as **interviews with real people and the use of real locations, hand-held camera, covert filming and Cohen's voiceover narration**. The mockumentary style of film-making has become increasingly common in television and film recently, particularly for the genres of comedy and horror. The film-makers are always reminding the audience that what they are watching is 'real'. We see people looking at the camera, the presenter addresses the audience directly and interviews are often used. No matter how controversial Cohen's characters are, it is very often **the real people** who provide the real shocks and moments of comedy gold. Americans are represented (often through careful and calculated editing) as racist, homophobic and sexist, just like the 'Kazakh' Cohen has created. Endless scenes demonstrate this; the car salesman who has helpful advice about what car to buy to kill gypsies and attract a woman with shaved privates; the man at the rodeo who thinks all Muslims will have a bomb strapped to them; the college kids who display shocking sexist attitudes; the audience of a chat show that boos Bruno for looking for 'Mr Right', and the audience of the wrestling match that riots at seeing a public display of homosexuality. New Yorkers perhaps come off worst as Borat first arrives in America to be ignored, run away from, insulted and threatened – all of which is captured using **covert filming techniques** on the streets and subways of the city.

Cohen has shocked audiences as much with his vile creations from Kazakhstan and Austria as by holding a mirror up to Western audiences. However, it has been argued that, despite his aim being to expose other people's prejudices, sometimes these jokes can miss their mark and not truly reflect the intentions of Cohen and his team. Even though Cohen is Jewish, it is easy to see that his characters' anti-Semitism could lead to bullying and abuse in the playground. Similarly Bruno could be fuel for homophobia as audiences find it easy to laugh at, and quote from, the films, particularly those who do not pick up on Cohen's disguised morals and messages.

But does Sacha Baron Cohen really care? All publicity for the films feature Cohen in character, a useful way to disguise himself and not have to answer any serious questions in a serious manner. It is hard to dig out the interviews with the *real* Sacha Baron Cohen and only a small proportion of the audiences of ***Borat*** and ***Bruno*** will seek these out and learn about the creator's real intentions. Audiences are expected to get the joke; but with jokes that ridicule some ordinary well-meaning people (the Romanian gypsies, the feminists) it is easy to see Cohen as an exploitative, opportunistic – and manipulative – but very funny and talented performer.

References

www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-415871/Borat-film-tricked-poor-village-actors.html)
www.rollingstone.com/news/coverstory/sacha_baron_cohen_the_real_borat_finally_speaks

Borat: Opening Scene Analysis

The opening scene of ***Borat*** portrays Kazakhstan in a clearly absurd manner. A series of images are cut together to ethnic music; a shack, a rural location, an old bicycle and house in need of repair and a horse and cart. These images are shocking to the audience as they show poverty in the real world opening a mainstream comedy. Borat introduces himself to camera, surrounded by crowds of local people. Their clothes are old and cheap; there are no Ali G brand-name tracksuits on display here. Borat immediately demonstrates his racist attitudes describing people from Uzbekistan as assholes. He introduces the 'town rapist' as though every Kazakhstan town has one and then there is a cutaway to the kindergarten, where the children sit in the rubble of a building surrounded by a cache of machine guns. Next Borat introduces the audience to the town 'mechanic and abortionist', further emphasising the primitive technology of the 'Kazakh' people and also shocking us with a mental image of extraordinary violence implying the torture of women. He describes his conflict with his next door neighbour; a conflict based on one-upmanship that Borat is winning, having got a clock radio which his neighbour cannot afford.

Borat then introduces the audience to his family. He shows us a very old woman and describes her as the oldest woman in Kazakhstan – at 43. The woman appears far older; this suggests that the inhabitants of Kazakhstan have short lifespans and age prematurely due to lack of medical care, tough living conditions and poverty. This is especially shocking as these are clearly not well-paid actors but actual local people that Cohen is ridiculing. In Borat's house, the primitive technology and apparent savagery of the Kazakh people is further demonstrated. Borat appears proud to tell the audience that he has a VCR and a cassette player – hilarious to an audience raised on DVDs and iPods. His living room is filled by a cow which Borat virtually ignores.

When Borat describes his employment as a television reporter, the audience sees clips from a programme in which Borat was reporting on an event called the 'Running of the Jew'. This is a shocking title in itself but the audience then witnesses a huge crowd watching as men run away from a giant green face with payot (black side-curls), big nose, a grin with fangs, a skull cap and giant hands. Borat can be heard reporting 'he nearly got the money there', suggesting that the event is an organised game where the townspeople have to run away from the 'Jew' who is trying to take their money. It is an obvious parody of the 'Running of the Bulls' – a Spanish practice where men run away from bulls that have been driven down the streets of a town. This both plays on stereotypes of Jewish people, and suggests that most Kazakhstanis are deeply anti-Semitic and enjoy the game. This is then taken one step further when 'Mrs Jew' appears looking similar to the previous 'Jew' but now with a large chopping knife. When 'Mrs Jew' squats and produces an egg, audience members may be shocked into giggling at the absurdity of it all. However, Cohen is not finished; he has not yet taken the joke to its shocking conclusion. Children run out and immediately start to kick and hit the egg, accompanied by Borat's voice encouraging them to 'crush that Jew egg'. On a personal level I find this very uncomfortable to laugh at; it reminds me of the Holocaust and how Jewish children were executed with all other Jews. Perhaps this is Cohen's intention: to make his audience cringe and feel bad for laughing at something so repulsive. Or perhaps he is merely exposing anti-Semitism as ignorance. The image of Jewish women producing eggs should be enough for the audience to dismiss what they see as pure comedy; an ironic comment on the ridiculous ideas of racists the world over.

When the film cuts back to Borat, he continues his anti-Semitic views and further demonstrates his ignorance/stupidity by saying Kazakhstan has problems that are 'social, economic and Jew' as if he does not realise that what he sees as problems are almost certainly social and economic problems for which Jews are being blamed. This also highlights the tendency of people to use social or economic groups as scapegoats for a nation's problems (as Hitler did when he came to power). However, most interestingly, the script juxtaposes this line with Borat's solution: to go to 'USA the greatest country in the world' where ironically Borat will uncover a great deal of anti-Semitism. The opening scene ends with a visual gag that further emphasises the poverty of the Kazakhstani people. Borat is seen saying goodbye to his townspeople in the back of a car. When the camera pulls back, the audience sees that the car is actually being pulled by a horse.

This opening scene is also useful to analyse for its tongue-in-cheek representation of gender. The audience is invited to laugh at the treatment of women in Borat's version of Kazakhstan. We first witness a woman chopping wood and then see a woman pulling a cart. Women are treated as labourers and in these two shots are clearly miserable and oppressed. The pulling of a cart equates women with animals, something that Borat often relishes. He only ever kisses men when greeting; another piece of evidence that suggests Borat's disgust at women. However he introduces us to the 'number 4 prostitute in whole of Kazakhstan' who is also his sister, and kisses her passionately suggesting incest is acceptable in Kazakhstan. This also suggests that women only have the opportunity to be employed as prostitutes. Borat dismisses his bellowing wife as 'boring' and prefers to look at his collection of pictures of women on the toilet. His wife is represented as a nagging, fat, angry woman who does not trust Borat and will 'snap off his cock' if he is unfaithful.

This whole scene is rendered even more shocking with the knowledge that the people featured in it are extremely poor Romanian gypsies who claim not to have known they were appearing in a comedy. According to ***The Daily Mail*** **Online**:

> **Villagers say they were paid just £3 each for this humiliation, for a film that took around £27 million at the worldwide box office in its first week of release.**

(Read for yourself: **http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-415871/Borat-film-tricked-poor-village-actors.html**)

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MOCK DOCS THAT SHOCK

T TO BRUNO – THE SHOCK TACTICS OF SACHA BARON-COHEN

the comedy of Lily Allen

Harmless pop, barbed wit, hurtful humour or social commentary?

I wanna be rich and I want loads of money
I don't care about clever, I don't care about funny

'The Fear'

As 'Smile' blares out of my radio, what at first seems like a cartoonish taunt takes on a nastier edge as I start to listen more closely.

But you were fucking that girl next door
What d'ya do that for. At first when I see you cry
It makes me smile..Yeh it makes me smile…
I couldn't stop laughing
I just couldn't help myself, see you messed up my mental health
I was quite unwell.

Reminiscent of **Sting's** 'I'll be watching you'; you can imagine people playing it at their wedding. But what seems like a catchy hook and radio smash (the technical code of the **chart pop song** and its accompanying pop video given a bit of a clever twist) is actually a nasty assault on an ex. The cheeky, girly voice Allen uses on both her albums (the first is more ska and reggae, the second more refined pop) tackles real issues: **drugs, absent fathers, hypocritical politicians, friends who are users**. This is why I like Allen; unlike Duffy, and to an extent Winehouse, she doesn't just sing about being lovesick which can, after eleven tracks, become a bit tiresome.

Lily's videos and lyrics all contain an element of **comedy**. In 'The Fear' Allen exposes the empty-headed world of the modern day pop princess wannabe, product of the ***X-Factor*** generation. She is wrapped up in a bow and everything is sugar and spice.

I want loads of clothes and fuck loads of diamonds…
I heard people die from trying to find them.

We are meant to laugh at the spoilt brat's aspirations in 'The Fear' and her misguided ambitions.

I'll take my clothes off and it will be shameless
Coz everyone knows that's how you get famous.

Her attitude is sickeningly naïve. The clean electro sound of 'The Fear' resonates in terms of what the character is saying; it is all quite empty and meaningless. There is something laughable about this character's mistaken assumptions, and also an underlying sadness – probably from the pointlessness of her existence, and the fact that girls like this actually exist; Allen's representation of the young, modern female will resonate with many members of her audience, whether they recognise it in themselves or others. It is ironic too that part of Allen's target audience, the **MySpace** generation, are girls who both buy her records and invest in these values of fame and fortune. She is a strong role model for what is arguably a 'lost generation', one that values fame over talent.

Catchy skits and samples provide the basis for Allen's chatty discourse: she is the **social commentator** of our age. The messages and values that Allen promotes – through the role of cheeky little girl who speaks more truth than politicians/the media – need the element of comedy to engage her target audience in the important issues, the issues that really matter, rather than the latest fashion fad. 'If I buy those jeans I can look like Kate Moss.' ('Everything's Just Wonderful') The clever thing about Allen is that she manages to contrast a sweet, childish voice with hard-hitting facts/social images, making her an instant hit on radio. But underneath the harmless sugary pop (especially on album two) a sharper edge emerges: she does not take any prisoners. Bad dads, boyfriends, pimps, politicians and air-heads are all made examples of, to be laughed at, though not just for the sake of it: these characters have victimised many in their lifetime and now it's their turn.

The best kind of comedy often goes hand in hand with sadness, and perhaps nastiness. Many from Lily's own past feel the wrath of her tongue:

You're not big, you're not clever…
I'm going to tell the world that you're rubbish in bed now…
And that you're small in the game.

As in Austen's ***Emma***, it is evident that Allen's wit has got her into trouble in the past. In 'Back to the Start' it sounds like an apology to a friend/close family member:

When we were growing up …
you always were and you always will be the taller and prettier one…
I don't know why I felt the need to keep it up for so long…
That's when I started to hate you so much and completely ignored you…
All the pain I caused you…
This is not just a song
I intend to put these words into action
I hope it sums up the way that I feel to your satisfaction.

The humour Allen uses is not harmless, and here you get the impression that sometimes people do get hurt. This raises the question: **does something truly funny also have to hurt?** With Allen it seems to; but much of the time the characters seem to deserve it.

Allen tackles real issues in an accessible way. Humour draws us in and makes us listen more closely. It is a tool vital to her success. She has an opinion too – but she is less of the preacher, more the sarcastic poet who has seen too much of life. Artists like Allen scare the institution of the record industry – freedom of speech is a dangerous thing in terms of a vocal 24-year-old who will not just shut up and be told what to sing. However, her recent comments (in September 09) that she could never make a profit making new records, that she has 'no plans' to make another album and she is not renewing her record contract, do lead one to wonder how hard life was made for Allen in the record industry, and how hard she had to fight to claim her own voice. If Allen sticks to her intentions, then British pop music will suffer.

She is the social commentator of our day, the voice of a generation, and the fact she's funny too – well, that's a bonus. Allen is the antithesis of the character in 'The Fear'. She wants to be clever *and* she wants to be funny, and that is where her success lies. She is a wag in the original sense of the word: a wit, not a ***Heat*** magazine footballer's wife. Being a humourless, meaningless airhead – well, that's Allen's biggest fear.

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CAN POSTMODERNISM MAKE US LAUGH?

Examiner **Tina Dixon** explores the nature of humour in three postmodern TV comedies.

We frequently hear it said that 'we are living in a postmodern world.' Are we? How do we know? And how is postmodernism as a theoretical perspective applicable to Media Studies? And, so that we can have some fun with this, how is it applicable to 'what makes us laugh?'.

Where do we start? How about some definitions? **George Ritzer** (1996) suggested that **postmodernism** usually refers to a cultural movement – postmodernist cultural products such as architecture, art, music, films, TV, adverts etc.

That definition seems to encompass what we need to look at, if we stick to comedy on television. Ritzer also suggested that postmodern culture is signified by the following:

- The breakdown of **the distinction between high culture and mass culture**. Think: drama about Dame Margot Fonteyn, a famous prima ballerina, on BBC4.
- The **breakdown of barriers** between genres and styles. Think: ***Shaun of the Dead*** a rom-com-zom.
- **Mixing up** of time, space and narrative. Think ***Pulp Fiction*** or ***The Mighty Boosh***.
- Emphasis on **style rather than content**. Think: **Girls Aloud**.
- The **blurring** of the distinction between representation and reality. Think, **Katie Price** or ***Celebrity Big Brother***.

The French theorist **Baudrillard** argues that contemporary society increasingly reflects the media; that the **surface image** becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish from the reality. Think about all the times you have heard an actor on a soap-opera say, that when they are out and about, people refer to them by their character's name. Look at ***The Sun's*** website and search stories on Nicholas Hoult when he was in ***Skins***: he is predominantly written about as though he *is* 'Tony', his character in ***Skins***.

Key terms

Among all the theoretical writing on postmodernism (and you might like to look up **George Ritzer, Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Frederic Jameson** and **Dominic Strinati**), there are a few key terms that you'll find it useful to know. These terms can form the basis of analysis when looking at a text from a postmodern perspective:

- **intertextuality** – one media text referring to another
- **parody** – mocking something in an original way
- **pastiche** – a stylistic mask, a form of self-conscious imitation
- **homage** – imitation from a respectful standpoint
- **bricolage** – mixing up and using different genres and styles
- **simulacra** – simulations or copies that are replacing 'real' artefacts
- **hyperreality** – a situation where images cease to be rooted in reality
- **fragmentation** – used frequently to describe most aspects of society, often in relation to identity.

So, what has all of this got to do with comedy? Pretty much everything, I would argue, and I intend to show this by analysing a cross-section of contemporary TV comedy: ***The Inbetweeners***, ***Gavin and Stacey*** and ***The Mighty Boosh***.

The Inbetweeners

Although it can be argued that comedy is subjective, a good deal of comedy on our television screens draws on **universal values and beliefs**. Let's start with ***The Inbetweeners*** (made by Bwark Productions, and shown on E4 and Channel 4 from May 2008). When first shown, the pilot episode attracted an audience of 238,000; the series as a whole averaged 459,000 viewers. Series Two, Episode One attracted 958,000 and the series averaged just over a million. The producers must, therefore, have done something right. The situation is set around four male A-Level students attending a local comprehensive school; however, the focal point of the comedy comes from **Will (Simon Bird)** who joins the school, when his wealthy parents divorce and his mum can't afford private school fees.

THE INBETWEENERS

GAVIN AND STACEY

The situation is ordinary enough. It happens to lots of people, starting a new school and making friends with an existing friendship group. However, for all of its ordinariness I would argue that this sitcom is quite postmodern.

Firstly, in some respects it **parodies** previous school-based texts such as ***Grange Hill*** (1978-2008) in that it sets the drama/action around characters at school, but makes those characters all the things the ***Grange Hill*** characters weren't. They swear (frequently), they constantly talk about sex and bodily functions, and appear naked in several episodes. None of which would ever have happened in ***Grange Hill,*** which was much more wholesome and moral, as appropriate for its young adult audience. I would also argue that it uses **bricolage**, in that it mixes comedy, drama, romance, realistic issues and slapstick. A scene where Will is thrown in a lake in his underpants by the mechanics at the garage where he is doing work experience, is pure **slapstick**. The love of Simon (Joe Thomas) for Carli is quite touching and **romantic**. The representation of Jay's father as an absolute monster, never missing an opportunity to humiliate him, is quite **realistic**: it provides a psychological reason as to why Jay is such a liar, as a result of a huge inferiority complex. Neil (Blake Harrison) has an almost **surreal** spin on life. And the Dickensian Head of Sixth Form Mr Gilbert is a sadist. All of which creates a rich bricolage or layering of meaning.

Series One, Episode Three, 'Thorpe Park', parodies the archetypally sleazy male driving instructor, turning it on its head: Simon is the object of the female instructor's desire.

Any episode (for example, 'Will's Birthday') reveals numerous **intertextual references**, such as posters in the common room for 'Run DMC' and 'NWA'. The boys discuss porn on the internet, and use Live Messenger. There are other references to Russell Brand, Take That and ***Supersize Me***, all of which, like bricolage, create layers of meaning. They are there to be read by the audience if they get the reference, but it does not matter if they do not see or hear them. The reference to ***Supersize Me*** makes the joke funnier if you know what they are talking about, but is still funny, even if you do not.

Gavin and Stacey

If we look at another successful contemporary comedy, ***Gavin and Stacey*** (written by James Corden and Ruth Jones, 2007-2010, produced by Baby Cow Productions for the BBC), we can see further elements of postmodernism to analyse. Like ***The Inbetweeners*** it started out on a digital channel (in this case BBC3) before moving to BBC1. An audience of 543,000 watched the first episode, and 8,700,000 the last one. Again, though ordinary in its situation, a young couple Gavin (Matthew Horne) and Stacey (Jo Pope) who work for companies in Essex and Wales strike up a telephone friendship, decide to meet in London, both bringing along a friend, Smithy (Corden) and Nessa (Jones). They fall in love, get engaged and then married. The comedy derives from the situations that their friends and families bring about. And, again, for all of its ordinariness, there are numerous ways to apply postmodernism.

Firstly, you could argue that as a consequence of their fictional characters Gavin and Smithy, **Matt Horne** and **James Corden** go on to host their own comedy show ***Horne and Corden***, as themselves – never really escaping their fictional personas, creating both a **hyperreality** and **simulacrum**. There are other such instances as this with the character who plays the Wests' neighbour 'Doris', the blunt and vulgar-mouthed pensioner who also appears in ***Little Britain*** as an incredibly blunt and vulgar-mouthed pensioner

Another rich vein of comedy comes from the fact that all of the characters are named after serial killers, for example: Gavin's family are the Shipmans named after the serial killer Dr Harold Shipman. Stacey's family are the Wests, named after Fred and Rosemary West, notorious serial killers. And the characters Dawn and Pete Sutcliffe, are named after Peter Sutcliffe, otherwise known as 'The Yorkshire Ripper'. There is also an interesting **mixing up of time and space**, in that though the Shipmans live in Essex, these scenes are actually filmed in Cardiff.

The Mighty Boosh

Finally, I want to look at ***The Mighty Boosh***, a more surreal comedy written by, and starring, **Julian Barratt** and **Noel Fielding**, and made by Baby Cow Productions for BBC3. ***The Mighty Boosh*** started life as a stage show, moved to radio, then TV in 2004. Unlike ***The Inbetweeners*** and ***Gavin and Stacey***, ***Boosh*** is anything but realist. Drawing on previous comedy of a surreal nature such as ***The Goodies*** and ***Monty Python,*** it is about two main characters – Howard Moon (Barratt) and Vince Noir (Fielding), and various other strange characters, including Bollo the Gorilla and the enigmatic Naboo. It is not set in a regular location like other sitcoms but each series is set in a different place. It could be argued that everything about ***The Mighty Boosh*** is postmodern. Noel Fielding's character Vince has an extremely **fragmented identity**: his mixing fashions from various periods and sub-cultures, for example Glam Rock, Punk, Goth and Emo, is compounded by his references to the rock stars he also emulates (Mick Jagger, David Bowie and Gary Numan).

Time and space boundaries are blurred as the characters travel to other places, usually other worldly places, and through time.

To understand some of the jokes you have to recognise the **intertextual references**. For example, in Series One, Howard discusses his favourite heroes such as Livingstone, and Vince asserts that Mick Jagger is his hero. When challenged on this by Howard as to what Jagger would do when staring into the abyss, Vince does an imitation of Mick Jagger's stage dancing. This is extremely funny – as long as you are aware of Mick Jagger's stage persona.

Bricolage is used, referencing numerous styles and genres, such as fashion, musical genres, surreal humour. And it could be argued that the female audience's attraction to Noel Fielding is in part as a result of his character's fashion creations as Vince, blurring the distinction between the real and the hyper-real.

By way of a conclusion to this look at contemporary comedy from a postmodern perspective, I think it is fair to say that it is almost impossible to imagine contemporary comedy *without* these intertextual references; they are peppered throughout the narratives. And being able to read them certainly enhances our experience of the comedy. I would also argue that understanding bricolage, parody, hyperreality, simulacrum and fragmentation help us to enjoy the comedy at a deeper level. It only remains to be said that whatever you watch, enjoy; but try to go below the surface really to get the most out of it.

Image.net for *Gavin and Stacey*, *The Inbetweeners* and *The Mighty Boosh*

in the sketch based around 'the only gay in the village'.

Taking one particular episode at random, in this case **Series Three, Episode Four**, there are a huge number of **intertextual references**, including references to Twitter, Facebook, Angelina Jolie, Om Puri, ***The Blues Brothers***, Puff Daddy, ***Patch Adams***, ***Beaches***, ***Doubt***, ***Breakfast at Tiffany's***, ***The Boat that Rocked***, Smack my Bitch up, Fix You, and Ben. These intertextual references help construct layers of meaning within the text, making the comedy richer.

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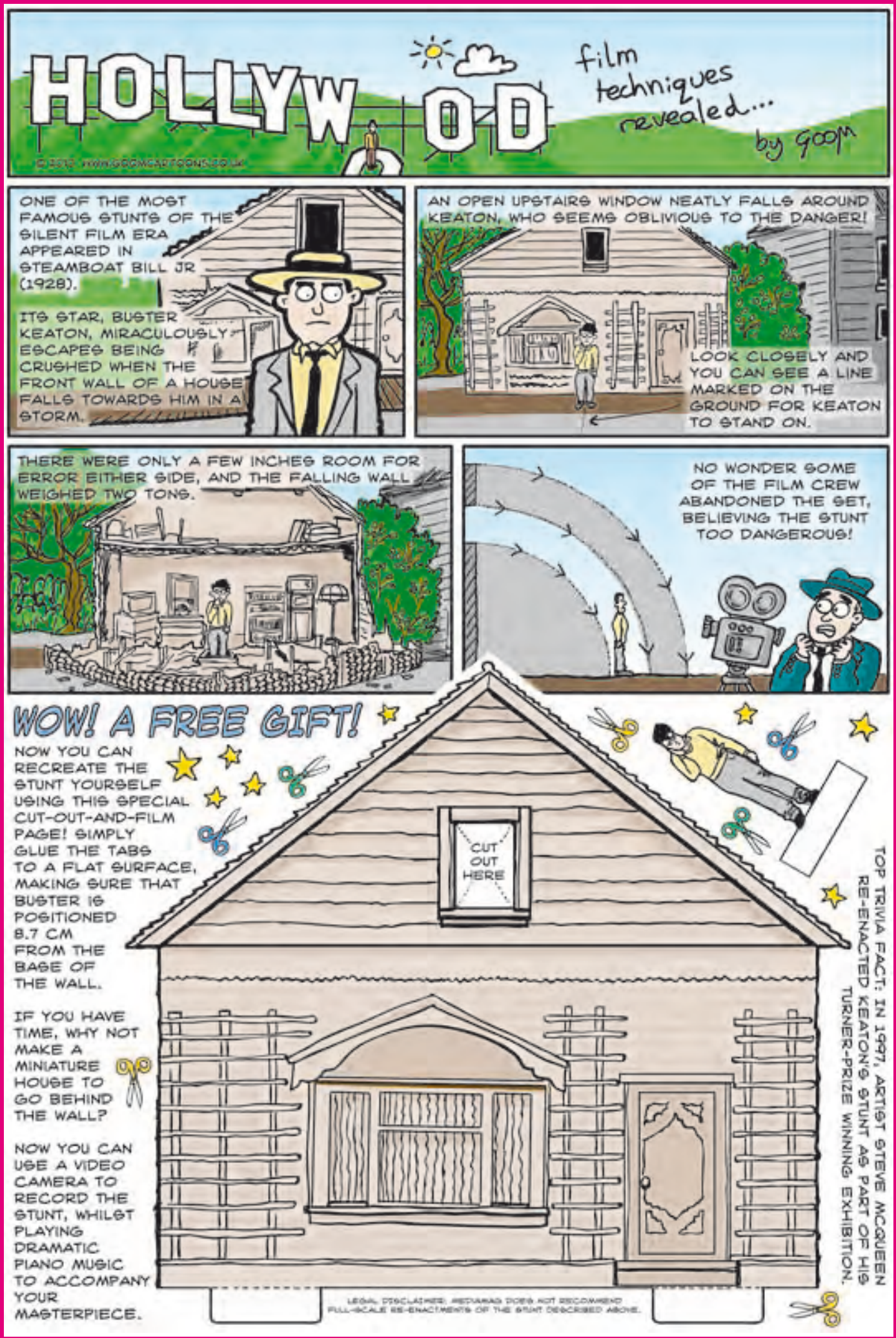
HOLLYWOOD
film techniques revealed...
by Goom
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ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS STUNTS OF THE SILENT FILM ERA APPEARED IN STEAMBOAT BILL JR (1928).
ITS STAR, BUSTER KEATON, MIRACULOUSLY ESCAPES BEING CRUSHED WHEN THE FRONT WALL OF A HOUSE FALLS TOWARDS HIM IN A STORM.
AN OPEN UPSTAIRS WINDOW NEATLY FALLS AROUND KEATON, WHO SEEMS OBLIVIOUS TO THE DANGER!
LOOK CLOSELY AND YOU CAN SEE A LINE MARKED ON THE GROUND FOR KEATON TO STAND ON.
THERE WERE ONLY A FEW INCHES ROOM FOR ERROR EITHER SIDE, AND THE FALLING WALL WEIGHED TWO TONS.
NO WONDER SOME OF THE FILM CREW ABANDONED THE SET, BELIEVING THE STUNT TOO DANGEROUS!
WOW! A FREE GIFT!
NOW YOU CAN RECREATE THE STUNT YOURSELF USING THIS SPECIAL CUT-OUT-AND-FILM PAGE! SIMPLY GLUE THE TABS TO A FLAT SURFACE, MAKING SURE THAT BUSTER IS POSITIONED 8.7 CM FROM THE BASE OF THE WALL.
IF YOU HAVE TIME, WHY NOT MAKE A MINIATURE HOUSE TO GO BEHIND THE WALL?
NOW YOU CAN USE A VIDEO CAMERA TO RECORD THE STUNT, WHILST PLAYING DRAMATIC PIANO MUSIC TO ACCOMPANY YOUR MASTERPIECE.
CUT OUT HERE
TOP TRIVIA FACT: IN 1997, ARTIST STEVE MCQUEEN RE-ENACTED KEATON'S STUNT AS PART OF HIS TURNER-PRIZE WINNING EXHIBITION.
LEGAL DISCLAIMER: MEDIAMAG DOES NOT RECOMMEND FULL-SCALE RE-ENACTMENTS OF THE STUNT DESCRIBED ABOVE.

MISFITS

To be able to hear what others are thinking, to see into the future, to become invisible, and to be immortal. These are the superpowers the Misfits possess but are they all they are cracked up to be? **James Rose** explores the comic and tragic aspects of becoming a superhero.

Channel 4 Press Extranet for *Misfits*

Howard Overman's ***Misfits*** (E4, 2009) began with a very simple idea: **five very different people are caught in a freak thunder storm. Each is struck by the same flash of lighting which invests them with an unusual superpower**. To make his superheroes unique in a time when the film and television markets are saturated with superheroes, Overman decided to find a group of tangible, real-world people who would usually be considered very unheroic:

> **I'd been reading the papers about ASBO kids and it struck me that young offenders doing community service were exactly what I was after: a gang of strangers from different walks of life, thrown together who didn't particularly want to know each other. Perfect.**

With this decision made, Overman began to push his ideas further by writing his five unwitting superheroes away from a stereotyped and tabloid image of young offenders and making them into believable teenagers. These would be people who **the target audience – 16 to 21-year-olds** – could recognise and empathise with. For Overman:

> **These kids…aren't angels, but they haven't stabbed or shot anyone; they just got trapped by circumstance.**

Such a quality lends not only a believability to Overman's characters but also a strong sense of tragedy for, as the six-episode series unfolds, the lives of the Misfits are revealed to be ones in which loneliness, desire and the need for acceptance dominates. And it is these painful truths that, ironically, make the series all the funnier. As Overman has stated, the narrative is driven forward by

> **How you handle being a superhero when society is already looking down on you… It's also about having the responsibility of greater powers; my characters don't always use it for the greater good. That's where the fun starts.**

Genre

Like many contemporary serials, ***Misfits*** contains the elements, qualities, and tropes of a number of different genres: its superhero context immediately suggests it fits into a fantasy genre more equated with cinema than television. Yet whilst this is an obvious observation, each individual's acquisition of their superpower generates a much larger text that is driven by the drama of their individuals lives: **their power brings about great challenges and disruption to their daily lives whilst simultaneously allowing them to find acceptance and romance**. These qualities dominate the narrative of each episode so much that the genre that ***Misfits*** is best equated with is the **coming-of-age drama**. Throughout the series each of the Misfits slowly but steadily learns something about themselves (and others) through their power, a process which leads to acceptance of others, themselves and of their personal limits. Consequently the superpower doesn't make this group of teenagers 'special'; it actually has quite the opposite effect as it starts to transform them into normal human beings. **Given the age of the Misfits, this transformation from something 'different' into something 'normal' can be easily equated with the bodily and emotional changes of puberty**, with each Misfit shifting from something different – an awkward teenager – into something normal – a responsible adult. Such a change leads to some beautiful and tender moments, as the seemingly disparate group of teenagers steadily comes together and form friendships and more intimate bonds that allow them to become who they actually are. Whilst this **transformative** reading of the series – coupled with content typical of an intense coming-of-age drama – suggests that ***Misfits*** is a morally complex and serious drama, it is very far from it. Instead, this drama is distilled through layers of increasingly **dry and dark humour**. This quality adds a further generic layer, comedy. To read ***Misfits*** as a comedy is not difficult at all because not only is Overman's script littered with witty one-liners; his very idea of making his superheroes **young offenders** correspond to that **great British comedy institution character: the Loser**.

The Loser?

As an archetype within British comedy, **the Loser** is a character who is defined by **a strong sense of failure**. The typical narrative trajectory for this character type is one of **repeated attempts to better themselves**. These attempts play out as an almost titanic struggle against all the odds in a futile effort to achieve; yet time and again and despite their very best efforts, the Loser always fails. As each narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that the Loser is, in fact, **an individual who conceals a profound lack of confidence**, struggling as they do not only to **overcome this personality trait but also to prove themselves within their immediate peer group**. The comedy these characters elicit is in their attempts to achieve and to prove their self worth: the effort they put in and the lengths they go to make the audience laugh for they know it will end in failure – that is **the audience expectation of such a character type**. Yet, for all this humour, the Loser also elicits a certain sense of sympathy for their experiences, their predicaments and their lack of self-confidence can be readily recognised by most audiences.

For ***Misfits*** Overman has taken this comedy archetype as the foundation, subtly twisting the archetype to fit his ideas for the series. Consequently, each Misfit is a variant upon this character type, sometimes being explicitly the loser – such as Simon (Iwan Rheon) – or its apparent opposite, as in Nathan (Robert Sheehan).

Simon is described on the official site (**www.e4.com/misfists**) as **a social outcast**, a teenager who is shy, unassuming and nervous. He is **'desperate to make friends'** and wants **'to feel noticed and valued by actual people'**. His attempts to integrate into the group through proving his worth are either ignored by the other Misfits or ridiculed by Nathan. It is with this **repeated rejection** that the audience's sympathy lies; for although Nathan's put-downs are highly amusing, Nathan and the others fail to recognise that Simon actually understands the situation they are in, and that he offers the group

invaluable advice to help them not only stay out of trouble but also to come together as a group of friends.

Elements of the Loser character-type manifest itself within the other Misfits: Curtis (Nathan Stewart-Jarrett) was destined for Olympic stardom but was caught in possession of drugs and made an example of by the courts. His 'failure' is deeply personal, one that has had a dire effect on his potential career as a well-regarded sportsman. Alisha (Antonia Thomas), like fellow Misfit Kelly (Lauren Socha), projects a different image of herself but steadily comes to recognise her 'real' self. Consequently, she begins a relationship with Curtis, a young man who is attracted to her personality and not her sexuality like all the other boys in her past.

Perhaps of all the Misfits, it is Nathan who most clearly defines the role of the Loser archetype within the series: **profoundly rude, sarcastic, cheeky and humorous, Nathan consistently projects an image of immense self-confidence**. He can win people over just as quick as he can put them down and, it would seem, has a personal mission to sleep with just about every girl he sees. But all this apparent confidence is just bravado, for deep down **Nathan** is still just an attention-seeking child who, by the end of Episode One, has been thrown out of the family home by his mother and now sleeps rough in a community centre. Afraid to admit this both to the other Misfits and to his mother, he lies to them, covering his tracks with an endless stream of profanity, put-downs and embarrassing displays with which he attempts to endear himself to the group. Such actions are clearly manifest in the second episode, in which Nathan begins a sexual relationship with an attractive young woman – Ruth – who he has met at the community centre. Whilst he can't believe his luck, Nathan-the-loser looks like he is actually Nathan-the-winner. But, during a graphic sex scene, the humorous truth of their relationship becomes apparent: Ruth straddles Nathan and, as she reaches her climax, transforms – not into something monstrous, but into her real self, an aging pensioner. As Nathan screams in horror, Ruth explains that she was struck by lightning in the same storm that he was caught in and can now regress her age at will. Just when he thought he had achieved something everyone else wanted, it is cruelly and humorously taken away from him.

Superpowers

Whilst Overman may have mutated the Loser archetype, his choice of **superpower** for each of his Misfits certainly works to amplify **the potential Loser aspects** of his heroes: Simon, the boy who is invisible to everyone, is cursed (or blessed) with the gift of invisibility. Curtis, the boy who wants to change his past, can see into the future and travel back in time. Alisha, the attractive young woman, is invested with the power sexually to engage anyone who touches her. Kelly, the girl who does not care what others think about her, realises she can hear the thoughts of others; whilst Nathan, the boy who is so self-obsessed he wants to live forever is blessed with one powerful gift – immortality.

But instead of being superpowers that can heroically save mankind, the powers the Misfits are invested with **help them to save those dearest to them** and, more importantly, help the Misfits themselves to recognise who they actually are. In the process of mastering his power, Curtis travels back in time to a few minutes before his and his girlfriend's arrest. By steadily changing events over time, he manages to alter the future not for himself but for his girlfriend, ensuring that she does not go to prison. Kelly and Alisha's powers work on a much more personal level, **allowing them to reflect on who they are and so encourage a steady change**. Such are the qualities of these superpowers that it is clear that they are – in one way or another – **a reflection on the experience of growing-up**, a quality which compounds the generic potential of the series as a coming-of-age drama: dreams of the future; a desire to be seen and recognised by peers; to appreciate the better qualities in oneself and to develop them; to mature into a responsible adult and, perhaps best of all, to do something of such value that, in some small way, immortality is ensured.

James Rose is a freelance writer and film-maker. His book on del Toro's *The Devil's Backbone* has just been published.

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All quotes are taken from *Teenage Mutant Heroes,* Howard Overman and James Donaghy. *The Guardian Guide*, Saturday 17th November 2009. pp. 14-15.

Too much information:

Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip

Emma Louise Howard investigates the curious failure of a TV comedy about TV comedy.

Aaron Sorkin's short-lived comedy-drama ***Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*** took us backstage to meet the presidents, executives, writers, actors and assistants on the set of a late-night live sketch show. But why did it fail?

Take one long table, littered with laptops and snacks. Adorning the walls are wonky posters, framed magazine articles and sitcom memorabilia. Dotted around the table is a group of people, drinking soda, coffee, wearing baseball caps; analysing what's 'funny'. Deciding what will 'get laughs'. What I'm describing doesn't sound very spontaneous. It sounds cold, robotic and quite dull. And yet, whenever we laugh at an American sitcom, a live comedy show or a drama series with comical moments, our laughter has been engineered by a large group of writers and producers who came to a collective decision. Welcome to the machinations of US comedy.

Is this something we want to see? Can what transpires behind the scenes be funnier than the sketch itself? Aaron Sorkin, creator of ***The West Wing***, thought so. He who introduced us to the offices, communal areas, boardrooms and boudoirs of fictional politicians, decided to take us backstage at a ***Saturday Night Live***-esque sketch show and not only gave us access to the lives and loves of the actors, directors, writers, producers, PAs, costume designers, floor managers, executives and such-like, but also exposed the 'science' behind comedy – the processes involved in creating something 'funny'.

Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip aired between September 2006 and June 2007. The fictional history behind the 'show within a show' is as follows:

Studio 60: the back story

Studio 60 premiered in 1986 and by 1999 Wes Mendell, the show's creator was 'the boss' and was writing most of the material alone. An assistant head writer presided over the writers' room where brainstorming and submission of individual ideas for Wes's consideration took place. By 2001 the show was enjoying network flagship status. With Wes ill from a heart attack the show was temporarily left in the hands of Matt Albie (a former ***Studio 60*** writer who takes over production and the role of head writer) and segment producer Danny Tripp. Matt and Danny had the thankless task of creating a show appropriate for America's sombre mood following 9/11 and network boss Jack Rudolph insisted they create a show totally devoid of 'anti-American' political satire. The opening sketch (written by Matt) was opposed by Jack but a deal was struck in which the sketch would be pulled if sponsors objected in dress rehearsal. The sketch was broadcast, a conservative backlash followed, and Matt and Danny quit after Wes buckled under pressure and issued an apology on the show's behalf. Following their exit Wes doubted his own integrity and handed artistic control to productive but untalented Ricky and Ron (assistant head writers) and the show's creative decline began.

Wes attempts to re-animate the show with the sketch 'Crazy Christians' (written by Matt before his departure). Overruled by Standards and Practices, he storms onstage to interrupt that night's broadcast with a live rant about the demise of quality television. This is coincidentally Jordan McDeere's first day as president of entertainment programming at NBS. Jack fires Wes but Jordan controversially brings back Matt and Danny to restore the show to its 'golden age'. Having since found success as a film writer/director team but still hurt by Wes's betrayal and angry at Jack, they are reluctant to return, but following Danny's failed drug test, which renders him temporarily uninsurable for films, they decide the homecoming is potentially lucrative. Matt's low opinion of Ricky and Ron leads them to leave, taking all but one of the writing staff with them. Only Lucy Kenwright (a junior writer on the show) remains. Matt puts together a small and eclectic team of his own which includes Lucy.

Studio 60 deftly depicts what goes on 'behind the scenes'. The hierarchy of talent exhibited among the 'cast' and the machinations of the executives are portrayed realistically. Sorkin also provides occasional **intertextual** nods; for example, the network meeting to discuss Wes's 'live rant' is reminiscent of the 'War Room' scene in **Stanley Kubrick's** satirical black comedy ***Dr Strangelove*** (1964) with its oval table and the use of continuous camera panning. This paradigmatic choice suggests perhaps that Sorkin is taking a somewhat satirical approach in his depiction of the TV industry. But is a 'warts and all' look behind the scenes entertaining? More to the point – is it actually funny?

Bitter humour

During his live on-air tirade Wes tells viewers to switch off their TV sets. He claims that the show has been 'lobotomised by a candy-ass network'; he accuses TV, which he describes as 'this country's most influential industry' as brainwashing its viewers, and states that:

> **people are having contests to see how much they can be like Donald Trump... we're eating worms for money... [TV is] making us mean, it's making us bitchy, it's making us cheap punks – that's not who we are.**

This outburst could be interpreted as a piece of **social commentary** upon the current trend towards the **'tabloidisation'** of TV and the lack of integrity and imagination associated with the ascendancy of **reality shows**.

However, it's not only with the decline of quality programming that Sorkin appears to take issue. The show also takes issue with the token attention given by serious critics to the online views of 'amateurs' and 'bloggers'. Sorkin admitted the personal nature of this particular

Channel 4 Press Extranet for *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*

gripe to the ***Chicago Tribune***:

> **That's a constant theme of mine… I do believe that we've seen an enormous rise in amateurism. One of the things I find troubling about the Internet… is that we can all communicate with each other, and that everybody has a voice… everybody's voice oughtn't be equal. You people are credentialed journalists in here… There's a certain understanding that you had to be good to have gotten that job… when the *New York Times* quotes a blogger, saying 'Pastyboy2000 says this,' suddenly you give it the imprimatur of the *New York Times*… first of all, [it's] lazy… second of all, incredibly misleading…'**

In one of the show's most tense arguments journalist Martha O'Dell is confronted by Danny who accuses her of quoting an amateur blogger, and his lines, just as Simon's do, reflect Sorkin's own comments on the subject.

Coincidentally, Sorkin was also unhappy about the ***LA Times*** referencing a TV blogging website called **TelevisionWithoutPity.com**:

> **This was nonsense and the *LA Times* should be ashamed of itself. And frankly, an arts section in a town like Los Angeles running a piece like that… just godawful… I think there [were] probably… two misperceptions about this show, one, that it was angry, that it was a screed, that you were going to be made to eat your vegetables. And the other was that it was about me.**

Methinks Sorkin protests too much...

Up close and personal

In any creative media profession (as Wes claims in his rant) **'there has always been a struggle between art and commerce'**. Creative types like Matt and Danny struggle with Jordan's suggestion to incorporate **product placement** into the show.

Danny notes that Jordan, 'looks like one of them [commerce], but talks like one of us [art]'. She is the person who appears to bridge the gap between the financial and creative sectors and she champions 'cerebral programming'. Yet Jordan is keen to make the point that she occupies 'the real world' (commerce), leaving Danny wondering what realm she thinks he (an 'artistic type') occupies. **The clash between art and commerce** is a recurring theme in the show and is symbolised by the **chairpeople** (Jack, Jordan, Wilson White, the shareholders, sales) in their sleek neat offices and boardrooms and the **creatives** in a rustic rabbit warren of graffiti, haphazardly strewn papers, props and manic animation.

Many plot developments in the series appear to **mirror events from Sorkin's personal life**, the most significant of which is the tumultuous relationship between the characters of Matt and Harriet. The two appear as exes in the series, working together within a strained atmosphere. The character of Harriet was supposedly based closely on ***West Wing*** actress Kristin Chenoweth with whom Sorkin had a relationship. ***Studio 60's*** pilot show details the nature of Matt and Harriet's last break-up – Harriet chose to appear on ***The 700 Club***, the Christian Broadcasting Network's flagship show, to promote an album of Christian music she released. Chenoweth made this exact move in 2005, to the horror of some of her gay fans (host Pat Robertson's views are less than open-minded; in ***Studio 60*** Matt states, 'you sang for a bigot'). The **gay fan backlash** is also represented in ***Studio 60*** in a separate episode, in which Harriet has been interviewed and her quote from the Bible about gay marriage is taken out of context.

There has also been much speculation that the character of Jordan is based on **ABC's Jamie Tarses**, who presided over ABC's entertainment division at the age of 32.

Sorkin, however, is keen to discourage audiences from drawing real-life parallels. He says in an ***Insider*** interview:

> **When all everyone does is try to draw personal connections between your characters and real people, you're not really watching a play or a TV show anymore… It becomes a tabloid experience.**

Sorkin might not have wanted such speculation, but his subject matter openly invites it, especially as he, a TV writer with a history of drug problems, has created a lead character who happens to be a TV writer with a history of drug problems. As he told ***Insider***...

> **[Speculation is] just unhealthy. *After the Fall* is a better play if you don't know that Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe were married. It doesn't enhance the experience of seeing the play if you're being a detective, always looking for clues. You only see the writing through a filter that takes you out of the actual story… But I'm glad that you've given me**

the opportunity to put the lie to the fact that I'm in any way writing autobiographically… I'm really not thinking about myself when I'm writing the show.

Yet there are still rather extraordinary similarities with the real world of TV entertainment. Is it this **blurring of fiction and reality** that caused ***Studio 60's*** demise? Is this entertainment or merely a self-indulgent, narcissistic attack upon the US media as a whole?

Genre

Sorkin exploits the **codes and conventions of comedy** dexterously, whether he's utilising vicious satire or evoking a nostalgic 'golden-age-of-television' atmosphere with his musical number sketches. **Nostalgia**, it seems, is an important element of this show. The title itself is a nostalgic intertextual reference to 1950s' shows ***77 Sunset Strip*** and ***Studio One***, whilst the inclusion of the Mary Tyler Moore 'you've got spunk' exchange provides retro charm. The focus on **romantic comedy**, incorporating the three 'screwball' relationships of Matt and Harriet, Danny and Jordan, Tom and Lucy, also gives the show a retro feel. Indeed, the sharp-tongued wit of Jordan and Harriet against their hapless partners is reminiscent of **Katherine Hepburn** or **Lucille Ball**, and the 'will-they-won't-they' narratives borrow a great deal from popular 'rom-com' movies and relationship-based sitcoms such as ***Friends*** and ***How I Met Your Mother.***

Sorkin employs an eclectic mix of comedy codes and conventions both in front of, and behind, the cameras. There's the vicious satire of Wes's outburst and the satirical sketches that were axed; the impressionist comedy of Alex Dwyer in comedy sketches performed in front of the camera; the farcical backstage comedy of director Cal Shanley losing a snake, followed by a ferret, followed by a coyote under the stage; and there are Matt's backstage slapstick moments; sitting where there isn't a chair or accidentally swinging a baseball into the window of his office. Maybe that's part of the problem; maybe Sorkin was trying to appeal to too wide an audience.

A friend-ly face

Another possible problem for ***Studio 60*** may be linked to the audience's inability to disassociate **Matthew Perry** from his previous incarnation as **Chandler Bing** in ***Friends.*** Perry is acutely aware of the Chandler typecasting issue as these comments in ***The Guardian*** reveal:

We were shooting something where two people creep up on me and say my name, and my tendency is to do a huge scare take… But I'm not going to do that, because it's too reminiscent of Chandler… if you're seeing a lot of Chandler here I'm not doing my job. It's a fine line because my character Matt's a funny guy, he's a comedy writer… when he's creating he can be kind of a goofball… without being the kind of neurotic, over-the-top character that Chandler was.

Perry has enjoyed a degree of success with smaller parts in ***The West Wing*** and ***Scrubs***, but it may be difficult for the audience to differentiate between Chandler and the similarly wacky, goofy Matt in ***Studio 60***. In fact Sorkin's predilection for **casting the same actors in different shows** could also have had a detrimental effect on the success of ***Studio 60***... do we think of Bradley Whitford as Danny Tripp – or do we still think of him as Josh Lyman, his character in the long-running ***The West Wing***?

Conclusion

So why did ***Studio 60*** fail? It was certainly innovative and culturally and contextually relevant. As to whether it was funny or not, that, as always, is a matter of personal taste. But consider this – perhaps ***Studio 60*** didn't fail. Perhaps it was a show that was out of step with the evolution of TV. Audience viewing habits have changed beyond all recognition due to the **availability of on-demand TV and digital recording and streaming**. Viewers can watch shows when it suits them, and issues like timeslot winners, overnight ratings and shareholder/advertising pressure (ironically, issues discussed in ***Studio 60***) could completely change. It's an interesting twist that ***Studio 60*** was the top 'time-shifted' show at the time it aired (in other words, viewers were recording and watching it at their leisure), a fact which never filtered through into the main ratings. Eventually, perhaps, those responsible for compiling ratings data will incorporate this increasingly important statistical group into their ratings assessments. In the end, ***Studio 60*** may eventually be considered a classic which was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

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Back to Earth with a Bang or a Whimper?

Fay Jessop welcomes the return of one of our funniest TV fantasies.

It takes a very brave man to don a pink spandex jumpsuit and risk the mirth of his colleagues, but **Danny John Jules** did just that when he rejoined fellow ***Red Dwarf*** actors **Craig Charles**, **Chris Barrie** and **Robert Llewellyn** for ***Back to Earth***. Some might also say it takes a

Image.net for *Red Dwarf*

very brave man to make the decision to revisit ***Red Dwarf*** after ten years off the air. This trilogy of episodes, filmed and produced by satellite channel Dave in 2009 marked ***Red Dwarf's*** return to the small screen after a decade. The question is, was ***Back to Earth*** worth the wait, or was it an experience that only the Despair Squid could induce?

Let me first nail my colours clearly to the mast as a hardcore ***Dwarfer***. Being of the thirty-something generation, I grew up with ***Red Dwarf***, and every week I eagerly anticipated the adventures (or otherwise) of the surviving crew of the eponymous JMC mining ship. The original crew of Lister, Rimmer, The Cat, Holly (in both guises), Kryten and later Kochanski kept me glued, and, a decade after the last series finished, the excitement was rekindled when I discovered that there were to be new episodes.

The ***Red Dwarf*** brand has faced difficulties over the years, so it was a great and wonderful surprise when new episodes were commissioned. **Writers Rob Grant and Doug Naylor** went their separate ways after six highly successful series together, leaving Grant to head up Series Seven and Naylor to write Series Eight. The new episodes were overseen by Doug Naylor once again, and were filmed on a much tighter budget than the original episodes.

Back to Earth opens nine years on from the close of the last series. As the main action begins, the old mining ship is in shot. By now the ship has 'no brakes and three million miles on the clock'. In a reversed replay of the opening shot from the original series, the camera pans through space towards the ship Red Dwarf, pulling in closer to the ubiquitous 'F' that Lister is painting during the original opener, and then through a porthole to find Lister wandering along the corridor carrying a bag of tomatoes. Cut to Rimmer in the sleeping quarters, berating Bob the skutter for hanging his Vending Machine Maintenance Man of the Month award incorrectly. What follows is standard ***Red Dwarf*** banter between our two antagonistic protagonists, firmly re-establishing the footing of their relationship – as if we needed reminding.

Certainly, the pace of the dialogue when compared to the original shows is slower, but these are characters who are supposedly older and wiser now. The viewer can still sense the odd couple frustrations of the two, but those frustrations seem muted, suggesting that they have learned to live with one another over the years. The banter seems more born out of habit than any desire to irritate or aggravate. This is interaction that seems as comfortable as a pair of old slippers, and, as Stephen Bray puts it 'a wonderful recreation of the old Rimmer and Lister dynamic'.

But for me, the next scene is what sets ***Back to Earth*** apart from just being another sitcom remake. Lister's grief is palpable as he reads an extract from ***Sense and Sensibility*** to the memorial stone, around which are various framed photographs. These include a shot of Lister's lost love Christine Kochanski, and, in a poignant reminder, that of Mel Bibby the production designer on the original show, who died in 2002. Craig Charles brings just the right amount of emotion and pathos to this moment, and it was a reminder that, back in the day, ***Red Dwarf*** wasn't just about the comedy; bleakness permeated the humour from time to time. Lister's emotional state is a reminder that, despite the sitcom setting, he really is the last human alive in the universe.

As for the rest of the new episodes, they follow a pretty standard formula of madcap antics, interspersed with a slightly incoherent plot, but as realism was never a huge priority in the original shows (Lister was both an orphan from birth and also able to remember his father's death, and had his appendix removed twice!) we forgive this in the sheer excitement of having the old characters back on screen. Certainly the inclusion of Katerina the Russian hologram is more of a distraction than a real addition to the plot, but the parallel plotline of the Hope Squid, bringing back fond memories of 'Back to Reality' is a great device to have the boys running around in true ***Dwarf*** fashion and, to paraphrase Kochanski, without knowing where they are, what they're doing, and with zero expertise at the helm. Even a trip to ***Coronation Street*** and an extended ***BladeRunner*-esque** sequence seem acceptable, and a lovely postmodern nod.

Sure, there is an argument that sleeping dogs should be left to lie; and with a larger budget and the inclusion of either incarnation of Holly the ship's computer, there would possibly have been greater scope for comedy and nostalgia. Norman Lovett, the original Holly, provoked an internet frenzy when he revealed he was far from happy about being omitted from ***BTE***. However, in the opinion of this old Dwarfer, ***Back to Earth*** was a pleasure to watch. The winning combination of **Craig Charles,** who brought a new maturity to the role of Lister, **Chris Barrie**, who returned as the pre-resurrection Rimmer and thus was able to give the role the depth of character that post-Series Seven Rimmer didn't have, **Robert Llewellyn**, who seemed to shrug on Kryten's personality with the same easy familiarity as ever, and **Danny John Jules** who reprised The Cat with the insouciance we all know and love (and let's not forget that amazing diving suit!), made ***Back to Earth*** a winner. It was also lovely to see **Chloe Annett** back as Kochanski, albeit an alternative version. I only hope we'll see more of the Red Dwarf crew. And maybe, just maybe, Lister might end up getting home, and getting the girl. At last.

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DARK HUMOUR, OBSESSION AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

AS Media student Yasemin Kaplanbasoglu considers a hard-hitting indie comedy and its social and political impact.

Little Miss Sunshine **(dir. Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006)** is far more than your average Hollywood comedy. In many ways, this charming film about a struggling family explores American society and Westernised taboos with warm humour; but, more importantly, it opened a gate-way for a new and exciting culture: Indie.

Those of you who have watched the film will undoubtedly remember Dayton and Faris's unique spin on the film's comedy appeal, and how they used dark humour to lighten **taboo topics** such as suicide, homosexuality and death. A great example of this would be the scene when Grandpa (Alan Arkin) is comically hauled out of the hospital window after dying from a drug overdose, which comically balances the film's hard-hitting reflection of a corrupt reality.

We can assume that ever since 1964's dark humour hit ***Dr. Strangelove*** (dir. Stanley Kubrick) the American film industry has embraced such genres, and directors have jumped at the chance of using it as a way to convey their political views safe in the knowledge that they're going to be accepted and respected. We've already established that Dayton and Faris used dark humour to explore taboos, but how does that link in with political and social views?

Dark humour, obsessions and the American Dream

Well, the film openly discusses America's obsessions with sex, drugs and money, and particularly the idea of aimlessly and relentlessly pursuing the American Dream. For example, the grandfather continuously and openly projects his compulsive interest in sex, women and drugs. And the fact that his life was terminated by his own actions suggests that Dayton and Faris are putting forth the message that embracing such things to the degree of obsession is dangerous and irresponsible to both yourself and America's reputation.

In addition to the theme of obsession, the American Dream is highlighted by the character of **Olive (Abigail Breslin)**, the seven-year-old, slightly plump and geeky would-be beauty queen. The dramatic contrast between her character and her dream leaves the audience questioning whether her goal is plausible. Another example would be the character of **Uncle Frank (Steve Carrell)**, who was brutally denied his dream of being loved and respected as a scholar. The representations of these characters are classic examples of directors questioning the American Dream and suggesting that today's American society is totally consumed by it.

Furthermore, Dayton and Faris also touch upon an important point: that the American Dream is blinding its youth into thinking that there can only ever be winners or losers, an idea which is projected through **father Richard (Greg Kinnear)**. The film also resolves this at the climactic ending where the family finally accept who they are by breaking the rigid structure of the **'Little Miss Sunshine'** beauty pageant, and thus symbolically breaking the rigid structure of life. All of this is done with intelligent and endearing humour, which makes bearable the sometimes offensive and controversial themes.

So, now that I've got you thinking about the film's meaning, I hope you can see why Hollywood might at first have been wary of the film's criticism of American society. This may explain why the film was made independently with a budget of just $8 million.

Impact on the industry

However, the simple fact that the film was bought by Fox Searchlight Pictures with a record-breaking offer of $10.5 million at the Sundance Film Festival highlights the beginning of the welcomed success of independent films. It could be argued that ***Little Miss Sunshine*** paved the way for other indie films to blossom. For instance, I'm sure that 2007's ***Juno*** **(dir. Jason Reitman)** rings a few bells. The film was independently made with a budget of $6.5 million and was also distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures. This film also explores controversial issues such as teenage

pregnancy, abortion and gender roles with humour, encouraging people to embrace a more open attitude towards such issues.

An influence on society?

So if we're being presented with more challenging ideas, perhaps indie films do more for today's society than we think. For instance, due to the fact that independent films tackle real-life situations with characters we can relate to, could the film's content influence its target audience – for good or ill? It's been alleged that ***Juno*** encouraged teenage pregnancy (or alternatively discouraged termination) to the degree that after the film's release, the US teenage pregnancy rate was affected, including allegations that 17 teenage girls from a single Massachusetts high school fell pregnant. Whether or not the speculations about the film's influence are justified, I believe that, although films in general may impact on individual worlds and behaviours, independent films influence people to resolve issues more than make them worse. I would argue that whatever the effect, the successful emergence of Indie films has profoundly influenced today's society, generally for the better.

Keeping it real

Furthermore, we all know that the representation of the general public in Hollywood films can be a bit artificial and a tad too glam when compared to real life. Although it could be argued that this aspect makes the films more entertaining and more appealing to the eye, the superficiality that accompanies this can be unsatisfying: this is something Indie films avoid. ***Little Miss Sunshine*** completely breaks Hollywood conventions with its frank representations of the suicidal uncle, the stressed mother, the delusional father, the drug-addicted uncle and the depressed and obsessive teenage son. Some may interpret this aspect of the film as unnecessarily bleak; but all I can say is that the raw representations of the family is altogether more real and human than that of most mainstream Hollywood films. It's evident that

others agree; the film grossed **$100.3 million** worldwide, and won numerous awards. With that in mind, we might infer that the emergence of Indie films has provided mainstream film-fans with an alternative potential for film: one that doesn't focus on the money and 2-D entertainment, but revels in expressing art.

Indie cinema in Britain

So far I've described the effect of ***Little Miss Sunshine*** and indie films on America, but the British film industry has also been influenced. Although there has always been an independent tradition in British cinema, the recent British success of ***Slumdog Millionaire*** (dir. Danny Boyle, 2008) has demonstrated the thriving popularity of Indie films. This film was again distributed by Fox Searchlight Pictures, had a budget of $13.5 million, and grossed an astonishing $377, 417, 293. The film has clearly had an impact on the British film industry, and the film's international success meant that the American audiences who took an interest in ***Little Miss Sunshine*** and ***Juno*** gained awareness of Indie films from Britain. All of this suggests that independent films have encouraged more mainstream film-fans to have a go at expressing themselves politically and socially through film. Hopefully this may mean that there will be more funding to come for British Independent films in the near future.

Not only is ***Little Miss Sunshine*** a beautifully written and delivered film that captures comedy at its best, it may also have helped to open the flood-gates for more Indie films to compete on equal terms with mainstream culture. Across the world, ***Little Miss Sunshine*** has pushed the idea that alternative comedy film can be a means to express political and social views in an artistic and comically entertaining fashion.

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With a new series on the way, **Nicola Laxton** explains just why this cult show became essential viewing.

What is a cult audience?

Cult audiences are loyal fans who immerse themselves in the text. A show designed with cult appeal may not take off immediately, but it may generate a following to enable it to keep its place in the schedule and slowly build an audience. ***Star Trek: the Next Generation***, ***The X-Files*** and ***The Simpsons*** are examples of cult shows. Cult television has almost become a marketing category. The BBC, for example, directly targets the audiences of a cult show like ***Buffy the Vampire Slayer*** and ***Star Trek***, directing them to the BBC's own cult TV web pages: **http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/**

The League of Gentlemen: a cult show

The League of Gentlemen was first aired on BBC2 on 11th January 1999. The show developed a following of loyal fans and ran for three series (**http://www.leagueofgentlemen.co.uk/**). It can be described as a cult TV show. As an avid fan of the series I am interested in examining why I enjoyed this particular programme more than any other.

On first seeing it, I did consider it to be rather odd and didn't quite know how to react to the characters. It is a mixture of **horror, comedy and thriller**. The characters are grotesque and all have bizarre obsessions or mannerisms; and yet they are at the same time strangely 'normal' and familiar. For example, Pauline the evil Re-start Officer, who loves belittling her job seekers, and Tubbs and Edward who own the local shop and disapprove of anyone or anything that isn't 'local'. I love the way the programme elicits a response from the audience, be it laughter, repulsion, shock, horror, bemusement, or a mixture of these emotions. I am impressed by the amount of effort and attention to detail that goes into each episode – the costumes, the props, the cinematography and the references to films. Spotting the film references makes the audience feel clever. I enjoy the fact that the more you watch it the more things you notice... I could eulogise about the programme all day.

From the makers of The League of Gentlemen we bring you... Psychoville!

It has been a long wait since the last series of ***The League of Gentlemen***. I've replaced my original video box-set with a DVD version, and proudly given the videos away to someone who missed the series the first time round. I've initiated new fans, some of whom were too young to watch it originally. And I have taken great pleasure, with fellow ***League*** fans, in reciting memorable lines from the series – a personal favourite being:

this way and that way enough to make a whore blush.

When I discovered that **Reece Shearsmith** and **Steve Pemberton** had written a new TV comedy series I could hardly contain my excitement. I changed the status on my Facebook to:

> **can't wait for *Psychoville* on Thursday (BBC at 10pm), I hope it is as good as *The League of Gentlemen*.**

To which I received a reply from a ***League*** fan asking what it was.

It was the Monday of the week of the first episode and it seemed like a long wait. To help build up the anticipation, I decided to search the internet for any possible clues. I found two interesting articles, in *The Guardian Guide* (13th June) and *The Times* (15th June). However, the fun all started when I logged onto the official BBC website: **http://www.bbc.co.uk/psychoville/**

The narrative

The series is a **comedy murder mystery** about five main characters: Mr Jolly, a one-handed child entertainer, David Sowerbutts, a man obsessed with serial killers, Robert Greenspan, a dwarf with psychic powers, Oscar Lomax a blind collector of soft toys and Joy Aston, a midwife who loves her 'special' baby. These characters are just as sinister as the characters in ***The League of Gentlemen***. In the first episode each character receives a **blackmail letter** from an anonymous mystery man. The narrative takes on lots of complicated twists and is inspired by **Hitchcock**. All the characters have their own stories, but there is something from their past that links them all together. For vigilant viewers there are hidden clues and website addresses in each episode that unlock the puzzle.

The online invitation

On the BBC website there is the opportunity to send a blackmail email to your friends. You upload a picture of your friend and type in their 'darkest secret'. If you want to try if for yourself here's the link: **http://www.bbc.co.uk/psychoville/grahamnorton/graham_norton.shtml**

Your friends then receive a spoof clip from ***The Graham Norton Show*** revealing their picture and their secret. I sent loads and it was great fun and very clever viral marketing. After scouring the internet I found plenty of amusing links, YouTube clips and Facebook pages, all cleverly constructed to make the characters seem more three-dimensional and to give fans some background information (**http://www.comedy.org.uk/guide/tv/psychoville/videos/**).

Immediately after the first episode had aired on Thursday 18th June, the BBC advertised their website and gave digital viewers the opportunity to watch the second episode. Of course, after being totally mesmerised by the first episode, I was desperate to see what happened next; and so I obliged and pressed the red button. By the next day, however, I regretted it; I now had nothing new to look forward to! The only thing to do was to sign up for the **'Psychoville Experience'**. You are invited to sign up after you have sent a blackmail email to your friends – I had multiple invites in my inbox. After each episode the ***Psychoville*** team sends you a message containing a question related to the episode you've just watched. The first week was a question about Robert Greenspan's seedy past; week two was about Oscar Lomax's commodities; week three's request was to find out the name of the hospital where Mr Jelly had his operation; week four the name of Victor Perez's first victim; and the fifth week I had to discover Freddy Fruitcakes's birthday. To find the answers you must trawl through the different websites and watch the various YouTube clips. I think only a serious fan would be bothered with the effort; the point being that if you are a serious fan – a member of the cult audience – it isn't actually an effort, but part of the whole experience. I found a handy website that had all the relevant links: **http://www.comedy.org.uk/guide/tv/psychoville/**

The dirty tricks campaign

After the sixth episode on 23rd July, the BBC played a little trick on us fans. Episode Six was particularly fast moving and revealed a lot of twists in the narrative (which I won't spoil for anyone who hasn't seen the series). At the end it was announced that viewers could once again press their red buttons and watch the final episode. Alas, it was all a cruel trick; I spent the whole of ***Newsnight*** frantically trying to get my red button to work, and went to bed very disappointed. The next day the BBC delivered a double whammy by not even giving me a question to answer in my inbox – I was told the game had come to an end! On the ***Psychoville*** Facebook page, there were many disgruntled fans complaining about their red buttons not working. When I noted the times of the posts, I realised that some of the fans had been discussing the red button dilemma into the early hours of the morning. You've got to hand it to the BBC for their impeccable timing; I for one would never have found the time and energy to devote to the programme if it had been aired during the busy exam period.

I refused to believe the game was over: those crafty ***Psychoville*** people had to be concealing something. And I was right. It didn't take me too long to find a website for Ravenhill Hospital. This site was supposedly constructed by a 22-year-old student, living opposite the derelict building that had once been Ravenhill Hospital, where all the main characters were once inmates. The BBC certainly enjoy taunting and tantalising their fans: it took a further six days for them to upload the case studies for each character. These were hilarious to read and give you insight into the character of Nurse Kenchlington, who you don't actually meet until the final episode.

I can proudly say I found all the clues, contributed to the discussions on the Facebook page, am already quoting from ***Psychoville***, and have received texts messages from other fans:

> **Come quickly der bin anudder murda.**

Which, in my eyes, means it is another cult TV show – and I'm definitely a member of the cult audience.

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Image.net for *Psychoville*

PSYCHOVILLE AND CULT TV