



**This electronic thesis or dissertation has been
downloaded from the University of Bristol Research
Portal, <http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>**

Author:

Von Baibus, Nil Melissa M

Title:

In pursuit of collective laughter

Bergson, Bakhtin, and contemporary conceptions of the comic

General rights

Access to the thesis is subject to the Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International Public License. A copy of this may be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. This license sets out your rights and the restrictions that apply to your access to the thesis so it is important you read this before proceeding.

Take down policy

Some pages of this thesis may have been removed for copyright restrictions prior to having it been deposited on the University of Bristol Research Portal. However, if you have discovered material within the thesis that you consider to be unlawful e.g. breaches of copyright (either yours or that of a third party) or any other law, including but not limited to those relating to patent, trademark, confidentiality, data protection, obscenity, defamation, libel, then please contact collections-metadata@bristol.ac.uk and include the following information in your message:

- Your contact details
- Bibliographic details for the item, including a URL
- An outline nature of the complaint

Your claim will be investigated and, where appropriate, the item in question will be removed from public view as soon as possible.

In pursuit of collective laughter:
Bergson, Bakhtin, and contemporary conceptions of the comic

by

Nil Melissa von Baibus

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the
requirements for award of the degree of Master of Philosophy in the Faculty of
Arts.

School of Arts, February 2021.

25,677 Words.

Abstract

The state of contemporary comedy has been catapulted into a culture war, with one side arguing for the danger of mockery whilst the other regards any mention of political correctness an infringement of their free speech. The aim of this thesis is to offer an analysis of frameworks for assessing the relative harms and benefits of comedy in light of this contemporary debate. The thesis offers an in-depth analysis of two seminal studies within the field of humour, Henri Bergson's *Laughter* and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, originated as 'carnival' in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* and further developed in *Rabelais and His World*. The concepts elaborated in these theories are used to consider recent prescriptive and restrictive measures taken against celebrated instances of film and TV comedy. These measures are looked at through Bergson's and Bakhtin's conception of the physical form, and the relation of this to a laughing collective. Furthermore, it explores how the historical disappearance of the 'body politic' eventually structured a framework of politics around bodily identity which has reached the zenith in contemporary culture. The concept of policing comedy and the notion of laughter as a social corrective concludes the research as the question arises as to why restrictions of the comic exist in a contemporary culture which lauds its freedom and diversity. This thesis thus does two things: firstly, critically reconstructs Bergson's and Bakhtin's positions, and secondly, develops an analysis of comedy in contemporary culture which argues for a return to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque in order for humour to not only survive contemporary culture, but also provide contemporary culture with a regenerative power to fully establish and appreciate a diverse society.

Author's declaration

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Nil Melissa von Baibus DATE: 11th February 2021

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
Conceptions of the comic in contemporary culture	11
Bergsonian Laughter	30
Bakhtinian Laughter	39
The Body politic and the political body	50
Case Studies: <i>Blazing Saddles</i> and <i>Little Britain</i>	58
Corrective laughter and a call to return to the festive.....	87
Conclusion	94
Works Cited.....	96

Introduction

In his 2010 posthumously published autobiography *Last Words*, American stand-up comedian George Carlin argued that:

“No one is ever more herself or himself than when they really laugh. Their defences are down...They are completely open, completely themselves when that message hits the brain, and the laugh begins. That’s when new ideas can be implanted. If a new idea slips in at that moment, it has a chance to grow.”¹

The new ideas Carlin refers to offer an interesting platform on which to open an analysis of twenty-first century comedy. Carlin’s reputation precedes him today, as the comedian who equated political correctness as ‘intolerance [...] disguised as tolerance’². Carlin’s comedy did not conform. His nonconformity reached the extent that his radio monologue ‘Seven dirty words’³ resulted in a landmark US Supreme Court Case which led to ‘The Carlin Warning’, a reminder that the Federal Communications Commission had won the case and thus upheld their power to regulate indecency on the public airwaves⁴. Freedom of speech, in other words, was determined by the moral boundary of an institution.⁵ Comedy and humour, for Carlin, was therefore used as a strategic form of protest against the oppressive system of a prescriptive society. Indeed, in 1972 words such as ‘tits’ and ‘shit’ were considered appallingly immoral, an act of violation that was

¹ George Carlin, *Last Words*, (New York: Free Press Simon & Schuster, 2009) p.250.

² Carlin, *When will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops?* (London: Hachette, 2004) p.69.

³ Carlin, “Filthy Words”, The Transcript Presented to the Supreme Court in 1978, accessed via University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law.
<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/filthywords.html>.

⁴ Christina A. Corcos, ‘George Carlin, Constitutional Law Scholar’ (2008). *Journal Articles*. 333.
https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/faculty_scholarship/333.

⁵ Case 438 U.S 726 (1978).

deemed too vulgar for the general public. However, in 2010, thirty-eight years after the ruling, a federal appeals court struck down the government's near-zero-tolerance indecency policy as a violation of the First Amendment protection of free speech.⁶ In this instance, the moral boundary of the institution was no longer considered to be above the right to freedom of speech. Of particular interest here, is the concept of censorship, that is the official supervision of morals and conduct⁷, leading to a reduction of unwanted behaviour. Despite the ban on immoral words, the use of foul language continued to prosper within everyday speech and indeed enjoyed the quality of becoming an act of rebellion primarily perhaps because of institutionalised censorship. This is possibly most visible in the emergence and incredible popularity of rap music within the last four decades, a genre which considers profanity a key ingredient of its artistic creation.⁸ Whilst it is difficult to quantify how much Carlin's routine helped pave the way for this increased approval towards a liberal approach to language, it nevertheless highlights the idea that censorship oftentimes provides counterproductive results. This notion is important to bear in mind when beginning an analysis of comedy and the concept of offence and/or malice within artistic creation.

Comedy's association with malice traces back as far as Ancient Greece, where Plato treated humour in relation to malice and envy, or *phthonos*⁹ which led to a perception that humour can perpetuate harm and undermine the morality of a

⁶ Jim Puzzanghera and Meg James. FCC indecency rule struck down by appeals court. [online] Los Angeles Times. Available at: <<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-jul-14-la-fi-fcc-indecency-20100714-story.html>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

⁷ Oxford English Dictionary. 2022. Oxford English Dictionary: "censor, n.". [online] Available at: <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29595>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

⁸ See for example: Jon Christopher Wolfe, 'Sex, Violence, and Profanity: Rap Music and the First Amendment', 44 Mercer L. Rev. 667 (1993).

⁹ Pierre Destrée and Franco V. Trivigno (eds.), *Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

society.¹⁰ Yet the ‘new ideas’ Carlin refers to in the introductory quote as being produced by laughter are associated with social improvement. Indeed, comedy has been regarded as a tool to engage with and question an individual’s biases, prejudices and worldview.¹¹ To the extent that they push established norms and perceptions, humour and the act of laughter have thus been considered corrective remedies that allow society to smooth the rough edges of outdated beliefs and their corresponding damage to social progress. This notion is at odds with the recent re-emergence of attitudes that tend to blame comedy and humour for allegedly perpetuating dangerous stereotypes and old-fashioned beliefs. This now-dominant counterview is inclined to see comedy as actively hindering the pursuit for equality and tolerance.¹²

The aim of this thesis therefore is to offer an analysis of frameworks for assessing the relative harms and benefits of comedy in light of this contemporary debate. This thesis will offer an in-depth analysis of two seminal studies within the field of humour, Henri Bergson’s *Laughter* and Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, originated as ‘carnival’ in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* and further developed in *Rabelais and His World*. The concepts elaborated in these theories will be used to consider recent prescriptive and restrictive measures inflicted upon celebrated instances of film and TV

¹⁰ See for example: Andres Mendiburo-Seguel, Ford, T.E. The effect of disparagement humor on the acceptability of prejudice. *Curr Psychol* (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00354-2>. Or Gordon Hodson & Cara C. MacInnis, ‘Derogating Humor as a Delegitimation Strategy in Intergroup Contexts’ in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 2016, Vol. 2, No.1, 63-74 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tps0000052>

¹¹ For the historical political impact of this effect see for example: Dannagal G. Young, ‘Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski & Kathleen Hall Jamieson, September 2014, DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.29_update_001

¹² See for example: Raúl Pérez “Racism without Hatred? Racist Humor and the Myth of ‘Colorblindness.’” *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 60, no. 5, Oct. 2017, pp. 956–974, doi:10.1177/0731121417719699.

comedy which will be assessed through case studies of Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* and the comedy series *Little Britain* (TV-Series 2003-2005).

The first chapter will establish recent examples of discourse and censorship from UK streaming sites, as indicative of a contemporary mindset towards comedy. It will proceed to argue that, in fact, two rival conceptions of the comic are operative within the so-called 'culture wars' of the twenty first century.

The second chapter will introduce one of the prime theories which will underpin the investigation, by concerning itself with Bergson's theory on Laughter, published in 1900 and preceding Bakhtin's publication of his works. Offering an analysis of his argument, the chapter will focus on Bergson's idea of mechanical humour and the incompatibility of laughter with emotion. Thus, Bergson's idea of the comic is regarded within the framework of the corrective, a view of comedy that contrasts with Mikhail Bakhtin's theory discussed in the following chapter.

Bergson sees comedy as militating against the acceptance of non-normative members of society, determining that anybody or anything which is not in adherence with society's norms must be corrected through the disciplinary action of laughter and humiliation.

Mikhail Bakhtin and his theories of the carnival and the grotesque will be analysed in the third chapter, which will present his argument regarding the restorative function of comedy and the unity achieved amongst society through the engagement with the carnivalesque. The importance of Bakhtin relies on his emphasis on 'folk laughter'¹³, which views society as a unified whole in which mockery is understood as the mockery of a part of this unity, and not the mockery

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009). p.4

of an ‘other’ in need of correction. This approach refrains from fragmenting society into an hierarchical order of correct and incorrect citizens, and instead provides space for the acknowledgement of a multifaceted society. Furthermore, in Medieval times, it provided the space for a conception of popular culture which was emancipated through the carnival, as it allowed the emergence of a separate discourse from the official dogma and traditions that ruled over the period.

The fourth chapter will offer a comparative analysis of Bergson and Bakhtin’s conception of the physical form, and the relation of this to a laughing collective. It is of interest that both Bergson and Bakhtin rely on the physical body to underpin their theories on laughter. This is reflective of a wider interest in the body during the twentieth century, as the body moved from being seen ‘as a transitory vehicle, a means to higher spiritual ends’¹⁴ to a position where it ‘has literally taken over that moral and ideological function from the soul’¹⁵. This analysis will act as a foundation to explore how the historical disappearance of the ‘body politic’ eventually structured a framework of politics around bodily identity which has reached the zenith in contemporary culture.

The thesis will continue with providing case studies of Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* and the TV series *Little Britain* in the fifth chapter, two comedies which recently became examples of comedy in need of correction or contextualisation. Through a close analysis of Mel Brooks’ film and *Little Britain* sketch segments, the chapter will offer an analysis that will allow a concluding argument that

¹⁴ Mike Featherstone. ‘The Body in Consumer Culture.’ In *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 1, no. 2, Sept. 1982, pp. 18–33, doi:10.1177/026327648200100203. page 26.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard. *The Consumer Society*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1970) p.129.

suggests how considering contemporary comedy in terms of the carnivalesque can be socially beneficial.

The sixth chapter will look at the concept of policing comedy and the notion of laughter as a social corrective. The question arises as to why restrictions of the comic exist in a contemporary culture which lauds its freedom and diversity.

Several aspects will be addressed, starting with the distinction between the corrective and the festive. The distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with* will be considered, along with the question of whether fun and festivity may serve as a tool for oppression. The second half of the chapter will then advocate for a return of the carnivalesque for comedy to cater for an increasingly diverse society.

In this thesis I will thus do two things: firstly, critically reconstruct Bergson's and Bakhtin's positions, and secondly, develop an analysis of comedy in contemporary culture which will argue for a return to Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque in order for humour to not only survive contemporary culture, but also provide contemporary culture with a regenerative power to fully establish and appreciate a diverse society.

Conceptions of the comic in contemporary culture

‘To our knowledge, no culture exists that is unfamiliar with humour’¹⁶

Conceptions of the Comic

Prior to commencing an in-depth analysis of contemporary conceptions of the comic, it is important to assess and establish the precise definition of the subject matter. There are various theories that exist about humour and comedy and arguments about an absolute theory have yet to, and remain unlikely to ever, be established. However, such a diverse spectrum of theories helps establish the rich theoretical arguments that exist about the subject matter and are thus important to introduce in order to offer an accurate presentation of the subject’s association with malice and vulgarity.

Plato regards laughter, which is linked to humour as being a vice, arguing that the personal deception which allows individuals to believe that they are smarter, or in another way superior, is a reflection of their failure to attend to the Delphic maxim to ‘know thyself’, which therefore associates laughter with a degree of malice.¹⁷ Influenced by Plato’s teachings, Aristotle too regarded humour as potentially ‘a sort of abuse’¹⁸, although he does admit a distinction between valid wit and vulgar humour, noting (snobbishly) that ‘the well-bred man’s jesting

¹⁶ Joseph Polimeni, Jeffrey P. Reiss ‘The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of Humor’ in *Evolutionary Psychology*, first published in January 1, 2006.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/147470490600400129>

¹⁷ See Plato *Philebus*, Loeb Classical Library DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.plato_philosopher-philebus.1925 also in Noel Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014) Published online: Jan 2014 DOI: 10.1093/actrade/9780199552221.001.0001 p.7

¹⁸ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009) p.78

differs from that of a vulgar man, and the joking of an educated man from that of an uneducated.’¹⁹ Genuine humour, therefore, is seen as the province of the noble classes, and must be generated with tact, since ‘those who carry humour to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons, striving after humour at all costs, and aiming rather at raising a laugh than at saying what is becoming and at avoiding pain to the object of their fun.’²⁰ Plato and Aristotle’s linking of humour with malevolence has settled into one of the primary theories of humour, referred to as the *superiority theory*. This concept was further developed by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who argued in favour of this hierarchical concept of humour: ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour’.²¹ The superiority theory therefore relies on the diminished status of the object being laughed at, whether that is a separate individual or one’s own inferior past, if someone is laughing at themselves.

The issue of how humour works, however, is only one side of the coin as how humour is judged ethically also factors into the argument of humour theory.

In this sense, the superiority theory is undeniably pertinent when analysing humour that is employed at the expense of others who may in some way be regarded as “deficient” by certain members of society. Such examples would include but are not limited to racist jokes, jokes about disabilities or unintended

¹⁹ Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*, p.78.

²⁰ Ibid., p.77.

²¹ Hobbes, *Thomas The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic: Part I, Human Nature, Part II, De Corpore Politico; with Three Lives*, Editor John Charles Addison Gaskin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.55.

accidents caused by clumsiness. However, although many jokes may easily be categorised as falling under the superiority theory, it is nevertheless not suitable as a framework to comprehend all jokes, as superiority is not always the sole reason behind laughter.

Arguably, theories regarding humour should exclusively concern themselves with amused laughter, that is the laughter which arises from comic amusement and not a generalised laughter.²² As Noël Carroll has noted, since Hobbes's self-triumphant humour does not focus primarily on comic amusement, it cannot provide the basis for an analysis of the humour that arises from art.²³

The incongruity theory has to-date garnered 'the largest allegiance among philosophers and psychologists' given that the theory works for a large amount of comedy.²⁴ The theory argues that the crucial aspect to comic amusement is a divergence from an assumed rule which is, to a certain degree, universally accepted. The humour therefore offers a challenge to an established worldview. It is this anomaly which causes amusement, Kant argues, as 'in everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.'²⁵

Schopenhauer furthermore highlights the component of surprise, arguing 'the greater and more unexpected [. . .] this incongruity is, the more violent will be his laughter'²⁶. The notion of surprise suggests that the incongruity theory relies on

²² Carroll, *Humour*, p.16.

²³ Ibid., p.16.

²⁴ Ibid., p.17.

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007) p.133.

²⁶ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, Volume 2, (London: Trübner & Company, 1906). P.271.

amusement being caused by the unexpected, particularly with regards to a notion on how society should be structured, both morally and with regards to social decorum. Carroll notes that ‘incongruity is a comparative notion. It presupposes that something is discordant with something else. With respect to comic amusement, that *something else* is how the world is or should be.’²⁷ This would explain why humour in an age of strong social norms would concern itself with vulgar, immoral or socially taboo subjects, and why comedy would be drawn to comic characters who defy standard behavioural expectations. According to the incongruity theory, comic amusement:

‘[...] presupposes that the audience has a working knowledge of all the congruities—concepts, rules, expectations—that the humour in question disturbs or violates; and perhaps part of the pleasure of humour involves exercising our ability to access this background information, often very rapidly’²⁸

Despite wide applicability, however, incongruity does not lend itself as an absolute theory of humour. There is no singular and established definition of what entails an incongruity, making the concept rather shapeless and arbitrary. At any rate, not every incongruity is a catalyst for comic amusement. Moreover, an account on this basis would tend to focus on structure as the defining aspect of the joke. To take comic amusement chiefly as a pleasure derived from formal comparison might neglect other functions of humour, such as the way comedy might serve as a form of cultural intervention. In addition to establishing the

²⁷ Carroll, *Humour* p.18.

²⁸ Ibid., p.27.

range of humour theories, the concept of comedy and its relationship with humour must also be determined.

Broadly speaking, the distinction between comedy and humour is that the former is a conscious attempt to provide entertainment whereas the latter is often seen as a natural characteristic or a response to stimulation in the form of laughter. In comedy, the words and actions are written, performed or displayed with the singular goal of amusing the audience, and should this amusement remain absent, the comedy is considered a failure. Amusement and the incitement of laughter is therefore the objective of comedy writers, and their point of purpose. Humour on the other hand, is something which cannot be planned, a 'species of play'²⁹ that is therefore prone to appear out of nowhere, usually associated with the moment in which we laugh. For humour, laughter underpins a point but is not the sole objective. As Judith Roof notes, 'not all comedy results in laughter and not all laughter is a response to the comic'³⁰. In a sense then, comedy can be seen as the creative endeavour of turning humour into art. Whilst it is important to acknowledge the distinction between both, it is also important to concede that they are intricately linked. Whilst comedy and humour are therefore not the same, the former is nevertheless mostly present in tandem with the latter. A nuanced understanding of this relationship is necessary to engage with comedy in contemporary culture. As Elliot Oring argues, it is the contexts surrounding humour that determine its nature. Oring suggests that:

²⁹ Elliot Oring, *Engaging Humor* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003) p.145.

³⁰ Judith Roof, *The Comic Event: Comedic Performance from the 1950s to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 22.

‘These contexts include the experiences that an individual brings to the humour that he or she hears and performs; the social interaction in which the humorous performances are embedded; the social and historical conditions in which jokes arise, proliferate and disappear; the cultural knowledge upon which humour depends and with which it plays; and the range of expressions, both within and beyond a society’s boundaries with which localised humorous performance may be compared or contrasted.’³¹

Oring thus acknowledges that humour is fundamentally subjective and vulnerable to the individual understanding of its own distinct contextual surroundings. In order to grasp the intricacies of humour, the audience must therefore be suitably versed in its culture and contexts. This concept of humour has also extended to the contemporary conception of comedy. Those lacking the appropriate cultural knowledge or bringing a different context to bear upon the material will necessarily interpret it differently. Both comedy and humour are therefore a diverse playing-field that are open to a range of interpretations dependent on the individual circumstances of audience members.

Contemporary Culture and the Comic

The 2010’s marked a momentous turn in culture, as restructurings of the concept of a heteronormative, traditional and religious society were catalysed by the participative and social web 2.0 which gave rise to various media that altered established forms of communication and entertainment. Whereas in 2005 only sixteen percent of the world were engaging with the internet, by 2019 it had

³¹ Oring, *Engaging Humor*, p.145.

reached over half of the world's population, rising to over fifty-three percent.³² This development led to cultural change that affected almost all areas of society. Although there is nothing new about the notion that 'we make culture and we are made by culture'³³, advances and developments in technology exponentially multiplied the output of said culture, as it allowed everybody with an internet access to actively participate in its creation and consumption. The advent of constant connectivity via smartphones, social media platforms and the new practice of sharing personal feelings and images with the web led to a blurring of the public and private sphere which created new discourses around accepted norms and dominant social structures.³⁴ The decade thus became occupied with a newly revived and augmented notion of social justice, as challenges to inequalities related to race, wealth, gender and sexuality, immigration and the environment were given an infinite platform offering individuals an unprecedented opportunity to be heard.

The spotlight on the marginalised placed comedy in an interesting position. As dominant social structures became contested and re-negotiated, a new discourse emerged on the ethics of humour, built around a concern for social identity and the representation of marginalised groups. Questions were asked about how comedy helped to reinforce and/or re-shape stereotypes. There was a renewed emphasis on comedy as 'a vehicle for social and cultural identities to be consolidated, constructed or even challenged'³⁵. Whereas the new millennia had

³² "Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019". Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

³³ John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. 3rd. edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.) p.172.

³⁴ Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) p.8.

³⁵ Sarah Illot and Helen Davies, *Comedy and the Politics of Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p.1

begun with shamelessly provocative comedy such as *Da Ali G Show* (Tv-Series 2000-2004), *Little Britain* (Tv-Series 2003 – 2007) and *Chappelle's Show* (Tv-Series 2003 – 2006), the same humour was no longer as appreciated a mere decade later.³⁶ Alongside this, the presuppositions of jokes started to be seen as ideological claims, similar to Ronald de Sousa's contention that a joke can only be funny if the consumer accepts the presuppositions it entails, renewing the old idea that laughter is always caused by 'malice or envy'.³⁷ De Sousa argues that laughing at a joke which is morally questionable reflects a person's inner approval of the polarising subject at stake. For reasons outside the scope of this thesis, new demands emerged in certain circles for comedy to be a vehicle for, and not to impede, the cause of 'social justice', and these demands often became characterised (or caricatured) by opponents as 'political correctness'. Comedy become a player in a 'culture war' between what US Sociologist James Davison Hunter regarded to be a war between the orthodox and the progressives.³⁸ Progressive ideology argued that comedy was not harmless and the excuse of 'it was just a joke' was therefore no valid justification. Advocates of social justice such as Sarah Illot furthermore asserted that 'we all have a role to play in the shaping, perpetuation, and potentially the challenging of problematic identities

³⁶ See for example:

Emma Brockes, 'Whether it's Ali G or Tina Fey, ironic racism isn't funny anymore' in The Guardian. Published Thursday 3rd March 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/03/sacha-baron-cohen-ali-g-tina-fey-amy-poehler-ironic-racism>.

Stuart Heritage, 'Should Little Britain and The Simpsons change with the times?' In The Guardian Newspaper. Published Wednesday 11th April 2018.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/apr/11/should-little-britain-and-the-simpsons-change-with-the-times>.

Patrick Marlborough. 'Dave Chappelle's New Standup Is Offensive in All the Wrong Ways' <https://www.vice.com/en/article/538k7k/a-study-of-how-dave-chappelle-isnt-nailing-2017>.

³⁷ Ronald de Sousa, 'When is it wrong to laugh?' in *The rationality of emotion* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) p.291.

³⁸ James Davison Hunter. *Culture wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 2001).

that are constructed by cultural forms'.³⁹ On the other side, those resisting restraints on the creation and consumption of cultural forms raised concerns about the politicisation of culture through control, 'cancel culture'⁴⁰ and a new round of 'political correctness gone mad'⁴¹.

The term 'political correctness' is of particular interest as it highlights a core argument surrounding the ethics of humour. Indeed, the phrase has experienced an interesting trajectory in the past three decades, from being regarded as a mythical 'movement without followers'⁴² to being considered 'a threat to the Enlightenment hope that humanity might one day achieve maturity [...] a drive towards shallowness, anti-intellectualism and self-flagellation'.⁴³ The linguist Sarah Mills argues that the term has undergone a change which has seen it transform '[...] from a knowingly ironic usage in leftist political circles to its current usage as a term of abuse largely by those on the right'.⁴⁴ Despite the discrepancies regarding its existence, the term has been acknowledged by The Oxford English Dictionary defining the term as 'conforming to a body of liberal or radical opinion, especially on social matters, usually characterized by the

³⁹ Sarah Illot and Helen Davies, *Comedy, and the Politics of Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). p.16.

⁴⁰ Eve Ng, 'No Grand Pronouncements Here...: Reflections on Cancel Culture and Digital Media Participation' in *Television & New Media*, Volume: 21 issue: 6, page(s): 621-627 Article first published online: July 26, 2020; Issue published: September 1, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420918828>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

⁴¹ Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, 'Comedy Has Issues' in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume: 43, Number 2, Winter 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/689666>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

⁴² John K. Wilson. *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

⁴³ Tsakalakis, Thomas. *Political Correctness: A Sociocultural Black Hole*. (London: Routledge, 2020).<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003058489>. Abstract. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

⁴⁴ Sara Mills 'Political correctness'. In *Language and Sexism*. pp. 100-123. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) doi:10.1017/CBO9780511755033.004. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

advocacy of approved causes or views, and often by the rejection of language, behaviour, etc., considered discriminatory or offensive.’⁴⁵

In his book *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture*, Geoffrey Hughes categorises the six themes that fall under political correctness to be ‘political, literary, educational, gender, cultural, and behavioural.’⁴⁶ Hughes furthermore contends that ‘political correctness inculcates a sense of obligation or conformity in areas which should be (or are) matters of choice’ and therefore there ‘is an antithesis at the core of political correctness, since it is liberal in its aims but often illiberal in its practices: hence it generates contradictions like *positive discrimination* and *liberal orthodoxy*’⁴⁷. Although political correctness continues to be a complicated and loaded term which is often simply dismissed as a rhetorical device, the omnipresence within discourses on the ethics of comedy has resulted in the term becoming shorthand for the issues surrounding ‘fair’ comedy. Indeed, these concerns have become a constant feature in popular commentary⁴⁸, with regular complaints about the existence of a ‘PC Culture’ that inhibits the activity of comedic artists.⁴⁹ Furthermore, research by *ArtsProfessional* has highlighted the overwhelming existence of self-censorship within the artistic

⁴⁵ Oxford English Dictionary. "politically, adv.". OED Online. December 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146889> (accessed December 04, 2021).

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Hughes, *Political Correctness: A History Of Semantics And Culture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010) p.4.

⁴⁷ Geoffrey Hughes, *Political Correctness: A History Of Semantics And Culture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010) p.4.

⁴⁸ A cursory internet search of ‘political correctness gone mad’ achieves 2.210.000 results, including Stephen Fry’s Book *Political Correctness Gone Mad* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2018), YouTube videos by comedians such as Jimmy Carr <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3weaaOzHVfg>, and articles by almost all leading newspapers such as: *The Economist*, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/09/10/has-political-correctness-gone-too-far>, *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump>, *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/political-correctness-gone-mad>, *The Daily Mail* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4251306/Political-correctness-gone-mad-writes-TREVOR-PHILLIPS.html>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

⁴⁹ e.g. ‘Mel Brooks: We have become stupidly politically correct’, *BBC NEWS*, 21 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-41348510>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

community in recent years. During the *Freedom of Expression Report* undertaken in February 2020, the data confirmed the suspicions that those working in the arts sector are, as one participant expressed: ‘unable to have a view on anything or challenge anything that’s extremely left wing or politically correct for fear of being called racist, xenophobic, bigoted etc.’⁵⁰. Another respondent argued apprehensively: ‘Our arts, culture, and indeed education sectors are supposed to be fearlessly free-thinking and open to a wide range of challenging views. However, they are now dominated by a monolithic politically correct class (mostly of privileged white middle class people, by the way) who impose their intolerant views across those sectors. This is driving people who disagree away, risks increasing support for the very things this culturally dominant class professes to stand against and is slowly destroying our society and culture from the inside’.⁵¹ It is of note that there is no tangible censor who enforces the apparent silence of creative professionals within the industry, and no legal framework on which this self-censorship is based, but the finding is troubling. Our society likes to see itself as tolerant, progressive, and open-minded⁵², but the report indicates that many of those working in the creative industry upon which culture relies, do not share this same sense of freedom.

Censorious scrutiny has particularly been directed towards comedy due to its nature of flirting with the established boundaries of society. Despite the animosity surrounding the discourse, calls for the boycott of certain forms of taboo humour no doubt issue from good intentions. Sarah Ilott, co-editor of *Comedy and the*

⁵⁰ Arts Professional, *Freedom of Expression Report 2020*, p.8.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.7.

⁵² Jan G. Janmaat, Avril Keating, ‘Are today’s youth more tolerant? Trends in tolerance among young people in Britain’ in *Ethnicities*, Vol:19, issue 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796817723682>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Politics of Representation, argues that ‘if the joke is, for example, racist, homophobic or transphobic, by sharing in laughter you're constructing a community that excludes those who are the butt of the joke’.⁵³ Advocating for cultural shelter, Illot states ‘Cultural safety means I can take any of my disabled friends or any of my black friends or queer friends or people who are marginalised to any of these shows and not walk away going, 'Once again I was the butt of 50 per cent of the jokes!' ’.⁵⁴

During the summer of 2020, this fear of comedy causing offence began to take more concrete shape following the public interest into the political ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) movement which gained momentum as a response to the death of George Floyd in the United States. The momentum of the BLM movement put cultural commentators on high alert for forms of ‘insidious’ racism, i.e., not just directly racist comments and acts, but forms of behaviour and communication (including comedy) that could be seen as having racist premises. With reference to the political movement, several comedy films and TV-series were put under scrutiny of the contemporary discourse surrounding race inequality and became subject to alterations and removals from streaming sites. In a campaign referred to in the media as both ‘a long overdue decision’⁵⁵ and ‘censoriousness on steroids’⁵⁶, the five most prominent examples were HBO Max’s trigger warning for *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks, USA, 1974), the removal of all seasons of *Little*

⁵³ Illot, *Comedy and the Politics of Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁵⁴ Siobhan Hegarty "Can I Laugh At That? When The Lines Between Offensive Comedy And Off-Limits Jokes Are Blurred - ABC Life", *Abc.Net.Au*, 2020 <<https://www.abc.net.au/life/knowning-when-comedy-crosses-a-line/11090890>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

⁵⁵ BBC News. Little Britain: Should we switch off the past? 10 June 2020 [online] Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-52994195>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

⁵⁶ Brendan O’Neill, The madness of censoring shows like Little Britain. 10 June 2020 [online] Spectator.co.uk. Available at: <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-madness-of-censoring-shows-like-little-britain>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

Britain (TV Series 2003-2005) and *The Mighty Boosh* (TV Series 2004 – 2007) from BBC iplayer, Netflix and BritBox, the removal of episodes from *Fawlty Towers* (TV Series 1975-1979) and *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2017), and an addition of an ‘Outdated Attitudes’ Disclaimer by SKY for *The Jungle Book* (Wolfgang Reitherman, USA, 1967) *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (Blake Edwards, USA, 1961) and *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller, USA, 2008) amongst others. It is of particular interest that most of the targeted films and series are celebrated instances of comedy.

The rationale for these actions is worth considering carefully. One such example is the decision taken by HBO Max to reframe Mel Brooks’ satirical Western black comedy *Blazing Saddles*. The film is frequently regarded as one of the funniest films of all times, having reached place 6 on the AFI’s ‘100 years ... 100 laughs list’ of the top funniest movies in American cinema.⁵⁷ Perhaps the most prominent comment about *Blazing Saddles* is that the film could no longer be made today.⁵⁸ The addition of a trigger warning to the HBO Max stream of the film further adds to this argument. In August 2020, presumably under pressure from activists, HBO Max felt the need to set the film in its ‘proper social context’ by issuing a three-minute introductory trigger warning by Jacqueline Stewart, Professor of Media Studies at the University of Chicago. Stewart’s introduction aims to explicitly highlight that whilst ‘racist language and attitudes’ pervade the film, ‘those attitudes are espoused by characters who are explicitly portrayed here as narrow-minded, ignorant bigots. The film’s real and much more enlightened perspective

⁵⁷ "AFI'S 100 YEARS...100 LAUGHS", American Film Institute, 2020

<<https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-laughs/>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

⁵⁸ BBC News ‘Mel Brooks: *Blazing Saddles* would never be made today.’ [online] 21 September 2017. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41337151>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

is represented by the two main characters.⁵⁹ Although Stewart's commentary might suggest otherwise, there has indeed been a consensus in society for the past forty-six years, that the film is funny not for the primitive assumption that the use of the n-word would amuse racists, but precisely because the film is a biting and patent satire of racism.

Whilst a trigger warning may appear benign and relatively harmless, it nevertheless raises important questions. One of the issues that arise is the perception of an elitist monitoring of popular culture. The fact that the statement is given by a professor, could be seen to manifest a policing of popular culture by the intellectual classes, implying that there needs to be a mediator between the 'uncultured' and potentially bigoted thoughts of the uneducated public. It is important to note that there is, to my knowledge, no evidence-based research regarding the film's potential to incite racist extremism. Indeed, as Stewart herself observes, the butt of Brook's film is not the black character, but the racist stereotypes and mindsets that are being challenged, rather than established or reinforced. The disclaimer therefore seems to have been added in bad faith, yet it serves as a further warning shot to future comedians who dare to deal with controversial topics outside of a set frame of narrative.

A similar argument regarding the representation of marginalised members of society was used to justify the removal of *Little Britain* from all UK streaming platforms in June 2020. The reasoning for removing the highest-rating BBC Three show and the fastest-selling UK television DVD title ever from all UK streaming

⁵⁹ Movie News and others, "'Blazing Saddles' Is Now Streaming With A Disclaimer On HBO Max", Movieweb, 2020 <<https://movieweb.com/blazing-saddles-disclaimer-hbo-max/>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

platforms was due to the use of blackface in a number of episodes.⁶⁰ In earlier forms of art, the historical use of blackface had promoted condescending stereotypes of black people that facilitated concepts of superiority based on race, giving rise to the accusation that David Walliams and Matt Lucas were engaging in the same type of racist behaviour.⁶¹ In recognition of this apparent ignorance, Lucas and Walliams issued an apology, establishing ‘regret’ [of] ‘playing characters of other races’[making it clear] ‘that it was wrong’ [and they were] ‘very sorry’.⁶² It is of note that only two months prior to this statement, both Walliams and Lucas had announced that *Little Britain* was making a comeback having been offered a rumoured three million pounds from *Netflix*, the same company who axed the show completely sixty days later.⁶³ A further U-turn was made by Lucas who three years earlier, in 2017, had ruled out a continuation of *Little Britain* stating that ‘I wouldn’t make that show now. It would upset people. We made a more cruel kind of comedy than I’d do now. Society has moved on a lot since then and my own views have evolved’.⁶⁴ Walliams agreed, stating in a different interview in 2018: ‘You’d definitely do it differently because it’s a

⁶⁰ BBC Press Office, ‘Little Britain series three starts Thursday 17 November at 9.00pm on BBC ONE’http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/11_november/08/britain_facts.shtml

⁶¹ See: “Foundations: Blackface Minstrelsy in the United States and across the British Empire, 1830–1862.” *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond*, by Chinua Thelwell, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst; Boston, 2020, pp. 16–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv160btb3.5. Accessed 26 Jan. 2021

⁶² Molly Blackall. ‘David Walliams and Matt Lucas apologise for Little Britain blackface’ in *The Guardian* published Sunday 14th June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/14/david-walliams-and-matt-lucas-apologise-for-little-britain-blackface>

⁶³ Elizabeth Aubrey, ‘Matt Lucas says he’s ready to bring back Little Britain’ <https://www.nme.com/news/tv/matt-lucas-says-hes-ready-to-bring-back-little-britain-2640581>

⁶⁴ Nadia Khomami. ‘I would not play black person in remade Little Britain, says Matt Lucas’ in *The Guardian*, published Tuesday 3rd of October 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/oct/03/matt-lucas-little-britain-remake-would-not-play-black-character>

different time. There's all kinds of tolerances that change'⁶⁵. Following their offer from *Netflix* to revive the show, however, the main concern for Lucas had not been the ethical parameters of reviving the 'cruel kind of comedy' but was mainly focused on the format: 'But we don't know what it will be. Could it be a podcast? Could it be a series on TV? Could it be a stage show?'⁶⁶. The swift change of opinion raises the question as to whether their statements of regret were genuine pronouncements of remorse or heavily influenced by outside pressure to conform to a politically predisposed discourse.

It is important to bear in mind that *Little Britain* first aired less than twenty years ago, thus acting as a stark example of how attitudes towards comedy have changed in recent history. As with *Blazing Saddles*, there is an apparent confusion in this decision between the subject of the joke and the target of the joke (one might say, between 'representation' and 'ideology'). An example of this could be *Little Britain*'s 'Black Friend' sketch, which parodies white people who see black people solely through the stereotypes that exist about their race.⁶⁷ As with *Blazing Saddles*, whilst the subject of the sketch is race, it does not make fun of black people, but of white people who believe they are not racist yet engage with black people solely through established racial stereotypes. Thus, while the sketch certainly involves the exaggerated employment of racial stereotypes, its humour is just as patently not motivated by racist hatred. This nuance is prominent in many of *Little Britain*'s characters, such as Daffyd Thomas who, despite claiming to be gay, is actually very homophobic himself. Furthermore, he gets cross when people

⁶⁵Eleanor Bley Griffiths. 'David Walliams would "definitely" do Little Britain differently today: "it's a different time now"'. The Radio Times <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/comedy/david-walliams-would-definitely-do-little-britain-differently-today-its-a-different-time-now/>.

⁶⁶ Aubrey, NME

⁶⁷ *Little Britain 'Black Friend'*, 2020 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvKlmerjFa8>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

do not treat him in a similarly homophobic manner. This raises the question as to whether Daffyd is a genuine homosexual or whether he simply uses it as a tool to feed his insatiable desire for attention. Further complicating the notion that the show might be regarded as fuelling hatred towards minorities, is the fact that Lucas himself is a homosexual man. Any objections to the subjectively offensive content of the show are thus an example of the difficult boundaries that the concept of ethical humour is trying to establish. As Hannah Marcus argues: “Censorship is fundamentally a material and interpretive process. [...] While there may have been many possible interpretations [of a given text], censorship ultimately gave state and religious systems power over inscribing particular meanings to texts”.⁶⁸ Although Marcus is referring to an historical form of censorship often bound by religion, the same power divide between the authoritative institutions issuing singular interpretations of culture and the seemingly disenfranchised public who cannot veto these decisions, remains.

However, even if the ideology of censored examples were genuinely hateful, there is an argument that such censorship is self-defeating, and not only from those decrying ‘political correctness gone mad’, but from those who are sensitive to the potential pain caused by offence. In her 1997 published book *Excitable Speech*, for instance, Judith Butler explores the notion of being injured by language. She argues that every utterance of racist, sexist or homophobic speech transfers the oppression signified by this language into the present, thus reinforcing the hierarchy that led to the creation of this language.⁶⁹ Butler bases her exploration

⁶⁸ Hannah Marcus, ‘Censorship’ in Blair, Ann, et al., editors. *Information: A Historical Companion*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1pdrbbs>. p.368.

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1997).

on J.L. Austin's theory of performative utterance, that is, his argument that it is possible to 'do' things with words.⁷⁰ He suggests that when language is uttered in a certain context it is done so to perform an act. This concept therefore promotes language from the communicative to an instrument of performance which consequently enables language to break the barrier between the speech and the act. Austin labels these performative utterances 'illocutionary acts', the theory of which has been used to describe the structural process of Hate Speech.⁷¹ Yet, despite the possible danger language can cause, Butler does not advocate for censorship as a means to infringe on the proliferation of such language. Instead, she argues that censorship results in the exact opposite of the desired effect:

'The regulation that *states what it does not want stated* thwarts its own desire, conducting a performative contradiction that throws into question that regulation's capacity to mean and do what it says, that is, its sovereign pretension. Such regulations introduce the censored speech into public discourse, thereby establishing it as a site of contestation, that is, as the scene of public utterance that it sought to pre-empt.'⁷²

Butler therefore argues that it is impossible to eliminate unwanted language and its consequences. This stance also recalls Michel Foucault's argument regarding the censorship of sexuality, when he writes that, 'There was installed [since the 17th century] rather an apparatus for producing an ever-greater quantity of discourse about sex, capable of functioning and taking effect in its very economy'

⁷⁰ J.L. Austin, *How to do things with words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

⁷¹ Eric Barendt, 'What is the Harm of Hate Speech?' in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22, 539-553 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-10002-0>.

⁷² Butler, p.130.

⁷³. The idea that such censorship only helps proliferate the unwanted discourse can also be transferred to the notion of representation. A media furore about the use of blackface in comedy probably does more to resurrect the underlying stereotypes than the original offending instance.

What ultimately motivates such moves towards the censorship of comedy is the notion that humour compels us to join in a sadistic rabble, that laughter signals our complicity with conservative forces to expel or otherwise ‘correct’ the undesirable element. This perception of the ethical and moral superiority further establishes, rather than eliminates, the notion of power and the elements at play when prescribing a ‘correct’ form of living. This idea is expounded most notably by Henri Bergson, to whom this thesis will now turn.

⁷³Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol 1*. Trans. Robert Hurley. (New York: Vintage, 1976). p.23.

Bergsonian Laughter

A seminal investigation in humour studies was undertaken in 1900 by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. In an attempt to demystify the elusive source of laughter, Bergson's intention behind his study was not to offer an explanation of laughter in the Freudian sense, that is the processing of psychic energy through laughter, but instead to classify laughter as a tool, or a 'social gesture'⁷⁴ acting as a lubricant for social relationships. He commences his theoretical exploration by presenting three fundamental rules of laughter: comedy is inherently human; laughter is completely cerebral given it is reliant on an emotional distance to the object of laughter; and laughter has a social function. Thus, Bergson argues that laughter always happens in a social scene, as 'our laughter is always the laughter of a group'⁷⁵. For Bergson therefore, humans are dependent on other humans to produce laughter either by witnessing something amusing or being with someone who utters something amusing. The experience of laughter, however, does not rely on humans being with another human in-person, as laughter can also be produced by reading a book or watching a film. However, it is impossible to produce without the social aspect. A key element to Bergson's theory is that although laughter is dependent on the social aspect and the relationship between humans, Bergson does not frame laughter positively. Instead, he argues that 'its function is to intimidate by humiliating'⁷⁶, as it allows individuals to feel superior to others. Having already established that humans are irreducibly social beings, Bergson argues for the importance of adaptability within modern society. Those who do not adapt exhibit what he calls 'inelasticity', a quality that is highlighted

⁷⁴ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Translated by Cloudesley Brereton, Fred Rothwell, (New York: Courier Corporation, 2013) p.10.

⁷⁵ Ibid., P.103

⁷⁶ Bergson., P.110

by socially shaming these individuals through laughter.⁷⁷ This exercise in social shaming, Bergson argues, results in a healthier society and one which is thus beneficial to all members, even those who may be the temporary target of a joke. Thus, for Bergson, laughter offers a practical function to highlight members of society who have not adapted accordingly to the contemporary context.

Having established that laughter acts as a social corrective, the essential crux of his theory on humour is his argument that the comic is dependent on ‘something mechanical encrusted on the living’, the rigidity of which can only be rectified by laughter.⁷⁸ Bergson’s concept of laughter relies on his belief that there is an inner core to life which cannot be aligned with either the mechanical or the automatic. Laughter, therefore, is created when ‘the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement’⁷⁹ are morphed into one. Relying on the incongruity of a merge between the organic and the mechanical, he believes it is this transformation that results in laughter. Thus, for Bergson, the dialectical organic matter of life being juxtaposed with the structure of a mechanical order is the sole root of laughter.

This framework suggests that for Bergson, laughter is a strictly dispassionate affair, employed solely to improve individual members of society who have yet to adapt to modern improvements and are therefore hindering collective society to progress. Thus, Laughter is characterised by an ‘utilitarian aim of general

⁷⁷ Bergson., p.43.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.84

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.34.

improvement'⁸⁰ and therefore 'is incompatible with emotion'⁸¹, as its function does not aim to focus on the feelings of individuals but on collective humanity.

The comic, therefore, is rooted in the concept of automatism, as 'rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character.'⁸² Bergson refers to this inelasticity also as the 'rigidity of a fixed idea', which explains why stereotypical jokes about vocations such as medical professionals are so vulnerable to mockery.⁸³ It is their 'professional automatism', 'that is their constant attention to form and the mechanical application of rules'⁸⁴ which allows for this ridicule, as it highlights the lack of adaptability of individuals to the greater framework of their environment.

The comic character incorporates this binary partition given that the character performance is often rooted within the unsociable whilst creating an effect of which the response is, if successful, widespread laughter within a social setting. The inflexibility of the comic's unsocial state reflects the notion of what Bergson terms 'a slumbering activity', which 'is the sign of an eccentricity'⁸⁵. These eccentricities are performed both through the mind and the body, as physical comedy and the social eccentricity of daring to utter the words which everyone is thinking, yet are too afraid to speak themselves, displays a regressive evolution. It is this change of direction which injects laughter with cheerful sentiment. Such hindrance to society's progression is therefore in need of a *social gesture*, or in

⁸⁰ Bergson., p.10

⁸¹ Ibid., p.68.

⁸² Ibid., p.72.

⁸³ Ibid., p.7

⁸⁴ Ibid., p.26.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.10.

other words laughter, as the fear produced by laughter restrains any further eccentricities and therefore ‘softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity’.⁸⁶

Given Bergson’s aversion to rigidity, his definition of the comic should not be regarded as fixed, but as a ‘leitmotiv’⁸⁷. For Bergson, ‘rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective’.⁸⁸ This establishes itself primarily in three areas: behaviour, character, and language. Human behaviour is prone to reveal rigidity through clumsy actions which fail to show ‘elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy...’⁸⁹. An example of this would be ‘a man, running along the street, [who] stumbles and falls’⁹⁰, causing onlookers to laugh at his failure to adapt to the situation and thus avoid the fall.

Human character is made comic when it is fixed in rigidity which embodies an ‘automatism’ and an ‘obstinacy of mind’. As Bergson states:

‘It is a very special inversion of common sense. It consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one’s own, instead of moulding one’s ideas on things – in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see.’⁹¹

Language, Bergson argues, displays rigidity through the inadvertent articulation of something of which we had no intention of saying or doing, as a result of inelasticity or momentum.⁹² As such, his general rule is ‘a comic meaning is

⁸⁶ Bergson., p.10.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p.11.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.10.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.5.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p.4

⁹¹ Ibid., p.90.

⁹² Ibid., p.55.

invariably obtained when an absurd idea is fitted into a well-established phrase-form'⁹³. He uses the example of a 'lazy lout' proclaiming 'I don't like working between meals', which creates comic effect as it is known that 'one should not eat between meals'⁹⁴. It is the inflexibility of relying on ready-made phrases which Bergson judges, as he suggests that language should display the same dynamism as 'the ever-changing and the living'⁹⁵.

Bergson's corrective function of laughter is therefore structured around revising and eliminating rigidity in behaviour, character, and language through using laughter and humiliation as the corrective tool. His theory thus relies on a society which is structured around organic functionality in which 'each member must be ever attentive to his social surroundings; he must model himself on his environment'⁹⁶. As such, the comic is utilised as a form of policing the dynamism within society by punishing rigid and inelastic members of society with laughter in order to humiliate them into altering their conduct:

'Society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which, although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter.

Always rather humiliating for the one against whom it is directed, laughter is really and truly a kind of social 'ragging'.⁹⁷

⁹³ Bergson p.55.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p.56.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p.64.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.147.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p.66.

His understanding of laughter is therefore distinctly social, classifying laughter solely through a corrective lens. He envisages it as a tool to aid society into improving by becoming a homogenous mass that shares an identical perception of a 'correct' form of living.

Discussion

Bergson regards laughter to be a social phenomenon which is often reliant on objects to create the comic. There are considerable difficulties with certain aspects of his argument as the objects of comic amusement are not always relatable in the contemporary context. As such, he argues for the comic to be found in a 'negro' because he looks 'unwashed' asking 'does this not mean that a black face, in our imagination, is one daubed over with ink or soot?'⁹⁸ Bergson argues that the comic rigidity stems from the view that this is similar to wearing a mask, which he suggests highlights the burden of a rigid system devoid of flexibility to incorporate the life of all members of its society. Stating that 'a negro is a white man in disguise', Bergson argues, is how the comic imagination draws its conclusion on the matter.⁹⁹ Similarly questionable is his statement that 'certain deformities undoubtedly possess over others the sorry privilege of causing some persons to laugh; some hunchbacks, for instance, will excite laughter.'¹⁰⁰ For Bergson, a deformity that may become comic is a 'deformity that a normally built person, could successfully imitate.'¹⁰¹ Although it is important to bear in mind that Bergson's theory was published in 1900 which may therefore explain his display of disturbing views and obsolete language, they nonetheless highlight the negative implications which Bergson assigns to laughter. Bergson believes that the negativity is an important tool for the overall greater good of society, which therefore necessitates a closer analysis of Bergson's model:

⁹⁸ Bergson., p.20.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.87.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.12.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p.12.

‘Society will therefore be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity.’¹⁰²

Bergson’s insistence on society swerving around a common centre is suggestive of society being in general agreement, or in other words, having a definite set of norms which therefore highlights any ‘eccentricities’ that diverge from this standard. However, it is not clear how these norms are established and what influences them. It is thus not explained why he regards the hunchback and the negro as comic objects, other than his suggestion that it does not conform with ‘normally built’ members of society and white members of society respectively. This becomes even more problematic when returning to his argument that the comic is a tool for the improvement of society. By disciplining ‘eccentric’ characters through the humiliation of laughter, it raises the question as to whether a Bergsonian society which is kept together under duress, ridicule and public humiliation is a desirable society in the first place. I would argue that blind conformity to a society which does not allow space for so-called ‘eccentricities’ loses the possibility to genuinely improve, given it does not allow a discourse outside of the accepted norms, therefore eliminating any chance of regenerative transformation. It becomes evident thus, that Bergson offers a prime theory for the concept of negative laughter, a social gesture for the humiliation and correction of members of society who step out of line. This lies in stark contrast to Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque, which advocates for a celebration of the

¹⁰² Bergson., p.10.

eccentricities of all members of society and recognises the positivity of laughter when understood through a concept of community. This will now be analysed in more depth.

Bakhtinian Laughter

Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* was first published in English in 1968, translated from the Russian by Hélène Iswolsky. Bakhtin was at the time an unknown figure within the western intellectual sphere. Considered a classic work of Renaissance studies, Bakhtin's work offers a fruitful introduction to a historical study of comic theory as it provides both the historical information of how the cultural aspect of laughter transformed between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but furthermore provides an analysis of the social systems, which transitioned from feudalism towards a more modern state of mind during the Renaissance. The shift resulted in humanism becoming the philosophical foundation of European intellectual thought, replacing scholasticism and the dogmas attached to a God-centred outlook for an emphasis on the value and agency of human beings, both individually and as a collective. This transition, Bakhtin argues, restructured language into a partition between language that was permissible and language that was not. The development of dialogic restriction complimented the newly established focus on the individual and the private sphere as the definition of morality and ethics slipped further away from the grasp of the Church. Further to Bakhtin's preoccupation with the restructuring of language, his analysis led to the identification of the carnival and the grotesque which, bound together by the body, offer a striking example of the role which comedy and laughter play with regards to the developmental progress of society.

Bakhtin's historical analysis of the signification of laughter can broadly be categorised into four historical phases. He commences his historical analysis by establishing that prior to a hierarchical and politically led society, 'the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally

‘Official’¹⁰³. At the time, the comic and the serious worked in a symbiosis of perfect unison, without marginalisation or power struggles infringing on either aspect. As feudalism emerged however, the Church and the higher classes were dependent on a separation between themselves and the lower classes in order to manifest their societal power. Unlike prior eras, the comic was no longer on par with the serious and therefore necessitated a new position to occupy within society. It is within this restructuring of the comic that the carnival emerged and indeed, Bakhtin argues, the comic presented ‘a completely different, non-official, extra ecclesiastical and extra political aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations.’¹⁰⁴

Bakhtin’s third stage is given to the Renaissance, an era distinguished by the breakdown of feudalism, the authority of the Church and the subsequent advent of the bourgeoisie. The newly established reigning class favoured humanism and the private sphere, the crass contrast to the previous regime meaning they necessitated a change of discourse in order to establish and anchor their power. Humanism benefitted from the carnivalesque laughter propelled by the grotesque, as it became a pivotal structure of the foundation for a novel view of the world, which was concentrated on the body, favouring an outlook of moral relativism:

‘Grotesque imagery, with its emphasis on corporeality, complemented the new humanist perspective on the world, and with their shared privileging of the human rather than the divine, they helped to call into question medieval ideology.’¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*. Volume 10, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009) p.6.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.362-363.

For Bakhtin, it is precisely the carnivalesque which enabled the introduction of a new discourse that rejoiced ‘the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities’¹⁰⁶. The emphasis on the grotesque body, an entity of contradictions as it was at the same time representative of birth and death, indulging and excreting, provided this relativity which Bakhtin views as a key aspect for the introduction of a new discourse. This ‘world inside out’¹⁰⁷ suggested that the rigid order of feudalism and the church were perhaps not as set in stone as universally assumed. Bakhtin’s understanding of the Middle Ages relied on the cultural binary between the stern, moral and powerful church and society’s Achilles’ heel of immoral debauchery as practiced during the carnival. For Bakhtin, laughter acted as an adhesive for relating the topography of carnival, the lower stratum of the body with the grotesque, the banquet and the marketplace into one unified cultural microcosm as ‘laughter destroyed epic distance; it began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out’¹⁰⁸.

The fourth phase follows the Renaissance and the bourgeoisie, which had set out to establish their values as ‘eternal truths’, thus the fluidity of the grotesque ‘could no longer be admitted’¹⁰⁹. This led to the demotion of the carnivalesque and comic forms to the lower sections of the cultural order. With this demotion commenced a new approach towards laughter and the comic in general, which no longer considered the endeavour worthy of a pursuit unless it was used as a societal tool to establish a hierarchy in which laughter only acted as a confirmation for an individual’s demeaned status. The collective had thus now been fragmented in

¹⁰⁶ Bakhtin, 2009., p.11.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.35.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p.101.

order to reflect the individuality of the private sphere, a move which had resulted in the introduction of moral relativism.

The rise of the bourgeoisie had created a shift between the feudalistic collective to a more prominent private sphere which eventually resulted in the elimination of the carnivalesque. This loss furthermore led to laughter losing its carnivalesque attributes, instead garnering a negative connotation which now demanded the act of laughter to be restricted. This development marked a turning point for laughter and comedy, as prior engagement with both had previously provided society with a healthy sense of both belonging and progression. Despite Bakhtin's analysis having been criticised for his populist tendencies with regards to his idealistic view of folk culture¹¹⁰, his examination serves a function for this thesis as it offers a perspective on a collective understanding of comic theory and humour and how this shifted from an open and collective endeavour to one of restriction. This restriction, Bakhtin argues, continued to influence laughter in contemporary culture and makes a distinction between the 'pure satire of modern times' and the laughter of the Middle Ages. Bakhtin suggests that modern laughter is distinguished from its medieval counterpart as the modern wit functions by belittling the individual within their private sphere. This stands in contrast to Bakhtin's account of medieval traditions, where mockery was directed to social roles within a collective.

Bakhtin's work identifies two important modes of comic activity: the carnival, figured as a social institution, and grotesque realism, which finds expression as a

¹¹⁰ See for example: Dominick LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*, (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1983) or C. Brandist 'Bakhtin, Marxism and Russian Populism'. In: Brandist C., Tihanov G. (eds) *Materializing Bakhtin*. St Antony's Series. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501461_. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

literary mode. Of interest to Bakhtin is the communication between the social institution and the literary mode as bound together by the body, which acts as a vessel where both modes of comic activity can merge and flourish. Bakhtin determines distinct characteristics which he argues are inherent to the carnival. Firstly, intimate and unrestricted interaction between all people during the carnival allows for a sense of unity amongst society which would otherwise be a binary division between peasants and noblemen. For Bakhtin, the people are the unified mass of society occupying the powerless binary of the feudalistic partition, or in other words, the unofficial realm which is also where the carnival as a folklore event is positioned. Thus, power is inverted, as the people are in control of the organisation, given they execute it 'in their own way'.¹¹¹ As such, 'all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age'.¹¹² Secondly, the festivities provide the occasion for hedonistic and improper behaviour without fear of repercussions. This lack of consequences allows for carnivalesque *mésalliances* between unsuitable alliances with disparate entities such as heaven and hell coming together in unity. These *mésalliances* furthermore complemented the vulgarity surrounding the carnival, as profane, obscene and blasphemous celebrations took the place of otherwise sacred and respectful rules of piety.

The carnival as an event is thus characterised by its lack of boundaries amidst a world of grotesque and superfluous hedonism, given it is a time where everything (besides, arguably, violence) is allowed. The realm of the carnival furthermore blurs

¹¹¹ Bakhtin.2009. p.255.

¹¹²Ibid., p.10.

the purposeful distinctions between art and reality, as the act of performance becomes the cardinal pursuit of a whole society, thus eliminating the barrier between actors and their audience, as the production becomes a communal endeavour in which etiquette and conventions are negated. Instead, novel perspectives and orders are allowed and encouraged. The carnival, Bakhtin argues, therefore freed men from ‘conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted’¹¹³.

In addition to this freedom, Bakhtin considered the carnival to convey a specific type of wisdom which had been associated with festivity since the ancient world, as he regarded the festival and the carnivalesque to form an alternate social space, defined by its distinctive support for a hedonistic approach towards a limitless society. Equality is a pivotal aspect of this state, as any distinction between people based on rank or other social status was completely disregarded. In its place, the mass of society transformed into one new amorphous body, devoid of the individual or the bourgeois ego, and instead defined solely by its collectivity.

Furthermore, these events, fuelled by the popular attributes of the communal, allowed for an alternate world view which did not necessarily conform with established truths, as the popular form enabled the Renaissance’s ‘new free and critical historical consciousness’¹¹⁴. This led to an inception of popular culture, a discourse detached from the official dogmatic culture and traditions.

As Bakhtin indicates, the Renaissance celebrated the higher strata such as the thought, speech, soul etc., thus hindering society as a collective to flourish. The grotesque, which functioned by engaging with the lower stratum and the laughter

¹¹³ Bakhtin.2009. p.34.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p.73.

associated with the inhibition to let loose, was no longer considered desirable. The private sphere perpetuated by the Renaissance thus eventually drained the grotesque of its liberatory potential, as ‘in the private sphere of isolated individuals the images of the bodily lower stratum preserve the element of negation while losing almost entirely their positive regenerating force’¹¹⁵. This worked in stark contrast to the nature of the grotesque, which for Bakhtin is ‘always conceiving’¹¹⁶, thus guaranteeing human’s immortality by providing an infinite source of regenerations. Indeed, for Bakhtin ‘this lower stratum is mankind’s real future’¹¹⁷.

Discussion

Like many festivities, carnival brought society to a halt. However, the nature of the festival meant that the abundance and lack of inhibition was welcomed by the masses which traditionally lived very scarce and rigid lives. Nonetheless, whilst this performance fuelled the act of laughter and comedy during times of quotidian scarcity, the event always anticipated a final scene and eventual return to normality. Thus, whilst different viewpoints and perspectives were encouraged and actively entertained, enduring change was not routinely achieved. Instead, it is precisely the characteristics which make carnival so distinct, the lack of boundaries and the hedonism, that compelled a return to the established social order. Indeed, it is tempting to see the carnival rebellions as merely an act, a performance which allows for the tensions within society to escape during a pre-

¹¹⁵ Bakhtin.2009. p.25.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. p.170.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.378.

planned annual relief valve. A further consideration must be dealt towards the increased interest of capitalist and political institutions in events such as the carnival. This creates a degree of hypocrisy, which is furthermore one of the criticisms which Bakhtin also faced in his analysis of the carnival. If commercial and political interests create a degree of policing during these events, turning them instead into carefully constructed events of prior established demarcations of excess, then carnival itself turns into a performative event in which a supposed act of transgression and hedonism is performed whilst remaining within the agreed realm of transgression, thus rendering the progressiveness of the act obsolete.

The laughter peppered the celebratory functions with the possibility of challenging the established truths, which in turn imbued the celebrations with, what Bakhtin believes to be, a rebellious potential. However, the paradox in a rebellion registered and approved by the status quo is biting obvious. Indeed, Terry Eagleton considers such mayhem to be ‘permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off as disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art’¹¹⁸. Similarly, Umberto Eco argues that it is precisely comedy and its operational functions such as the carnival which strengthen the status quo. Indeed, he regards comedy and carnival to lack any transgressive characteristic, arguing instead that they are key examples of law enforcement: thus ‘one should conclude that the comic is only an instrument of social control and can never be a form of social criticism.’¹¹⁹ However, whilst Eco’s standpoint rightly emphasises the carnivalesque function of excessively highlighting the

¹¹⁸ Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, (London: Verso Books, 2009) p.148.

¹¹⁹ Umberto Eco, 'The Frames of Comic "Freedom"' in *Carnival!* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011) p.6-7.

transgressions of social moral and their accompanying boundaries, it is undeniable that this highlighting might nevertheless encourage a restructuring of these accepted boundaries, or at least a questioning of their societal inauthenticity. A poignant example is John Waters' 1972 grotesque epic *Pink Flamingos* which crudely demolished the status quo understanding of morality and helped open the door to transgender and queer actors in an industry that traditionally favoured aesthetic conformity. Waters' transgressive achievement was recently commemorated when the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress.¹²⁰ For a film that depicts every immoral transgression from sodomy, rape, incest, murder, cannibalism, castration (amongst many others) to be considered 'culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant'¹²¹ is undoubtedly a restructuring of accepted boundaries.

However valuable, Bakhtin's account of the carnival is doubtless utopian and arguably idealistic. Bakhtin universally celebrates all immoral gestures as instances of the grotesque, for instance, thus rendering even acts of obvious violence harmless pronouncements of the renewing cycle of the lower stratum and the grotesque body. As the historian Peter Burke argues, violence during the carnival often expressed itself in its pure physical form, as 'objects which could not easily defend themselves, such as cocks, dogs, cats, and Jews' were subjected to acts of violence such as stoning.¹²² The manifest cruelty of this is too readily excused or ignored through a celebration of the grotesque body.

¹²⁰ The Library of Congress. n.d. Complete National Film Registry Listing. National Film Preservation Board. [online] Available at: <<https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009) p.266.

Nevertheless, the concepts as defined by Bakhtin as the Carnival and the Grotesque have value in their articulation of the possibility of collective laughter. This is achieved by focusing on the body, which acts as a bridge between the social hierarchies and the community. Bakhtin's account is generally persuasive in its claim that the decline of the carnival and its glorification of the grotesque led to a change of the idea of comedy and humour, and that, in the works of Rabelais, laughter relished a solely positive significance, bound together by the collective and their individual bodily functions which reminded society of the cycle of life. As Bakhtin argues, the carnivalesque notions of renewal and communality have since been relegated within the social establishment, with the incessant bourgeois focus on the private sphere and the personal body.

'Do we of the twentieth century laugh as did Rabelais and his contemporaries?'¹²³, Bakhtin questions, rhetorically. Clearly not, and no more in the twenty-first. This begs the question how we might restore, if not the specific characteristics of the medieval carnival, the kind of progressive, regenerative and rebellious laughter that Bakhtin so clearly lauds. How might our own forms of humour afford the possibility to question our own accepted truths and hierarchies? Bakhtin's understanding of laughter is a very distinct laughter, one which has been created in a utopian vision for the pursuit of absolute freedom, devoid of any negative connotations. Bakhtin's laugh, however notional, flourishes within community and extinguishes prejudice and division.

One might think the contemporary moment would leap to embrace this kind of laughter. Yet the current cultural realm is intensely personalised and fragmented.

¹²³ Bakhtin, p.134

The rise of social media and the internet has not allowed society to return to the public world of the marketplace but has instead magnified the private realm to such an extent that the privatised, negative laughter is now executed with the same publicity as the marketplace, yet devoid of the community upon which the carnivalesque laughter flourished and without its regenerative benefits.

Meanwhile, the body is fiercely guarded as a vehicle for individual expression and a marker of social identity, not as a collective or even as a point of commonality.

This may start to explain the impasse we have reached.

The Body politic and the political body

Two perceptions of the body

We have been presented with two distinct notions of the comic body. First, we had Bergson's rigid version, detached from the flexibility of the soul and therefore an object for the creation of negative comic amusement. Secondly, Bakhtin's idea of the body as manifestation of renewal, a celebration of the cycle of life. Both Bergson and Bakhtin give the body a prominent position with regards to their theory of the comic, but their concepts are strikingly at odds.

The connection between humour and the body can be traced back etymologically to the Latin *humor*, which in ancient and medieval physiology and medicine referred to 'any of four fluids of the body (blood, phlegm, choler, and so-called melancholy or black bile) believed to determine, by their relative proportions and conditions, the state of health and the temperament of a person or animal'¹²⁴. These bodily excrements were utilised as judgments of character, as an excess or a lack of a certain fluid was believed to influence the temperament in a manner which diverged from the norm. It was these people who were regarded as eccentric, a view which later developed into ridicule, and which was therefore a suitable subject for mockery by comic actors.¹²⁵ The body, therefore, was a founding concept related to humour and offered a link between the physical and the psychical since the term's conception.

¹²⁴ "humour | humor, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2020. Web. 21 January 2021.

¹²⁵ Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) p.5.

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the development of the body is reflective of society's centuries-long trajectory which moved away from the collective mockery of the medieval age to the rise of the private sphere during the renaissance. The move away from the physical body to the psychological allowed for the emergence of subjective truth to be established, distinct from the previously tangible objectivity. This change of perception reflected the transformation of politics regarding the body, that is, the human body and its functions within society. For Bakhtin, 'grotesque realism' hinges partly on a 'bodily principle' that is 'deeply positive'¹²⁶. Bakhtin emphasizes how this 'bodily principle' centres on 'the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed' and how consequently 'all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable'¹²⁷. In Bakhtin's view, the resulting corporeal 'exaggeration has a positive, assertive character.'¹²⁸ This is the 'grotesque body', defining a carnivalesque image of the world and refuting the hierarchical arrangement of pre-renaissance society. Parts of the body associated with the lower stratum such as sexual organs, the belly, and the mouth that are given prominence as a means of challenging and rejecting the political and ideological hegemony of the status quo.

Elsewhere, in *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, Bakhtin considers how we relate to our own bodies in the modern era, asking 'How do we experience our own exterior?' Bakhtin suggests that there is now a fundamental distinction between the 'inner body' (as I experience it) and the 'outer body' (as defined by the apprehension of others). His experience of his own exterior is therefore always

¹²⁶ Bakhtin, 2009. p.19.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p.19

¹²⁸ Ibid., p.19.

fragmentary, ‘dangling on the string of [my] inner sensation of myself’¹²⁹. Thus, for Bakhtin, the creation of an outwards, united form is reliant on the action of an ‘other’:

‘The body is not something that is self-sufficient: it needs the *other*, needs his recognition and his form-giving activity. Only the inner body [...] is *given* to a human being himself; the other’s outer body is not given but set as a task: I must actively produce it.’¹³⁰

The festive notion of production was left behind as the contemporary culture migrated towards a Bergsonian notion of the corrective in which the body is given to automatism and anxiously governed by the laughter of others.

‘This is just why the tragic poet is so careful,’ Bergson writes, ‘to avoid anything calculated to attract attention to the material side of his heroes. No sooner does anxiety about the body manifest itself than the intrusion of a comic element is to be feared.’¹³¹ Bergson further illustrates the point: ‘Let us now give a wider scope to this image of *the body taking precedence of the soul*. We shall obtain something more general—*the manner seeking to outdo the matter, the letter aiming at ousting the spirit*.’¹³² In contrast to Bakhtin’s favouring of the body, Bergson regards the body as being subordinate to the consciousness. Moreover, Bergson focuses on the binary within each human, the body as a ‘heavy and cumbersome vesture’ in comparison to the soul which is ‘eager to rise aloft’.¹³³ For Bergson, it is the attachment of the mind to the body which hinders humans

¹²⁹ Bakhtin, ‘Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity’, in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* (Austin: University of Texas press, 2011) pp. 27-28.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹³¹ Bergson, p.25.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p.24.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp 24-25.

from reaching the desired degree of intellectual divinity. Bergson argues that it is primarily the intellect which leads itself to the material world, as '[...] our intellect, in the narrow sense of the word, is intended to secure the perfect fitting of our body to its environment, to represent the reactions of external things among themselves – in short, to think matter.'¹³⁴ Bergson's conception of the body is thus wholly dependent on the mind, and contrary to Bakhtin's celebration of the body, Bergson's body provides an output to portray the flawed characteristics of human failure in need of correction.

The Body Politic

The decline of 'the body politic'¹³⁵ is often associated with the developing empirical and mechanistic methods that emerged during the seventeenth century which moved society away from being seen as an organism, instead introducing the notion of 'society as a mechanism'.¹³⁶ This notion was further extended with the rise of democracy. Claude Lefort argues that 'the democratic revolution [...] burst out when the body of the king was destroyed, when the body politic was decapitated and when, at the same time, the corporeality of the social was dissolved. There then occurred [...] a disincorporation of individuals.'¹³⁷

Relatedly, though in a radically different context, Jacques Lacan argues that 'the body in pieces' is reliant on the mirror stage to bring the severed parts together.

As such, through the conception of the ego, the individual enables the prevention

¹³⁴ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, (New York: Dover Publications, 2012) p.ix.

¹³⁵ Mark Neocleous. 'The fate of the body politic' in *Radical Philosophy* 108 (Jul/Aug 2001) https://www.libraryofsocialscience.com/assets/pdf/Neocleous-The_Fate_of_the_BP.pdf

¹³⁶ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, (London: Penguin, 1991).

¹³⁷ Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986), 303.

of a Freudian anxiety about fragmentation, in which the ‘images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, bursting open of the body’¹³⁸ is kept at a distance. At a societal level, by analogy, we might ask what form of ‘mirror’ we require to overcome the perception of fragmentation without producing a society that is wholly dependent on an unhealthy conception of the ego. We appear to have reached a societal stage where community has been fragmented into various bodily and behavioural traits that supposedly define an individual, traits such as race, sex, and gender. It used to be thought, not so long ago, that comedy might be universal in its appeal, that we might put our superficial differences aside and join together in laughter. The relentless pursuit of comedy that addresses these bodily and behavioural traits seems to suggest that a decreasing number of people seem to countenance that idea anymore.

‘The politics of identity in relation to comedy affect us all,’ Illot argues, before adding: ‘but some of “us” more than others at different times and in different places.’¹³⁹ The scare quotes around “us” is telling. To elucidate her argument, Illot refers to an event in May 2017 to explain the ‘power relations of “mocking” in comedy’.¹⁴⁰ Referring to a photo of the American comedian Kathy Griffin in which she is seen holding up a prop of a severed head that bears resemblance to the US president at the time, Donald Trump, Illot maintains that this comedic act does not compare to a potential mocking of former US president Barack Obama as ‘they are not equal when it comes to the politics of identity’. This is because,

¹³⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1989) p.11.

¹³⁹ Illot, p.5.

¹⁴⁰ Illot, p.5.

for Illot, Obama is ‘a black man’, period.¹⁴¹ As ‘a member of a community that has received centuries of racially motivated violence and hateful derision’, Illot argues, the mocking of Obama by the same means would be wholly out of bounds.¹⁴² Given that Trump is ‘a white, heterosexual, wealthy and able-bodied man’, his body signifies the ‘epitome of privilege’ which therefore enables all mockery to be deemed acceptable.¹⁴³ Adding further identity politics into the mix, Illot then echoes the sentiment with which Griffin defended herself, arguing she only faced a backlash to her actions because of her age and gender.¹⁴⁴ What interests me here is Illot’s policing of comedic legitimacy by invoking the politics of identity. The players in this drama are all defined by prefabricated categories, although even these are invoked unevenly (for instance, Obama is represented only by his skin colour, despite sharing the other traits which Illot assigns Trump, that is heterosexual, wealthy, and able-bodied). Amidst the furore regarding the dynamics between superiority, power, and identity, Griffin’s stunt crystallises how the medieval metaphor of the body politic, in this instance an image of a decapitated President, has shifted from a political understanding of the state, to politicising the organic body of an individual. Griffin suffered major backlash for her actions, as she was fired from her job at CNN¹⁴⁵ and all her remaining scheduled tour dates were cancelled by their venues.¹⁴⁶ Given she felt that the

¹⁴¹ The political concept of Barack Obama’s body is further dissected in an article by Joseph Lowndes, ‘Barack Obama’s Body: The Presidency, the Body Politic, and the Contest over American National Identity’ in *Polity*, October 2013, Vol.45, No.4, Behind the Curtain (October 2013), pp. 469 – 498. www.jstor.org/stable/24540317. [Accessed 28 January 2021]

¹⁴² Illot., p.5.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p.5.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p.4.

¹⁴⁵ Sandra Gonzalez, ‘CNN fires Kathy Griffin’, May 31, 2017.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170531213247/http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/31/media/cnn-kathy-griffin/>. [Accessed 28 January 2021]

¹⁴⁶ Jennifer Drysdale, ‘Kathy Griffin’s Final Tour Date Cancelled Amid Donald Trump Drama’.

June 2, 2017. [Accessed 28 January 2021]

https://www.etonline.com/news/218923_kathy_griffin_final_tour_date_cancel_ed_amid_donald_trump_drama. [Accessed 28 January 2021]

hostility towards her primarily stemmed from her age and gender, it would be understandable if she felt that the subsequent events confirmed her sentiment. Similarly, some responses referred to Griffin's actions as reflective of women losing agency over their own bodies (referring to the Trump administration's policies regarding healthcare and abortions)¹⁴⁷. At the same time, conservative commentators argued that the discourse would have been very different if this comedy stunt would have happened with President Obama's head. One piece summarised: 'there should be no question that a right-leaning person doing the same with Obama's head would have had to fear for his or her life. Because, remember, anything awful done to Obama carried with it a charge of racism'.¹⁴⁸

As evident in this example, the focus on bodily identity as understood through the mind thwarted the chance for debate and regeneration within society given it merely strengthened preconceived opinions or prejudices before anyone even attempted to find the humour in Griffin's post. The vulgar perception of Griffin's act was overtaken by a Bergsonian lens of placing mind over body, the superiority of which resulted in a courting of ideologies rather than the arguably critical message that Griffin was attempting to make. The lack of a carnivalesque celebration of the grotesque therefore thwarted the opportunity of regeneration within society and instead directed the discourse into a dead-end discussion about the flawed characteristics of human failure in need of correction, without achieving any sort of progress or justice for any involved party.

¹⁴⁷ Aja Romano, Kathy Griffin, political protest art, and the backlash over "beheading" Donald Trump. May 31, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/5/31/15719118/kathy-griffin-donald-trump-beheading-feminist-art>. [Accessed 28 January 2021].

¹⁴⁸ Ashe Schow, 'Let's not pretend Kathy Griffin's career would survive if she held Obama's head'. <https://observer.com/2017/05/kathy-griffin-loses-squatty-potty-deal-trump-head/>. [Accessed 28 January 2021].

In contrast to this policing of comedy via the politics of the body, it appears that comedy is in need of a return to the festive. As evident in the Griffin example, it is counterproductive for comedians to be obliged to tread carefully, under fear that their art would otherwise descend to cruelty and name-calling, to a diabolical version of Bergson's laughter where eccentricity and difference are mocked. Rather, it is a carnivalesque, irreverent approach, not one constrained by ideological boundaries, that would allow for the examination of society's stereotypes and accepted norms. The following case studies will elucidate the power of the carnivalesque in further detail.

Case Studies: *Blazing Saddles* and *Little Britain*

Blazing Saddles (Mel Brooks, USA, 1974)

In the featurette *Back in the Saddle*, added to the 30th Anniversary Special Edition DVD of *Blazing Saddles*, Mel Brooks summarises his film as ‘one of a kind – it’ll stand for all time as a monumental American film comedy’¹⁴⁹. Indeed, throughout the five decades since the film’s release, it has enjoyed a canonical status as one of the funniest films of all-time and in 2006 received an entry in the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress which lists films that are ‘considered culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant’¹⁵⁰. Although *Blazing Saddles* is today considered a classic example of comedy, initial reception of the film was mixed. As with most spoof comedies, some critics were not fond of the countless gags, as Vincent Canby of *The New York Times* lamented it ‘has no dominant personality, and it looks as if it includes every gag thought up in every store conference’¹⁵¹, whilst critic Roger Ebert famously called the film a ‘crazed grabbag of a movie that does everything to keep us laughing except hit us over the head with a rubber chicken’.¹⁵² Nevertheless, the film received three Oscar

¹⁴⁹ *Back in the Saddle*. 2001. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

¹⁵⁰ The Library of Congress. n.d. About this Collection | Selections from the National Film Registry | Digital Collections | Library of Congress. [online] Available at: <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/selections-from-the-national-film-registry/about-thiscollection/#:~:text=The%20National%20Film%20Registry%20is,enduring%20importance%20to%20American%20culture.>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

¹⁵¹ Vincent Canby. 1974. Screen: ‘Blazing Saddles,’ a Western in Burlesque. *The New York Times*, [online] Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1974/02/08/archives/screen-blazing-saddles-a-western-in-burlesque.html>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

¹⁵² Quoted in: James Robert Parish. *It’s Good to Be the King: The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks*. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008). p.12.

nominations and became the #1 box office hit of 1974, grossing \$119.5 million.¹⁵³

Regardless of personal preference, the film is undeniably due credit for seasoning a spoof classic Western comedy with the unprecedented and fierce condemnation of racism in the United States, or as Brooks explained: ‘We were celebrating the triumph of humanity over its inherent hatreds and prejudices.’¹⁵⁴

In comparison to the film’s sumptuous comic antics, the plot presents itself more of an addendum. It tells the story of the dubious and corrupt politician and land speculator Hedley Lamarr (Harvey Korman) who, in order to avoid a region riddled with quicksand, needs his railroad to run through a town called Ridge Rock. In an attempt to cause a revolt in the town and drive the residents away, Hedley replaces the deceased white Sherriff with the imprisoned black railroad worker Bart (Cleavon Little). However, rather than the anticipated revolt at being sent a black Sherriff, Bart convinces the townspeople of their own bigotry and wins them over instead, signing up a drunken gunslinger named The Waco Kid (Gene Wilder) on the way. For comic effect and to further emphasise the insularity of Rock Ridge, all its residents are called Johnson. As the unlikely community rattles together to fight against the dubious land speculators, they build a dummy town in an attempt to save Ridge Rock and, miraculously, succeed.

The film commences with a shot of a group of Black, Asian and Irish workers constructing a railroad. As the boss rides up to bully the workers, the audience is introduced both to our hero, Bart (Cleavon Little), and to the first utterance of the

¹⁵³ Warner Brothers. 2019. ‘45 Years of "Blazing Saddles"’. [online] Available at: <<https://www.warnerbros.com/news/articles/2019/02/07/45-years-blazing-saddles>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

¹⁵⁴ *Back in the Saddle*. 2001. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

n-word. In defence against his oppressive employment, Bart attacks his boss with a spade. As a consequence, he is sentenced to hang, yet is freed shortly before his execution when the Attorney General, Hedley Lemarr, suggests Bart to become the new Sheriff of Rock Ridge. The film continues to revolve around Bart, who is given the complete dramatic agency, as the film's themes make Bart's concerns the main point. Of particular note is that Bart, and not one of his white colleagues, remains the saviour.

The film was released a couple of years after the Blaxploitation genre had emerged, which were the first instances where black characters were the subject and heroes of films. Although the genre was criticised for being 'written, directed, and produced by whites [and] played on the needs of black audiences for heroic figures without answering those needs in realistic terms'¹⁵⁵, the genre nevertheless offered new and empowering ground for the creative output of black artists.

Features such as Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971) brought '[...] not only compelling but realistic images of black Americans into mainstream cinemas, breaking with decades-long traditions in which blacks were portrayed as either shockingly servile (Butterfly McQueen), impossibly honourable (Sidney Poitier), or perhaps not black at all (Susan Kohner in Douglas Sirk's 1959 classic, *Imitation of Life*)'¹⁵⁶. *Saddles* was unquestionably a big-budget production that arguably had white Americans as its main target audience, yet in an act of rebellious justice, the film follows a heroic black character who not only included the black audience but perhaps more importantly, validated their

¹⁵⁵ Donald Bogle. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. (London: Continuum, 1994) p.242.

¹⁵⁶ Robert Reid-Pharr. *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*. (New York: NYU Press, 2007) pp.152-153.

experiences in the United States. Mel Brooks commented that 'the engine that drove the movie was the hatred of the black; it was race prejudice. Without that, the movie would not have had nearly the significance to force to dynamism and the stakes that were contained in the film'¹⁵⁷.

By engaging the tropes and cliches of classic Westerns and American mythmaking, Brooks' ingredients were as daring as they were brilliant: 'The western story, in its classic form, constitutes the affirmation (albeit sometimes qualified) of the Anglo-American's supremacy in his stoic resolution to conquer the continent'¹⁵⁸, which for Brooks, is the perfect backdrop to deconstruct the troubling foundations which were the root of such ideas. However, Brooks' approach was very nuanced, as he was furthermore aware that African Americans were not the only minority to have suffered injustices in the United States. Slavery, the killing of indigenous people by white colonizers and the enslavement of Chinese people to build the American railroad system are all examples which not only highlight the injustices of American history, but which Brooks also represented in his film. His approach to tackle these racial injustices were therefore not stereotypical. Instead, Brooks declares an open season on using any and all racial epithets and stereotypes rendering it impossible for the audience to ignore all the disgraceful parts of American history. Viewed from this angle, it becomes clear why the only possible genre to fulfil Brooks' intention could have been the greatest celebration of white American manhood, i.e., the Western.

Brooks not only questions the Western's devoted Anglophilia but furthermore

¹⁵⁷ *Back in the Saddle*. 2001. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

¹⁵⁸ Bill Hug. "'Blazing Saddles' as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 36, no. 1, Popular Culture Association in the South, 2013, pp. 63–81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23610152>. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

declares a new, carnivalesque order which unapologetically demands inclusion rather than exclusion.

Whilst most Blaxploitation films were set in urban environments, Brooks chose the Old West as his setting, but not as his timeframe. Instead, he juxtaposed the timeline by having the events take place in 1874, whereas the story presumes it is actually 1974, poignantly highlighted when Jim asks Bart: ‘What’s a dazzling urbanite like you doing in a rustic setting like this?’¹⁵⁹. One of the film’s screenwriters, Andrew Bergman, confirmed that this urban juxtaposition was indeed deliberate: ‘We have Eldridge Cleaver riding into town on a pony and you make the joke with a Gucci bag that he’s hip and that’s it and you don’t examine it’¹⁶⁰. It is precisely the uncanny placement that emphasizes the outdated racist views that perpetuated the Old West and which, when faced with a 1970s mentality, creates comic effect due to its incongruity. However, race does not remain the only source of comedic value as much of the film is reliant on Brooks’ immense absurdity, from a noose around the horse’s neck as his rider is about to be hung, to the ground-breaking baked beans scene which was the first time in cinema history that flatulence was shown on screen.¹⁶¹

In carnivalesque film ‘oppressive structures are not so much overturned...as they are stylized, choreographed, and mythically transcended’¹⁶² as the point of the carnivalesque representation of oppression is to reunite what has been separated –

¹⁵⁹ *Blazing Saddles* [30th Anniversary Special Edition] 2017. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

¹⁶⁰ *Back in the Saddle*. 2001. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

¹⁶¹ David Fear. 2016. Mel Brooks: Why 'Blazing Saddles' Is the 'Funniest Movie Ever Made'. [online] Rolling Stone. Available at: <<https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/mel-brooks-why-blazing-saddles-is-the-funniest-movie-ever-made-252004/>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

¹⁶² Robert Stam. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989). p.92.

rich from poor or the powerful with the disenfranchised. As Stam continues: ‘carnavalesque art is uninterested in psychological verisimilitude or conventional audience identification with rounded personalities’¹⁶³ given its purpose is precisely to question established structures and conventions as it seeks to eliminate the hierarchies that conventional audiences are accustomed to and instead offer a level playing field for all members of society.

It is important to remember that although Richard Pryor did not get the lead role, his position as co-screenwriter played a pivotal part in the crass hatred depicted towards blackness and too the generous injection of racial epithets. The ubiquity of the n-word was not commonplace at the time of production, yet it served a function given its effect exposed the unspoken aspects of American life. Pryor was adamant that he wanted the film’s villains and townspeople to be depicted exactly as racist as they would have been: ‘The bad guys can say it, they would say it’, Pryor explained about the script.¹⁶⁴ Pryor’s insistence on using the n-word neutralised the slur’s power to wound, similar to the trajectory that the term ‘queer’ has undergone.¹⁶⁵ The appearance of the n-word in *Blazing Saddles* is therefore not rare, indeed the use of racial slurs is recurrent and unrelenting. However, Pryor’s aim was to create comedy through an approach in which the audience would be shocked by the authenticity, and the n-word is a valuable example of this technique at play. Brooks’ thus uses the n-word not to degrade the people it is directed at, but to degrade the people uttering it.

¹⁶³ Robert Stam. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. p.109.

¹⁶⁴ Andrew Roberts., 2016. ‘Mel Brooks Credits Gene Wilder And Richard Pryor For ‘Blazing Saddles’’. [online] UPROXX. Available at: <<https://uproxx.com/movies/mel-brooks-gene-wilder-blazing-saddles/>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

¹⁶⁵ Gregory Coles. “The Exorcism of Language: Reclaimed Derogatory Terms and Their Limits.” *College English*, vol. 78, no. 5, National Council of Teachers of English, 2016, pp. 424–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44075135>. [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Therefore, although the bigoted epithets are continuously used in the film, the slurs are only ever associated with foolishness. The racist villains and townspeople remain the ignorant characters, until they understand their foolishness as they need to unite their powers with the minority workers to save their town. Wilder touches upon this subject in *Back in the Saddle*:

‘That was one of the things that made me want to do the film. Because they’ve done something, the writers, remarkable. They smashed racism in the face, and the nose is bleeding. But they’re doing it while you laugh. And that’s what I thought was one of the most brilliant things about the movie.’¹⁶⁶

By producing a film that successfully blends the Blaxploitation genre and the Western, Brooks makes a statement that clearly highlights how the continued separation between black and white would never overcome racism. As the film continues, both parties gradually realise that they must learn to become one force if their plan to save their town should succeed. Brooks does not simply erase the racist tendencies of the townspeople but instead emphasises how community can overcome prejudice particularly when both parties are looking for the same goal. *Blazing Saddles* therefore does not provide the viewer with a moral revelation because the stupidity of racism becomes obvious when their lives depend on it. Like the Blaxploitation films, Brooks’ representation of Bart diverges from the expected representations that audiences were familiar with seeing at the cinema. Indeed, Brooks utilises many of the Blaxploitation genre’s particular characteristics which had established a new perspective on black characters in

¹⁶⁶ *Back in the Saddle*. 2001. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

films who act ‘with premeditation [and are] always in control of the situation’.¹⁶⁷ These traits are common for the so-called ‘trickster’ characters which abound in the Blaxploitation genre. These characters are ‘[...] ostensibly disadvantaged and weak [yet] succeed in getting the best of their larger and more powerful adversaries. Tricksters achieve their objectives [...] through playing upon the gullibility of their opponents [...] [Tricksters] succeed by outsmarting or outthinking.’¹⁶⁸ Bart’s trickster characteristics help him wring himself out of dead-end situations thus enabling him to maintain control over situations. Upon his arrival in Rock Ridge, Bart is welcomed by Howard Johnson who provides a welcome speech: ‘As chairman of the welcoming committee, it is my privilege to extend a Laurel-and-Hardy handshake to our new [...] nigger’¹⁶⁹. The ‘outrageous’ scene of being introduced to a black man as the new town sheriff reduces the townspeople to silence. Bart however is not deterred by this abject welcome and instead heads to the stage and speaks to the crowd. As all the townspeople draw their weapons in preparation to shoot Bart, he turns the situation around by threatening to shoot himself. Startled by this quick wit, the townspeople drop their weapons whilst Bart continues to warn that he will ‘blow this nigger’s head all over town’. Responding to himself in a stereotypical and exaggerated tone: ‘Oh Lordy Lord, he’s desperate, do what he says!’, Bart heads to his office for protection while a lady exclaims ‘Isn’t anyone going to help that poor man?’.¹⁷⁰ Naturally such emotions were absent just minutes before Bart

¹⁶⁷ John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), p. 23.

¹⁶⁸ Trudier Harris. ‘The Trickster in African American Literature’. National Humanities Center. 4th December 2021. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/trickster.htm>. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

¹⁶⁹ *Blazing Saddles* [30th Anniversary Special Edition] 2017. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

utilises the townspeople's naïveté to outwit them. Brooks therefore enables Bart to utilise the trickster 'mentality as a strategy for survival with dignity as well as a strategy for political intervention.'¹⁷¹ While Bart navigates multiple precarious situations, he is never framed as inferior or demeaned. Instead, his trickster characteristics help to emphasise his intellect and ingenious tactics of manipulation further to highlighting his sense of humour and the ignorant and bigoted naïveté of the townspeople.

From the outset the audience is encouraged to sympathise and identify with Bart whose character is continuously presented as an intelligent, honourable, and valiant individual. His heroism is nobler than the stereotypical Western heroes as Bart does not depict a monoculture, nor does he portray stereotypically virtuous or morally superior behaviour. For example, his language reflects the contemporary as he frequently uses the term 'baby' and has a dalliance with the German dancer Lilly. There is nothing cliché about his conduct neither does his character represent any stereotypes. Instead, Bart is a round and realistic character that breaks any prejudices the audience may bring to the screening. The same cannot be said for the film's white characters who unapologetically depict flat, ignorant, and clichéd racist tropes. Lyle, LePetomane and Taggart are fools. The townspeople are all named Johnson which can be read as a metaphor for their limited worldviews but furthermore suggests that perhaps inbreeding may be a cause for their ignorant behaviour. Jim summarises the townspeople as follows: 'simple farmers [...] people of the land [...] you know, morons.'¹⁷² Therefore, although Brooks engages with racist stereotypes, he repeatedly engages these

¹⁷¹ Harris, 'The Trickster in African American Literature'.

¹⁷² *Blazing Saddles* [30th Anniversary Special Edition] 2017. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

stereotypes not to reinforce racism but to highlight the foolishness of racist views. This depiction is in crass opposition to the honourable cowboys that inhabit classic Westerns who, despite stealing the land of Native Americans, are portrayed as honest and virtuous. However, regardless of their blatant and unapologetic bigotry, Bart honours the responsibility of being the town sheriff and is eager to get the townspeople to respect him. Perhaps the defining comedic characteristic of *Blazing Saddles* is that all the characters, bar Lamarr, are acquitted by the end of the film. At no point does the film frame the townspeople as malicious or inherently evil citizens. They are depicted as the ‘good people of Rock Ridge’ and other than their racist mindsets, lead normal and respectable lives. It is furthermore of note that although the film commences by depicting the antagonists as racist, once Bart arrives in Ridge Rock, he is faced with racism from the very people he is supposed to protect. The townspeople profit from the audience’s sympathetic position towards Bart as this position, together with Bart’s efforts to gain the townspeople’s respect, results in a sense of community which recognises the citizen’s racism as wrong yet does not denounce them for it. Instead, it is understood that the only malice stems from the antagonists which are successfully defeated precisely due to the sense of community that Bart builds through his reliance on comedic effect. For example, when Bart requests an extra day to think of a suitable plan to save Ridge Rock, the townspeople are initially reluctant. Yet Bart responds ‘You’d do it for Randolph Scott’ referring to the celebrated white Western star. This witty response, funny because it’s true, pushes the townspeople to agree. It is an act of rebellious idealism that the film allows the townspeople to correct their bigoted mindsets.

Yet the film also extends this comic frame to the antagonists who are also given the opportunity to re-join society through a Bakhtinian performance of the grotesque as depicted in the infamous bean-eating scene. Although the protagonists of the scene are also the film's villains, Brooks divorces this sentiment by reducing the characters to their grotesque bodily functions herewith establishing the humanity of the antagonists. As the group are sat around a campfire, the camera provides a close-up of one 'cowboy' eating beans and burping. The camera proceeds to dolly back to the whole group who begin to break wind for multiple seconds until the antagonist Lyle is shown, therefore highlighting that the whole group are indeed Bart and the townspeople's enemies. Although the passing wind scene became infamous given it was the first time that the grotesque act was shown on screen, it is just one of multiple grotesque such as Jim's excessive drinking, the bartender throwing up into a glass or LePetomane's extravagant sexual conduct. All characters therefore engage in grotesque behaviour, turning *Blazing Saddles* into a menagerie of the carnivalesque. Brooks' film thus offers a great example between the unnecessary distinctions of the audience laughing *at* or laughing *with* the character when viewed through a carnivalesque lens. The film is specifically written in an attempt to create a community within which the audience laughs without creating a divisive environment that necessitates this distinction.

Indeed, the Bakhtinian carnival reaches its peak in the fight sequence which literally and figuratively breaks the fourth wall. Towards the end of the film the camera pans to a completely different set where the musical *The French Mistake* is being filmed with several homosexual dancers. One of the dancers' trips and is reprimanded by the director (Dom DeLuise) who throws sexual sobriquets

towards the entire entourage. It is in this moment that the Old West escapes the confined studio set, as the *Blazing Saddles* characters burst onto the musical set. The director, appalled at the disruption, shouts ‘This is a closed set!’ to which Taggart retorts ‘Piss on you. I work for Mel Brooks’, punching the director, before the dancers join the brawl.¹⁷³ Taggart’s reference to Brooks again shatters the fourth wall, making a poignant statement that the fight against bigotry is much grander than the mere following of a fictitious storyline. Brooks cast has been directed to shatter every wall that is responsible for upholding ignorant views and bigoted actions, a point which is further re-enforced by the cameo appearance of an actor dressed as Hitler who can be seen saluting amongst the crowd. Thus, whilst the fight commences as a representation between the moral versus immoral, it soon descends into chaos involving everyone, crossing the line between the *Blazing Saddles* cast and crew and everyone in the Warner Brothers studio and beyond (tourists, tour guides, actors, random people walking down the road), given the protagonists are even filmed leaving the studio premises and getting into a taxi on the real streets of Burbank.

The ‘Great Pie Scene’ offers a rich ground for the analysis and effect that the comic frame achieves in this key scene. Brooks is very vocal about his intentions: ‘I want to make trouble,’ he says. ‘I want to say in comic terms, ‘J’accuse’.¹⁷⁴ ‘My job as a comedy filmmaker,’ he continues, ‘is to point out and remind us of what we are— to humble us and expose our foibles’¹⁷⁵. Given that the scene shatters every boundary, it unapologetically utilises the grotesque to drag

¹⁷³ *Blazing Saddles* [30th Anniversary Special Edition] 2017. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

¹⁷⁴ Maurice Yacowar. *Method in Madness: The Comic Art of Mel Brooks*. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1981) p.3.

¹⁷⁵ Nick Smurthwaite and Paul Gelder. *Mel Brooks and the Spoof Movie*. (London: Proteus, 1982) p.45.

everyone down to the same level, establishing a biting commentary on society and by extension the film industry: racism affects and may be perpetuated by anyone, anywhere. It is neither confined to Hollywood nor can it be fixed by the film industry alone. The problem is intrinsic to society and Brooks 'Great Pie Scene' returns the responsibility of making a difference to everybody (not ignoring his own guilt and responsibility given he casts himself as LePetomane), as everybody is equally guilty of grotesque behaviour and thus by extension capable of initiating change. Brooks creates an ending in which everyone laughs and the distinction between laughing *with* or *at* is erased.

It is of note therefore that Bart effortlessly moves within two segregated concepts of representation, realistically depicting both the outsider and the authority. This binary representation is noteworthy given the film's newly added trigger warning as discussed in an earlier chapter. When analysing the distinct characteristics of the comedy, it could be argued that it is precisely this carnivalesque feature of inclusion wherein he outsmarts the racist townspeople through inclusive mockery rather than a Bergsonian attempt of corrective laughter that has given rise for the need of a trigger warning. Despite the hostility that Bart initially encounters, he still helps save the village and the community by coming together to defeat the corrupt politicians. Bart therefore never accepts the initial presumption of the townspeople who welcome him as an 'other' and instead uses humour to foster a sense of community which instead 'others' the racist behaviour. This argument is pertinent when considering that *Blazing Saddles* no doubt creates a conundrum: the audience must be aware of the stereotypes and the existence and concept of racism to understand and be amused by the jokes that make fun of said racist tropes. This means that the film can be regarded as a mechanism to depreciate the

effect that racism has in the real world given it perpetuates a strong message of overcoming racism through the rejection of offence in favour of community. If, as argued by systemic racism advocates, racism is an omnipresent feature of society, then it might be argued that a film like *Blazing Saddles* provides a worthwhile contribution and attempt to eliminate racism by providing a platform where it is tackled from a novel angle which refrains from accepting a different race as the ‘other’, and instead uses comedy to emphasise how absurd all types of racist behaviour are. Of all the comedies that engage with difficult languages and racist subject matters, the focus on *Blazing Saddles* in need of a trigger warning to put it in its correct social context thus emphasises the current dislike for the carnivalesque when touching on comedy that deals with the representation of identity. In true carnivalesque fashion, Brooks refrains from condemning or correcting individual behaviour and instead makes the audience aware of the human condition and the community with which its faults can be corrected. It is therefore the regenerative power which is given through the carnivalesque understanding of community and common faults that gifts Brooks’ film the necessary nuances to tackle racism through the art of comedy.

***Little Britain* (TV Series 2003-2007)**

Little Britain was written and performed by Matt Lucas and David Walliams, initially starting out as a BBC Radio 4 series in 2001 before being transferred to BBC's digital channel, BBC Three television. The first two series aired in 2003 and 2004, garnering 'cult comedy' status which led to a further transfer, albeit in edited form, to BBC 1 in 2005. Various spin-offs followed, from *Little Britain Abroad* Christmas specials, *Little Britain Comic Relief Sketches*, *Little, Little Britain*, *Comic Relief: The Big One*, *Little Britain Live* and *Little Britain USA* which was broadcast on HBO and BBC towards the end of 2008.¹⁷⁶ The show thus successfully moved from a niche cult comedy to 'mainstream mass appeal'¹⁷⁷.

In June of 2020 however, the series was removed from all UK streaming platforms due to concerns about the use of blackface by its two stars, David Walliams and Matt Lucas¹⁷⁸. Various other media outlets such as the alternative punk magazine *Vice* echoed that in the past decade the show had not aged well and was no longer deemed appropriate.¹⁷⁹ It is difficult to gauge the sincerity of the sudden backlash towards *Little Britain* given its astonishing success and celebration at the time of production. Indeed, the show and its creators were publicly hailed as 'national treasures'¹⁸⁰ and received a plethora of awards throughout the years; from the British Comedy Awards in 2004 (for Best TV Comedy, People's Choice Award

¹⁷⁶ Sharon Lockyer. 'Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain' in *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*. Ed. By Sharon Lockyer. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010) p.1.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p.1.

¹⁷⁸ Toby Moses. 'Little Britain removed from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox due to use of blackface'. [online] The Guardian. 09 June 2020. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/09/little-britain-removed-from-bbc-iplayer-netflix-and-britbox-blackface>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

¹⁷⁹ Angus Harrison. 'Little Britain' Has Not Aged Very Well. 09 February 2018. [online] Vice.com. Available at: <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/evmxyk/little-britain-has-not-aged-very-well>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

¹⁸⁰ Gareth McLean. 'Don't Be Cruel'. *The Guardian*. 16 October 2004.

and Best TV Comedy Actor [David Walliams]); British Comedy Awards in 2005 (for Best Comedy Programme and the Ronnie Barker Writers' Award); a National TV Award 2005 (for Most Popular Comedy Programme); a BAFTA 2005 (for Best Comedy Programme); two Rose d'Or Awards in 2005; and an International Emmy award in 2006.¹⁸¹ In 2005, the Radio Times poll named Lucas and Walliams the most powerful people in television comedy, and in 2008 Channel 4 included Lucas and Walliams in their *New Heroes of Comedy* documentary.¹⁸² The industry recognition undoubtedly stemmed from the very strong viewing figures that the show consistently achieved. Series two became the highest-rated show on BBC Three with an average 1.5 million viewers. Following its move to BBC 1, it achieved an average rating of 5.5 million, above average for post-9pm ratings¹⁸³. The audience further increased with the third series, with the first episode achieving 9.5 million views, a figure that accounted for almost forty per cent of the television audience.¹⁸⁴ Further to a large amount of the general public, the show also counted rather established members of society as their fans. It was therefore not only popular culture that embraced the fandom of Little Britain, as traditional members of society such as the Royal Family (Duchess of Cornwall, Prince William and Harry), the Blair family which at the time was the Prime Minister and the actor/author Alan Bennett publicly praised the series, seemingly unifying the country through comedy.¹⁸⁵ The series' success was finally commemorated in the 2008 Guinness World Records as the highest-selling comedy DVD in the world.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸¹ Lockyer. 'Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain'. p.3.

¹⁸² Ibid. p.3

¹⁸³ Stephen Armstrong. 'Middle England Has Fallen Head over Heels for Outrageous Little Britain. Yeah, but No, but Why?' *Sunday Times*. 30 October 2005: 16 quoted in Lockyer. 'Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain'. p.3.

¹⁸⁴ Lockyer. 'Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain'. p.3.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. p.3

¹⁸⁶ Dugan, Emily. 'Little Britain Enters Record Books with £3m DVD. The

Although the rapid decision to remove the complete series from online streaming services might suggest otherwise, *Little Britain* was no stranger to controversy, even at the height of its fame. It was routinely criticised for being too transgressive, ‘grotesquely un-PC by mocking the disabled, gay, poor, elderly or overweight, and for reinforcing negative racial stereotypes’¹⁸⁷. In series three, Walliams and Lucas first introduced non-white recurring characters; Desiree DeVere, a black woman played by Walliams and Ting Tong Macadangdang, the Thai mail-order bride played by Lucas¹⁸⁸. The introduction of these characters increased the criticisms against the series and raised concerns that it was bordering on ‘racist’ and increasingly inappropriate humour. In 2005, the incontinence charity Incontact criticised *Little Britain* for its sketch that showed Mrs. Emery, an elderly lady with the tendency to urinate on the floor without noticing. The charity complained that ‘The comedy sketch [...] was in poor taste, and for many of our 15,000 members particularly offensive. People with incontinence are often ridiculed, but it is not a joke, and the condition can be life-destroying for many older people’.¹⁸⁹ In response, the BBC spokesperson defended the sketch, stating:

Comedy is a subjective medium, and the *Little Britain* characters have been deliberately magnified to cartoonish proportions. This particular

Independent Online. 27 September 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/little-britain-enters-record-books-withpound3m-dvd-403665.html>. quoted in Lockyer. ‘Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain’. P.3.

¹⁸⁷ Leapman, Michael. ‘Littler Britain: Once Scathingly Witty, Why Has the Gloriously un-PC’ *Little Britain* Suddenly Lost Its Way? The Daily Mail, 13 December 2005: 15. And Dominic Cavendish, ‘Big Laughs at Little Britain: Lucas and Walliam’s Grotesque Characters Shocked and Awed Comedy Lovers’. The Daily Telegraph, 24 December 2005: 16. Quoted in Lockyer. ‘Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain’. P.5.

¹⁸⁸ Lockyer. ‘Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain’. P.10.

¹⁸⁹ BBC NEWS. ‘Little Britain sketch criticised.’ [online] Available at: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4460876.stm>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

sketch is exaggerated to such an extreme level, it's clear that it has no grounding in reality.¹⁹⁰

This defence was upheld despite an increasingly critical response by viewers who deemed the third series to be increasingly offensive having turned 'vicious and cruel'¹⁹¹. Whether this loss of interest stemmed from the increasingly grotesque transgression or perhaps a sense of boredom given the repetitive form of the series is open for debate, yet it is noteworthy that despite of this increasingly critical objection towards the series, the BBC did not believe it was necessary to censor nor remove the series, thereby establishing an official stance of approval towards the show.

In 2007, research conducted by the Open University and the BBC found that the most popular subjects of jokes were national, ethnic or racial identities and sex.¹⁹² Sarita Malik similarly argues that the axis of a large proportion of British comedy has rested on notions of racial difference¹⁹³. Parallel sentiments have been stated to be characteristics of American humour:

Ethnic identity humor plays a huge role in American culture. It's part of the toughening-up process that leads to mutual tolerance (if not mutual admiration) in America's mongrel culture. Theoretically, we are all fair

¹⁹⁰ BBC NEWS. 'Little Britain sketch criticised.'

¹⁹¹ Tony Barrell. 'The Battle of Little Britain'. Times Online. 6 November 2006. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article621516.

Ece. [Accessed 06 January 2022]. Quoted in Lockyer. 'Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain'. P.7.

¹⁹² Quoted in Sarita Malik *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*. (London: Sage Publishing, 2002) quoted in Sarita Malik 'How Little Britain does Race' in *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*. Ed. By Sharon Lockyer. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010) P.75.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p.92.

game. Everybody has a right to be ignorant in America. We are expected to be able to ‘give as good as we get,’ to ‘dish it out and take it.’¹⁹⁴

However, this concept of mutual tolerance and acknowledgement of a fondness for such humour is not universal. In his book *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Global Race Joking*, Simon Weaver argues that ‘racist humour is a form of racist rhetoric that supports serious racism’¹⁹⁵, a similar stance to his earlier argument that ‘jokes may act as a type of coping mechanism for the racist, in the form of a palliative because the effects of joking allow for the expression, reinforcement and denial of racism.’¹⁹⁶ Although it is unreasonable to neglect the argument that racist humour *can* perpetuate racism, it is equally absurd to argue that all humour that *invokes* a cultural stereotype works to *endorse* that stereotype. There is an argument to be made that the more tolerant we are about each other as a society, the more tolerant we should be about making jokes about each other.

Lucas has previously discussed that *Little Britain* is a commemoration of diversity ‘the concept of the show is that we’re everybody: tall, short, fat, thin, black, white, straight, gay, man, woman, whatever’¹⁹⁷. The point of such comedy is therefore not to enforce social boundaries between ‘them’ and ‘us’ (as in the superiority/social correction hypothesis) but to join together in a community that laughs *at and with itself*. This approach therefore erases the distinction between *laughing at* and

¹⁹⁴ John Strausbaugh, *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult Imitation in American Popular Culture*. (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2007).

¹⁹⁵ Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Globe Race Joking*. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011). P.8

¹⁹⁶ S. J. Weaver, Humour, rhetoric and racism: a sociological critique of racist humour. PHD thesis University of Bristol. P.25. <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/34506125/534509.pdf>. [Accessed 04 January 2022].

¹⁹⁷ Tony Barrell. ‘The Battle of Little Britain’. Times Online. 6 November 2006. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article621516. Ece. [Accessed 06 January 2022]. Quoted in Lockyer. ‘Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain’. P.2.

laughing with, as the community makes no provisions for social outcasts. The use of comedic techniques is as diverse as the characters, with Lucas and Walliams engaging with caricature, drag, satire and repeatable catchphrases¹⁹⁸. The series skilfully exposed the biases that people have towards one another regardless of their race, religion or sexuality. Yet the question surrounding the discourse around *Little Britain* is often whether they wrote equal-opportunity satire or whether they only ‘punched down’. The answer to this question arguably depends on the lens with which the series is assessed, given that a carnivalesque reading does not make provisions for the existence of a discriminatory ‘other’ who can be punched down. As Sarita Malik argues ‘*Little Britain* works against the traditional idea that, in racial terms, it is only ethnic minorities that can be considered as a ‘vulnerable’ social group or be positioned as the ‘victims’ of national humour’¹⁹⁹.

The issue of blackface is further complicated when introducing arguments by minstrelsy scholars who consider early minstrel performances and blackface an important historical milestone for the culture of American peasantry ‘in short, a manifestation of a carnivalesque world’.²⁰⁰ Scholars of minstrelsy such as Dale Cockrell, David Roediger, Eric Lott and W.T. Lhamon and Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen argue that there is more to minstrelsy than basic depictions of racist stereotypes. Instead, there is a consensus amongst several scholars that ‘the foundation of American comedy, song, and dance was laid down by white and black

¹⁹⁸ Lockyer. ‘Introduction: Britain, Britain, Little Britain’. P.2.

¹⁹⁹ Sarita Malik ‘How Little Britain does Race’. P.85.

²⁰⁰ Jon W. Finson. *The Voices that Are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p.160.

minstrel stage legends'²⁰¹, therefore 'if you dismiss [minstrelsy] as simply 'demeaning', you miss half the picture'²⁰².

This perception of the trajectory of popular culture is starkly reminiscent of Bakhtin's argument that the popular culture derived from the Medieval carnival. Indeed, outlines of the identities surrounding blackface were distinctly antiauthoritarian as 'despite the appearance of minstrelsy as a servile tradition, there were elements of *liberation* in it from its very beginning, and these were instrumental to its popularity'²⁰³. Certainly, 'Blackface performance harboured dormant seeds of resistance, even as it served more consistently as a potent tool of racism and discrimination'²⁰⁴. It is undeniable that the carnivalesque of early minstrelsy overturned societal rules and allowed artists and performers to diverge from the sensible ideas, instead rejoicing in the ridiculousness of peasants governing over rulers and the marginalised becoming powerful. The multifaceted history of blackface is further complicated as 'early minstrelsy was characterized not only by racism but also by misogyny, nationalism, cross-racial identification, and working-class hostility toward mockery of the bourgeoisie, and it helped its immigrant performers to transform themselves from racial Others to ethnic white Americans.'²⁰⁵ The blackface minstrel show therefore represented 'the first formal public acknowledgement by whites of black culture'²⁰⁶ and created the United

²⁰¹ Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen. *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012) P.4.

²⁰² Taylor and Austen. *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop*. P.4

²⁰³ Ibid p.27.

²⁰⁴ W. T. Lhamon, Jr. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) p.45.

²⁰⁵ Robert Nowatzki. 'Blackin' up is us Doin' White Folks Doin' Us': Blackface Minstrelsy and Racial Performance in Contemporary American Fiction and Film. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 18(2), pp.115-136. DOI: 10.1080/10436920701380695. [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²⁰⁶ Lott, Eric. "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy." *Representations*, no. 39, University of California Press, 1992, [pp. 23–50], p.23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928593>.

States' first definable national popular culture, beginning a commercial industry 'at a time when it lacked a definable national culture'²⁰⁷. In neighbourhoods such as the diverse and working class Five Points in New York City, 'there was an 'eagerness to combine, share, join, draw from opposites, play on opposition'²⁰⁸. Lhamon furthermore argues that the culture of slaves symbolized liberty to blackface entertainers and fans who, 'unmistakably expressed fondness for black wit and gestures'²⁰⁹. He continues by explaining that initial blackface minstrel shows permitted white people to identify with black people as representations of all the liberties and desires that employers, moral reformers and churches 'were working to suppress'²¹⁰. The idea that blackface and minstrel shows united and empowered the working classes is further reiterated by David Roediger who refers to Sean Wilentz' argument in *Chants Black* that 'as [blackface minstrelsy] developed, the real object of scorn [...] was less Jim Crow than the would-be aristocrat – either the white interlocutor or the dandified black.'²¹¹ Lhamon agrees, furthermore stating that 'blackface action is usually slashing back at the pretensions and politesse of authority more than at blackness. Certainly, in these earliest instances of white fascination with black performance there was little laughing at blacks'²¹² as what 'frightened [The New York's elites] the most [...] was when this white and black lumpenproletariat merged into a common force with a distinctive consciousness'²¹³, or in other words, a community that approached their differences

²⁰⁷ William John Mahar. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). P.9.

²⁰⁸ Lhamon, Jr. *Raising Cain*. P.3.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.44.

²¹¹ Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. (London and New York: Verso, 1991) p.123.

²¹² Lhamon, Jr. *Raising Cain*. P.22.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p.35.

through a collective carnivalesque lens that went against the authoritarian approved narrative of irreparable differences between different members of society.

These arguments are important to bear in mind when analysing why *Little Britain* was removed from streaming sites. One of the reasons the series got taken down was due to Lucas' portrayal of the Black Reverend Jesse King in Series 2, episode 6.²¹⁴ The two-and-a-half-minute long sketch opens with an establishing shot depicting churchgoers approaching an Anglo-Saxon country church. The camera pans to the left, stopping at the church sign, directing the audiences' attention to the absurd notice that the church is closed on Sundays. The absurdity is further reflected by the voiceover narration (Tom Baker) which informs the audience that 'Christianity is one of the most popular religions in Britain with over eighty members.' The absurdity foreshadows the remaining trajectory of the sketch, as the camera cuts to the inside of the church with Walliams portraying a church minister who introduces his parishioners to Jesse King, the exchange Reverend from Harlem, New York. The scene immediately cuts to a medium shot of Reverend King (Matt Lucas in Blackface), who is stood at the end of the aisle, red microphone in hand, his left arm outstretched crying out 'HALLELUJAH!!'. Lucas' grandeur is emphasized by his microphone, a prop that may be necessary in a grand American church that televises their services but seems wholly out of place in a small country church in England. The camera reverts to a full shot, framing the parishioners who have turned around in awkward silence to welcome the visiting Reverend. King (Lucas) commences his service stating in a pristine American accent: 'I...is from the ghetto! You...is from the ghetto! We is all from the ghetto! But how we gonna

²¹⁴ 'Pastor Jesse King, from the Ghetto' [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6BzBntT_w8> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

get outta the ghetto? I tell you how you is gonna get outta the ghetto! We is gonna fight the power! Fight the power!’ (0:04:23 – 0:04:44). As he is walking down the aisle, he approaches a parishioner with his microphone, asking a middle-aged, middle-class woman: ‘What we gonna do, mamma?’. She timidly replies in received pronunciation ‘fight the power, perhaps?’ to which the Reverend replies ‘Praise the Lord. Hallelujah!’, placing his palm on the lady’s forehead making her faint in either an apparent spiritual apex or shock at witnessing the culturally distinct service. The sketch continues with the Reverend preaching eccentric gibberish to the congregation (hi-de-hi-de-hi, ho-de-ho-de-ho) after which he calls upon Lord Jesus to help him ‘heal the sick and the lame’. King asks whether anyone in the congregation can’t walk, before quick-stepping backwards and forwards to ask if there is anyone present who ‘can’t do that’. Whilst continuing by asking whether anyone present may suffer from leprosy, King catches a man sat in the first aisle coughing, asking him ‘Brother, what be your sickness?’. The man replies ‘Oh, I’m fine. Just a slight cough’, the comedy once more stemming from the sharp observation and juxtaposition of British mannerisms and apologetic politeness. Undeterred, the Reverend invites him to join him for some faith healing, a practice that does not commonly occur during mass at British services. As the parishioner gets up to be ‘cured’, King begins to talk in tongues (Anno-hey-whoa-whoa! Anno-hey-whoa-whoa!) after which he slaps him and asks whether it has cleared up. The parishioner replies that his neck is still a bit tickly, upon which King flicks a packet of cough sweets from his jacket pocket handing them over to the parishioner. Confused, the man walks back to his seat, while the sketch ends with King shouting ‘He can walk! Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!’. The two-and-a-half-minute long sketch has presently become a victim of what Alex Clayton refers to as the ‘grand

reduction'²¹⁵. Thus, the whole sketch has been reduced to Lucas' act of 'blacking up' in order to impersonate the black pastor, which has been argued to be motivated from a stance of superiority by repeating the antiquated minstrel practice of blackface that may be understood to 'punch down'. However, I would argue that the comedy here does not stem from Lucas' 'blacking up', but from the ability to highlight the radically different cultural approaches to faith through his pristine observation skills and his accurate comedic timing. There is a common ground upon which the culture clash takes place, given that all characters in the sketch are practicing Christians. The sketch is therefore not mocking African Americans, but instead highlights the absurdity of condemning different approaches to preaching within the same religion, given all members are united in their belief in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, it emphasizes how this different approach may seem uncanny to a foreigner's point of view, whilst erasing the distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with* the congregation given there is no need to alienate any party within the sketch. In an act of impossible foreshadowing, the sketch even draws similarities to the reaction of the British guests to the US Reverend's Royal sermon during Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding, making Walliams and Lucas' observational comedy even more pertinent.²¹⁶

Although comedy is, 'a double-edged game, in which it is impossible to ensure that the audience is laughing with, not at, the stereotype'²¹⁷, it is simultaneously impossible to authoritatively state that the audience is laughing *at* the stereotype.

²¹⁵ Alex Clayton. *Funny How? Sketch Comedy and the Art of Humor*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2020) p.46.

²¹⁶ Lyall, Sarah. 'Meghan Markle Introduces the British Monarchy to the African-American Experience' (Published 2018). [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/europe/uk-royal-black-priest-choir.html>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²¹⁷ June Givanni. 'Black and White in Television' in *Remote Control: Dilemmas of Black Intervention in British Film and TV*. (London: BFI, 1995) [13–28]. P.21.

As Alex Clayton states: ‘to speak with authority about *other* people’s responses, without consulting them, is to risk presumptuousness.’²¹⁸ Indeed, *Little Britain’s* Jesse King sketch has garnered over 1.2 million views on YouTube. Even a cursory read through the top-comments demonstrates that no monolithic reaction (of offence) is present. The top three, top comments each address this discrepancy: ‘I am a black American woman, and I laughed until I cried. Felt sooo good!!!; Black American here laughing hard as hell bcoz this is exactly how most pastors are here; Honestly, I’m black and have NEVER EVER had an issue with little Britain.’²¹⁹ Furthermore, two reaction videos have been posted in the last year, both by black YouTubers. Josh from the YouTube account ‘After Work Reactions’ summarises the sketch as ‘ridiculous, and crazy accurate’ (00:02:48 – 00:02:42)²²⁰, continuing ‘that’s so funny, because it really, really does remind me of my pastor from the church I grew up in’ (00:03:36 – 00:03:33).²²¹ The Youtuber from the ‘Island Girlz HaveFlow’ account had a similar reaction stating, ‘I hope you guys enjoyed that one because golly, I did!’ (00:04:44 – 00:04:40)²²². Neither YouTubers commented on Lucas’ blackface nor raised any concerns about being offended. As Malik argues ‘[...] there is no monolithic reaction to black programmes by black audiences’²²³ and I would argue by extension the same applies to black representation in non-segregated programmes such as *Little Britain*. In fact, to assume that everybody from a certain race will react in a certain

²¹⁸ Alex Clayton, *Funny How?* p.13.

²¹⁹ ‘Pastor Jesse King, from the Ghetto’ [video] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6BzBntT_w8> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²²⁰ After Work Reactions, 2020. ‘Little Britain - Pastor Jesse King, from the Ghetto Reaction’. [video] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXvNaNv3Hqo>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Island Girlz HaveFlow, 2021. Little Britain - Pastor Jess king Reaction. [video] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEQS1h5uNcU>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²²³ Malik, Sarita. *Representing Black Britain*. P.100.

way does more to stereotype people solely based on their skin colour, ironically the reason why *Little Britain* is oftentimes (arguably unjustly) condemned. These examples naturally do not provide an authoritative argument that *Little Britain* is not offensive to black viewers, however it is precisely this impossibility to ascertain this offence that serves as evidence to highlight that no such monolithic argument exists.

The argument for removing the series is further complicated when assessing the institutions that performed the authoritative culling of the series. The BBC has notoriously failed to achieve its own BAME leadership target of 15% by 2020 and in August of 2020, only a couple of months after *Little Britain* had been removed from iPlayer, was accused by its staff of being ‘institutionally racist’.²²⁴ In a similar vein, only 9% of the *Netflix* leadership team are black.²²⁵ This data is of importance as it raises the question as to who is responsible for the decisions that were made and perhaps more importantly, whose opinions they reflect. The irony of having a corporation that is 90% non-black prescribe what will be offensive to black audience members is tragically not a representation of inclusivity but rather ‘others’ the black audience by highlighting their apparent lack of deciding such matters for themselves.

Additionally, the power of such institutions to direct the discourse surrounding culture is further problematised when compared to the historical development of blackface and minstrel shows. Discourses surrounding blackface rarely mention

²²⁴ Nadine White. ‘Exclusive: BBC Staff Accuse Corporation Of Being ‘Institutionally Racist’’. 2020 [online] HuffPost UK. Available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/bbc-institutionally-racist_uk_5f3f9c78c5b697824f977779> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²²⁵ Julia Stoll. ‘Netflix: ethnicity of employees in the U.S. 2021’ in *Statista*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/1000578/netflix-employees-ethnicity/>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

that the success and communal unification of minstrel shows became the target of an undermining ruling power: ‘Almost immediately, minstrelsy’s power to unify and excite class consciousness troubled elites, who took steps to eliminate it and, failing that, to recast its character.’²²⁶ Lhamon further argues that the element of blackface thereafter was transformed from being an affirmation of interracial solidarity to an inversion utilised to establish racist stereotypes that served a discourse of divisiveness.²²⁷ Simultaneously, minstrelsy was subject to continuous critique as being low entertainment thereby manipulating later performances to accommodate more genteel tastes hence minimising the shows subversive quality. Lhamon’s analysis of how blackface developed into a tool for oppression is eerily echoed in today’s discourse about the offensive nature of comedy such as *Little Britain* which is now considered to be an ‘incorrect’, unintellectual and cheap form of comedy. It returns the dialogue to the apparent distaste of modern times for the carnivalesque power of unity and regeneration which seems to be continually undermined by a Bergsonian insistence of corrective behaviour. With the instance of *Little Britain*, this discourse is perpetuating an idea that large swathes of the population were either ignorant to, or openly in support of racism by enjoying a show that is now prescriptively considered incorrect humour that punches down on vulnerable members of society. Through this reading, the fans of *Little Britain* are seen as deficient due to their ability to laugh at and with, what I would argue, are a carnivalesque menagerie of characters who were outrageously exaggerated and unapologetic in their boundaryless targets. Yet, Bergson’s mechanic approach to comedy fails to acknowledge the historic

²²⁶ Howard L Sacks. “Turning about Jim Crow.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, [pp. 187-194] P.190. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041639>. [Accessed 14 January 2022].

²²⁷ Ibid., P.190.

evidence of the power of a communal laughter, which brings communities together through the grotesque humbling of individuals, highlighting the flaws not of races, sexuality or other marginalised characteristics, but of humanity as a collective. How this can be remedied will be discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

Corrective laughter and a call to return to the festive

The polarisation of present-day comedy centres around what appears to be a binary existence of comic purpose. One faction regards comedy through a regenerative lens, achieved mostly by celebrating the liberatory notion of the carnivalesque. However, the opposition and arguably dominant view, stresses a negative notion of laughter. This notion sees comedy through the Bergsonian concept of the corrective which is thought to rectify nonconform members of society through humiliation. Contemporary culture's stress on the negative hinders the creative endeavours of the party outside of the norm, as the possible condemnation for engaging in carnivalesque humour seems omnipresent. This need for correction stems mainly from the contemporary viewpoint that comedy is equated with mockery, the extent of which will now be discussed.

Comedy and mockery

As evident in examples from the first chapter, contemporary culture has fostered a difficult relationship with politically incorrect humour. The perception that comedy is on par with ridicule explains the anxiety surrounding the representation of marginalised groups in these instances. Although the Bergsonian conception of the comic allows for a laughing community, this community is limited only to conforming members, or in other words, an in-group and an out-group. Whilst the in-group, the "us", always remains the singular norm, the out-group, or "them" proliferate. Thus, all comedy which is seen as 'eccentric' is deemed inflexible, devoid of understanding the current climate and accepted norms on popular discourse. As such, comedy in contemporary culture is often regarded as a social corrective. The partition between the 'us' and 'them' arguably relies on comic amusement being dependent on the notion of a communal understanding and

shared cultural assumptions. This understanding surrounds rules which have been, to a certain extent, widely accepted in the culture of a society. The norms concern anything from intellect to personal hygiene, so long as there is a common agreement on the matter. It is this shared understanding that produces a communal laughter, as an individual's laughter essentially admits to their affiliation with this certain culture. The membership here is based and celebrated solely on these shared assumptions which therefore strengthen the cultural bond whilst too reinforcing these communal assumptions. Humour is thus an active participant in the creation and conservation of a society's culture as it continuously repeats and reinforces their cultural parameters and the corresponding unity. However, as aforementioned, the creation of unity implies that there must also exist an opposition, as where there is an *us*, there is also a *them*, against whom the rest of 'us' are defined. In the Bergsonian conception of comedy, the 'other' consist of those who deviate (or are alleged to deviate) from the norms celebrated in the comic event.²²⁸ The 'other' is seen as a negative in need of correction. From this point of view, comedy seems essentially cruel, doubly so in cases where the target is defined by a social status deemed 'marginalised'.

The contemporary concept of avoiding targeting the marginalised is bound to the idea that political correctness will empower those less fortunate, through the dismissal of jokes that make members of traditionally oppressed groups such as ethnic minorities, the economically disadvantaged, LGBTQ, or people with disabilities, the butt of the joke. A worthwhile introduction at this point is a historical analysis of black humour in the United States published four years after

²²⁸ Carroll, *Humour* p.77

the introduction of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1968, Nancy Arnez and Clara Anthony defined the history of ‘negro humour’ as having undergone three distinct stages.²²⁹ The first stage commenced with ‘an oral tradition’ which created an ‘in-group’ amongst the people outside of the mainstream.²³⁰ There was an undeniable link between ‘a relationship between the group’s social and economic position and the humour the group [created].’²³¹ Following on, the humour ceased to be purely in-group, as ‘a public humour perpetuated by outsiders [used] a minority group, Negroes, as the brunt of half-truth caricatures.’²³² This created the tradition of black-faced comedy and relied on the mockery of the marginalised. The third stage is the one which Arnez and Anthony considered contemporary comedy to have reached at the time of writing. Also considered a public humour, the stage paralleled the social and economic fortunes of black citizens which had improved considerably during the sixties. As Arnez and Anthony argue:

‘[...] because Negroes [had] become less negative about their heritage, even, in fact, to the point of being proud of it, they [were] able to create their own “public” humour. It is self-conscious, but in a new way, self-conscious because it is image-creating. Now the group permits a sharing of its humour with the outside group, while continuing to perpetuate and enrich its own private in-group humour.’²³³

Arnez and Anthony thus argue that humour for the ‘marginalised’ black community consisted of ‘a self-conscious humour for a general audience whom

²²⁹ Nancy Levi Arnez and Clara B. Anthony. “Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire.” *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 29, no. 4, 1968, [pp. 339–346], p.339. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/274014. [Accessed 11 Feb. 2021]

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, P.340.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, P.340.

²³² *Ibid.*, p.340.

²³³ Arnez, p.340.

they no longer [feared] or [felt] inferior to.’²³⁴ This brief look at an historical example of humour within a marginalised community highlights two points. Firstly, the idea of policing comedy in the name of social progress should remain suspect given that comedy has a long history of being written and performed by the non-dominant culture and being employed as a fruitful tool for both challenging and surviving oppression without overtly criticising the status quo. In essence, the ‘marginalised’ in this instance emancipated their status through comedy, allowing the creation of a unified culture without the reliance on spiteful mockery. Secondly, as the circumstances of marginalised groups has arguably improved substantially since the 1960s, both with regards to social status and the increased visible diversity within popular culture, should contemporary comedy not have reached a stage now where the Bergsonian notion of the corrective is regressive?

It is worth putting this into a historical trajectory involving a gradual shift towards the idea of comedy as an expression of moral superiority. We can chart this development, in very broad terms, since the Medieval Ages, from the carnivalesque, to the humanistic, concluding with the Bergsonian. Commencing with the Bakhtinian sense of carnivalesque humour, as an endeavour that challenged societal norms within a communal mockery which did not position anybody as an ‘other’, as discussed in previous chapters. Following the Renaissance and the rise of the private sphere, according to Daniel Wickberg’s account of humour in this period, comedy became more humanistic, more interested in the individual as the subject of laughter. Referring to literature during

²³⁴ Elsie Griffin Williams. ‘The Comedy of Richard Pryor as Social Satire’ in *American Humor*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1977, pp. 15–19. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42594583. [Accessed 11 Feb. 2021].

the Renaissance period, Wickberg suggests that ‘What was important in defining the person was less the feature that identified him with the type he represented, and more the feature that distinguished him from the type’²³⁵. Thus, an individual now became defined by their character, in comparison to earlier understandings wherein a person was solely defined by their associations, trade, or social standing. Wickberg argues that ‘this change in meaning – from physical to the psychical, from exterior to interior, from objective to subjective – can be seen for what it is, a fundamental revolution of what it is to be a person’²³⁶. This shift towards the acknowledgement of the individual is of importance as it thus also acknowledges the individuality of other members of society. There is a kind of ‘laughing at’ here, but the laughter is essentially generous. At a certain point, however, the norm of laughter turned into what Bergson identified as corrective humour, which entailed laughing at someone who displayed eccentricities that did not conform to the established norm. Despite all the changes brought by the 20th century, this notion that laughter is essentially corrective and urging conformism has lingered. This is why comedy is seen as dangerous in a society that rightly prizes diversity. This is the notion that Berys Nigel identifies when he writes of humour as a potential ‘instrument of oppression... a way of expressing contempt towards those outside the privileged group, as a way of keeping outsiders in their place’²³⁷.

Although the corrective notion arguably stems from a strong desire to empower the marginalised and shower humanity in empathy, it dismisses comedy as purely

²³⁵ Wickberg., p.20.

²³⁶ Ibid., p.26.

²³⁷ Berys Nigel Gaut, ‘Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour’ in *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1):51-68 (1998). *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/phl.1998.0014. [Pp. 53-54]. [Accessed 11 Feb. 2021].

a power play. It disregards the nuanced examples of comedy which engage with politically incorrect topics whilst often offering a constructive criticism of prejudices. Furthermore, it patronises the audience who is no longer being stimulated, or even just titillated, as such comedy focuses mainly on simply validating the audience and its belief system. This validation is further complicated as it assumes a certain belief system on behalf of individuals who may not identify with such opinions. Indeed, it irrevocably identifies certain members of society as marginalised, as the lack of critical discourse hinders these individuals from emancipating from this identity. This approach, therefore, results in culture policing comedy, which consequently divorces comedy from the artistic sphere as it is no longer producing culture, only repeating, and reinforcing a set culture with its norms and boundaries. I would argue that this leads society to a standstill, as the regenerative forces of comedy are shackled in a system that is too afraid to laugh at itself. Bergson's privatised, negative laughter is thus now executed with the same publicity as the marketplace, as social media abounds in the corrective humiliation of no 'eccentricities' which are seen as being outside of the established norms. However, whilst Bakhtin's language of the marketplace 'abuses while praising and praises while abusing'²³⁸ the new marketplace is devoid of the same sense of community upon which the carnivalesque laughter flourished and with which it was able to offer its regenerative benefits.

However, despite the Bergsonian stress on contemporary culture, some residue of the carnivalesque remains, perhaps most notably in comedians' conception of what they are doing in comedy. For example, David Walliams insists that his work is not fuelled by malice, stating: 'you've got to understand comedy for me is

²³⁸ Bakhtin, p.415.

celebrating things'²³⁹. Unsurprisingly, his *Little Britain* partner Matt Lucas has a similar view, confirming 'the show is a celebration of the different types we have in Britain. It's a comedy show, it's not a documentary'²⁴⁰ As we have seen, Mikhail Bakhtin advocated for the power of what he terms 'festive folk laughter', which he argues 'presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death, it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses.'²⁴¹ This conception of comedy is defined by irreverence. It has no need to place a distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with* as, for the celebrator of carnivalesque humour, these two notions are essentially the same thing. Whilst they might be laughing *at* a member of society, this is done within an understanding that this person is not an 'other'. Instead, it is a celebration of their eccentricity, which is arguably what a diverse society consists of. The carnivalesque is built on the shared assumption that *all* eccentricities are welcome, and it is this characteristic that is in need of making a return to contemporary culture.

²³⁹ David Walliams would "definitely" do Little Britain differently today: "it's a different time now". The Radio Times <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/comedy/david-walliams-would-definitely-do-little-britain-differently-today-its-a-different-time-now/>.

²⁴⁰ Decca Aitkenhead. 'Matt Lucas: 'I feel very vulnerable''. 04 September 2009 [online] The Guardian. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/04/matt-lucas-little-britain>> [Accessed 14 January 2021].

²⁴¹ Bakhtin, 2009, p.92.

Conclusion

It's a big club, and we're all in it!

This thesis set out to analyse the current conceptions of comedy in light of contemporary discourses surrounding the boundaries between offensive mockery and ‘un-PC’ comedy. The examples of contemporary developments in comedy such as trigger warnings and the removal of series from streaming sites indicate the existence of a contemporary mindset split between two rival conceptions of the comic, partitioned between a Bergsonian comic regarded within the framework of the corrective and a Bakhtinian ‘folk laughter’ which views society as a unified whole in which mockery is understood as the mockery of a part of this unity, and not the mockery of an ‘other’ in need of correction. Through the close case-studies of *Blazing Saddles* and *Little Britain*, both recent examples of comedy that have undergone prescriptive or restrictive measures, it becomes apparent that although these actions may have stemmed from good intentions in a Bergsonian attempt to ‘correct’ society, they fail to acknowledge the nuances present in these comedies and how a carnivalesque reading results in a positive outcome for society despite its engagement with actions that may be deemed offensive and in need of correction.

Furthermore, a discrepancy of power has crystallised, between the incredibly diverse public devoid of a singular opinion towards the comic and increasingly monolithic institutions which have set out to prescribe comic boundaries, oftentimes disregarding their own bias and hypocrisy. As such, it could be argued that contemporary comedy has become disenfranchised, giving rise to an

increasingly damaging division, as the Bergsonian corrective lens refrains from offering a unified platform from which pertinent social issues can be assessed. From this point of view, comedy seems essentially cruel, doubly so in cases where the target is defined by a social status deemed ‘marginalised’. For Bakhtin, however, the people are the unified mass of society occupying the powerless binary of the feudalistic partition, or in other words the unofficial realm which is also where the carnival as a folklore event is positioned. Thus, the carnival allows power to be inverted, as the people are in control of the organisation, given they can execute it in a way they deem fit.

As such, for comedy to leave the divisive impasse behind and offer society the possibility of reformative improvement, it must remove the Bergsonian distinction between laughing *at* and laughing *with*, and instead dare to acknowledge the regeneration and progress that carnivalesque comedy can achieve through its pursuit of collective laughter.

Works Cited

Aitkenhead, Decca. 'Matt Lucas: 'I feel very vulnerable''. 04 September 2009 [online] *The Guardian*. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2009/sep/04/matt-lucas-little-britain>> [Accessed 14 January 2021].

American Film Institute. "AFI'S 100 YEARS...100 LAUGHS", American Film Institute, 2020 <https://www.afi.com/afis-100-years-100-laughs/> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009).

Armstrong, Stephen. 'Middle England Has Fallen Head over Heels for Outrageous Little Britain. Yeah, but No, but Why?' *Sunday Times*. 30 October 2005:16.

Arnez, Nancy Levi, and Clara B. Anthony. "Contemporary Negro Humor as Social Satire." *Phylon* (1960-), vol. 29, no. 4, 1968, pp. 339–346. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/274014. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Arts Professional, *Freedom of Expression Report 2020*.

Aubrey, Elizabeth. 'Matt Lucas says he's ready to bring back Little Britain' <https://www.nme.com/news/tv/matt-lucas-says-hes-ready-to-bring-back-little-britain-2640581>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Austin, J.L. *How to do things with words*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

Bakhtin, Mikhail.

Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).

Rabelais and his World. Volume 10, translated by Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009.)

Barendt, Eric. 'What is the Harm of Hate Speech?' in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22, 539-553 (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-10002-0>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Barrell, Tony. 'The Battle of Little Britain'. *Times Online*. 6 November 2006. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/article621516. Ece. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1970).

BBC News.

‘Little Britain sketch criticised.’ [online] Available at:
<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/4460876.stm>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

‘Mel Brooks: We have become stupidly politically correct’, *BBC NEWS*, 21 September 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-41348510>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

‘Little Britain: Should we switch off the past?’ [online] 10 June 2020. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-52994195>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

‘Mel Brooks: Blazing Saddles would never be made today.’ [online] 21 September 2017. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-41337151>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

BBC Press Office, ‘Little Britain series three starts Thursday 17 November at 9.00pm on BBC ONE’http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/11_november/08/britain_facts.shtml [Accessed 28 January 2021].

Bergson, Henri.

Creative Evolution (New York: Dover Publications, 2012).

Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Translated by Cloudesley Brereton, Fred Rothwell, (New York: Courier Corporation, 2013).

Berlant, Lauren and Ngai, Sianne. ‘Comedy Has Issues’ in *Critical Inquiry*, Volume: 43, Number 2, Winter 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/6896666>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Blackall, Molly. ‘David Walliams and Matt Lucas apologise for Little Britain blackface’ in *The Guardian* published Sunday 14th June 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/14/david-walliams-and-matt-lucas-apologise-for-little-britain-blackface>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. (London: Continuum, 1994).

Bonilla-Silva, E. Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation. *American Sociological Review*. 1997;62(3):465–480.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2657316>.

Bonnstetter, Beth E. “Mel Brooks Meets Kenneth Burke (and Mikhail Bakhtin): Comedy and Burlesque in Satiric Film.” *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 63, no. 1, [University of Illinois Press, University Film & Video Association], 2011, pp. 18–31, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.63.1.0018>.

Brandist, C. ‘Bakhtin, Marxism and Russian Populism’ in *Materialising Bakhtin*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

Brockes, Emma. ‘Whether it’s Ali G or Tina Fey, ironic racism isn’t funny anymore’ in *The Guardian*. Published Thursday 3rd March 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/03/sacha-baron-cohen-ali-g-tina-fey-amy-poehler-ironic-racism>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2009).

Butler, Judith. *Excitable Speech*, (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1997).

Canby, Vincent. 1974. Screen: ‘Blazing Saddles,’ a Western in Burlesque. *The New York Times*, [online] Available at:
<<https://www.nytimes.com/1974/02/08/archives/screen-blazing-saddles-a-western-in-burlesque.html>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

Carlin, George.

“Filthy Words”, 1973, The Transcript Presented to the Supreme Court in 1978, accessed via University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law.
<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/filthywords.html>.
[Accessed 26 January 2021].

Last Words, (New York: Free Press Simon & Schuster, 2009).

When will Jesus Bring the Pork Chops? (London: Hachette, 2004).

Carr, Jimmy. ‘Political Correctness gone mad’.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3weaaOzHVfg>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Carroll, Noël. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014) DOI: 10.1093/actrade/9780199552221.001.0001 [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Cavendish, Dominic. ‘Big Laughs at *Little Britain*: Lucas and Walliam’s Grotesque Characters Shocked and Awed Comedy Lovers’. *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 December 2005: 16.

Clayton, Alex. *Funny How? Sketch Comedy and the Art of Humor*. (New York: State University of New York Press, 2020).

Coles, Gregory. "The Exorcism of Language: Reclaimed Derogatory Terms and Their Limits." *College English*, vol. 78, no. 5, National Council of Teachers of English, 2016, pp. 424–46, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44075135>.

Corcos, Christina A. 'George Carlin, Constitutional Law Scholar' (2008). *Journal Articles*. 333.https://digitalcommons.law.lsu.edu/faculty_scholarship/333. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Dannagal G. Young, 'Theories and Effects of Political Humor: Discounting Cues, Gateways, and the Impact of Incongruities' in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, ed. Kate Kenski & Kathleen Hall Jamieson, September 2014, DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199793471.013.29_update_001. [Accessed 26 January 2021]. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Destrée, Pierre and Trivigno, Franco V. (eds.), *Laughter, Humor, and Comedy in Ancient Philosophy*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Drysdale, Jennifer. 'Kathy Griffin's Final Tour Date Cancelled Amid Donald Trump Drama'. June 2, 2017. https://www.etonline.com/news/218923_kathy_griffin_final_tour_date_cancel_ed_amid_donald_trump_drama. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Dugan, Emily. 'Little Britain Enters Record Books with £3m DVD. The Independent Online. 27 September 2007. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/little-britain-enters-record-books-withpound3m-dvd-403665.html>. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

Dyer, Richard, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

Eagleton, Terry. *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, (London: Verso Books, 2009).

Eco, Umberto. "The Frames of Comic "Freedom"" in *Camival!*, (Berlin:Walter de Gruyter, 2011).

Fear, David., 2016. Mel Brooks: Why 'Blazing Saddles' Is the 'Funniest Movie Ever Made'. [online] Rolling Stone. Available at: <<https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-features/mel-brooks-why-blazing-saddles-is-the-funniest-movie-ever-made-252004/>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

Featherstone, Mike. 'The Body in Consumer Culture' in *Theory, Culture & Society*. Vol., no.2 Sept. 1982. pp. 18-33. DOI: 10.1177/026327648200100203. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Finson, Jon W. *The Voices that Are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Foucault, Michel.

Discipline and Punish. (London: Penguin, 1991).

The History of Sexuality: An Introduction. Vol 1. Trans. Robert Hurley.
(New York: Vintage, 1976).

Fry, Stephen. *Political Correctness Gone Mad* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2018).

Gaut, Berys Nigel. 'Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour' in *Philosophy and Literature* 22 (1):51-68 (1998). *Project Muse*
doi:10.1353/phl.1998.0014. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Givanni, June. 'Black and White in Television' in *Remote Control: Dilemmas of Black Intervention in British Film and TV*. (London: BFI, 1995) [13–28].

Harris, Trudier. 'The Trickster in African American Literature'. National Humanities Center. 4th December 2021.
<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1865-1917/essays/trickster.htm>. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

Hegarty, Siobhan. "Can I Laugh At That? When The Lines Between Offensive Comedy And Off-Limits Jokes Are Blurred - ABC Life", *Abc.Net.Au*, 2020
<<https://www.abc.net.au/life/knowning-when-comedy-crosses-a-line/11090890>>
[Accessed 16 August 2020].

Heritage, Stuart. 'Should Little Britain and The Simpsons change with the times? In The Guardian Newspaper. Published Wednesday 11th April 2018.
<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/apr/11/should-little-britain-and-the-simpsons-change-with-the-times>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Hug, Bill. "'Blazing Saddles' as Postmodern Ethnic Carnival." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 36, no. 1, Popular Culture Association in the South, 2013, pp. 63–81,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23610152>. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

Hunter, James Davison. *Culture wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

Griffiths, Eleanor Bley. 'David Walliams would "definitely" do Little Britain differently today: "it's a different time now"'. The Radio Times
<https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/comedy/david-walliams-would-definitely-do-little-britain-differently-today-its-a-different-time-now/>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Gonzalez, Sandra. 'CNN fires Kathy Griffin', May 31, 2017.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20170531213247/http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/31/media/cnn-kathy-griffin/>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Harrison, Angus. 'Little Britain' Has Not Aged Very Well. 09 February 2018. [online] Vice.com. Available at: <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/evmxyk/little-britain-has-not-aged-very-well>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Hobbes, Thomas. *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic: Part I, Human Nature, Part II, De Corpore Politico; with Three Lives*, Editor John Charles Addison Gaskin, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

Hodson, Gordon. & MacInnis, Cara C. 'Derogating Humor as a Delegitimization Strategy in Intergroup Contexts' in *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 2016, Vol. 2, No.1, 63-74 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tps0000052>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Hughes, Geoffrey. *Political Correctness: A History Of Semantics And Culture* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

humour | humor, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2020. Web. 21 January 2021.

Ilott, Sarah and Davies, Helen. *Comedy and the Politics of Representation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

International Telecommunication Union. 'Measuring digital development: Facts and figures 2019'. Telecommunication Development Bureau, International Telecommunication Union (ITU). <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/facts/default.aspx>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Janmaat, Jan G, Keating, Avril. 'Are today's youth more tolerant? Trends in tolerance among young people in Britain' in *Ethnicities*, Vol:19, issue 1, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796817723682> [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Jauss, Hans Robert. "Theory of Genres and Medieval Literature." In *Modern Genre Theory*, edited by David Duff, 127 -47. (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*, (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007).

Khomami, Nadia. 'I would not play black person in remade Little Britain, says Matt Lucas' in *The Guardian*, published Tuesday 3rd of October 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/oct/03/matt-lucas-little-britain-remake-would-not-play-black-character>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Klaniczay, Gábor. *The Uses of Supernatural Power: the Transformation of Popular Religion in Medieval and Early-modern Europe*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Lacan, Jacques. *Ecrits: A selection*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1977).

LaCapra, Dominick. *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*. (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1983).

Leapman, Michael. 'Littler Britain: Once Scathingly Witty, Why Has the Gloriously un-PC' *Little Britain* Suddenly Lost Its Way? *The Daily Mail*, 13 December 2005: 15.

Lefort, Claude. *The Political Forms of Modern Society*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986).

Lhamon, Jr. W.T. *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) p.45.

Lockyer, Sharon. *Reading Little Britain: Comedy Matters on Contemporary Television*. Ed. By Sharon Lockyer. (London: I.B.Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010).

Lott, Eric. "Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy." *Representations*, no. 39, University of California Press, 1992, pp. 23–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928593>.

Lowndes, Joseph. 'Barack Obama's Body: The Presidency, the Body Politic and the Contest over American National Identity' in *Polity*. October 2013, Vol.45, No.4. Behind the Curtain (October 2013).

Lusher, Adam. *The Independent*, <https://www.independent.co.uk/topic/political-correctness-gone-mad>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Lyall, Sarah. 'Meghan Markle Introduces the British Monarchy to the African-American Experience' (Published 2018). [online] *Nytimes.com*. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/19/world/europe/uk-royal-black-priest-choir.html>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Mahar, William John. *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

Malik, Sarita. *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*. (London: Sage Publishing, 2002).

Marcus, Hannah. 'Censorship' in Blair, Ann, et al., editors. *Information: A Historical Companion*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1pdrbbs>. p.368. [Accessed 06 January 2022].

Marlborough, Patrick. 'Dave Chapelle's New Standup Is Offensive in All the Wrong Ways' <https://www.vice.com/en/article/538k7k/a-study-of-how-dave-chappelle-isnt-nailing-2017>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Marsh, Huw. *The Comic Turn in Contemporary English Fiction: Who's Laughing Now?* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

McLean, Gareth. 'Don't Be Cruel'. *The Guardian*. 16 October 2004.

Mendiburo-Seguel, A., & Ford, T. E. (2019). The effect of disparagement humor on the acceptability of prejudice. *Current Psychology*.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00354-2> [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Meyrowitz, Joshua. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Mihailovic, Alexander *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*, (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1997).

Mills, Sara. 'Political correctness'. In *Language and Sexism*. pp. 100-123. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)
doi:10.1017/CBO9780511755033.004.

Moses, Toby. 'Little Britain removed from BBC iPlayer, Netflix and BritBox due to use of blackface'. [online] The Guardian. 09 June 2020. Available at:
<<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2020/jun/09/little-britain-removed-from-bbc-iplayer-netflix-and-britbox-blackface>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Movieweb. Movie News and others, "'Blazing Saddles' Is Now Streaming With A Disclaimer On HBO Max", Movieweb, 2020 <<https://movieweb.com/blazing-saddles-disclaimer-hbo-max/>> [Accessed 16 August 2021].

Neocleous, Mark.

Imagining the State, (Maidenhead: OUP, 2003).

'The fate of the body politic' in *Radical Philosophy*. 108 (Jul/Aug 2001).

Ng, Eve. 'No Grand Pronouncements Here...: Reflections on Cancel Culture and Digital Media Participation' in *Television & New Media*, Volume: 21 issue: 6, page(s): 621-627 Issue published: September 1, 2020,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476420918828> . [Accessed 25 January 2021].

Nowatzki, Robert., 2007. 'Blackin' up is us Doin' White Folks Doin' Us': Blackface Minstrelsy and Racial Performance in Contemporary American Fiction and Film. *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 18(2), pp.115-136. DOI: 10.1080/10436920701380695. [Accessed 14 January 2022].

O'Neill, B., 2020. *The madness of censoring shows like Little Britain*. [online] Spectator.co.uk. Available at: <<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-madness-of-censoring-shows-like-little-britain>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

Oring, Elliot. *Engaging Humor* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

Oxford English Dictionary.

"censor, n.". [online] Available at:
<<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/29595>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

"politically, adv.". OED Online. December 2021. Oxford University Press.
<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/146889> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

Parish, James Robert. *It's Good to Be the King: The Seriously Funny Life of Mel Brooks*. (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

Plato, *Philebus*, Loeb Classical Library DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.plato_philosopher-philebus.1925 [Accessed 23 January 2021].

Pérez, Raúl. "Racism without Hatred? Racist Humor and the Myth of 'Colorblindness.'" *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 60, no. 5, Oct. 2017, pp. 956–974, doi:10.1177/0731121417719699. [Accessed 25 January 2021].

Phillips, Trevor. *The Daily Mail* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-4251306/Political-correctness-gone-mad-writes-TREVOR-PHILLIPS.html>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Polimeni, Joseph & Reiss, Jeffrey P. 'The First Joke: Exploring the Evolutionary Origins of Humor' in *Evolutionary Psychology*, first published in January 1, 2006. <https://doi.org/10.1177/147470490600400129>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Powell, J.A. *Structural Racism: Building upon the Insights of John Calmore*. North Carolina Law Review. 2008;86:791–816.
<https://scholarship.law.unc.edu/nclr/vol86/iss3/8/>.

Puzzanghera, J. and James, M., 2022. FCC indecency rule struck down by appeals court. [online] Los Angeles Times. Available at:
<<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2010-jul-14-la-fi-fcc-indecency-20100714-story.html>> [Accessed 13 January 2022].

Reid-Pharr, Robert. *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual*. (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

Roberts, Andrew., 2016. 'Mel Brooks Credits Gene Wilder And Richard Pryor For 'Blazing Saddles''. [online] UPROXX. Available at:
<<https://uproxx.com/movies/mel-brooks-gene-wilder-blazing-saddles/>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Roberts, John W. *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

Romano, Aja. 'Kathy Griffin, political protest art, and the backlash over "beheading" Donald Trump.' May 31, 2017.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/5/31/15719118/kathy-griffin-donald-trump-beheading-feminist-art>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Roof, Judith. *The Comic Event: Comedic Performance from the 1950s to the Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

Sacks, Howard L. "Turning about Jim Crow." *American Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, [pp. 187-194] P.190.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041639>. [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Schow, Ashe. 'Let's not pretend Kathy Griffin's career would survive if she held Obama's head'. <https://observer.com/2017/05/kathy-griffin-loses-squatty-potty-deal-trump-head/>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Shahar, Galili. "Fragments and Wounded Bodies: Kafka after Kleist." *The German Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. 4, 2007, pp. 449–467. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org/stable/27676106. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Smurthwaite, Nick and Gelder, Paul. *Mel Brooks and the Spoof Movie*. (London: Proteus, 1982) p.45.

Stam, Robert. *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989).

Stoll, Julia. 'Netflix: ethnicity of employees in the U.S. 2021' in *Statista*. [online] Available at: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1000578/netflix-employees-ethnicity/> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Storey, John. *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture*. 3rd. edition. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.)

Strausbaugh, John. *Black Like You: Blackface, Whiteface, Insult Imitation in American Popular Culture*. (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2007).

Symons, Julia. 'Has Political correctness gone too far?' in *The Economist* 10 September 2018, <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/09/10/has-political-correctness-gone-too-far>. [Accessed 28 January 2021].

Taylor, Ben. *Bakhtin, carnival and comic theory*. (Nottingham: University of Nottingham, 1995).

Taylor, Yuval and Austen, Jake. *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012)

Thelwell, Chinua. "Foundations: Blackface Minstrelsy in the United States and across the British Empire, 1830–1862." In *Exporting Jim Crow: Blackface Minstrelsy in South Africa and Beyond* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press 2020) pp. 16–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv160btb3.5. [Accessed 28 January 2021].

The Library of Congress.

Complete National Film Registry Listing. Library of Congress. [online] Available at: <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/film-registry/complete-national-film-registry-listing/> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

The Library of Congress. Selections from the National Film Registry | Digital Collections. [online] Available at: <<https://www.loc.gov/collections/selections-from-the-national-film-registry/about-thiscollection/#:~:text=The%20National%20Film%20Registry%20is,ending%20importance%20to%20American%20culture.>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

Tsakalakis, Thomas., *Political Correctness: A Sociocultural Black Hole*. (London: Routledge, 2020).

‘David Walliams would “definitely” do Little Britain differently today: “it’s a different time now”’. The Radio Times <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/comedy/david-walliams-would-definitely-do-little-britain-differently-today-its-a-different-time-now/>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Warner Brothers. 2019. ‘45 Years of "Blazing Saddles"’. [online] Available at: <<https://www.warnerbros.com/news/articles/2019/02/07/45-years-blazing-saddles>> [Accessed 04 January 2022].

Weaver, Simon.

‘Humour, rhetoric and racism: a sociological critique of racist humour’. PHD thesis University of Bristol. P.25. <https://researchinformation.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/34506125/534509.pdf>. [Accessed 04 January 2022].

The Rhetoric of Racist Humour: US, UK and Globe Race Joking. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2011).

Weigel, Moira. *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump>. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

White, Nadine. ‘Exclusive: BBC Staff Accuse Corporation Of Being ‘Institutionally Racist’’. 2020. [online] HuffPost UK. Available at: <https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/bbc-institutionally-racist_uk_5f3f9c78c5b697824f977779> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Wickberg, Daniel. *The Sense of Humor: Self and Laughter in Modern America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

Williams, Elsie Griffin. ‘The Comedy of Richard Pryor as Social Satire’ in *American Humor*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1977, pp. 15–19. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42594583. [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Wilson, John K. *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

Wolfe, John Christopher. *Sex, Violence, and Profanity: Rap Music and the First Amendment*, 44 Mercer L. Rev. 667 (1993).

Yacowar, Maurice. *Method in Madness: The Comic Art of Mel Brooks*. (New York: St. Martin's, 1981)

Films & Media

After Work Reactions, 2020. 'Little Britain - Pastor Jesse King, from the Ghetto Reaction'. [video] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXvNaNv3Hqo>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Back in the Saddle. 2001. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

Blazing Saddles [30th Anniversary Special Edition] 2017. [DVD] Directed by M. Brooks. USA.

Island Girlz HaveFlow, 2021. 'Little Britain - Pastor Jess king Reaction'. [video] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEQS1h5uNcU>> [Accessed 14 January 2022].

Little Britain.

Great Box Collector's Box. 2008. [DVD].

'*Black Friend*', 2020. [video]
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvKlmerjFa8>> [Accessed 16 August 2020].

'*Pastor Jesse King, from the Ghetto*' [video] Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6BzBntT_w8> [Accessed 14 January 2022].