Shedding Light on Dark Comedy:

Humour and Aesthetics in British Dark Comedy Television

Rebecca Louisa Collings

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University of East Anglia

School of Art, Media and American Studies

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Abstract

The term 'dark comedy' is used by audiences, producers and academics with reference to an array of disparate texts, yet attempts to actually define it perpetuate a sense of confusion and contradiction. This suggests that although there is a kind of comedy that is common enough to be widely noted, and different enough from other types to require separation, how and why this difference can be perceived could be better understood. Accordingly, I investigate what is enabling the recognition and distinction in respect of British dark comedy programmes, and use this as a basis for considering how this type of comedy works.

I argue that the programmes may be distinguished primarily by aesthetic features, placing their rise on British television in a broader context of aesthetic trends towards a display of visual detail, spectacle, and excess that puts the private and the taboo on greater show. Using the theories of Freud, Bakhtin, and Bergson about taboo, the uncanny, the grotesque, and the appearance of mechanical actions in humans, I examine in detail examples of British comedy television programmes that are typically referred to as 'dark', demonstrating their consistent depiction of subjects that are often repressed or avoided, particularly those around which taboo restrictions and prohibitions have evolved (such as violence and death, illness, and transgressive sexuality). These areas are strongly linked with the body and physicality, and are also ones which occasion negative feelings of unease and denial that are connected to concerns about mental and corporeal fragility and fallibility.

I conclude therefore that dark comedies provide a space where viewers may confront and ultimately minimise fears surrounding the human condition, enabling a 'safe' exploration of them that can be enjoyed as humorous.

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Introduction

I begin this project with a series of questions in mind; ones that have emerged from a desire to think critically about a term that seems to have become normalised as a way of describing certain television programmes, but for which a concrete definition is elusive: 'dark comedy'. When I first watched the programme *Psychoville* (BBC 2, 2009-2011), for example, I found that within a very short space of time I had mentally identified and categorised it as 'a dark comedy'. But what led me to do that? What was it about *Psychoville* that had triggered such an easy, automatic categorisation? And how had the term 'dark comedy' come to be available to me as an appropriate descriptor for the programme in the first place? A kind of ordinary and common sense usage of the term in discourses surrounding television is apparent, yet the inevitable lack or vagueness of any related definition implies that there is something so self-evident about this type of comedy that no further qualification is needed. So *what* is this evidence that has enabled dark comedy to become a shared and normalised term for particular programmes? Is it certain thematic content that triggers the association of darkness, or could it be particular aesthetic elements that signal it? In answer to these questions, this thesis sets out to examine programmes that are typically described as dark comedies, with the intention of identifying specific features that may be triggers for such a categorisation. The work ultimately aims to present a rationale for 'dark comedy' as a category that is marked out through the clear presence of a consistent (and theoretically-grounded) set of typical textual features; one that is contextualised within wider televisual and cultural trends, and that may help to explain both the potential appeal and the possible function of dark comedy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.

Accordingly, the first section of this thesis will consider the evolution of dark comedy terminology, identifying the ways in which this phrase and other similar expressions, such as 'black comedy', have been used within the British television industry in recent times. It will go on to examine past approaches towards defining dark comedy, before suggesting a way in which the definitional vagueness that has persistently characterised the term may be overcome in the case of contemporary television programmes. Through these means, I hope that an argument for the value of studying dark comedy and for using textual analysis to do so will also become clear. This section concludes with an explanation of the structure I subsequently follow in carrying out this analysis.

Contemporary Dark Comedy Terminology

Considering how the British television industry makes use of dark comedy terminology, it appears that the phrase (or at least, the distinction it is expected to make) is seen as a useful one: it is used to refer to a wide variety of texts. For example, when I began writing this thesis, an impromptu search on the BBC's online programme listing saw shows like *The Afternoon Play*'s then-forthcoming 'The Caretaker' episode (BBC Radio 4, 28 April 2012), the comedies *I, Regress* (BBC Radio 4, 2012-2013), featuring Matt Berry as a twisted hypnotist, and *Psychoville*, and films such as *Carnage* (Polanski, 2011)*, The Men Who Stare At Goats* (Heslov, 2009) and *Trainspotting* (Boyle, 1996) all described either as being or containing dark comedy. A similar search through their listings for 'black comedy' showed this term in use as well, bringing up references to a version of *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (BBC Radio 7, 2007), the Peter Schaffer play *Black Comedy* (1965), Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and a documentary about the experiences of black comedy performers, *Is Black Comedy a Joke?* (BBC Radio 1Xtra,

2012). It is interesting to note that one article listed in the search, about the film *The Guard* (McDonagh, 2011), referred to it as both dark *and* black, with the words apparently being interchangeable rather than indicating two different qualities (Smith, 2011). A search for 'dark comedy' today nets a repeat airing of Chris Morris's radio show *Blue Jam* (BBC Radio 1, 1997-1999), another radio show called *Funny Kind of Love* (BBC Radio Scotland, 2014), "featuring comedians tackling taboo aspects of love and relationships through laughter" (BBC iPlayer Radio, 2015a), *Vent* (BBC Radio 4, 2006-2009), "about a man lying in hospital in a coma, who lives out a fantasy life of his own creation while his family argue over him from the real world" (BBC iPlayer Radio, 2015b), and reference to a review of the play *Hope* (Thorne, 2014), about a local council dealing with austerity measures. 'Black comedy' returns an episode of *The Stanley Baxter Playhouse* (BBC Radio 4, 2006-2014), a reference to the film *Calvary* (McDonagh, 2014), about child abuse within the Catholic Church, and *Syria: Bread and Bombs* (BBC Radio 4, 2014), "set among aid workers in Syria" (BBC iPlayer Radio, 2015c). This wide and confused usage seems to reflect a generally vague and varied approach to definition in this area of comedy, and perhaps highlights a difficulty in relying upon institutional approaches to form a firm basis for categorisation in this case: the understanding here does not appear coherent or systematic. Incidentally, something highlighted by the example of the *Is Black Comedy a Joke?* documentary is the possibility that increasing use of the term 'black comedy', particularly in the United States, to describe comedy created and performed by black actors and comedians, has led to a rise in 'dark' as a way of avoiding confusion between the two. Maybe the answer to the question of why one phrase would be used in preference to another is sometimes as pragmatic as this?

Dark comedy has also been a term used in the BBC's comedy commissioning briefs. For example, in 2012 the then controller of

comedy commissioning, Cheryl Taylor, took pains to point out that "BBC Four is not the home of 'dark comedy', so while satire and thought-provoking ideas are important this shouldn't be at the expense of big laughs" (BBC Commissioning Brief, 2012). Here, she was not only clearly linking certain qualities with dark comedy, but also disassociating it from 'big laughs'. More importantly, she seemed to assume that readers would automatically understand what was meant by 'dark comedy', and it is implied that the term and what it represents was known well enough for people to have started associating it with the content of the channel at that time. Subtly, she might even be seen as distancing herself from the term via her use of quotation marks, as though it was terminology she employed because it had become popularly used, rather than because she regarded it as an appropriate term for the kind of comedy to which it typically referred. The strengths or weaknesses of the specific wording aside, what is clear from this is that the term had a working meaning as a reference to a particular type of comedy, and its usage is therefore reflective of a desire to identify and separate such a type from other kinds. Taylor's successor, Shane Allen, was the former Head of Comedy at Channel 4, where he was responsible for commissioning a number of shows that contained humour around themes I will identify below as commonly associated with darkness – Ricky Gervais's *Derek* (Channel 4, 2012-2015), Charlie Brooker's *Dead Set* (E4, 2008) and *Black Mirror* (Channel 4, 2011-), and Frankie Boyle's *Tramadol Nights* (Channel 4, 2010), for example. His interest in comedians who create dark programmes appears to have been recognised, with Allen remarking that at a premiere, "Jimmy Carr came over and said [that backing Frankie Boyle over the content of *Tramadol Nights*] sent a message around the industry that if you want to do edgy stuff, Channel 4 is the place to do it" (quoted by Foster, 2011). The implication that dark themes are regarded within comedy as 'edgy' (and controversial enough for creators and performers to value such opportunities and support) is

another indication of the kinds of qualities that may be contributing to tacit understandings of 'dark comedy' as a term, and to its differentiation as a type.

Within television and discussions surrounding programmes, dark humour is often presented as a selling point, whether the term appears in advertising material, or in the reviews and opinion pieces of amateur and professional critics. It also appears that, in terms of hierarchies of taste, the appreciation of dark comedy television is considered by some to be a marker of sophistication and intellect. While Cheryl Taylor might have been keen to stress that BBC Four was not the home of 'dark comedy', it nevertheless broadcast programmes like *Getting On* (BBC Four, 2009-2012), a bleak sitcom set in an NHS geriatric ward, which is described as "darkly funny" in its own publicity material (BBC Press Office, 2008). BBC Four at that time proclaimed itself "…an intelligent alternative to programmes on the mainstream TV channels" (Neilan, 2010), with the attendant implication that *Getting On* and its dark humour was considered an appropriate programming choice for the intelligent and cultured audience sought by that channel. This sentiment is reflected in audience research undertaken by Sam Friedman, who found when questioning people classified as having 'High Cultural Capital' that "…many respondents expressed preferences for 'dark' or 'black' comedy […]. These respondents argued that by invoking negative as well as positive emotions, the comedian was better placed 'to challenge' them intellectually" (2014: 70). Their responses additionally "…seemed to suggest that an inability to appreciate 'dark' or 'black' comedy implied a somehow less sophisticated or nuanced understanding of the world" (114). This points towards there being not only a kind of normalised or common sense understanding amongst industry personnel and audiences alike that a specific category of 'dark comedy' exists, but that there are certain qualities that have become associated with it that extend beyond textual features and into a wider

discursive framework of comedy taste, discernment and cultural capital. The idea that comedy viewers may claim a preference for dark comedy in order to signal a sophisticated sense of humour, or (in the face of accusations that such humour is offensive) as a sign of holding transgressive credentials, is suggestive of dark comedy's potential to be used as a 'litmus test' or boundary-policing device amongst comedy fans, and this is another reason why investigating this category of comedy in more detail is worthwhile. Friedman notes that one significance of the findings of his research into comedy taste is "…that despite comedy's traditionally discredited position, it *is* now being mobilised by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction" (2014: 162), and the fact that the ability to 'understand' or appreciate dark comedy in particular is identified by his respondents as challenging and important demonstrates its contemporary salience *and* prompts further interest as to what exactly it is about this material that has lent it so readily to becoming a key reference point in discourses surrounding British comedy.

Incidentally, the programme *Getting On* also provides a good example of the readiness of television critics to make use of the dark comedy distinction (and the terms surrounding it), with write-ups on the second series including comments such as: "…a rawly naturalistic tragicomedy" (Unknown Author, 2010), "Bleak gallows humour provided the painful laughs in Getting On" (Watson, 2010) and, "The second series […] opened up even darker, richer seams of black comedy than the first" (Harvey, 2010). Once more, the intriguing paradox of a type of comedy that seems to be routinely recognised and referenced, but in an inconsistent and undefined manner, is palpable. What has emerged from this evidence is that there must be *something* significant about it. It points to the existence of a type of comedy that people are interested in talking about, and that they want to differentiate from other kinds, and it seems that whatever comedy it *is* that is represented

by the terms 'dark' or 'black', it would be valuable to make the effort to find out more about it.

Historical Usage: *Umour* and *Humour Noir*

The phrase 'dark comedy' has previously been used within literary and theatre studies, often to describe various works of Aristophanes and Plautus, or the specific cycle of Shakespearean plays consisting of *Measure for Measure, All's Well That Ends Well* and *Troilus and Cressida*, for example. Aside from 'dark comedy', the terms 'black comedy' or 'black humour' have also been used, sometimes to describe the same texts as above, and more consistently for modern novels, plays, television shows and films which present humour and tragedy which is interlinked. Something that is evident from the vast majority of the usage is that these terms are seldom ever defined in this context either, merely named in conjunction with examples from which the readers or viewers seem expected to draw their own conclusions. It is almost as though dark comedy can be seen operating in specific texts, but cannot easily be cleaved off and discussed in isolation; that it is something that can be perceived in, but not unpicked from, a host. A clear example of such usage can be found in André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, where the term 'black humour' is applied by the surrealist to particular works by forty-five authors in which he felt "this humor has been given its highest degree of literary expression" (1997: xviii).

In the anthology, Breton praises Jonathan Swift for his exemplary black humour, considering him to be "the inventor of 'savage' or 'gallows' humor" (1997: 3). He further compliments Swift's work for the "…very special and almost unprecedented emotion it elicits," and dismisses Voltaire's assertion of him as a 'perfect Rabelais', saying that actually he "…shared to the smallest possible degree Rabelais's taste for innocent,

heavy-handed jokes and his constant drunken good humor" (Ibid.). These comments, through their indication of what Swift is not, must by extension (as Swift is his example of black humour *par excellence*) hint at some of Breton's ideas of what dark comedy *is,* somewhat circumventing his apparent reluctance to give an explicit definition. According to this, it must be a type of humour that provokes strong, unusual emotion; a type that is knowing, and bad in nature if not intent. As such, it appears that black humour as Breton describes it could in fact be thought of as analogous to the type of satire that Mikhail Bakhtin is quick to disassociate festive, carnivalesque comedy from in *Rabelais and His World* (1984: 12). There does seem to be a link between dark humour and satire, wherein the behaviour of individuals or groups within society, or (on a macro level) whole societies or even humanity itself, is grimly offered up for ridicule. Of course, such ridicule is the basis of *all* comedy, but the way it is presented in dark examples might be seen to offer something differentiating them, whether tonally, aesthetically, or simply though narrative content. These features – this difference – could even provide the basis for a definition of dark comedy.

Although Breton identifies Swift as the originator of black humour, he explains that the term itself is drawn from another source, with its ancestry coming by way of "…'umour,' borrowed from the English 'humour' and coined by Jacques Vaché, a veteran of trench warfare in World War I and an important contributor to the surrealist movement" (Naremore, 2004: 28). Unfortunately Vaché's definition of 'umour' is, paradoxically, precise yet vague, but it intriguingly suggests that distinguishing 'dark' from other humour is achieved *prima facie* by a kind of sensing (the feature that prompts Breton's remarks about emotion, perhaps). Vaché says that "…umour derives too much from a sensation not to be expressed without great difficulty – I think it's a sensation – I was almost going to say a SENSE – so – of the theatrical

(and joyless) uselessness of everything" (Sorrell, 1979: 107). He appears here to articulate nearly the exact problem I opened my introduction with; he chooses to express his sensation as 'the theatrical and joyless uselessness of everything', but the key aspect of his comment is that this *is* a sense. It seems that multiple examples can be seen of authors struggling to articulate the qualities of dark humour and treating it as something that just has to be perceived in things, whether these struggles are hidden in the stylised musings of Vaché and Breton, or stated more straightforwardly. Writing in 1978, Max Schulz calls black humour 'elusive and chimerical' (15), and this repeated experience of trying to pin down an unusually-formed humour that is not easily to be seen, more sensed, thus starts to become visible across a variety of contexts.

Vaché speaks to Breton about umour in a further way that I regard as very revealing. When pressed by Breton for a definition, he immediately begins speaking of symbols, using the alarm clock as an example; symbolic of time passing and time-specific demands on individuals, the device uses the cover of being a useful and harmless object to hide a monstrous weight that Vaché nevertheless feels:

> And then you ask me to give a definition of umour – just like that –
>
> IT IS IN THE NATURE OF SYMBOLS TO BE SYMBOLIC
>
> is something which has long seemed to me one such definition
> because it is capable of containing a multitude of living things:
> EXAMPLE: you'll recall the dreadful life of the alarm-clock – it's a
> monster which has always horrified me with the range of things its
> eyes project, and the way in which this worthy fellow stares at me
> whenever I enter a room – why does he have so much umour, can
> you tell me that? (Sorrell, 1979: 107).

Umourously, the joke is simultaneously on Vaché (horrified by a 'mere' clock) and on the clock itself (doomed to the dreadful life of

representing time slipping away and attracting negative regard). The most interesting feature of Vaché's definition here is that, as demonstrated by his example, dark humour holds the quality of becoming evident through the observation of symbols. In a way, umour can be seen as a state affecting everything – after all, everything is symbolic – one which we notice and can dissect. This is incidentally rather reminiscent of Henri Bergson's ideas about seeing the mechanical (and, therefore, the comic) in everything (1956: 79, 105). Taking Vaché's points about umour together, they seem to point to the perception of hidden meanings behind symbols as being what gives the sensation by which dark humour makes itself known. This evidently has links to Freudian theory, and this will be picked up again below; for now, it is enough to call attention to the idea that an overall impression, or tone, or other such abstract aspect of a text, could have its roots – albeit obscured – in specific textual features.

The fact that there are few very precise definitions provided by past writers, but many sets of collected examples (such as the *Anthologie de l'humour noir*), could either be indicative of an attitude that dark comedy is overly complicated to define clearly, or that it has generally been assumed unnecessary to define. I am interested in the idea that the reliance on texts themselves as enough definitional evidence is suggesting that it *is* the text itself that holds particular importance in dark humour: after all, Breton could have chosen another way to convey the idea of black humour to his readers, but he selected the method of displaying and discussing existing works, just as J.L. Styan does in *The Dark Comedy* (1968) by presenting and commenting upon the work of playwrights as diverse as Osborne, Chekhov and Shakespeare. The conviction that knowledge about the nature of dark or black comedy can best be shared by collecting material in which readers will be able to perceive it themselves appears to have weight behind it. However, if a warning by Schulz is heeded, and the "critical

usefulness" of the terms is weakened by the lack of a concrete definition attached to them (1978: 15), then my own analysis of dark humour cannot end at accepting the self-evidentiary catalogue as a method of presenting its qualities.

So, whilst appreciating that, in practice, the perception of particular comedies as 'dark' might seem to manifest as a strange kind of sixth sense sparked off by abstract things like tone and atmosphere, their mere capability to be experienced this way is not enough as an explanation for their differentiation from other kinds of humorous texts: I must instead seek to know what it is that underlies and creates this tone. What is sufficiently characteristic of these comedies that, upon encountering them, it is evoked? I (and the above commentators) have hinted around the fact that specific textual features are likely to be responsible for the impression of darkness, and the key question I will be exploring in the rest of this work is of whether there is a particular aesthetics that is available for ready recognition and interpretation by viewers as evoking this tone or 'sense' that is thereafter characterised as dark.

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge that the textual approach I go on to take in this thesis, whilst following in the tradition I have noted in the work of Breton and others, is open to critique by those who would suggest that it is not the aesthetics and their potential to be perceived in particular ways that should be the focus of any investigation into the identification of dark comedy, but the empirical evidence of viewer responses themselves. David Morley notes, "the meaning produced by the encounter of text and subject cannot be 'read off' straight from textual characteristics" (1992: 57), and I accordingly remain mindful at all times that while any text under analysis "…may offer the subject specific positions of intelligibility [and] may operate to prefer certain readings; what it cannot do is to guarantee them" (1992: 71). I am thus looking for what sort of messages and possible

experiences appear to be being 'set up' with frequency within the texts, based upon their content and its presentation, without implying that all viewers will read the texts in these ways. As the first sustained analysis of dark comedy as a type of British television comedy, it is my aim to establish an overview and lay out the potentialities of this category in the hope that a wider variety of methodological approaches to investigating its texts and their audiences will be able to proceed from it in the future.

Similarly, my choice to use psychoanalytic theory as the basis for the analysis clearly apportions value to particular ideas (such as taboo, ambivalence, repression, and so on) and regards them as possible contributing factors to what may be recognised and experienced by viewers of dark comedy; a feature that would invite criticism from those uncomfortable with the abstract nature of the concepts and the universalist assumptions about the subject that they are predicated upon. To return to Morley, he suggests that work employing such theory, "premised as it is on universalist criteria, finds it difficult to provide the theoretical space within which one can allow for, and then investigate, differential readings, interpretations or responses on the part of the audience" (1992: 59). Here again, I acknowledge this critique, and emphasise that the aim of this thesis is primarily to produce a general theory of dark comedy focussed upon the role that aesthetics which can be related to key Freudian ideas (and others inspired by them) might play in grouping together comedy texts that otherwise exhibit a variety of modalities and styles, under one overarching category: a category that appears to already be in common usage, terminologically-speaking. There are limitations of this approach in that individual variations and nuances of the programmes or programme types – for example, sketch comedies in comparison with comedy-dramas, or comedian-led series that use a range of modalities within each episode – remain, in effect, buried under the surface of the

final conclusion, but since all these programme types *are* exemplified in popular and scholarly discussion of 'dark comedy', I believe the thread that is capable of explaining this and linking them all together is the crucial thing to identify at this stage. In short, this is not a project that seeks to focus upon the specific encounters that individuals have with certain texts, but upon the shared characteristics of a set of texts that may serve to make them recognisable *as* a set or category, and I will argue below for the salience of psychoanalytically-related theories, in particular, for illuminating these characteristics.

Chapter Structure

This exploration begins with a brief assessment of the work that has been done on dark comedy television by other scholars, with Chapter 1 contextualising the present study within a field that has as yet yielded no long-form examination of this type of comedy as a discrete entity, before going on to place a rise in dark comedy programming on British television in a broader context of aesthetic trends towards a display of visual detail, spectacle, and excess that puts the private and the taboo on televisual show. Coupled with a move toward depicting human fallibility – both mentally and physically – in greater detail and extremity than before in non-comedic genres, a turn in comedy towards similar content (both in and out of the context of parody) is identified, and relevant theories for interpreting and discussing this type of preoccupation are introduced in order to examine this further. Chapter 2 introduces the idea of the body as a potentially important signifier within the aesthetics of dark comedy television, before setting out the applicability of the work of Henri Bergson, Mikhail Bakhtin and Sigmund Freud in particular for the subsequent analysis. A rationale for grouping different yet allied thematic elements from the programmes together for analysis is also laid out.

The central section of the work, theorising that the visual content of certain contemporary comedy programmes may be evocative of other genres that are more firmly associated with darkness, considers different aesthetic elements of a variety of programmes that have been typically termed as dark comedies, using close textual analysis of specific examples to link the comic content and dark aesthetics together. Given the propensity for comedies obviously influenced by traditions in horror – such as *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC 2, 1999-2002) – to be classified as dark, Chapter 3 takes the horrific as its focus. The consistent incorporation of aesthetic features drawn from the grotesque, gross-out, surrealism and the uncanny, all of which are used extensively in horror, suggests that such material could be significant in lending these comedies their darkness. Trends in the aesthetics of these comedies can even be seen to focus upon specific types of horror: a thematic focus on humour around sex and violence, coupled with the extremity with which sex and violence are depicted on the screen not only distinguishes these dark comedies from other kinds of comedies, but also ensures that a major feature of their aesthetics is a focus upon the human body, whether this is through body horror elements or through the depiction of bodies subject to violence. Chapter 4 takes analysis of the aesthetics of the body and sexuality in dark comedy further, examining the propensity of dark comedy programmes to present a degree of nudity and a focus upon sexual behaviour which exceeds that seen in other kinds of television comedy and that adopts aesthetics more reminiscent of drama, some types of shockumentary, and pornography. The similarity of particular presentations of the body and sexuality to those found in American underground cinema of the 1970s, or on Internet 'shock sites' is also considered. The last chapter in this section, Chapter 5, again looks at the use of an aesthetics more associated with 'serious' television genres such as drama and documentary, highlighting the repeated use of

illness, death, and medical or mortuary settings such as those seen in body trauma television or police procedural shows.

In the final section, the work moves towards its conclusion by way of a consideration in Chapter 6 of the contribution to the overall aesthetics of dark comedy of imagery that is not visually centred around the body on the screen, but that may still attempt to engage with the body of the viewer. The chapter examines techniques that might serve to align the viewer with specific characters and viewpoints, to disorientate by means of editing and through non-representational signs, and to complexify the consumption of programmes and narratives via forms of hybridity and the intertextual techniques of parody and pastiche. The interrelation between language and aesthetics, and the ways in which their combination can work to signal dark comic excess and promote laughter is the last topic to be explored in the thesis, before I draw an overall conclusion about the distinctive workings, aesthetics and messages of British dark comedy television.

CHAPTER 1

Contextualising Dark Comedy

Percy Thomas: "If it's so funny, why are you crying?"

(*Fun at the Funeral Parlour*, Series 2 Episode 1, 2002)

Introduction

The few authors who have attempted to define dark comedy have taken a variety of approaches. For example, in her study of the translation of dark humour from English into the Italian language, Chiara Bucaria uses 'dark humour' to refer "…to the more or less explicit and sacrilegious representation of humour that has as its aim that of making fun of situations usually regarded as tragic, such as death, sickness, disability, and extreme violence, or of the people involved or subject to them" (2008: 218-219). By speaking of the 'aim' of dark humour, she puts the weight of the definition into the realm of intent; i.e., the creator or presenter of the humour sets forth with the intention of making fun of tragic situations, and it is in this that the darkness lies. It rather seems to suggest malevolence on the part of such humourists, but things are not as straightforward as this: as with the intent that is invoked in tendentious joking, a specific piece of dark humour might not be created or delivered with malevolence in mind – in fact, quite the opposite could be the case, with the creator/presenter being unaware of the tendency underlying their words. Here can be seen another hint that it may be the text that takes primacy in the identification of dark comedy, wherein evidence of intent may be found regardless of any conscious position taken up by the creator/presenter themselves.

Aside from Bucaria, another author to forward a definition of dark humour is Leon Hunt. In his examination of the work of comedy group The League of Gentlemen, he describes dark comedy as "a cultish comic subgenre in which the League were prime movers," and identifies other examples of the subgenre as *Human Remains* (BBC 2, 2000), *Jam* (Channel 4, 2000) and *Funland* (BBC Three, 2005) (2008: 24). His expanded definition is two-fold in approach; one area relating to content, and the other institutionally and contextually contingent: "First, it is perhaps best seen as a mixture of the 'Black' and the 'sick', sometimes vaguely satirical but rarely attributable to an especially noble agenda. Second, it is defined by its institutional and media context, by testing the boundaries of what is permissible on broadcast TV, particularly within a genre that is ostensibly a branch of light entertainment" (2008: 25). Considering the content strand first, I have already linked black comedy with dark comedy above, but the additional consideration of sick comedy adds a valuable extra dimension. *Time* magazine said of the sick comedians who emerged in the United States during the 1950s: "They joked about father and Freud, about mother and masochism, about sister and sadism" (Unknown Author, 1959: 44). The article goes on to align this type of comedy with horror and excess, remarking that "sociologists, both professional and amateur, see in the sick comedians a symptom of the 20th century's own sickness. Says one: 'It's like the last days of Rome – all this horror and mayhem in humor'" (Ibid.). These reported interpretations, linking the comedy style with the problems of a changing world, and its content with horror, Freudian psychosexual theories and chaos, closely parallel characteristics that are identified within contemporary British dark comedy programmes later in this thesis. Another feature that the article usefully highlights is that sick comedy is capable of creating a kind of visceral jolt in its audiences: "The novelty and jolt of the sickniks is that their gags ("I hit one of those things in the street – what do you call it, a kid?") come so close

to real horror and brutality that audiences wince even as they laugh"
(Ibid.). I will return to discuss these points more in the following
chapters, but for now it is sufficient to note that reading dark comedy
as a textually-evident blend containing elements that are also common
to sick comedy is an avenue that is certainly worth exploring further.

Peter Hutchings takes a similar approach to Leon Hunt's second
definitional strand, suggesting that dark comedy can be defined by its
relationship to "the boundaries of taste and acceptability" (2007: 3).
This idea of identifying dark comedy by its proximity to the boundaries
of the permissible has a Carlin-esque attraction to it, but questions of
measurability arise: is permissibility or acceptability to be judged in
relation to industry guidelines (such as the BBC's compliance
procedures surrounding taste and standards issues), or determined via
reception (for instance, whether audience members are motivated to
complain or not, or whether a press outcry about a programme
transpires), or by more abstract, theoretical means? If a programme's
dark comedy status is to become evident relative to boundaries, and
the boundaries cannot be clear, then defining the category precisely
with reference to this would seem a rather awkward task; additionally,
it does not automatically follow that a comedy that is found offensive
should therefore be considered dark, for example. Whilst not
dismissive of the utility of institutional and reception-based approaches
to identifying this type of comedy, I am more inclined to begin from a
position that seeks to examine the textual features that are available to
prompt such perceptions of boundary-overstepping, seeing institutional
legislation or negative viewer response as additional evidence (of the
desire to police boundaries surrounding taboo subjects, rather than as
evidence of darkness in and of itself). It is clear that many of the
programmes I discuss in this thesis have created moments of outcry
surrounding particular content: *The League of Gentlemen* caused
controversy with a scene implying that a woman was bringing baby
clothes and toys into a charity shop because her child had just died, yet

the shop staff were making humorous remarks about the mortal danger that some of those items might pose to babies (Hunt, 2008: 28-31), and *Tramadol Nights* attracted considerable negative regard for comments made by Frankie Boyle concerning glamour model Katie Price's vulnerability to being raped by her own disabled son (Ofcom, 2011). While the responses to these scenes demonstrate that they were not felt to be acceptable for broadcast TV (therefore testing the boundaries of what is permissible in that context in the manner ascribed as an indicator of dark comedy above), I suggest that their controversial status relies primarily upon the association of their topics with taboo – in this case joking about the dead, and incest – which invokes an inherent sense of darkness that can be subsequently reacted to by the pointing toward and reinforcement of boundaries through censure. In other words, the display within joking of subjects that are considered taboo is enough to indicate darkness, and as taboo subjects already imply the existence of boundaries, any subsequent evidence in this direction in the form of specific viewer reaction can be seen as additional.

Hunt has supplemented his initial analysis of dark comedy, noting that, "'Dark comedy' and 'cringe comedy' overlap in many areas, particularly those determined by matters of taste – both trade on unacceptable behaviour, comic transgressions and gross imagery or language" (2013: 167), and he, too, traces dark comedy up through the literary-theatrical tradition, identifying Harold Pinter and Joe Orton in particular as similar to contemporary dark programmes through their 'comedy of menace' and 'artful bad taste', respectively (2013: 170). This ties in with the propensity for dark comedy to be perceived via a 'sensing' reaction, with factors such as the 'cringe' effect and the potential recoil from gross and disgusting visual material standing alongside the potential to pick up on a tone of threat surrounding characters and events, to create an air of discomfort that could translate to 'dark' recognition. That these potential feelings must be rooted in content that illustrates

behaviour which can be perceived as transgressive or unacceptable, and/or imagery that is gross or otherwise affecting is an important idea, supporting the case for textual analysis as a means of illuminating dark comedy. Additionally, the highlighting of transgression and the gross suggests the utility of theories connected to them (such as those surrounding taboo, or the grotesque, for example) for understanding this type of comedy further. He observes that "…amongst the forms of discomfort that TV comedy has elicited, unease and a disorientating mixture of comedy and dread are significant developments" (2013: 173), and I am very interested in investigating the degree to which these senses and the textual content that underlies them might be seen as reflective of general human fears about mortality, sexuality and integrity, in a way that may explain both the way dark comedy works, and its attraction as a television form.

Televisual Context

As has been discussed in the introductory section, dark comedy under one name or another has been a perennial feature of various forms of entertainment. However, many of the examples drawn upon in this thesis come from the twenty-first century, and it is the first decade of the 2000s that saw a proliferation of British television comedy programmes displaying the kinds of themes and aesthetics introduced above; a marked enough increase that this may be considered the key period for British dark comedy television. This prompts a question of timing: why is it the case that these shows, with this kind of visual content, should particularly appear then? The first point to make is that comedy is not the only area in which a turn towards depicting more graphic human frailty, societal and personal breakdown, and horrific content has been noted at this time, and television not the only format. Speaking of film, Riegler forwards the idea that the World Trade Center attacks marked an important turning point in the themes that were

being expressed: "…post 9/11 Hollywood pictures express how society and culture underwent profound changes since 2001: From freedom to paranoia, from perceived stability towards uncertainty" (2014: 104), and he goes on to state that, "besides the fear of terrorism there was a growing awareness of further threats like pandemics, natural disasters, or the breakdown of society" (113). This viewpoint is echoed by Pollard: "A dark, dystopic, and violent filmic style developed rapidly after September 11, 2001 […]. Reflecting the mass trauma that 9/11 caused among thousands, movies since 9/11 dramatically darkened and became increasingly more violent and paranoid" (2011: 177). He cites the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, increased use of surveillance, and the publicising of practices at Guantanamo as additional contributors to this trend in filmic content and style, and an idea implicit in the words of both authors here is that uncertainty, disaster and violence in the world and society around us is a source of paranoia in particular; a quality that becomes reflected in the filmic content. Nelson Algren is quoted in the 1959 *Time* magazine article on sick comedians, remarking: "This is an age of genocide. Falling on a banana peel used to be funny, but now it takes more to shock us" (Unknown Author, 1959: 44), and as well as highlighting the persistence of an impulse to link movements towards darkness in comedy to contemporary social and cultural situations, there is an interesting point underlying his words – if part of the laughter at seeing someone suffer a physical misfortune (such as Buster Keaton or Laurel and Hardy slipping on a banana peel) is tied up with the shock of witnessing a potentially injurious event played for humour, then upping the scale of the event to reflect a contemporary fear certainly seems one possible way of making the shock 'hit home'. In the same article, Irwin Corey adds: "The future seems so precarious, people are willing to abandon themselves to chaos. The new comics reflect this" (Ibid.). This context (that saw sick comedy emerge during a decade of Cold War uncertainty and swift scientific and technological advancements) forms a neat parallel with that surrounding the rise of

dark comedy programmes in the early twenty-first century, during the 'War on Terror' and a time of even more quickly evolving technologies, and it is certainly tempting to suggest that eras during which individual mortality and the collective future may be perceived as particularly precarious or uncertain seem to produce comedy that is inflected with fear, anger, and ready reference to human fragility.

The global context, post-9/11 may be seen as a potential 'trigger' for an uptick in the appearance of media texts reflecting these themes and evoking the uncertain, paranoid or pessimistic tone that has emerged as an important characteristic in the above discussions of umour, humour noir and the tendency towards being able to recognise dark comedy more swiftly and easily than it is apparently possible to describe it. However, there are also longer-term trends in British television that I suggest have contributed to the appearance – in both senses of the word – of dark comedy programmes. One such factor is the general influence of social realism as a form. The prevalence of comedy television programmes which adopt a realist style and use it to present darker elements of everyday existence might be partly explained by the advent and endurance of social realist drama. For example, the fact that social realist dramas of the 1960s started to consider working class characters living in the north as interesting subjects, in turn presented comedy with the possibility of taking up a similar track, and programmes such as *The Likely Lads* (BBC 2, 1964-1966) have proved to be forerunners to many other northern social realist sitcoms like *The Royle Family* (BBC 2, 1998, BBC 1, 1999-2012) and *Bread* (BBC 1, 1986-1991). As Hunt remarks, *The League of Gentlemen* frequently displays "…the 'traps' of socially realist British comedy. Frustrated joke-teller Geoff and warring couple Charlie and Stella in particular belong to a tradition that includes Hancock, Harold Steptoe and Basil Fawlty, characters who long for something better" (2008: 6-7). Charlie and Stella Hull also have a great deal in common with *Boys From the Blackstuff*'s (BBC 2, 1980-1982) struggling couple

Chrissie and Angie Todd, and with dramas such as *Boys From the Blackstuff* frequently containing dark humour themselves, the identification of social realist comedies from social realist dramas might sometimes seem to depend more upon form than content.

Samantha Lay has shown that, "despite a range of styles, all social realist texts identify themselves by conforming, to varying degrees, to the iconography of British social realism – stark urban landscapes, run-down seaside towns, vandalised parks and council estates strewn high with burned out or abandoned cars" (2002: 110). This is certainly the aesthetic employed by a number of the dark comedies of the 2000s, and examples of this are seen in many of the programmes discussed here. Lay has also commented that as well as frequently employing northern settings, social realist dramas generally boast 'regionally authentic' casts (2002: 12). The fact that comedies such as *Catterick* (BBC Three, 2004), which was largely performed by actors from the regions of North Yorkshire and the North East, and *Ideal* (BBC Three, 2005-2011) and other shows made in and around Manchester with comedians and actors from the North West, have this same authenticity amongst their personnel adds to their social realist identification.

Hybrid social realist comedy dramas like *Billy Liar* (Schlesinger, 1963) and *Shameless* (Channel 4, 2004-2013) show that there is flexibility in the genre to move quickly between drama and comedy and also to embody them both simultaneously, and some television texts have also routinely set social realist themes and aesthetics against those much less grounded in reality. The range of other genres that might reasonably co-opt social realism, or be co-opted by it, is hinted at by Glen Creeber when he talks of "…contemporary social realism beginning to push its aesthetic boundaries into elements of fantasy, stylisation, and anti-naturalist techniques. This may partly be linked to the rise of a new media-literate (postmodern) audience who had seemingly grown frustrated with the limitations of realism" (2009: 429). Dark comedies

that have taken the opportunity to adopt mixed-genre aesthetics in this way include both *Catterick* and *Ideal*, which employ pastiche, and parody a number of other types of text, for example.

However, it does appear that comedy shows which genre bend do so with care, taking pains to ensure that their comedy is signalled clearly enough to maintain an audience's comic insulation. Brett Mills has pointed out that, "*The League of Gentlemen* uses horror aesthetics most often at those points where its primary intention is not to be funny, whereas the more obviously comedic scenes, such as those in the local shop, are shot in a very traditional manner" (2005: 32), adding that when shows like The League adopt the conventions of other genres (such as horror) "…as merely aesthetics that can be drawn on and played with, the 'seriousness' associated with them is undermined. That is, while many themes of *The League of Gentlemen* are horrific […,] because they are placed within the conventions of sitcom their dreadfulness is undercut and, most importantly, rendered merely laughable" (33). This reinforces the idea of comic insulation, suggesting that in dark comedy it is the comedy that generally holds the primary position of influence over audience responses, and may also point towards the importance of co-opted aesthetics in any formal conceptualisation of dark humour.

Writing in 2004, Naremore remarks: "Today, black humor is ubiquitous, appearing in everything from museum exhibits to television commercials" (2004: 30). In the context of British television, whilst the 2000s have been a time in which a number of comedy programmes with dark humour as a key feature can be noted (particularly on BBC 2, BBC Three, and Channel 4), preceding decades clearly provide a lead-in period where an increasing inclusion of dark qualities in television comedy shows can be identified. If a significant element of dark humour is, content-wise, joking about controversial topics (for example, joking about disabled people, or rape and abuse, et cetera) then the

1980s would appear to be a time in which various different kinds of comedians and programmes were engaging with it, but approaching these same topics from very different angles. In much of today's dark comedy, it seems expected that an audience will regard most 'politically incorrect' material as being intended as ironic (and hence actually functioning as a critique of that content) no matter how straight it is played. In alternative humour, however, the critique is the explicit feature of the material. With such comedy sitting cheek-by-jowl with that which either presented contentious material uncritically, or engaged with it in so far as to deliberately absent it, it is perhaps possible to see the heritage of twenty-first century dark comedy growing out of the gap between them.

Stand up performers like Keith Allen, Jerry Sadowitz and Ian Cognito could be described as dark comedians of the time, and a number of episodes from the 1980s era of *The Comic Strip Presents...* (Channel 4, 1982-1988) also feature dark comedy. Considering the sitcoms of alternative comedy, Neale and Krutnik identify that the themes and content constitute "...a blatantly aggressive attack on the decorum of the traditional sit-com, with a tendency towards anal jokes and sexual prurience which unconsciously allies them with Benny Hill. In the process, they make a point of deliberately rupturing the sit-com's conventions of 'naturalistic' representation: with musical interruptions, extreme, repetitive physical and verbal abuse, and such 'impossible' gags as the 'post-coital' conversation between an electric plug and socket (in *The Young Ones*)" (1990: 245). As with the Comic Strip programmes, it is worth noting the links *The Young Ones* (BBC 2, 1982-1984) has with surrealism, but it is also the case that many dark comedies play a sense of surrealism or absurdity off a naturalistic or realist base. In their guise as the Dangerous Brothers, Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson also provide a good example of the on-going practice of dark slapstick comedy portraying ultra-violence, which can be traced back via The Three Stooges and other physical comedians of

early-twentieth century film, to music hall, and forward to Mayall and Edmondson again (in *Bottom* (BBC 2, 1991-1995)) and to the reality version of violent slapstick offered by shows like *Jackass* (MTV, 2000-2002), *The Dudesons* (SpikeTV, 2006-2010) and *Dirty Sanchez* (MTV, 2003-2008). Returning briefly to Sadowitz, a comedian-magician, it can be seen that there is a definite trend of dark comedy in some quarters of the magic industry, whether in geek magic or in more mainstream performance, such as that of Penn and Teller or Derren Brown. Moreover, there are dark musical comedians and ventriloquist acts as well, demonstrating the pervasive nature (and popularity) of the humour, and further supporting the case that there is not only a desire for this kind of comedy within entertainment, but also that such comedy seeks to be positioned by audiences and performers as being different from what else is on offer in each of these fields.

In contrast to the 2000s (when dark comedy appears less gender biased), the 1990s predominantly provides examples of programmes featuring introspective men who seem to awkwardly mix 'new man' and 'new lad' qualities in their concerns and behaviour. One such show is *The Mary Whitehouse Experience* (BBC 2, 1990-1992), a programme which comprised stand up and sketch comedy on a variety of frequently satirical, controversial or distasteful topics, performed by four comedians on a set recalling the fixtures and fittings of a shadowy industrial building. Its title appears specifically to taunt those who might seek to regulate dark content on television, name-checking Mary Whitehouse, the figurehead of the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (who was at this point still its president). During the 1990s, various programmes routinely crossing the lines between sitcom and other forms of comedy were also starting to incorporate into their eclectic formats a darker shade. Channel 4's *Sean's Show* (Channel 4, 1992-1993), is a good example of this. The show featured stand up comedian Sean Hughes, as himself, starring in a sitcom about himself; he was followed around (and addressed the camera directly from) his

flat and its locale, which was clearly visible as a studio set. *Newman and Baddiel in Pieces* (BBC 2, 1993) had a similar set-up, minus the 'built-in' sitcom, with the respective studio set flats of Rob Newman and David Baddiel providing a location for direct to camera stand up as well as domestic scenes. Both shows also had a studio audience with which the performers directly engaged. *Newman and Baddiel in Pieces* essentially ran a sitcom, featuring recurring characters and narrative elements spanning multiple episodes (such as a secret affair between David's girlfriend and Rob, and Rob's plans to kill himself), alongside interspersions of stand up and sketches in which the comedians either appeared as other characters, or played themselves again. The convention of comedians appearing in fictional versions of their own lives is as old as radio and television comedy itself, but it might be argued that these programmes had begun to edge (in fact, sometimes fully push) the form towards a dark parody of itself, with the comedians becoming – amongst other things – clairvoyant, delusional, substance-dependent, or murderers. Linked to this taste for dark or unusual parody, other shows which took familiar formats and twisted them into darker versions became more evident at this time; the work of Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer (who were later to become part of the dark comedy movement of the 2000s), for example, took the variety show and then the quiz show form in hand in this way. Although their material in the 1990s was not exceptionally dark, the qualities it shared with surrealism and Dadaism are clear; later, I will explore the idea that surreal and dark comedy are closely linked, as already pointed towards by Breton's affinity with black humour. Taking the 1980s and the 1990s as a lead-in period to the decade from which the programmes considered later in this work are drawn (a decade in which dark comedy becomes a far more coherent, high profile, style), the various elements of surrealism, hybridity of form, preoccupation with the physical, pessimism and satire, parody, and noticeable difference from

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'mainstream' comedy that can be seen here scattered across different programmes will be evident again, but in much greater cooperation.

Following on from this, if these kinds of qualities are indeed some of those that contribute to the inclination and ability of audiences to see dark comedies as a distinct group, it is worth considering whether there any other factors that might also promote a sense that dark comedy is capable of offering something different from other types of humour. One avenue that could reward exploration concerns the extent to which viewers might be recognising the ability of dark comedy texts to provide a different mental experience to that obtainable from lighter comedy. Here, ideas around generic pleasures and expectations come in.

Generic Expectations and Generic Pleasures

Levy states: "Intertextuality suggests that the meaning of a particular work derives from its relation to a larger set of films. It also means that viewers bring to the specific film watched a set of expectations, based on previous experiences, which the film may satisfy or violate" (1991: 23). In terms of dark comedy, viewers who seek out this type of entertainment and the comic pleasures it can offer may indeed have certain expectations coming into a programme; for example, that it will contain some features such as those suggested by Bucaria in her definition earlier in the chapter (violent content, comedy surrounding tragic situations or characters, for instance). When these expectations are satisfied, those viewers can potentially derive pleasure from their inclusion not only through the comedy in and of itself, but also because something they sought from the experience was fulfilled. Tuning into a programme which had been advertised as a dark comedy only to find it to be 'light' in nature would constitute, if not a total disappointment (it could, after all, still be funny), certainly a failure in supplying the experience originally sought. Playing with audience expectations seems

to be a crucial element in Rick Altman's idea of the 'genre crossroads' – a moment in a text when it seems that something that would provide the audience with a generic pleasure (i.e., an element of the genre that forms part of its appeal in the first place) can be accepted or rejected. He provides an example from *Top Hat* (Sandrich, 1935), of Ginger Rogers being disturbed by loud tap dancing from the hotel room above. Confronted by this noise nuisance, she could employ the socially expected solution of speaking to the hotel staff about it and asking them to call on the offender, or she could take the more proactive (but less polite) route and remonstrate with the dancer herself. Generically, it would be desirable for her to take this second action and therefore meet Fred Astaire, setting up the promise of dance numbers featuring the two of them. If she merely speaks to the staff, the wait for 'Fred & Ginge' would be prolonged, which is presumably temporarily disappointing for fans (Altman, 1999: 147). Altman's development of this concept is compelling, and he ties it neatly in with Freudian theory.

Speculating for a moment that it might be possible to consider dark comedy as operating on a continuum (ranging from comedy which is only very mildly dark, to that which is very dark indeed), and that part of the pleasure viewers might experience from a dark comedy text could come from seeing just how dark it can become, generic crossroads in such texts would be those incidences when it is possible to foresee multiple potential progressions of a situation, some of which are clearly darker – or more taboo – than others, and for the taboo progression to be the one that transpires. To give a brief instance of this from series two of the sitcom *Ideal*: the main character, Moz, hears the rumour that his new neighbour Judith is a necrophiliac. When a situation arises in which he is able to discuss this with her, the non-pleasurable (yet socially acceptable) generic crossroads outcome would be that the rumour turns out to be a misunderstanding or scurrilous gossip, especially since the likelihood of open necrophilia is so slim. However, Judith actually confirms the rumour, furnishing the sitcom

with a self-confessed necrophiliac character and the possibility of further dark comedy stemming from this in the future. The applicability of the generic crossroads (and its links to Freud) to dark comedy will be further examined momentarily, but for now it is sufficient to comment that mapping the pleasures that dark comic texts aim to provide to their audiences onto the breaking of societal taboos could be a promising exercise, especially given that the failure of much dark comedy to eventually resolve narratives in a socially acceptable way might account for displeasure in viewers who encounter this type of programme and do not enjoy it. After all, dark comedy does not routinely favour the possibility of the dawn of a brighter future or escape into a better world that Bakhtin discusses in relation to the grotesque (1984: 47-48), preferring to focus instead on its more pessimistic death and decay aspect, and Schulz informs us that "[i]t enacts no individual release or social reconciliation; it often moves toward, but ordinarily fails to reach, that goal. Like Shakespeare's dark comedies, black humor condemns man to a dying world; it never envisions, as do Shakespeare's early and late comedies, the possibility of human escape from an aberrant environment" (1978: 19). As with the visual aesthetic identified below, this outlook seems to be well-described as bleak.

Trisha Dunleavy has commented "[t]hat the most memorable sitcom characters have also been the most overtly defective – the staggeringly bigoted, incompetent, arrogant, naïve, deluded, self-absorbed, or stupid," (2009: 175-6) and it is conceivable that the expression of contentious attitudes in comedy may be one of the pleasures that can be associated with it; in other words, the opportunity to watch the behaviour of such characters might be both an attraction and an enjoyable feature of viewing these shows, and comedy texts may indeed try to position their audiences to find this behaviour pleasurably funny. She goes on to suggest that "…the persistent incorrigibility of these characters makes an important contribution to what makes a sitcom funny" (Ibid.), and although she is speaking here of sitcom in

general, it might be suggested that this point is particularly relevant to dark comedy, where the degree of defective behaviour displayed by many characters is often far more extreme than that shown by their mainstream counterparts, and frequently manifests in ways that can be considered much more immoral. For instance, the prevalence of violent murderers, racists, persons self-absorbed to the point where they are a danger to others (especially vulnerable people in their care), and so on, is markedly higher in dark comedy. These characters, and the extremes to which dark comedy allows the audience to see them go, could be regarded as part of the attraction for some, just as they might be an alienating feature to non-fans. Indeed, a kind of dichotomy is at work here, where the same material produces an affective response that is either welcome or unwelcome. Frances Gray describes the reaction of embarrassment, which can be caused by "…a sense of observing (im)moral attitudes – racism, sexism or sheer nastiness – which are not reproved, imparting discomfort at our powerlessness to change the situation. Embarrassment is a real physical sensation on the skin and in the stomach: it leaves us with a sense of our own, real, damage" (2005: 147). In line with Freudian theory concerning psychic economy and Altman's elaboration of the workings of genre crossroads, up to a certain point, it is enjoyable for a viewer to 'go along' with the generically pleasurable (yet culturally less-acceptable) branch of every fork, until – with the timing dependent upon the individual and the degree of cultural pressure working upon them – it becomes more comfortable to see a socially acceptable reversal/resolution of the situation than it is to see it continue. This discussion gives a taste of the idea of dark comedy as a 'body genre' – something important that will be picked up in a later chapter. Another important feature to note, however, is how often dark comedy spectacularly fails to provide such a reversal or resolution, or does so only with a great sacrifice of some kind for at least one of the characters involved. An awareness of the above elements, even if it manifests more as an overall impression of

the kind of engagement a text's content appears to be seeking than through precise noting of the events at each crossroads or surrounding each incidence of (im)morality, could be something that leads audiences to associate certain qualities with dark comedy that are not noticed in other types, hence leading to its distinction.

Hybridity and Liminality

Other contributory factors to the sense of dark comedy as a specific kind with its own traits and mechanisms might lie within its hybrid nature, or its tendency to operate in a state of liminality. Within genre theory, evidence has been noted of a move from resistance to acceptance of the mixing of genres (particularly concerning comedy and tragedy). Altman comments that the Neoclassical period was characterised by a struggle to accept the tragicomedy that was being produced, its roots coming through classical, and then medieval texts, but that "…little by little the production of new plays by Pierre Correille and Jean Mairet in the second quarter of the seventeenth century, along with the apparent Roman precedent of Plautus' Amphitryon, broke down critical resistance and led to acceptance of the hybrid genre" (1999: 4). The plays by William Shakespeare now referred to as his dark comedies (mentioned above) provide examples of this hybrid that predate Neoclassicism, being part of Renaissance Classicism, and point towards the perennial presence in stage entertainment of works that combine humour with drama. Perhaps tragicomedies are the forerunners to modern televisual dark comedies: "What we perceive as a mixture of pre-existing genres is often nothing less than the liquid lava of a new genre still in the creation process" (Altman, 1999: 143). In this case, it may be more accurate to refer to the liquid lava of a new sub-type of comedy rather than a new genre, but if nothing else, this history demonstrates that stories mixing darkness and comedy have captured the attention of creators and audiences enough for the

form to be visible across many centuries. As will be considered later in a discussion of Freud's theories, maybe there is something about the combination, with its potential to prompt ambivalent readings in audiences, that is particularly compelling.

There is a further interesting point to be made in relation to the linking of tragicomedy and dark comedy: if one way of recognising something as darkly comic involves identifying both comedy and tragedy within the same text, viewers who have existing knowledge of the nature of both will presumably already be aware of the difference in response to them that is generally expected in society. Yet, with a text that invites laughter in respect of the tragic, the individual viewer is seemingly pressed to make a decision as to whether this is acceptable given the specifics and context of what is being presented. In some ways, dark comedy is therefore challenging conventional responses to both comedy and tragedy. As Styan says: dark comedy, "[w]hen it is stimulating, it is because it *refuses* to allow us to respond with preconceived notions of the tragic or the comic" [my italics] (1968: vi). This situation is somewhat reminiscent of the notion 'I didn't know whether to laugh or cry' as a reaction to experiencing bad luck or calamitous situations that seem to pan out with comic neatness. Incidentally, the relationship that dark comedy has with past genres and texts shows that it is possible to retrospectively apply the term; for example, the dark comedies of Shakespeare were not referred to in this manner in their own time, but there is clearly something that has been recognised about them that has led to their classification as such now. This suggests that although the precise wording used to describe specific comedies can change, the general desire (and ability) to group and separate them according to their qualities is certainly there.

Analysis of Shakespeare's dark comic plays also introduces a notion of dark comedies thriving on liminality. Foakes asserts that the characters often operate within a grey-zone between the clear-cut attributes of

good and evil, and that observing them "…forces on us a sense of the gap between belief and act, between what people would be and what they are" (1971: 30), something he later clarifies as satire that is able to "…expose comically and hence criticize human failings, while leaving ideals unscathed" (60). This interestingly echoes an element of the theory of Bergson that whilst some characters are active agents in their own ridiculousness, and some are just victims of mechanical absentmindedness that veers them into ridiculousness, we laugh at them both alike, as "…runners after the ideal who stumble over realities, child-like dreamers for whom life delights to lie in wait" (1956: 69). Additionally, even when the plot might appear neatly wrapped up at the end of a text – as in *Measure for Measure* – "…the dramatic effect of the play stems from the gap between that neatness and what remains unexplained and unresolved below the surface" (Foakes, 1971: 30). It seems that a key feature of dark comedy is that its characters consistently fail to truly achieve anything good; even if there is an appearance of a happy resolution, usually the viewer is reminded that some kind of loose end has been left with the potential to rear up at any moment and overturn this temporary equilibrium. "Affairs in dark comedy rarely conclude: they persist, and their repercussions may be felt to be unlimited. This drama does not make decisions for us, but at the most suggests likelihoods, depicts chanciness and stresses both sides" (Styan, 1968: 285). Initially, this kind of assertion might appear to challenge the generic crossroads, as in those moments one (dark) pathway is explicitly chosen by the text, but even in an apparent foregone conclusion the pathway that is not taken is implicit in the one that is, as its alternative; hence the presence of a choice being felt. The 'chanciness' is there in spirit if not in practice, and a temporary position of being in between two points is still effected.

Christine Cornea has noted that a "…challenge to genre theory has been presented by those who have noticed an escalating use of parody, pastiche and allusion in both film and television that confuses generic

certitude" (2010: 10), and this is pertinent in the case of dark comedy. If there are ways in which dark comedy is presented that do not accord with other types of comedy, then audiences have to make a different kind of sense of it; for example, *Funland* is a dramatic comedy with thriller and mystery elements which are sometimes parodic and sometimes just allusive. As will be seen later, viewers are invited by the text to constantly negotiate between the comic and the serious in the programme in order to make sense of it. Some dark comedy borrows both visual and verbal features from documentary, and audiences have to negotiate in a similar way between those forms. Where this is taking place, not only can hybridity of form be seen but also operation in liminal space, and it is perhaps also an engagement with this that gives viewers a sense of the 'otherness' of dark comedy.

In Summary

So far, this work has shown a variety of evidence of dark comedy being regarded and treated as a type of comedy in its own right, ranging from casual, industrial and academic reference to its terminology, to attempts to actually state its qualities. A frequent feature of such references and attempts, however, is that understanding of what is meant by dark comedy does not seem consistent or straightforward, and various different approaches to defining it have not produced coherent results. Despite apparent confusion about the nature and features of dark comedy, the fact that the term is assumed to mean something, and that in practice it is needed and used to distinguish some kind of comedy from the rest, points towards the importance of such a category. The rest of this work aims to counter these problems, and some initial suggestions as to why and how dark comedy might be perceived as distinct by audiences have already been forwarded. The following chapters will follow up and augment these, using the theories of Freud, Bergson and Bakhtin for support.

CHAPTER 2

Odd Visions

> Vic Reeves: "Some people get their kicks from odd sexual things, you know… I get mine from odd visions."
>
> (*Omnibus*, Series 35 Episode 10, 1997)

Introduction

In order to explore the ways in which the aesthetics of dark comedy television work in relation to both their 'dark' and their 'comedy' nature, the application of theory that is concerned with the visual, the physical, comedy, *and* the ambiguities of the comic (wherein aggression, darkness or horror might be found) would be an expedient course. I believe that three particular theorists stand out as applicable and that individually, and especially collectively, they have the potential to illuminate dark comedy substantially: namely, Mikhail Bakhtin, with the concept of the grotesque; Henri Bergson, with a focus upon the appearance of mechanical actions in humans; and Sigmund Freud, whose work in relation to the uncanny, to taboo, to jokes and the unconscious, and to the interpretation of dreams, is especially relevant to questions surrounding dark comedy. I would like to take the rest of this chapter to briefly discuss the value of taking a visual approach to dark comedy, to establish the importance of the aesthetics of the body as a key site of representation within it, then to take an initial perspective on the correlation between horror and dark comedy. Finally, I will outline in turn how each of the theorists and their specific works can be used to consider humour surrounding the body, its qualities, and particularly its fragile integrity.

A Visual Approach

What is the value in taking a visual approach to analysing dark comedy? This is in some ways a very straightforward question, and in others far more complicated: earlier I noted that, *prima facie*, dark comedy appears to be somewhat of a mysterious entity that eludes definition yet is capable of being recognised by viewers, just as Jacques Vaché sensed the umour in his alarm clock. I suggested then that identifying the 'darkness' of dark comedy actually involves recognising some kind of combination of darkness and humour in the material that is either thematic, aesthetic, or spans both aspects. From this, it might appear that a comedy could signal its darkness through thematic means (characters humorously discussing a death, for example) without a visual indicator being present; however, it is my suggestion that even in such cases, the thematic content inevitably recalls to the listener visual imagery that constitutes a dark aesthetics (as in the death discussion, the invitation to consider imagery surrounding death: a corpse, violence or ageing, for example). In other words, dark comedy has a graphic aesthetics that forms an integral part of its humour whether or not it is directly shown on the screen. In the cases where this aesthetics does directly appear, it might be considered a short-cut to viewer recognition.

So, taking the visual material (at the level of, in particular, character appearances and movements, but also the appearance of objects and locations, and of any graphic or editing techniques that affect the appearance of what is on the screen – distortion or colour-alteration, for instance) as a basic element for analysis would enable the identification of recurring and significant features in the aesthetics of dark comedy. These could point towards certain effects in terms of viewer responses to, and recognition of, darkness and comedy. For the purposes of this study, I propose to take examples from British television comedy programmes that have been commonly referred to –

by critics, viewers, or academics – as 'dark', and analyse their visual content in light of the theories of Bakhtin, Bergson and Freud (the specifics of which are elaborated below). By doing so, I hope to demonstrate the role of aesthetics, especially surrounding the body, in creating and distinguishing dark comedy. It should be noted here that due to the nature of the selected theories as heavily visually-inclined, and of the focus upon physical appearances and spectacle being similarly so, sound aesthetics – a programme's accompanying music, sonic effects, et cetera – and consideration of how these aural elements may contribute to dark comic identification is something that the following work does not engage in at as great a level of detail. However, the significance of particular language use, sound effects and musical choices is examined in the case of specific examples, and while the primacy of visual aesthetics as signifiers of 'darkness' is established by this thesis, the role of sound in supporting them (for example, being used to draw attention to moments of humour, shock or spectacle, or to create discordant or disorientating effects in conjunction with visual imagery) is not overlooked.

The Body

> The body is a most peculiar "thing," for it is never quite reducible
> to being merely a thing; nor does it ever quite manage to rise
> above the status of thing. Thus it is both a thing and a nonthing,
> an object, but an object which somehow contains or coexists with
> an interiority, an object able to take itself and others as subjects, a
> unique kind of object not reducible to other objects. Human
> bodies, indeed all animate bodies, stretch and extend the notion of
> physicality that dominates the physical sciences, for animate
> bodies are objects necessarily different from other objects; they
> are materialities that are uncontainable in physicalist terms alone.
> If bodies are objects or things, they are like no others, for they are

the centers of perspective, insight, reflection, desire, agency

(Grosz, 1994: xi).

Elizabeth Grosz draws attention here to the unique and important nature of the human body as a site of both representation and interpretation. As thinking things, we can perceive the external world via the senses, and rationalise what is perceived using our mental faculties. In counterpoint to this, the body can reflect or exteriorise mental states. In discussing how the body has been used and described within formal enquiry since the firm advent of mind/body dualism, she highlights how "…the body is commonly considered a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects). […] [I]t is a vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained, incommunicable psyche. It is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority" (1994: 9). Although there are alternative conceptions of the body and mind that position them as one entity – as in monism – dualism has been the dominant reading, and this idea of the body as a site of expression for interior states is certainly one that is useful for the consideration of aesthetics I wish to undertake here, not least because such an idea is clearly a preoccupation across a variety of art forms. The surrealist movement, for example, frequently sought to explore interior states through the depiction of fragmented, obscured or deconstructed figures, whilst many dance and acting techniques also emphasise the body as a medium through which to express an individual's emotions. To some extent – in fact, in the case of surrealism, to a great extent – psychoanalytic theories have informed the depiction of bodies in this way, and this emphasises the importance of considering Freudian theory as a part of this thesis. A second point highlighted by Grosz is that the body can be interpreted simultaneously as both an object and a subject; a feature that will become very important when considering the Freudian concepts of the uncanny, composites and condensation,

and ambiguity and ambivalence, as well as resonating with Bergson's ideas about the appearance of mechanical actions in humans, and Bakhtin's corporeal grotesque – capable of representing both death and life, the ex-animate and animate, at once. Bodies are uniquely positioned to be interpreted as sites where competing and contradictory meanings can be read, and I suggest that this attribute helps explain why they are a particularly strong focal point within dark comedy texts, which are themselves constantly presenting and managing the competition and contradiction of the serious and the tragic with the comic and facile.

An increase in graphic portrayals of human physicality within visual media can be seen occurring at a similar time to the turn towards more overt exploration and depiction of disasters, pandemics and global violence/threats referred to above as a feature of post-9/11 film and television, but in a number of ways the interest in the detail and fragility of the body can be seen to pre-date the more specifically negative, paranoid and trauma related narratives identified by Riegler and Pollard. Indeed, the more personally-inflected trends of wound culture, confessional culture and striptease culture are closely tied to corporeality and all of these have been identified as coming to prominence during the 1990s. Steven Allen speaks of this decade as one which placed a particularly strong emphasis on the human form as something to be "investigated and experienced" (2013: 95), adding that by the year 2000, "[e]xhibitions such as Spectacular Bodies, as well as renewed interest in anatomy to the point that it form[ed] televisual entertainment, ha[d] encouraged spectators to contemplate the artistic spectacle of the dismembered body and to reconnect with its corporeal fragility" (23). Jason Jacobs, too, in his examination of the 'body trauma' TV that focusses upon medical and forensic work and locations has shown that the early- to mid-1990s marked a turn towards displaying a more graphic aesthetics of the body in hospital-based

drama and documentary shows, which spread across a variety of other genres related to action, crime and horror (2003: 147-148).

Increased attention to the body as a site of representation is evident not only in media at this time, but also in academic analysis, with Michele Aaron locating an even earlier beginning to this in the mid-1980s (1999: 2), while Chris Shilling notes that "[b]y the 1990s […] it had become clear that the body had assumed the status of an underdetermined concept that was able to 'stand in' as a malleable signifier for things other than itself. Different theories proceeded to define the body in widely contrasting ways and invested it with incompatible roles" (2003: 181). These theories all saw the body as subject to or representative of different controls and influences, and Shilling goes on to assert that: "In being tied to these other agendas, however, the physical materiality of the body was not only subordinated to them, but often disappeared over the theoretical horizon" (2003: 181). However, I would argue that this trend in ignoring the materiality of the body has always been bucked by those associated with the academic exploration of 'body genres', and the propensity to afford equal weight to the body as a site of representation and as a site of identification through physical means runs through work dealing with horror, thrillers, melodrama, pornography, and martial arts/action cinema, to name only a few areas of film, television and new media studies. These are all genres or modes that have embraced the body, its appearance, and its capacity to be moved by other bodies as an important element within their aesthetics, and I suggest that dark comedy television, which frequently combines aspects of all of them, is another such form that can connect with its viewers through the use of bodily aesthetics. Linda Williams has identified the three basic body genres as pornography, horror and melodrama, citing that the key feature they have in common is depicting "…the spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion. […] The body

spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping" (1991: 3). The dark comedy texts that will undergo consideration in the following chapters provide a great number of examples of exactly such spectacles of sensation, and as the comic intent of these moments often dictates that they are performed in ways that augment or subvert their typical appearances in their 'home' genres, the excessive and unusual bodily aesthetics of dark comedy mean that it deserves attention not just for its potential to be seen as a type of body genre itself, but as one that plays and experiments with expectations surrounding body genres as well.

Drew Leder picks up on another aspect of human physicality that will have relevance to my examination of the body as a key motif within dark comedy, and again there is a link to be made with the importance of physical appearance *and* physical sensation as elements that can be portrayed by characters on screen and perceived/experienced in multiple possible ways by audiences. He discusses the body's ability to suddenly make itself felt, noting that: "It is characteristic of the body itself to presence in times of breakdown or problematic performance" ('presence' here meaning 'to come to our attention') (1990: 83). He terms this characteristic 'dys-appearance', noting that the "dys is from the Greek prefix signifying "bad," "hard," or "ill," and is found in English words such as "dysfunctional"" (84). Leder initially uses dys-appearance to describe the reminders of our own embodied status that are prompted by stimuli like pain, hunger and physical overexertion, before going on to make a link between dys-appearance and sexuality, pointing out that physical sexual responses, along with those to other passions such as anger and shame function to bring the body to our awareness (1990: 37). I suggest that the phenomenon of viewers experiencing physical and emotional responses to moments in texts (for example, the visceral jolt at being confronted with something shocking,

tears wrought by empathising with a character's loss, or arousal at seeing a character in a sexual situation) can function similarly to bring a person's own embodied status, with all its attendant fragilities, potentials or desires, suddenly to their attention. When taking into account the high visibility of the body in dark comedy programmes, and their preoccupation with depicting sexual, violent, or embarrassing acts, it seems reasonable to consider them as drawing particular attention to the unruly nature of the body, and the fact that dys-appearance is focussed upon reminders of 'base' natural urges, physical limitations, weaknesses and reactions we may find ourselves unable to control, leads the possibility of dark comedy being an expression or reflection of fears about human fragility, couched within the 'safe' parameters of comedy and fiction, to rear its head. As Judith Butler says: "The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well" (2004: 26); paranoia about what we may be inherently capable and incapable of, through our object/subject bodies, may well be a key aspect of what is really being represented and explored in the visual aesthetics of dark comedy programmes.

Dark Comedy = Horror + Comedy?

The visual analysis requires a starting point, and alongside the centrality of the body as a site of representation and concern within comedies that are habitually described as dark, it is noticeable that an aesthetics that draws upon horror is particularly prevalent; programmes such as *Psychoville*, *The League of Gentlemen*, and *Jam* regularly employ as part of their aesthetics the kind of visual material that appears in horror texts, for example. An appropriate initial question to consider may therefore be whether one simple explanation for the

recognition of darkness and use of 'dark' in relation to particular comedies is merely that they tend to be in some way reminiscent of this genre to which 'dark' qualities are already typically ascribed. This is an explanation that, whilst surely *too* simplistic as it is, certainly provides food for further thought: if it is the case that many of the subjects that dark comedy explores and invites laughter around are the same ones that are often depicted and explored in horror (death, murder, physical abnormality/transformation to an undesirable state, being terrorised by a stronger person/force, and so on), then recognition of the presence of horror content within a programme does not seem an illogical basis upon which viewers might be led to adjudge it 'dark', and to append 'comedy' in acknowledgement of the fact that laughter appears intended as the primary response. One indication that the equation Horror + Comedy = Dark Comedy is indeed too simplistic swiftly appears with the necessity of the recognition that laughter is the *overall* or *primary* intended response, crucial in order to avoid the term also covering texts that contain horror subjects and sometimes offer the possibility of laughter at them, yet have an overall intended effect that is something different. Slasher movies may contain scenes of humour predicated upon horrific situations, for example, but it does not seem appropriate to call them dark comedies because the main focus of the films appears to be upon being entertainingly frightening. However, I think that a correlation between horror imagery and British television comedies habitually classified as dark points towards the possibility of such aesthetics being an important aspect, and one worth examining further in order to build a more detailed picture of what the darkness in dark comedy entails. It may also be the case that examining the specific nature of the horror aesthetics that are included can help uncover other qualities that are important or even foundational features of this type of comedy.

As noted, given that one function of such horror aesthetics *in* horror is to evoke the type of feelings that can preclude amusement and other responses typically considered desirable in comedy – fear, for example – it may seem an unusual aesthetic for these programmes to co-opt. However, beyond a first glance these shows are still recognisable as comedies, and can still be found funny. So what exactly is it about this visual material that means that it is capable of provoking differing responses in different contexts? Is it something inherent in the horrific imagery itself, or is it always the case that some kind of additional means must be used to 'convert' it into appearing amusing (and if so, what are these)? Noël Carroll has considered this in relation to the horror figure of the monster, noting that "…what appears to be exactly the same figure – say the monster in *House of Frankenstein* and the monster in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* – can look and act in exactly the same way; they can be perceptually indiscernible. Yet, one provokes horror and the other provokes humor. How can the self-same stimulus give rise to such generically different emotional responses?" (1999: 147). He makes a compelling case for the monster's multifaceted provocation being located in its status as an impure thing, resistant to being categorised, and therefore open to the same kind of responses as incongruity humour: "On the map of mental states, horror and incongruity amusement are adjacent and partially overlapping regions" (156).

It seems that the visual appearance of a monster has an inherent potential to be taken in more than one way by viewers: it can potentially be horrific; it can potentially be humorous, or it can potentially be a combination of both. However, it *is* only potential until something else (either in the text itself, or in the mind of the viewer) steers the monster's interpretation a certain way. The figure of a clown provides a good example here, as an entity whose appearance may be wholly designed to be amusing, yet is nevertheless thought of as

frightening by some. When observing a circus-style clown, a person who is not generally afraid of clowns is likely to remain unafraid of it until and unless it does something to prompt a re-appraisal; a person who is, on the other hand, frightened of clowns regardless of their actions, will have already adjudged the clown monstrous – their judgement in part informed by the knowledge that clowns also figure in a variety of horror texts and are a commonly-known source of phobic reactions in spite of supposedly being comedic. Such viewer responses have interesting implications for the reception of dark humour on television, and a later chapter will consider this point further, but for now I would merely like to note that what is important in the initial imagery (in this case, of a monster) is that there exists an ambiguity, or 'impurity' as Carroll identifies it, that can be capitalised upon in different ways – by horror texts to evoke feelings of uncertainty, discomfort and fear, or by comedy texts to suggest incongruity and ridiculousness. In each case, this potential is created by the imagery being of something that is open to problems of categorisation and capable of evoking a sense of being some kind of composite thing. This quality is one that can be seen discussed across the theories of Bakhtin, Bergson and Freud precisely as one that prompts either discomfort, amusement, or both, and the fact that such reactions seem to neatly align with possible responses to dark comedy itself is intriguing. Are ambiguity, the combination of multiple and contrasting signifiers in the same figure, and a resultant uneasy or unsettling underlying tonal effect potentially responsible for the common *sense* surrounding the recognition of dark comedy? To consider this further, it is to Freud's analysis of imagery, comedy and elements of horror that I turn first.

Freud

Talking about the utility of psychoanalysis as a tool in examining texts (in the face of criticism from those who find Freud and psychoanalytic approaches outdated and unhelpful), Harvey Roy Greenberg speaks of hoping to demonstrate "...the abiding suitability and adaptability of analytic instruments for dynamic textual elucidation" (2004: 124). I hope to demonstrate a similar thing. In the case of dark comedy, Freudian theory appears to be apposite in a number of ways, not least in terms of having a set of imagery and stock-scenarios associated with it that have already been extensively employed in the genres that dark comedies appear to most often visually co-opt (horror, melodrama and thriller, to give only three examples). Additionally, the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis upon surrealism, and the subsequent influence of surrealism within British comedy television, provides another means by which Freudian imagery has found its way into modern dark comedies. The degree to which the thematic content of dark comedy corresponds to basic recurring themes in Freud's work is very high (often involving characters who have mental health problems, or are concerned with problematic familial or sexual relations, or preoccupied with death or questions around identity and the self, for instance). It also seems to me that with ambiguity and the effects it can produce being identified as of possible importance to dark comedy, Freud's ideas surrounding the uncanny – elucidated in his 1919 paper, 'The 'Uncanny'' – are particularly relevant; many elements of the phenomenon appear to be clearly visible in the texts. Therefore, my outline of the utility of Freudian theory to a visual analysis of dark comedy will begin by summarising the key features of the uncanny and highlighting how they can be applied, before moving on to consider the applicability of other significant concepts from Freud's major works.

The Uncanny

The role of the uncanny in relation to comedy has not been overlooked by scholars. Robert Pfaller has catalogued the specific ways in which the uncanny and the comic can be seen to parallel each other, identifying four such important examples: "Let us term these four aspects the *occurrence of symbolic causality*, *success*, *repetition*, and *double*" (2006: 202). The first term refers to a situation whereby something which is being done in pretence ends up becoming true. The comedy scenario in which a couple are pretending to be lovers (when in fact they are seemingly mismatched antagonists) only to fall in love with each other for real, is one such example of the *occurrence of symbolic causality*. It also covers instances where an object which is symbolic of something takes on (or appears to, at least) other features of that thing: for example, in the series *Psychoville*, a plastic baby doll that bereaved mother Joy Aston treats as though it is a real baby demonstrates this phenomenon on two levels. Firstly, Joy's actions and beliefs are manifest by symbolic causality – a symptom of her mental state; secondly, when the doll appears *actually to come to life*, move things around and murderously pursue her, symbolic causality is played out as though it were a real phenomenon. Freud's example of this in relation to the uncanny lies in a story he reads in *The Strand* magazine about a couple who believed that crocodiles carved into a wooden coffee table had begun to haunt their rooms with the smells, sounds and shadows of the real reptiles (1955: 243-244). The term Pfaller refers to as *success* covers the fact that often in comedy, events or people (or love affairs, et cetera) appear implausibly successful; characters achieve happy endings where none seemed likely, marry above themselves, become wildly rich, and so forth. Pfaller is able to link this to the uncanny through Freud's example of Polycrates, whose every wish is granted, and goes on to say that the case of his psychoanalytic patient Rat Man wishing an old man dead, only for this

to then actually happen, can be seen as an example of 'too much' *success* as well as one of symbolic causality. A superficial desire that was not serious intent on the part of the Rat Man nevertheless came true, creating a sense of the uncanny via the appearance of supernatural power: "He thought that his remark was only a joke, mere words, but reality answers as though it had understood differently. His reasonable knowledge that he cannot perform miracles, that his words cannot kill, seems here to be suspended" (2006: 205). *Repetition* refers, for Pfaller, to a situation that is repeated to comic (or to uncanny) effect; Freud's lost wanderings around an Italian city which bring him accidentally back time and time again to one street in the red light district is the uncanny example given (2006: 206). It is a particularly successful one in relation to dark comedy, given that it combines not only the uncanny and comedy (with the joke being on the figure of Freud himself, unimpressed and embarrassed at this turn of events on a variety of levels), but also contains a salacious sexual element complemented by a seedy aesthetic. The idea of *doubling* as a comic and uncanny mechanism simply refers to the presentation of multiple identical things, and will be discussed further below. These examples of ways in which the content and workings of some comic situations can be seen as paralleling elements of Freud's uncanny illuminate the possibility of the uncanny acting supportively towards the comic, rather than counter-productively, and in this echoes the sentiments of Carroll in relation to horror and comedy above.

Cynthia Freeland has discussed some weaknesses in Freud's account of the production of the uncanny, suggesting that for a paper that purports to consider aesthetics, he generally avoids any discussion of them in his theorising: "Attending to the psychological nuances in life and art, Freud sought explanations of why we respond to certain fictions. He offered a 'deep' explanation of the uncanny as grounded in more primitive and allegedly universal human motivations. But Freud

neglected the very phenomenon he purported to be studying, namely an *aesthetic* one" (2004: 89). Following the writing of Neil Hertz (1985: 97-121) on Freud's analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Sandman* (1816), she notes "…that Freud's search for 'deep' emotions leads him to elide the surface of Hoffmann's story, ignoring how it creates and evokes aesthetic response" (2004: 93). Freeland has a point here; Freud does hurry past this aspect in his desire to fully dissect its relation to the interior of the subjects. In doing so, he downplays the importance of the aesthetic stage in the process, wherein the subject first perceives the object or scenario which prompts the feeling of the uncanny; without such an initial stage, there would be no evidence of a hidden interior process for him to follow up, after all! To an extent, his haste speaks of the obviousness of such a stage – of course we must first perceive and react to something in order for this reaction to be dissected, but I believe his focus upon the feeling that is prompted (and its roots in the unconscious), to the detriment of the object and process of perception itself is symptomatic of the wider trend of qualities linked to 'darkness' being vaguely *sensed*, where sense refers to 'gaining some kind of feeling of' as opposed to its empirical meaning; this is the feeling of umour that Vaché gets from the alarm clock, rather than the sense-perceptions that tell him the nature and the details of the clock that is there. It is precisely the nature of the actual appearance of the uncanny object that I am interested in, in so far as it must signal its potential to be regarded as uncanny to a viewer somehow. To my mind, this could be analogous to the potential signalling of the 'dark' of dark comedy by aesthetic means first and foremost, the accompanying feeling (or sense) of which is actually the second stage of a process that begins with the perception of the visual element. As a reminder, I have noted above that the visual element does not *have to* be directly shown, but can be implied by verbal reference to something that then activates a visual association (as in the example of a conversation

about death prompting a visual association with a 'moment of death' or a corpse).

Paul Flaig, in his analysis of animation aesthetics and the comic uncanny, sums up part of his argument thus: "What I have articulated as the uncanny's humour is one that produces laughter, enjoyment and delight through an invasive animation, one that [...] vivifies the spectators' excitement, over-assimilating them within a violently surreal montage" (2013: 16). Flaig's position is that the manic and over-exaggerated movements enacted by characters on screen – he gives the example of those of Mickey Mouse – can create a 'bodily sensation' for observers: as with the above, they are aware of a *feeling* of the uncanny, and this feeling stems from the observation of the appearance and movements of a character onscreen. From this standpoint, perceptions of the uncanny have physical effects(/affects) attached, and it is an awareness of these that offers one pillar of support to my argument about dark comedies drawing viewer attention to the fragility of the human body as well as the mind. Flaig uses this quality to describe the texts that display it as 'body genre' material, and the possibility that dark comedy, with its preoccupation with the human body, senses and emotions, aligns as a body genre itself is (as noted above) compelling.

While Freud may have overlooked the aesthetic elements of the texts and scenarios he wrote about when developing his *explanations* of the phenomenon of the uncanny, his descriptions and examples of uncanny things nevertheless still demonstrate what he considered uncanny imagery to consist of. It is this type of imagery that I am primarily concerned with, as the kinds of exemplar images and scenarios that Freud draws upon can be taken as a starting point for the identification of unsettling and uncanny aesthetics in comedies *without* automatically accepting his rationale for how they function psychologically. In other words, it is possible to agree that certain aesthetics can bear the name

uncanny, whilst remaining sceptical of Freud's exact explanations as to why – a situation that would presumably satisfy commentators such as Freeland and Hertz. For the purposes of this study, observation of instances of uncanny visual imagery within comedy programmes, alongside consideration of the role they appear to play in the humour, will further test the possibility that accordance between the uncanny affect and comic affect constitutes a key element for distinguishing dark comedy. If the uncanny can be accepted as something inherently dark – which I hope to demonstrate – then comedy which mixes the uncanny with humour could be a major element within dark comedy as a whole.

Alongside the general cases mentioned above of doubling and repetition, and objects symbolic of living things, which are visual features that can be extrapolated from the set of terms established by Pfaller, Freud's paper provides many examples of other uncanny objects and situations that may be open to identification in comic texts. For example, he follows Ernst Jentsch's suggestion of uncanniness lying in "…the impression made by wax-work figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata" (Freud, 1955: 226). "The unpleasant impression is well known that readily arises in many people when they visit collections of wax figures, panopticons and panoramas. In semi-darkness it is often especially difficult to distinguish a life-size wax or similar figure from a human person. For many sensitive souls, such a figure also has the ability to retain its unpleasantness after the individual has taken a decision as to whether it is animate or not" (Jentsch, 1997: 12). It is notable that horror films, horror videogames and dark comedies all make use of things like wax figures, shop mannequins, medical teaching aid dolls, children's dolls, crash test dummies, et cetera, to facilitate doubt and fear in observers as to human/object identification. Even a tiny hint of possible "bodily or mental functions" (Ibid.) such as the ability to move, cough, or blink

can have the effect of prompting the uncanny. Freud also identifies
"…the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity,
because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic,
mechanical processes at work behind the ordinary appearance of
mental activity" (1955: 226). In a number of ways, these examples will
be seen to accord with the visual elements of humour suggested in the
work of Bergson, so that a kind of cross-referencing of theory can take
place and provide a more detailed and nuanced exploration of the
examples.

Freud also discusses the uncanny feeling people can get from corpses,
the paraphernalia of death, and the idea of ghosts, and turns his
attention to the supernatural in so far as it might find expression in
living beings. "We can also speak of a living person as uncanny, and
we do so when we ascribe evil intentions to him. But that is not all; in
addition to this we must feel that his intentions to harm us are going to
be carried out with the help of special powers" (1955: 243). It is easy
to see here how the uncanny might be applied to the actions of
characters such as Kerry and the Silent Singer in *Psychoville* and Lotte
Lipp in *The League of Gentlemen*, all of whom appear to be able to
command the elements, objects, or others to move or behave in
unnatural ways. Furthermore, "[d]ismembered limbs, a severed head,
a hand cut off at the wrist […] – all these have something peculiarly
uncanny about them, especially when […] they prove capable of
independent activity" (1955: 244).

In another example taken up by Freud in 'The 'Uncanny'', Jentsch talks
of the effect produced by "…doubt as to whether a lifeless object may
not in fact be animate" (1997: 11). He uses the example of old-time
travellers' tales whereby a person making their way through the woods
sits down on what they assume to be a large log for a moment to rest,
only to suddenly have the log move underneath them and reveal itself
to be a giant snake: "The mass that at first seemed completely lifeless

suddenly reveals an inherent energy because of its movement. This energy can have a psychical or a mechanical origin. As long as the doubt as to the nature of the perceived movement lasts, and with it the obscurity of its cause, a feeling of terror persists in the person concerned" (1997: 11). At the point at which the unfortunate individual identifies the cause, the terror linked to the uncanny feeling is overtaken by whatever appropriate feeling stems from the newly understood scenario (in this case, perhaps fear linked to the danger presented by snakes). What is engaging about this example is twofold: first, the way Jentsch speaks of the movement of the uncanny object in terms of inherent 'energy', which creates a 'feeling' in the individual; second, how this links very neatly with Flaig's comments above. Of course, Jentsch's example involves a direct physical connection with the object, but suppose that instead of actually sitting on what appears to be a log, an individual observes another person do so or merely observes a 'log' in the landscape, which then moves and reveals its true identity as a snake. In the split second between registering an uncannily moving log and identifying *snake*, the reaction – the feeling – created by the scenario still is of the uncanny, and the potential evocation of an energy not just within the object, but echoed in the body of the observer as part of this feeling, still pertains. In other words, I am suggesting that uncanny movement on screen, following the ideas of Jentsch, Freud and Flaig, can act upon the observer as in a 'body genre'.

Related to the uncanny, I am also interested in the possibility that sketch shows and other comedies where the same actors play multiple characters can activate the phenomenon through the effect of doubling: audience members are likely to be aware that the same actors are appearing throughout, sometimes – due to technology or careful camera work – multiple times in the same scene. The (Freudian) psychoanalytic imagery elements here are compounded by the fact that

these doubles can (as well as having the reminiscent qualities that make them a double) also have differences of appearance and echoes of other things that make them a composite image as well: for example, in *Catterick*, two peripheral characters – the sea captain and the 'mermaid' – function as doubles of the major characters Chris Palmer and hotel bellboy Mark, and are played by the same actors. Not only does the appearance of the two pairs reflect their similarity, but their relationship to each other in both cases is echoed, with the scenario enacted between the captain and 'mermaid' illuminating the scenario between the other couple. In cases where an actor is made up to appear differently in each incarnation of a double, Schneider remarks that: "…it is to the extent that we can see, intuit, or otherwise discern that a unified physical entity underlies the various appearances and entities that uncanny effects are engendered here" (2004: 112). Coupled with my comments above, this is why the character comedians who appear in sketch shows or comedy series playing multiple roles can potentially activate notions surrounding split-personality/mania/dream-like settings/et cetera quite easily: such doubling is not perceived in real life, except in cases of mental ill health on the part of the observed or the observer. Viewers can accept the situation because a general understanding of how sketch comedy programmes typically work explains one actor in many roles, but it does not stop those associations being available. I believe that some dark comedies deliberately make use of them; for example, in the situation in *Catterick* I spoke of, other actors *could* have played the duplicate roles, but the fact that they did not adds additional possible readings to the text. The presence of the actor themselves, together with what they represent cannot always be avoided either. Consider the example of moments when you are watching a film and recall that the actor you are observing is now deceased; a sense of the uncanny in seeing 'them' speaking and moving can be evoked. If the character should happen to make a quip about death, living forever, dying in a manner related to their actual

demise, or something similar, that sense of the uncanny (via the occurrence of symbolic causality, or an appearance of fate) is only increased.

Further to Freud's considerations of the uncanny, it appears commonplace in both horror and comedy to have people in the text – whether they are diegetic characters or an audible/visible studio audience – who react in ways that model how viewers themselves might react while watching. Horror victims behave as though frightened by the monsters and shocked by jump-scares, while observers of comic behaviour can display a range of reactions, such as exasperation or amusement at the antics of funny characters. Of course, there is a crucial difference between the cause of the reaction (whatever it might be, as different people can react in different ways) in a character and the cause in the audience member. In the case of the former, their reaction is based upon the actions of the character/situation they are reacting to, their acted relationship to that character/situation, and the internal logical response that their character would have to such behaviour/incidents; if getting a sense of the uncanny is a plausible reaction, then Freud's account of the workings of the phenomenon could pertain for these characters, as they are *actually in* the uncanny scenario. However, for a television viewer, taking the actual position of someone in the scenario is not possible and nor therefore is such a reaction; even if their reaction is similar to the character's, it is not motivated in the same way. It could be said that the characters who are reacting in the text might cue or model a possible reaction in viewers outside it, but they are essentially also being reacted to, and form part of a greater whole that audience members are able to see but the characters are not. The reaction of individual audience members is therefore not properly comparable to actors within a text; if an audience member perceives there to be an uncanny moment in a text, what has prompted them to do so is not the

same. For instance, reading in *The Sandman* that Nathaniel realises Olympia to be a doll (as it is highly likely to be a conclusion at which the reader has already arrived) does not necessarily prompt a feeling of the uncanny, although Nathaniel reacts this way; the uncanny feeling surrounding Olympia would already have happened for the reader, thanks to cues in the text that Nathaniel did not get. However, Nathaniel's sense of there being an overarching plot against him, orchestrated by fate, is a general feeling that might be recognised by many readers in relation to their own lives – Nathaniel's specific predicament, whilst not prompting the feeling of the uncanny by the same means in him and them, still has the power to remind readers of something uncanny that *is* personally relevant.

It appears then, that there are different types of perceiving the uncanny that can take place in readers of a text: 1) An image or situation that is in-and-of-itself uncanny is recognised (such as the twins in *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980), standing together and identically dressed, appearing somehow threatening). In this instance, the reader's reaction might be similar to a character in the text, although cued differently. This type of perception might be described as relatively straightforward – it does not need to explicitly relate to anything in the reader's general life in order to seem uncanny, it might only fleetingly appear so, and the aesthetic alone is the main prompt; 2) An image or situation is recognised not as *prima facie* uncanny, but prompts the feeling by serving as a reminder of something that can be thought of as uncanny in the reader's general life (such as the feeling of fate controlling life, prompted by experiencing coincidences). This feeling could still be similar in the reader as to that of a character in a text, but again here would be motivated very differently – the experiences of the world are personal, and a reader might have the kind of experiences a character does not (which also explains why readers might perceive something uncanny at points when characters in

a text apparently do not). This type of perception is less dependent upon aesthetics, although they still play a part. The perception is less straightforward because it requires the relation of a specific textual feature to a wider without-text factor.

Finally regarding the uncanny, I would like to draw attention to wording used by Jentsch to describe the phenomenon as it arises when viewers (or readers of a story) are not sure if a particular character is an automaton or not, having been steered by the author/creator not to dwell over the possibilities long enough to decide: "The dark feeling of uncertainty, excited by such representation, as to the psychical nature of the corresponding literary figure is equivalent as a whole to the doubtful tension created by any uncanny situation, but it is made serviceable by the virtuosic manipulation of the author for the purposes of artistic investigation" (1997: 13). Notice here the use of 'dark feeling' – this seems to me to aptly accord with the ideas presented above concerning the *sensing* of the darkness in dark comedy, of umour, and so forth; a 'dark feeling of uncertainty' which is the uncanny could equally apply to these other things, and highlights the potential similarities between them.

Taboo, Mourning and Ambivalence

The Freudian concept of taboo has already been briefly mentioned above in relation to viewer complaints about two specific instances of dark comedy programmes making jokes that included reference to incest and child mortality, in *Tramadol Nights* and *The League of Gentlemen*. There, I speculated that the sense of boundaries being overstepped, and of there being certain topics which are unsuitable for joking, that contributed to such complaints may have been rooted in taboo, and that the presence of taboo topics within a comedic context has the potential to be an automatic signifier of 'darkness'. There are

certainly a great many examples in comedy programmes typically referred to as 'dark' of joking around the subjects Freud identified as taboo in his 1918 work, *Totem and Taboo*, and in particular the taboo of incest and taboos surrounding the dead (such as the defiling of corpses, treating the dead with disrespect, and failing to carry out post-mortem and funerary customs and requirements correctly) are themes that seem to recur in dark comedy with far more frequency than in other kinds of television comedy texts. This very fact alone creates the *prima facie* appearance of a link between taboo and dark comedy, and when the unusual prevalence of incest and corpse ill-treatment is viewed alongside these programmes' preoccupations with illness and the sick, dying and giving birth, the interior contents of the human body, and 'inappropriate' behaviour either by or towards authority figures such as religious officials, the overlap with Freud's catalogue of the taboo becomes near-complete. He notes of taboo that, "This power is inherent in all persons who are more or less prominent, such as kings, priests and the newly born, in all exceptional physical states such as menstruation, puberty and birth, in everything sinister like illness and death and in everything connected with these conditions by virtue of contagion or dissemination" (2012: 31), and also that "…something like the concept of reserve inheres in taboo; taboo expresses itself essentially in prohibitions and restrictions" (27).

In effect, Freud identifies that there are a number of states, including relational ones, around which rules and customs have persisted in many societies and cultures – generally manifesting in the forbidding of certain types of (especially physical) interaction – the taboo status of which he believes can be explained by psychoanalytic means. When these taboo topics are brought to our attention, they therefore have the potential to create a feeling of discomfort or uneasiness via the presentation of something that is traditionally considered necessary to avoid; to observe taboos being broken is to observe the prohibitions

and restrictions being ignored, and this aspect is a possible explanation for the offence taken at comic scenarios and joking which includes taboo content. Conversely, the observation of taboos being broken in such a way also has the potential to elicit a kind of thrill at the disregard of traditional restrictions, which may invoke a sense that what is being seen is illicit, or demonstrative of a type of freedom and frankness. This dual possibility in reaction to taboo is reflective of the concept of ambivalence – that the same thing is capable of being regarded simultaneously in contrasting ways – and the idea that this quality may be significant within dark comedy is once again raised. In fact, Freud refers to an example of ambivalence that happens to involve both comedy and taboo in *Totem and Taboo*. He remarks upon the tendency, common across cultures, to consider the relationship between a son-in-law and a mother-in-law as a fractious or awkward one: "The fact that the witticisms of civilized races show such a preference for this very mother-in-law theme seems to me to point to the fact that the emotional relations between mother-in-law and son-in-law are controlled by components which stand in sharp contrast to each other. I mean that the relation is really "ambivalent," that is, it is composed of conflicting feelings of tenderness and hostility" (2012: 21). Freud links this to the incest taboo, and for this thesis the interesting factor in his observation here is that a taboo-inspired ambivalence is reflected in the existence of joking on the topic. The joking highlights the ambivalence and the taboo, at the same time as being inspired by it, and I suggest that this complex mix of conditions is also at the heart of responses to joking on taboo subjects: the joking reminds hearers/viewers of the taboo itself, the related ambivalence, and offers the possibility of laughter at something typically characterised by restraint and prohibition; the dual possibility of finding such a joke offensive/inappropriate, and/or finding it freeingly bold/amusing, is in turn evocative of ambivalence and conflict itself.

Death is a key site of taboo for Freud in a number of ways. Mixed emotions can be felt when a death occurs, and Freud notes that a person's mourner can begin to punish themselves, feeling that they have contributed to the death in some way: "Not that the mourner has really been guilty of the death or that she has really been careless, as the obsessive reproach asserts; but still there was something in her, a wish of which she herself was unaware, which was not displeased with the fact that death came, and which would have brought it about sooner had it been strong enough" (2012: 80). This coincidentally accords with one of the elements of the uncanny – the sense that one's secret or hidden thoughts and wishes can, or have, somehow come to pass in reality. However, more important is the fact that the mourner's sense of having a conflict of feelings (distress at the death, yet a type of pleasure in it also) is indicative of another instance of ambivalence. Conflicting feelings surrounding a death can also be linked to taboos surrounding the dead themselves (which are tied up in superstitions about spirits, the afterlife, and the possibility of the dead being a hostile or vengeful force, able to hold power over the living). "We have learnt to understand part of the taboo regulations as temptation fears. A dead person is defenseless, which must act as an incitement to satisfy hostile desires entertained against him; this temptation has to be opposed by the prohibition" (Freud, 2012: 82). In other words, taboo regulations against ill-treating dead bodies and speaking disrespectfully of the dead, and towards the necessity of performing edifying funeral rites, are reflective of fears that the living would otherwise take the opportunity to express negative feelings on the deceased. Taboo instead means that we continue to keep their status as a subject alive through things like imagining them uncannily to be able to hear us or have influence from beyond the grave. Yet, at the same time, the evident 'object' status of their corpse still engenders the feeling that they are now powerless – a paradox whereby our inclination to regard them hostilely is confused by our distress at their state.

Freud succinctly notes that: "The double feeling – tenderness and hostility – against the deceased [...] endeavors to assert itself at the time of bereavement as mourning and satisfaction" (2012: 83). Our interior (unconscious) sense of being in some way happy about, or as having contributed towards, the death of the person is mitigated through being projected outwards to manifest in the idea of the deceased as hostile, at the same time as we are consciously sad about the death. Again the ambivalence, or 'double feeling' is the key feature arising with the taboo, and the aspect in which it seems to really resonate with reactions towards dark comedy. It is interesting that if Freud's wider ideas about the workings of the psyche are applied to this bereavement circumstance, it could be seen that the unconscious or 'hidden' and repressed feeling is the one that aligns with a positive/pleasurable response to, or sense of active involvement in, a negative thing while the conscious or openly displayed response is the fear/sadness. Could it also be the case that this applies to dark comedy itself; that it is able to use the inherent ambivalence of its typical content to tap into this and permit the open indulgence in a response that is generally repressed as 'inappropriate'? This would make it an especially clear form of tendentious humour, fulfilling the circumvention of the super-ego that Freud identifies in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960: 119-121) as allowing expression of negative and otherwise repressed ideas.

Following on from this, it is also interesting to note that 'ambivalence' is the same word used by Bakhtin to characterise the way the grotesque can be interpreted. This primarily indicates the Freudian influence upon Bakhtin, but it is nevertheless the case that this ability to regard the same situation or appearance as capable of being both 'dark'/negative/unpleasant, and positive/pleasurable/freeing at the same time is common to both taboo and grotesque, and this reinforces the idea of ambivalence as important to dark comedy in general. A

large number of recurring elements (the presence of the grotesque, the presence of taboo, the presence of the uncanny, melodramatic yet cathartic emotional moments, the possibility of characters – or viewers – taking pleasure in violence, and so on) involve situations or appearances being ambivalent, and it further seems reasonable to say that viewer recognition of such ambivalence may indeed be a necessary component of the ability to find dark comedy texts comedic at all.

Freud asserts that "[m]ourning has a very distinct psychic task to perform, namely, to detach the memories and expectations of the survivors from the dead. When this work is accomplished the grief, and with it the remorse and reproach, lessens, and therefore also the fear of the demon" (2012: 87). Prolongation of the feelings and the fear, and any continued belief that the hostile dead hold power, or that they must be constantly minded, is positioned as a psychological problem rather than 'normal' mourning behaviour (Ibid.). Here, there can be seen a link between elements that are referenced in horror – such as vengeful dead and fear of monsters – and some kind of psychological failing in the individual who is subject to their influence, particularly when (as in horror) the scenario at hand can be deemed excessive. Freud points out that in the normal course of mourning, people are not subject to troubling ambivalent feelings towards the dead for very long, and that "[w]e now find it easy to suppress whatever unconscious hostility towards the dead there may still exist without any special psychic effort on our part" (Ibid.). I suggest that dark comedy scenarios surrounding the dead, corpses, and bereavement offer via their excessive and horror-themed imagery and content a kind of playing out of these fears and hostilities unsuppressed; i.e., a vision of what is characterised by Freud as the neurotic, or psychologically abnormal, response to death. As with the tendency for escalating catastrophes and imagining worst case scenarios that can be identified both in specific characters and in the overall tone of various dark

comedy texts in relation to illness, life setbacks, and even trivial events, a neurotic point of view is applied to a situation, and viewers have the opportunity to observe (and engage with through laughter) particular kinds of feelings and behaviour that are more generally repressed in the course of 'normal' experience.

These scenarios can also demonstrate behaviour that subverts specific conventions constructed around death and the dead that Freud would say are rooted in taboo, such as that of 'De mortuis nil nisi bene' (Do not speak ill of the dead). In *Nighty Night* (BBC 2, 2004-2005), for example, Jill uses her funeral eulogy for husband Terry to speak ill of him instead of reverently: "I will not hear a word against Terry. Having said that, he was a very bad husband and quite an evil man. He did not do his duty to me, whether it be in the bedroom, in the shower, or strapped to the washing machine with a hairbrush in my mouth. He did however see fit to poke his pipe in a local tart" (Series 1, Episode 5). In her first two sentences Jill illustrates the ambivalence that Freud would call the 'double feeling' of tenderness yet hostility, as well as demonstrating an excessive transgression of common funerary practice with her choice to speak badly of him, to reference their sex life (in frank detail, no less) and to reveal his infidelity. I draw on this example not to psychoanalyse the fictional character, but to show a dark comedy breaking a taboo for comic purposes, and to point out that this makes another link between this type of comedy and the exploration or illustration of the (faulty) human psyche. The status of dark comedy as a space wherein confused and confusing ambivalences are presented, and viewers are encouraged to engage with them as part of the process of finding the humour, can be seen here. Further, the fact that the humour is ultimately at the expense of the human mind and its fears and preoccupations – just as in other examples it has been at the expense of the human body and its propensity to let us down – highlights that it is a type of comedy that is ultimately and intimately about the human condition.

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Above, the concept of agency was introduced in relation to the embodied subject, following Judith Butler's assertion that in addition to being at risk from the actions of other bodies, such as violence (which she refers to as the "touch of the worst order" (2004: 28)), our knowledge of this risk reminds us uncomfortably of our own potential to touch others in the same way. The idea that we are capable of *doing* bad things is crucial to taboo: "If taboo expresses itself mainly in prohibitions it may well be considered self-evident [...] that it is based on a positive, desireful impulse. For what nobody desires to do does not have to be forbidden, and certainly whatever is expressly forbidden must be an object of desire" (Freud, 2012: 91). Freud is quick to highlight, however, that this does not mean everyone consciously actually desires to commit incest, or to abuse the dead, or to kill, and so on; rather, that these taboos have root in the unconscious and that the prohibitions linked to them today have evolved via a convoluted path that is explicable psychoanalytically and evidenced by the careful study of people both with and without neuroses. For instance: "The analysis of dreams of normal individuals has shown that our own temptation to kill others is stronger and more frequent than we had suspected and that it produces psychic effects even where it does not reveal itself to our consciousness" (Freud, 2012: 92). These psychic effects manifest in all sorts of ways which are – again – evident through analysis, but the basic description of taboos as "forbidden action[s] for which there exists a strong inclination in the unconscious" (2012: 44) sums up Freud's attitude that whatever has come to be recognised as taboo now is indicative of both human fears and human desires, of the apparent need to repress and project desires *with* fear, and thus how it may be possible to see evidence of ambivalence in comedy as a sign that this comedy is presenting and exploring something about the human mind and its complexities. These taboo topics – taking a Freudian perspective – are by their very nature ones capable of hitting home and prompting strong and potentially confused and conflicting

reactions, and careful examination of moments in which they appear in the comedy texts considered during this thesis will seek to conclude whether the working-through of taboo is as equally distinguishing a feature of British dark comedy programmes as the exploration of fears surrounding the fragility and fallibility of the human body appears to be.

The Interpretation of Dreams, and Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious

Another strand of the analysis of the visual features of the dark comedies can be drawn from *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in which Freud introduces some concepts that are potentially highly relevant to the aesthetics of this kind of programme: primarily, I am interested in the notion of composite imagery, as both a facet of objects and characters/people within dark comic texts (and how this relates to the uncanny and to the ideas of Bakhtin and Bergson as well). Freud talks in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of images that can be recognised as a composite of two or more other things. A dreamer might identify a character as both their mother and a work colleague at once, perhaps, or two objects could become conflated. When such a depiction occurs in a dream it indicates that "[t]he unification into one image has here been to some extent unsuccessful; the two representations overlap one another, and give rise to something like a contest between the visual images" (1997: 207). I have discussed above the uncanny effect of doubling in so far as it may be possible to apply the term to characters played by the same actor within one text, and the presence of the actor within the character may also be pertinent here: Freud further remarks of composites that, "[t]he new creation may prove to be wholly absurd, or even successful as a fantasy, according as to the material and the wit employed in constructing it may permit" (1997: 207). In dreams, whether the composites are 'successful' or not is somewhat immaterial, as a

dreamer may well afford them the same lack of concern they would offer to a wholly realistic image, but in a comedy the absurd can be an important extra source of humour. Taking *The League of Gentlemen* as an example, many of the characters are deliberately designed to look ridiculous, not realistic, as a combination of the actor and the role they are playing (say, a suburban housewife), the better to signal the grotesque and to derive humour from it.

Other elements of the dream work (and its relation to joke work, as seen in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*) such as distortion, representation by other, multiple-determination and the treatment of words as things may also have interesting roles to play in creating both the darkness and the humour in dark comedy programmes. The location and examination of imagery that is specifically mentioned by Freud as part of 'The Dream Work', in such programmes, will enable me to see if this *is* the case, and if so, how this imagery fits into a wider aesthetics of the body within dark comedy. In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud states that "...the process of condensation, with or without the formation of substitutes, of representation by nonsense and by the opposite, of indirect representation, and so on, which [...] play a part in producing jokes, show a very far reaching agreement with the processes of the 'dream work'" (1960: 197), and it could indeed be the case that the imagery of the dream work and the ways in which certain meanings can be read within it by its observers can be regarded itself as a meaningful technique in dark comedy. Once again, even if one remains sceptical as to the explanations Freud gives for the workings of the imagery in relation to the unconscious and the individual's mental life, the imagery itself is still capable of evoking certain readings (not least because of its widespread use in popular culture *as a* reference to Freud and psychoanalysis).

This thesis will also explore the potential of particular texts to be treated as though they mimic a dream-state (in order to utilise the

qualities inherent in such a state for various purposes: aesthetic, stylistic, narrative and comedic). If the above links between the dream work and the joke work appear to bear out, it is reasonable to consider that there could be similarities between the two things in other respects. Even if dark comedy series are not read as themselves mimicking dream-states, there is still a vast amount of imagery within them that can be related to the Freudian dream work. As a basic example, typically the characters in such series completely fail to notice anything unusual in their interactions with each other, no matter how strange they are, or in bizarre events that transpire within the narrative. Not recognising things or events as being at all extraordinary, even when in reality they would be considered very unusual or even impossible is one of the hallmarks of a dream: "The mind of a man who dreams is fully satisfied by what happens to him. The agonizing question of possibility is no longer pertinent" (Breton, 1972: 13). There appears to be a great deal of symbolism that can be read into characters' interactions with certain objects, too. Freud comments that, "[i]n a number of cases the common quality shared by the symbol and the thing which it represents is obvious, in others it is concealed; in the latter cases the choice of the symbol appears to be enigmatic" (1997: 231). Once more, the idea of masking – and, by extension, composition – is apparent.

In short, from the theories of Freud concerning taboo, the uncanny, the visual elements of dreams, and to a lesser extent *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) (in which Freud's considerations of the phenomena of forgetting, misspeaking and bungled actions also display utility for an analysis of comedy and human failure), can be extracted a set of aesthetics and behaviours that – whilst observed *visually* – could provide an insight into something more beneath the visible surface of the characters and situations viewed: an interior state, the presence of which adds another layer to the dark comedy. Potentially, the nature of

this extra layer, and its effect upon the text, could be a factor that enables a differentiation between dark comedy and other kinds. Of course, it is also possible that the appearance and actions of characters in dark comedies, insofar as they accord with examples given by Freud as part of his theory, have the potential to evoke particular readings or reactions in viewers that are *not* connected with the interior of those characters, but instead with something else. In these cases, it might be that the imagery reflects something Freudian in a general way, as opposed to signalling something about a specific character's metal state. In either eventuality, the relevance of Freud's theories to the study at hand can hopefully be well-recognised. He is not the only theorist to be of use, however.

Bakhtin

The work of Mikhail Bakhtin on the grotesque has been used extensively by authors considering the role of the body and bodily aesthetics in both humour and horror. His key work of interest to this thesis, *Rabelais and His World* (1968), discusses the significance of the imagery of the grotesque, elaborating a theory as to its role in challenging authority and creating a celebratory mode that provides a counterpoint to the restrictions of everyday life. As with Freud, in setting down a thorough description of his theory, Bakhtin necessarily refers to a variety of situations and objects that demonstrate it, allowing examples of the visual appearance of the grotesque to be seen. Again, as with Freud, these kinds of visual features can be used as markers of the grotesque (and therefore potentially of 'darkness') where they can be identified within comedy television texts. Once identified, the ways in which such material contributes to both the humour and the construction of the body in the dark comedy can be

analysed, with the aim of mapping the form and function of aesthetics within it.

The Carnivalesque

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin analyses the work of the French Renaissance-era writer Rabelais and uses it to formulate the concept of the carnivalesque; one that is typically employed to describe a particular kind of festive humour involving lowbrow, an emphasis on the physical body, inverting hierarchies by mocking authority figures, collective revelry, and freedom (within a temporary or bounded limit). Historically, feast days and fairs are important examples of carnivalesque periods, and the concept can roughly be applied to modern examples of festivals, carnivals, partying, and some kinds of public demonstrations. The key things characterising carnivalesque occasions are collectivity and celebration, and the idea that the participation involved is not a 'normal', everyday way of behaving but a freeing temporary counterpoint to normality during which it is permissible to engage in acts that may be considered 'base' or lowbrow: behaving sillily, and indulging the body through consumption of food, drink, and sex, for example. Bakhtin's carnivalesque body is one that is focussed on what he calls the lower stratum: the stomach, digestive system, and genitals, and the carnivalesque body unashamedly celebrates its natural urges and functions. This is part of why carnivalesque is relevant to analysing lowbrow or unruly comedy, because styles such as gross-out, sex comedy, slapstick and humour surrounding particular appearances (for example, being overweight or voluptuous, or having a large penis) are all concentrated around the body in this way, and around laughing at these qualities. The trappings of the carnivalesque clearly have the ability to be visually identified, but there is also a language component: the use of joking innuendo and other sexual speech, coarse speaking in the form of swearing, imitating

highbrow and 'official' language but mangling and parodying it; all this is in carnivalesque too.

In the chapter 'The Language of the Marketplace in Rabelais', Bakhtin considers just this type of thing, analysing the content of Rabelais's novel series *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c.1532-1564) and contextualising its language in a long tradition of discussing and depicting scenarios such as drenching people in urine and tossing excrement upon them. He notes that, "Scatological liberties (mostly verbal) played an important role during carnivals" (1984: 147), along with language that reflected the procreative concerns of the bodily lower stratum, generally invoking fertilising, fertility, a death-rebirth cycle, and nature. In Rabelais's own time, this type of speaking was not considered coarse, Bakhtin stresses, but practically ever since has been categorised in this way. Moral opprobrium of various kinds, functioning to regulate social behaviour, has designated certain language and behaviours as impolite and to be hidden (or in the case of drunkenness and rampant sex, as something that should not be indulged in), so that these previously ambivalent aspects of life became debased and negatively associated (1984: 146, 150). This shift in designation therefore explains why modern humour which includes these elements is typically considered lowbrow, and possibly worthy of censorship or suitable for sharing only at certain times or in particular spaces. Concomitantly, there is potentially a high degree of (guilty) laughter and delight to be taken in this kind of humour precisely because it is 'basic' and frowned upon, and skirts around taboos concerning the interior contents of bodies, and bodily interrelation.

Bakhtin talks too of 'familiar speech' ("curses, profanities, and oaths"), and "the colloquialisms of the marketplace": "The marketplace of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was a world in itself, a world which was one; all "performances" in this area, from loud cursing to the organized show, had something in common and were imbued with the

same atmosphere of freedom, frankness, and familiarity" (1984: 153). It seems reasonable to suggest that the consistent use and performance of a joking language with 'lowbrow' or coarse properties, if it were to take place in another context – for example, across a particular range of modern television texts – could have the potential to create a similar sense of commonality and shared qualities of freedom, frankness and familiarity; one that might function to distinguish those texts just as the marketplace and other carnivalesque locations were distinguished as places characterised by such speech in Rabelais's time. It is the case that the dark comedy programmes considered in this thesis make consistent use of coarse language, and as many swearwords invoke the bodily lower stratum in their scatological or sexual meanings, it may be said that the frank and frequent use of swearing in dark comedy is another means by which references to the human body and physicality saturate these texts. While a quantitative study of the exact frequency and specifics of swearing in dark comedies as compared to other kinds of programmes or other kinds of comedies is beyond the scope of this work, the casual use of swearwords as part of character dialogue, the use of swearing as a necessary part of the construction of a joke (such as the punchline relying upon a swearword) or the use of bad language itself as the topic of humour (as in the 'Mr Tourette' segments of *Modern Toss* (Channel 4, 2006-2008), for instance), are all features that recur in the programmes considered here. Their presence as verbal references invoking graphic and taboo physicality, and as markers of carnivalesque, contributes to characterising dark comedy as a space in which frank representation of topics that are subject to censure elsewhere is a significant feature.

The Grotesque

The concept of the grotesque is inseparable from the carnivalesque. Bakhtin outlines a bodily aesthetics of the grotesque which highlights

how "…stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (1984: 26). In analysing the visual content of dark comedy programmes, I am keen to note the frequency with which attention is specifically drawn by some means towards such features of characters' bodies. Many film and television genres habitually employ shooting and editing techniques that fragment and objectify the human body, and comedy – with its propensity for making jokes about the physical appearance of characters, and for joking about sex and scatology anyway – seems well primed to take a focus upon the grotesque body. As has been seen above, the appearance on television of humour surrounding the body-emphasising topics of sex and death can prompt controversy that appears to be grounded in taboo, but debates about whether a programme went 'too far' or displayed 'too much' sexual content, or violence and gore, or other types of 'gross-out' aesthetics, are also media staples, and another angle that can be pursued in analysing dark comedy programmes lies in this notion of *extremity* of portrayal. This is perhaps meaningful only in a context of contemporaneous television comedy in general, and it would thus be instructive to consider whether the portrayals of (for example) sexual content in programmes typically described as dark could be regarded as generally more extreme or excessive than those in other types of comedy programme, or obviously different in some specific way that might lead to their being perceived as more shocking somehow.

Mary Russo explains how Bakhtin's "grotesque body is the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change. The grotesque body is opposed to the classical body,

which is monumental, static, closed, and sleek, corresponding to the aspirations of bourgeois individualism; the grotesque body is connected to the rest of the world" (1986: 219). This emphasises the positive aspect of the grotesque as a celebration of the capacity to endure, to connect with others and the world, and to remain grounded. However, it is to Bakhtin's great dismay that since Rabelais, the use of grotesque imagery for satirical purposes has given primacy to its more negative aspects instead. He complains that when satire is brought into grotesque imagery,

> ...a weakening of the ambivalent image's positive pole takes place. When the grotesque is used to illustrate an abstract idea, its nature is inevitably distorted. The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life. Negation and destruction (death of the old) are included as an essential phase, inseparable from affirmation, from the birth of something new and better. The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase.
>
> The abstract idea distorts this nature of the grotesque image. It transforms the center of gravity to a "moral" meaning. Moreover it submits the substratum of the image to the negative element. Exaggeration becomes a caricature (1984: 62).

In other words, while exaggerated physical characteristics and behaviours linked to the bodily lower stratum may be available for ridicule as part of the grotesque, this ridicule *should* be ultimately overruled by their role in fostering the endurance, cohesion and advancement of humanity; yet, when the grotesque imagery is instead co-opted to serve as something like a warning against behaving or appearing in these ways (with the underlying message that indulgent eating, drinking or sex is morally unbecoming), the ridicule becomes wholly negative, with no room for the positive reading to take place.

Much as the coarse language characteristic of carnivalesque and reflective of grotesque themes has become a signifier for lowbrow and a lack of propriety, the physical characteristics and behaviour associated with grotesque then become signifiers of undesirable states over which judgement is being passed.

The risk of grotesque imagery being read, or indeed, presented, primarily negatively is present in relation to contemporary comedy. Consider the characters of Bubbles DeVere (the overweight health-spa client) or Mrs Emery (the incontinent elderly woman) in *Little Britain* (BBC Three, 2003-2004; BBC 1, 2005-2006), for example; they have various grotesque qualities which the show appears to position viewers to find humorously shocking or disgusting rather than to see them as people whose ageing and fallible bodies are part of an overarching cycle of death and rebirth. While it might be argued that in the case of Mrs Emery, whatever judgement is being passed is at the poor state of geriatric care in contemporary Britain as opposed to being directed at her, the states of being overweight and overtly sexual (Bubbles), or of being elderly and unable to control bodily functions (Mrs Emery), are clearly intended to be found undesirable. The possibility for ambivalence in how the grotesque imagery is viewed is reduced in these examples in favour of a negative reading, and it is this kind of usage that Bakhtin is unhappy with. Conversely, the possibility of reading the grotesque qualities of a character such as Moz in *Ideal* (an overweight man who smokes a large amount of weed) as positive and celebratory as well as or instead of seeing a negative side is far easier, and more in line with the original, Rabelaisian grotesque. These differing examples demonstrate that the ambivalence Bakhtin references in relation to the grotesque and the carnivalesque can be seen balanced differently in different contemporary comedy programmes, and an interesting line of enquiry to pursue in the following chapters will be to note how far the dark comedy examples

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bear out his suggestion that trends towards satire and cynical caricature render readings balanced heavily towards the negative more prevalent than those with more room for the positive (and whether there are accompanying features that may account for the difference; in the case of the characters I have considered here, two older women are clearly presented negatively while a younger man presents a more positively-inflected grotesque, for instance).

Bakhtinian Uncanny

Picking up further on the notion of grotesque's 'proper' essence being to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life, in this it can be likened in some ways to uncanny imagery – the machine/doll/object that looks lifelike but is simultaneously an inanimate thing combines the living and dead in its appearance just like the grotesque, for instance. As with the grotesque being negatively viewed, the uncanny is typically seen negatively as creepy and unsettling. What is placed around it, visually and contextually, is crucial to its reading (because we are less likely to look at Disney-style anthropomorphised teapots and think they are uncanny and horrible than we are to consider *Psychoville*'s plastic baby Freddie Fruitcake disturbingly uncanny, for example). Bakhtin notes of the grotesque humour of the Romantic era – referred to, interestingly, as 'destructive humour' by contemporary author Jean Paul (1984: 41) – that, "[t]hrough it, the entire world is turned into something alien, something terrifying" (1984: 42), and this has clear parallels with the uncanny too. The Romantic grotesque is perhaps the darkest incarnation that Bakhtin examines, and the one that particularly highlights the important role of masking. In fact, he comments that the mask "...reveals the essence of the grotesque" through its multifaceted qualities: "[It] is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality

and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles"
(1984: 39-40). His choice of the mask as the essence of all grotesque
is testament to the resolutely visual nature of the concept, and
highlights again the idea of ambivalence, and of composite, confused or
disguised appearances as important for providing a sense of natural
boundaries being exceeded (something which he regards as exclusively
freeing, in contrast to Bergson and Freud's more negative attitudes).
Once more, looking out for the use of not just literal, facial masks in
dark comedies, but any instances of imagery where something is
masking something else, is to look out for the ideas of these theorists in
action. Bakhtin might be the key theorist of *grotesque* physicality, but
there is one more author to consider when the study of human
appearances and actions is concerned.

Bergson

In his *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (1900), Henri
Bergson considers what is comic and what it is that promotes laughter,
theorising that human behaviour which exhibits hints of physical rigidity
or the mechanical, of mental fallibility, or any non-human or 'tampered-
with' qualities, is invariably comical to observers. Immediately, the
theory can be seen to be based firmly in the visual, with an emphasis
on the comic being recognised through visual means even when its root
cause comes from somewhere within the individual being observed
(i.e., stemming from a state of mind or attitude). In particular,
Bergson's ideas that human physicality and appearance can signal that
an individual has become out of touch with reality (in the sense that for
some reason they have ceased to pay attention to or accurately
perceive the actualities of the world around them) could prove to have
great significance for any conception of dark comedy and aesthetics.

The Appearance of Mechanical Actions in Humans

Bergson gives two examples of human mishaps: a man falling over in the street because he is not paying attention to the terrain, and a person dipping their ink-pen into a pot of mud that some joker has substituted for the real ink, and then attempting to sit down but falling instead because the joker has also relieved them of the chair (1956: 66). "The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity, just where one would expect to find the wideawake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being" (1956: 66-67). These examples and this explanation are particularly interesting in terms of what they have to say about the human body and its abilities versus those of automata. In failing to pay adequate attention (via sense perception) to the world around him, the man on the street, walking on autopilot, is subject to a physical accident that highlights the importance of having mental processes engaged correctly in navigating reality. Not to do so reduces the individual to the state of an automaton – a non-thinking thing – which is an undesirable position. For those observing such an individual, there is the potential for humour to be found in this appearance; the observer *does have* their faculties engaged and is capable of seeing what the non-thinking person does not (that the ink is not ink, that the chair is not there). Not only can the observer reinforce their own sense of mastery over potential corporeal automatism through viewing these incidents, but the inherent uncanny visual material of a human who behaves as though mechanical, and therefore raises doubts as to whether they *are* animate or not, illustrates a way in which the humorous events can also be seen as dark.

Bergsonian Uncanny

There is a clear link between the uncanny and Bergson's thoughts about the appearance of mechanical actions in humans, and Pfaller is able to elaborate on the position of the spectator towards such actions even further: "In this case [of human automatism] the illusion of the uncanny consists in the notion that people are machines. This notion has to be suspended as an illusion so that the impression of human automatism can develop its uncanny effect. Only those who consider the notion that people are machines an illusion can be affected uncannily by the opposite impression. One must be familiar with this notion, and at the same time 'know' that people are not machines, in order to be frightened when things appear different" (2006: 212). In other words, those who have not surmounted whatever belief it is that would allow them to consider the apparent presence of that thing to be an illusion only (in this case, that humans are machines) cannot gain an uncanny effect from seeing it; in order to feel the horror, you must have a sense of what is 'normal' that can be contradicted. It might be the case that many comic characters, in their appearance and behaviour, are capable of being read as contradictions to the norm, and that even if the viewers of comedy are not aware of the process by which they notice the 'abnormality', it is nevertheless initially signalled through a visual means. A dark aesthetics could be capable of contradicting what viewers consider (through their prior experiences, knowledge of the world, et cetera) 'norms', and both the sense of darkness and the comic in dark comedy could stem from this.

Bergson is attracted to, yet wary about expressing the potential link between the physical and the moral, questioning: "What bond of secret relationship can there be between the physical defect and the moral infirmity? It is difficult to say; yet we feel that the relationship is there, though we cannot express it in words" (1956: 96). This is interesting on two levels: firstly in that it initially recalls the kinds of difficulties

experienced by Vaché in expressing umour, which he could *sense* in the situations and objects surrounding him (such as the monstrous alarm clock), but struggled to explain, and; secondly because Bergson goes on to comment that, "*Any incident is comical that calls our attention to the physical in a person, when it is the moral side that is concerned*" (1956: 93), suggesting that not only is there amusement in seeing a person's moral qualities somehow betrayed by their appearance, but also that ultimately he *does* regard a link between the two. It is relevant to note that the phenomenon of a person's interior moral or mental state finding unintended exterior expression occurs across both Bergson and Freud's theories of humour, alongside similar ideas about repetition, doubling, doubts about animation, and so on: "*We laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing*" (1956: 97). Additionally, many of Bergson's visual indicators of the comic also accord with Bakhtinian ideas. This further demonstrates why I am interested in analysing dark comedy using a combination of the work of these three authors: at nearly every turn, the theory of one appears to link into or imply an element of the others, filling in an approach to this area of comedy that is simultaneously more robust and more nuanced than if any of these analytical bases was used alone.

A Three-fronted Approach

All three of the theorists I propose to use in building a picture of the aesthetics of dark comedy appear to agree on the subject of the visual functioning to draw attention to something else (often to do with an interior state) about the person or persons acting in a comic situation. This helps to explain why I am interested in taking a visual approach to dark comedy here: it seems as though this first stage – the visual prompt – is always implied but often taken for granted in terms of explanations about the comic, and I would like to place the significance

of this stage back at the forefront of my analysis. Without these visual elements, either directly shown or activated in the minds of the viewers of dark comedy, there would be no forward process involving the *sensing* of the uncanny/darkness/discomfort so frequently alluded to, and a major element of the comic would also therefore be absent. Previous work on the uncanny and comedy, and horror and comedy, such as that by Carroll, Pfaller and Flaig has pointed towards there being a multifaceted relationship between darkness and the comic, particularly in terms of viewer affect, and such a relationship is certainly implied in at least the work of Bergson and Freud as well. I believe that where the aesthetics of horror and the uncanny are present (including elements of the monstrous, composite imagery, confusion of human and inhuman, et cetera) in comedy programmes, they create potential viewer responses that can mix amusement with discomfort to cause a *sense* that is distinct to dark comedy programmes, and one that is therefore capable of distinguishing them from other kinds of comedies.

I think the presence of composites, in particular, is an important overarching element to the theories of Bakhtin, Bergson and Freud, and that in many cases, the composite nature of a situation or thing is a major feature in detracting from the 'reality' or humanity of it. This could be key to the difference between the *aesthetics* of dark comedy and those of other kinds of comedy, and it is in this area that I feel that representations of the body and of human physicality that call upon viewers to notice departures from some kind of notion of 'normality' comes to the fore. It is perhaps therefore the case that another way in which dark comedy can be categorised is by the inhuman nature of the characters and their behaviour, frequently shown through a *failure* of human characteristics. Although 'to err is human', humans nevertheless tend to feel uncomfortable about failure (and seek to mentally insulate or distance themselves from considerations of physical

and mental failure). When such failures are presented in the context of dark comedy, simultaneously what is being effected is an opportunity to laugh at and minimise the 'threat' of such things, but only alongside an inevitable reminder that they exist. In this, it might be argued, lies part of the darkness.

CHAPTER 3

Dark comedy aesthetics of **the horrific** (body horror, monsters, ghosts/supernatural, the uncanny, violence/crime)

> Graham Duff: "[H]is nose had rotted away. He couldn't afford, you know, reconstructive surgery, or he was on the waiting list for the NHS – whatever – so in the meantime he wore this silver plastic nose on a bit of elastic. And it always stuck with me as being one of the darkest images, and because it was… the silliness of a plastic nose combined with this really aggressive-looking character."
>
> ('Making of *Ideal* DVD Extra, *Ideal*, 2005)

Introduction

In terms of bodily aesthetics and excessive horrific appearances in characters, this chapter will examine dark comedy examples via two areas of focus: physiognomy, and the rest of the body. Additionally, situations and actions involving horror elements and their impact upon characters (and potential impact upon audiences) will be considered, both for what they reveal about the workings of dark comedy and for how this might reflect wider human concerns surrounding personal and corporeal integrity and longevity. It is this latter element that I will open with.

Lorna Jowett and Stacey Abbott have observed that, "The horror genre is frequently considered to be in bad taste or to be excessively violent and this is one reason there has been little consideration of TV horror,

since TV itself is assumed to be a mainstream medium that cannot sustain the graphic nature (visual or thematic) of horror's subject matter" (2013: 2). They go on to carry out a systematic consideration themselves in which they discuss how, since a general widening of the scope of what is deemed aesthetically and thematically acceptable for broadcast has occurred over the last fifteen to twenty years, horror is in fact a genre that has thrived on TV and mutated into many hybrid forms and styles that incorporate other genres and their aesthetics alongside its own. Their work, and hopefully the following section here, demonstrates that one of these hybrid-generic areas is comedy. Of course, it is not new to locate comedy within horror texts and vice versa, but in the case of television comedy and 'excessive' or 'extreme' horrific content, the dark comedy that has been produced over this time period marks a significant advance in graphic visual content and subjects being portrayed. For example, Jamie Sexton has noted that in *Jam*, "…many of the sketches felt as though they were informed as much by the genre of horror as they were by the traditions of comedy" (2013: 142), and reactions towards this programme were characterised by noting its innovation and aesthetic difference from previous television comedy. I have already spoken of the possibility that this permeation of horror into some recent comedy programmes has contributed towards their identification as 'dark' (and indeed, towards more general recognition that there *is* a branch of contemporary television comedy that may be distinguished by its inclination towards content and an aesthetics that is darker and more graphic than that of other kinds), and this in turn raises questions about what effect combining the two – comedy and horror – might have upon the way the humour in such shows is perceived.

In their analyses of horror, Carroll and Freeland have seen its aesthetics as creating an emotional response that is ultimately played off against the insulating knowledge that it is only fiction that is being observed: a

situation that preserves spectator enjoyment and involves a 'paradox of the heart' (Carroll, 1990: 10) surrounding the viewing of material that would in other contexts prompt wholly negative feelings (Freeland, 2000: 7-8). This can also be applied to comedy via its relation to Bergson's own cardiac-inflected idea that, "To produce the whole of its effect [...] the comic demands something like an anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple" (1956: 63-4). In other words, the enjoyment of observing misfortune, failure, other people's embarrassment, and so on, can be preserved by ignoring the heart's emotional response and so creating a distance from feelings via rationality. Importantly, in the case of viewing such things in the context of television comedy programmes, audiences are aided in this distancing by the knowledge that they are taking place within a fiction, even if the content may be readily reminiscent of similar real-life moments. These two standpoints in relation to horror and comedy may seem basically incompatible: they depend upon us (as viewers) doing contradictory things with our hearts, but if the reactions are considered to be part of a near-instantaneous process by which we feel yet dismiss the 'negative' (as Bergson says, "for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity" (1956: 63)), the parallel between the ability to enjoy dark comedy just as we are intended to enjoy being horrified by horror can be observed. Further, I am tempted to suggest that the mental gymnastics involved in this process of automatically feeling yet instantly dismissing the emotional 'of the heart' reaction while watching dark comedy is what gives the response of laughter the potential to be accompanied by a sense of guilt (one that accounts for comments such as, 'I shouldn't laugh... but it *is* funny', or laughing exclamations about how 'wrong' particular comic moments are). In other words, societal pressure not to laugh at bad things in real life is technically rendered irrelevant by the fictional aspect of proceedings (viz. Freeland and Carroll), but the censure may still be present – like a spectre – in the mind of a viewer, where it must

ultimately be ignored (anaesthetised, viz. Bergson) in order for laughter to take place. We can enjoy this strange mixture, prompted by aesthetics, of experiencing fear/disgust/repulsion and humour at the same time, but it takes some overcoming of paradoxical feelings to do so. The concept of ambivalence, as raised already in relation to carnivalesque, grotesque, taboo and the uncanny, is also centred upon conflicting or paradoxical feelings, and the possibility that dark comedy derives its distinctive affect from constantly invoking these kinds of 'double-feelings' is further reinforced here, too.

Reacting to 'Abnormal', 'Broken' or 'Horrific' Bodies

Bergson also believes that, "Where matter [...] succeeds in dulling the outward life of the soul, in petrifying its movements and thwarting its gracefulness, it achieves, at the expense of a body, an effect that is comic" (1956: 79). He considers the problem of a graceless body stifling the impulses of the soul to be part and parcel of the presence of a body in the first place, but I propose a more nuanced view of the above statement: if a body can be stilled, dulled or made less responsive and graceful by violence afflicted upon it, and observers can harden their hearts against pitying reactions, leading to laughter – to finding the violated/injured body laughable – could this be an explanation for the capacity for violence itself to be found humorous? The popularity of characters like Tom and Jerry, The Three Stooges, and innumerable other examples throughout history shows that violence and laughter are frequently linked, and our ability to laugh at injuries and their infliction seems like it could easily be a product of something like Bergson's inherent comedy in abnormal bodily aesthetics combining with the 'paradox/anaesthesia of the heart' process to produce an unsettling yet positive and enjoyable response. There is "...an art of throwing a wet blanket upon sympathy at the very moment

it might arise, the result being that the situation, though a serious one, is not taken seriously", Bergson notes (1956: 151), and one way of throwing the blanket comes in the appearance and/or performance of the actors: they can act to destroy empathic or sympathetic affective responses. As will be discussed later, in Chapter 6, dark comedy programmes appear to have a propensity for using filming and editing techniques, as well as other positioning devices, to align viewers with the point of view of key characters. In a two-stage process, first the urge towards empathy is set up, but before the viewer can identify with a character to the point that it would become difficult to anaesthetise their heart – and therefore, to laugh – competing attention is drawn to the fictional nature of the character and proceedings (often, says Bergson, by making the character seem unreal/mechanical in some way) and laughter becomes a possible response instead. The laughter response, once made possible, could also be indicative of an impulse to mock and make light of things that constitute a potential threat to all of us (like violence, illness, embarrassment, et cetera), and fictional dark comedy would therefore be offering an easy opportunity to indulge that impulse by presenting these threats to us in a 'safe' context.

Mark Seltzer has considered the way in which we might be enabled to temporarily 'forget' our own corporeality, linking this to mediated representations of physical destruction: when we see bodily catastrophe, violence, and so on, through a mediated means – for example, on television – we are offered "…the "containment" or parrying of death by representation: the distancing of bodily violence by visual technologies" (1998: 36). This, in turn, he argues, affords us a kind of safety and a feeling of ourselves as non-corporeal and uninvolved. We can forget our own bodies at that moment as irrelevant. "Clearly, the conferring of a privilege of relative disembodiment makes for part of the fascination with such spectacles. But the relations between bodies and representations in these cases are

in fact more complicated" (Ibid.); I suggest that one of the complications relates to the possibility, in body genre entertainment, of experiencing the visceral jolt that effectively draws our attention to our own embodied state (following Leder above, and the concept of 'dys-appearance'), before we can reassert its irrelevance through the knowledge that the 'real' body to which we are reacting is not ours but a mediated representation of another. Once more, I suggest that viewers may in fact go through a near-instantaneous two stage process by which we are first reminded of our own corporeality and vulnerability via an empathic physical response, before the presence of visual technologies and our awareness of perceiving the destruction of bodies at a remove (or as fictional) allows our own body to safely recede once more. In this way, we have been able to experience the confrontation with, for example, bodily violence, *and* to swiftly move past it. In the case of dark comedy the ability to laugh at the representation of bodily collapse may also be bound up with a sense of relief at the distance. Violence towards, and the injury of, bodies is not the only kind of corporeal fear that might be safely engaged with through mediated means like this. We may also confront death (the aesthetics of which are typically sequestered away in hospitals or funeral parlours, behind the scenes from everyday domestic life) through 'spectacles of death' instead. Indeed, it might be said that the frequent representations of medical settings, criminal, police and pathology professions that are shown in television fiction, plus sensationalist news and documentaries about atrocities and murders, constitute a kind of 'return of the repressed' in relation to death; the elephant corpse in the room, as it were, continually finding its way into popular culture representations.

Speaking of *The League of Gentlemen*'s strange Local Shop-owning characters Tubbs and Edward, Jowett and Abbott observe that, "The excess of the performance, both in terms of self-indulgence and their gross physicality, enables these characters to walk the line between

comedy and horror, evoking laughter and shudders simultaneously"
(2013: 153). This idea of characters and situations that combine a
physical aesthetic, a performance aesthetic, and an implied focus upon
'self-indulgence' or self-fulfilment (at the expense of others) that are all
in themselves extreme or excessive can be seen as important to
understanding not only the dynamic of horror and comedy that is often
present in dark comedy programmes, but also to understanding
another aspect that may be assisting viewers to distance themselves
and anaesthetise their hearts. In many respects dark comedies are
presenting extreme or excessive scenarios and characters for the
purposes of eliciting laughter *at* the extremity; the capacity of viewers
to recognise that these figures and situations are extreme is a building
block of the humour. 'Immoderate' behaviour or extreme appearances,
insofar as they can be recognised via diverging from 'moderate'
behaviour and prescribed norms of various types, often lend themselves
to aesthetics that are unusual, spectacular or otherwise visually
interesting simply because of their excess; additionally, striking
depictions (whether because they are shocking or gory, or taboo, or
even just incredibly detailed) have the potential to signal fictional status
simply through their propensity to be unfamiliar to viewers through real
life, yet familiar through other filmic and televisual texts – such as
horror films. To a certain extent, dark comedy programmes could
therefore be seen as a comforting or reassuring kind of viewing; by
emphasising the fictional and comedic status of their depictions of
things like violence and death, and inviting laughter via excess and
extremity, they are effectively *de*-emphasising the real-life, serious
nature of those things.

However, as the example of *Limmy's Show* (BBC Two Scotland, 2010-
2013) and the highlighting of latent and ever-present threats and risk
shows (below, and Chapter 5), much dark comedy is additionally about
placing extreme characters and situations *into* contexts that resemble

real-life or non-comedic scenarios, while in other cases, the repeated presentation of excessive features or characters can even function to normalise and draw audiences to become familiar with and sympathetic towards them in spite of their dark nature. A key example of this can be seen in the characters of David and Maureen Sowerbutts in *Psychoville*. They are presented as incestuous serial killers, yet their status is also tragic and – especially at the time of Maureen's death from cancer – viewers clearly *are* intended to feel a degree of sadness or pathos towards them as well as finding their excessive and unusual traits laughable. This feature itself may even be considered to be a major element of the darkness inherent in such comedy: that it can be capable of getting viewers to feel sympathy for, or to 'root for' characters who exhibit behaviour or traits that are typically reviled in real-life situations, *as well as* eliciting laughter at them. The recent trend in American 'Quality TV' series such as *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013) and *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013-2015), and the past success of those like *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1997-2009), in presenting protagonists who commit crimes that would be considered unsympathetically in the real world yet are offered as figures of identification or pathos, could be described as analogous to this (and are also incidentally a good reflection of the dark turn in television entertainment from the late-1990s onwards).

Faces, Masks and the Mechanical

As the location of the human capabilities of sight, speech, thinking and hearing, the head and face is a privileged area of the body, particularly focussed upon in everyday interaction and acts of interpretation. Therefore, facial appearances are an important element of television aesthetics in general, and take on an even more interesting role when horror, a genre highly associated with unusual facial characteristics as

markers of threat or abnormality (such as vampiric teeth, red eyes, distorted or decaying features, et cetera) becomes involved. Facial prosthetics appearing in dark comedy are mainly seen augmenting noses and mouths or adding the appearance of weight to slimmer actors; fake teeth can be a site of fragility – missing teeth in characters lacking access to dentistry, for example – or menace. As well as exaggeratedly discoloured and misshapen teeth appearing in close-up to provide a type of gross-out shot similar in style and effect to vomiting moments, horror elements can also be invoked with characters such as *Psychoville*'s Silent Singer (Figure 3.1), who has sharp animal teeth.

Figure 3.1. The Silent Singer.   *Figure 3.2.* Cartoon Head.

In the show *Ideal*, the character of Cartoon Head has the notable feature of being masked at all times, wearing a plastic face with the appearance of a cartoon-style mouse (Figure 3.2). Bergson has commented on the significance of comical faces, examining their appearance as fixed and incapable of the range associated with non-comic expressions: "A laughable expression of the face […] is one that will make us think of something rigid and, so to speak, coagulated, in the wonted mobility of the face. What we shall see will be an ingrained twitching or a fixed grimace" (1956: 75-6). Therefore a mask face such as Cartoon Head's is rigid (and hence laughable) to a huge degree. It ought to be noted that masks can be interpreted in other ways as well; their association with the antagonists of slasher horror films, such as Michael Myers in *Halloween* (Carpenter, 1978), Jason Voorhees in

Friday the 13th Part 2 (Miner, 1981) and Ghostface in *Scream* (Craven, 1996), highlights the potential of masked characters to appear scary and inhuman through a lack of expression. As a criminal character who is regularly described by others as being a psychopath, this aspect of the mask seems very apt in Cartoon Head's case. The fact that the mask is of a grinning mouse is both comic and uncanny, and *Ideal* makes good use of the incongruity of the character's appearance by placing him on the one hand in banal everyday situations alongside characters with ordinary appearances (watching television, returning from the shops, and so on), and on the other, at the heart of violent scenes wherein the mask gains added connotations linked to horror and the obscuring of identity, or in sexual situations where it evokes kink. The audience will never find out what Cartoon Head's real face now looks like underneath the mask – he will appear forever unreal. To a certain extent, the clown make-up of Mr Jelly in *Psychoville* gives a similar effect, as despite there being no apparent narrative explanation for him being made-up when he is not at his work as a children's entertainer, he is never seen without it.

Bergson is not the only theorist to consider masks, though, and Bakhtin states that in folk culture:

> The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation,
> with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and
> similarity; it reflects conformity to oneself. The mask is related to
> transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries, to
> mockery and familiar nicknames. It contains the playful element of
> life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image,
> characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles. Of course
> it would be impossible to exhaust the intricate multiform symbolism
> of the mask. Let us point out that such manifestations as
> parodies, caricatures, grimaces, eccentric postures and comic
> gestures are per se derived from the mask. It reveals the essence
> of the grotesque (1984: 40).

Here it can be seen that the mask and its suggestion of exaggerated or excessive facial features can provide a template for the performance of comic appearances more generally, and that it is capable of more positive associations than are typically intended in horror usage. However, Bakhtin does add that Romanticism brought with it a new form of the mask – sinister, hiding, secret, and with a nothingness behind it – very different from the form of antiquity and the Middle Ages (1984: 40). This is the kind of mask that might most often be seen in horror today, and when dark comedy borrows this element of horror aesthetics, as it does with Cartoon Head, these meanings surrounding the mask may also be carried across. Between Bergson and Bakhtin then, the status of the mask as an ambivalent and category-troubling device, capable of invoking an unsettling sense of conflicting comic and horrific signals in a way that belies its apparent rigidity, is suggested. These qualities are very much in line with those already identified as important in dark comedy content, and perhaps the propensity for masks to play a greater role in programmes of this type relative to other kinds of comedy can be explained by this.

Visually, the distortion or masking of human faces via diegetic make-up is a large feature of *Psychoville*, in characters such as the clowns Mr Jelly and Mr Jolly, and in the disguises worn by Jelly and his elderly lady sidekick Claudia Wren – a painted ladybird face for her and a copy of Mr Jolly's clown make-up for him; also in the exaggerated 'feminine' make-up worn by David and Maureen as they attempt to pose as beauty technicians in order to carry out a murder, and in the stage make-up worn by the characters involved in Christopher Biggins's pantomime. Additionally, Maureen's impersonation of Tina Turner, complete with the appearance of blacking up via wearing opaque tights with holes cut in them over her head and a table tennis ball cut into two halves and placed over her eyes, provides an example of using bizarre items to create a horrifying and offensive visage. In every case,

the resulting appearances are extreme and excessive, and what is particularly notable is that in some of these instances – Mr Jelly wearing Mr Jolly's clown-face, Maureen wearing the ridiculously ill-applied beauty counter cosmetics or the Tina Turner ensemble – the actor/character is wearing multiple layers of masking. Maureen has the appearance of an elderly woman, yet the character is played by a male actor in his early forties, meaning that when she dons the Tina Turner fancy dress the audience is presented not only with an excessive facial distortion in its own right, but also with a distortion of something that was already a significant distortion of appearance. A variety of Freudian concepts could be applied to this scenario, and the one I believe is most salient is the notion of composite appearance, from the Dream Work (Freud, 1997: 203). Maureen's Tina Turner offers viewers an appearance that is a complex combination of real and fictional people, different genders, races and ages, rendered at differing levels of realism, and yet the resultant image makes sense in context: in this, the effect is very much like that experienced in the manifest content of dreams. Such instances highlight the complicated ways in which dark comedies are capable of evoking ambivalence and creating situations in which particular aesthetics can seem simultaneously highly unusual but also logical and (paradoxically) easy to accept, just as once the narrative of *Ideal* has introduced Cartoon Head, his plastic mouse face becomes familiar and 'normal' in subsequent scenes and episodes despite simultaneously being jarring alongside the naturalistic appearance of many of the other characters and their surroundings.

The uncanny effects achieved by masks and make-up, and via obvious prosthesis used to distort actors' appearances, can also be seen being achieved digitally in some dark comedy programmes. For example, in *Modern Toss*, the character of Alan appears as a continuously animated cartoon squiggle, performing in scenes alongside human actors in typical suburban locations (Figure 3.3). There is no narrative

explanation for his odd appearance, and it is never acknowledged by anyone, leading to a similar effect as with Cartoon Head in *Ideal*. In another example, from *Limmy's Show*, basic digital editing is used to create an effective horror-themed sketch about facial distortions that taps into the themes of mental illness, the supernatural, and the uncertainty over which of these categories any individual incident falls into (a recurring motif in the programme). A character looks at a magazine being read by his girlfriend – a lifestyle/gossip magazine with celebrity and real-life pictures in it. He is surprised to see that the faces of all the humans in the photographs have apparently been distorted into inhuman swirls. He at first appears to think that the magazine is having some kind of a joke, especially as the distortion is of the kind that could be easily achieved by anybody with access to Photoshop and the inclination to do so. However, it seems that his mind then gets the better of him and he begins to doubt that perhaps those faces are normal and he has somehow forgotten this, or alternatively that a strange and horrific plague of face-distortion is happening in the world.

Copyrighted image	Copyrighted image

Figure 3.3. Alan.   *Figure 3.4.* Facial Distortion.

Adopting some of the aesthetics of the horror genre, the sketch shows him steeling himself to peek at the face of his girlfriend to see if she too has taken on the strange facial appearance. Horror tropes are used to build up considerable tension surrounding whether or not she will be altered, and for viewers who are aware of such tropes this familiarity is played with for humorous purposes, using visual and aural techniques to confound their expectations: the girlfriend's face is shown to be

unchanged despite a musical build-up suggesting that the man will indeed see the horrific sight of the distortion, with shots cutting repeatedly between the two of them on the sofa until he does indeed see her face as afflicted by the strange appearance (Figure 3.4). The sketch is repeated twice more in the episode in different ways, with the man acting with increasing paranoia and strangeness as he panics that first his male friend in the pub, and then himself (looking into a mirror), will have changed. The psychological horror of his being unsure of whether or not what he is seeing is real or in his mind is also employed, with the sketch never resolving whether he is actually seeing things or not. In *The Shining*, various "scenes invite us to experience – to literally see – a reality that only exists in Jack's mad mind […]. Often, these scenes play on the ambiguous space of mirrors, suggesting that we have crossed into another reality that does not perfectly correspond to the one we think we live in" (Freeland, 2000: 219). This appears to be exactly what is going on with the man in this scenario: the swirls are the incongruent addition that is causing him doubt and fear about the reality surrounding him, in a context where everything else appears normal. The world has become uncanny through the appearance of the swirls, and in his anguished viewing of himself in the mirror, the man's fear can be read not only as prompted by the possibility that he will see his own face afflicted by a swirl, but also as dread that he is 'through the looking glass' and the real world is distant on the other side. In this respect, the sketch represents what Freeland refers to as a 'horror of the mind' (2000: 99).

The appearance of the mechanical in humans is a key aspect in Bergson's thinking about the comic, and the humorous potential of mechanical (or manipulated) objects appearing as though they contain life is the counterpoint that he considers to this: "*Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement*"

(1956: 105). He uses the examples of a 'Mr Plod' Punch and Judy policeman being battered by Punch yet jumping up again, and the actions of a Jack-in-the-box, as things which are mechanical but capable of acting as though they have life. They are subject to the actions of others, pushing them down, and either the mechanical gets them back up again, or their getting up appears mechanical in its unlikelihood. A similar notion might be seen to apply to the participants in slapstick comedy set pieces: consider the amount of physical damage absorbed by The Three Stooges, for example, which they are able to shrug off in order to continue with their business as though their bodies do not conform to normal human limitations. In *Psychoville*, the character of Nurse Kenchington survives being burned alive and beaten, as does Tony in *Catterick*, fulfilling also the horror and action cinema convention of the villain returning from apparent death to pursue or fight the hero(ine) again; the mechanical, the inhuman and the threatening combine here as they do in the character of Cartoon Head, as though perhaps their psychopathy also lends them these physical qualities. Bergson is attracted to, yet wary about expressing the potential link between the physical and the moral, questioning: "What bond of secret relationship can there be between the physical defect and the moral infirmity? It is difficult to say; yet we feel that the relationship is there, though we cannot express it in words" (1956: 96). This is interesting, as it recalls the kinds of difficulties experienced by Vaché in expressing umour, which he could *sense* in the situations and objects surrounding him (such as the monstrous alarm clock), and in the notion of the uncanny being a sense of something simultaneously familiar and not, in a way that is frequently hard to pin down.

Gross-out, Defilement and the Breakdown of Authority

Gross-out sequences have the potential to provoke strong affective reactions: in their first moments they essentially force viewers to see/hear things that are distasteful (although prior expectations of the programme, or narrative set-ups may have given a warning or hint of what might be coming). This forced element, in that viewers have to actively disengage with the sounds/images if they wish to avoid the 'gross-out' parts once they have recognised them, lends what might be described as an aggressive tone to the shows that incorporate them. Frequently, gross-out material is discussed in terms of it being in 'bad taste', and William Paul (using an analogy with physiology) links this idea with aggression: "Translated into aesthetics, bad taste endows the object with an aggressiveness that must be defended against. With food, we spit it out. With art, we turn away and ignore the aggression or, in more repressed times, attempt to ban it. Aggression then, is the essential element for gustatory and aesthetic bad taste" (1994: 10). Paul speaks of gross-out as an aggressive style in general, remarking of the films that made the genre famous that, "[a]ggression is the keynote of gross-out as these films assaulted us with images of outrageously violent or sexual behaviour, or violently sexual, or sexually violent" (1994: 5). It is significant that it is the presence of violence and sex, and the link between them that he focusses upon, as exactly the same presence and link is to be found in the British dark comedy series discussed here.

Another frequent focus of attention in these series *and* in gross-out is upon the loss of control over some kind of bodily function. This manifests mainly in two ways: the loss of the use of (or loss of control over) limbs temporarily or permanently, or; the loss of control over bodily fluids. In this second category, the gross-out element is clearly present, with good examples being found in the prolonged public

urination and vomiting of mature ladies in *Little Britain*, and in the following case from *Cardinal Burns* (Channel 4, 2012-). In one segment of the sketch show, police arriving to investigate a crime scene become nauseous and vomit copiously over the corpse of a murder victim, the surrounding area and each other. With the prevalent nature of body trauma television, audiences may well be familiar with how such television crime scene investigations are typically shown being carried out in non-comedic programmes, where the competency and professional detachment of the police personnel is demonstrated by them appearing unaffected – or minimally affected – by the presence of dead bodies or evidence of violence and bloodshed. The behaviour of the police in *Cardinal Burns* is thus available to be read as both inappropriate and excessive, especially as the act is over-performed by the comedians for comic effect – projectile vomiting impressive distances, vomiting a remarkable amount, and failing to direct the vomit to spaces where it would cause a lesser degree of destruction to the evidence (for example, away from the face and wounds of the murder victim) (Figure 3.5). It is also noticeable that the way in which the police personnel ruin their crime scene is through a lack of control of their bodily urges. In *Tittybangbang* (BBC Three, 2005-2007), a similar focus is shown in sketches involving *Silent Witness*-style forensic scene examiners, Parker and Harris, who arrive at crime scenes and autopsies to carry out professional duties but are invariably immediately side-tracked by their urges to engage in sex acts with the corpses. As with the nausea of the vomiting police in *Cardinal Burns*, the sexual arousal of Parker and Harris is clear on the faces and in the demeanour of the actors as they launch into an excessive performance of their necrophile behaviour (Figure 3.6).

Figure 3.5. Police vomit on a corpse.　　　*Figure 3.6.* Parker and Harris.

These instances are not just examples of depictions of vomiting or extreme sexual passion; they show the professionals making substantial errors in judgement on multiple levels. Of course, sex with the dead is both taboo and illegal, and therefore these characters are behaving in morally and socially questionable ways, but the exact nature of their transgression is also a matter for scrutiny in terms of unusual/unwise thinking. It might be assumed that a crime scene investigator who did wish to have sex with corpses would attempt to do so in a manner that would not alert the attention of others to the act, but Lucy Montgomery performs the sexual arousal of her character loudly and with a high degree of physical effort, just as the police apparently make no effort to vomit carefully out of the way of the corpse. In these cases, the professional responsibilities and ethics of the people in positions of trust and expertise are shown as compromised, and their apparent lack of awareness or caution in respect of what they are doing (carrying out their behaviour in obvious, public, or easily avoidable ways) additionally suggests not only a loss of control but a catastrophic failure of sensible thinking. The fact that these high-status professionals are shown as compromised by baser or bodily urges also recalls carnival in a Bakhtinian sense, and these scenes may be described as producing dark comedy through showing something that is simultaneously carnivalesque (authority turned on its head, behaving in a manner inviting ridicule) and disturbing (persons in authority being demonstrably fallible, in a graphic way), and also thematically and aesthetically in the realm of gross-out. It is also worthwhile to note

that during the scenes the involuntary nature of the physical spasms of vomiting or orgasm, and the repetition of similar movements again and again not only emphasises the impression of a loss of bodily control, but also recalls Bergsonian mechanical action; here again, simultaneous competing aesthetics (human/physiological versus non-human/mechanical) can be observed. Combined further with the Freudian aspect of the uncanny inherent both in the appearance of mechanical action in the human body, and in the subverted presentation of familiar television scenes, these types of sequence can be seen as highly complex aesthetically.

The scenes with Parker and Harris and the *Cardinal Burns* police can be described as extreme depictions and, like a moment in the *Mighty Boosh* (BBC Three, 2004-2007) when the villainous character of The Hitcher urinates into the face of one of the show's protagonists, the characters' actions may activate associations with kinky sexual practices and with Freudian ideas about the interchangeability of bodily fluids in dreams and fantasy as well. In fact, a variant of this type of dark comedy scenario does depict characters urinating or defecating deliberately, often with a sexual inflection, as with the urinating character Don Peacock in *Tittybangbang*, a sequence featuring 'Robin Atkins' (a parodic version of Robin Askwith, the actor in the *Confessions of…* sex comedy series of films) in *Tramadol Nights* where he portrays an unwilling voyeur to exhibitionist defecation, and of course, the actions of the Hitcher in the *Mighty Boosh*. Examples such as these demonstrate a trend in dark comedies for genre or pop culture parody that is carried out via lowbrow gross-out and sexual content. For instance, the producer of *Tittybangbang*, Lisa Clark, has revealed that as well as being intended to shock, Parker is a subversion of both the authority of forensic pathology and of the seriousness of procedural drama's portrayal of police personnel (as in *Prime Suspect* (ITV, 1991-2006)): "Some characters are more shocking than others, especially the

pathologist […]. She is loosely based on a (sic) Helen Mirren's character in Prime Suspect, but with a much sillier side! Throughout the whole series we tried to take authority figures and subvert them – getting them to do something you just wouldn't expect" (Unknown Author, 2006). The depiction of familiar characters or character types doing things that are unexpected, extreme, gross or sexualised can be seen repeatedly in the programmes considered here in this thesis (another example follows below, concerning *Jam*/Robert Kilroy-Silk), and it is worth considering how dark comedy's treatment and presentation of bodies seems to be heavily invested in the debasement of pompous or authority figures through physical and visual means, but also presents characters who have little social status or advantage *in the same ways*. This suggests that there is an underlying message in dark comedy that all humans are equally flawed, equally fallible, and equally comical (and, coincidentally, that perhaps one of the characteristics of this type of comedy is its capacity to tap into and reflect something universal about human failings).

Surreality, the Uncanny and Horror

In many ways, the aesthetics of dark comedy seem to frequently borrow from body genre entertainment and other popular culture imagery on the one hand, and surreal depictions of the body on the other. A co-mingling of these two styles – the former in fact a key influence upon surrealism itself – creates an aesthetic that is effective in comedy; it offers depictions that are uncanny and grotesque, yet in some ways easily reminiscent of elements of the real world at the same time. This appears to be in line with what Jill Parker, one of the writers of *Tittybangbang*, has said about characterisation in the show: "I'm interested in looking under the surface of almost everyday figures – which might mean dark, surreal characterisations – but they're based

on something tangible and then they take on another life from there"
(BBC Press Office, 2006). Another key feature of surreal aesthetics is
their link to dreaming and the pursuit of alternate realities. Ruth
Perlmutter, speaking of films that explore themes of remembering,
dreaming and reality, remarks that often they contain "…visual motifs
that are surreal, anxiety-ridden and enigmatic; embedded narratives;
non-sequential order rather than traditional linearity; unsynched sound-
image juxtapositions; fragmented plot lines; and the application of
Freudian dream-mechanisms of displacement, condensation, mis-
recognition" (2005: 126). These kinds of features can be observed in
televisual products that deal with the same themes: the Dennis Potter
series, *The Singing Detective* (BBC 1, 1986) is perhaps the most
sustained example of this, but interestingly the same things apply to
many dark comedy programmes. Frequently, the surreal and anxiety-
ridden visual motifs characteristic of Freudian dream imagery
correspond with imagery of the grotesque and the uncanny, and a clear
example of a dark comedy displaying all facets of this can be seen in
various scenarios from the series *Jam*. Sexton has identified the
horrific, Freudian and surreal qualities of the series, remarking that,
"Morris certainly draws on elements of horror cinema in *Jam*. This is
evident not only in the soundtrack but also in the general content and
atmosphere of some of the sketches, which sometimes recall surrealist
forms of horror in which logic breaks down and nightmarish dread
begins to infiltrate, or merge with 'reality'" (2013: 145). *Jam* makes
particular use of unsynched sound-image sections and also segments
where both images and sounds are speeded up, slowed down or
otherwise distorted alongside each other, giving an unreal and
dreamlike quality to the action. The programme balances this by
making frequent reference to real life people and locations, helping to
anchor the fantasy elements to aspects of the everyday in a similar way
to that referred to by Jill Parker above.

One section of the first episode shows television personality and former politician Robert Kilroy-Silk (impersonated by a lookalike) apparently having a mental breakdown. Footage with the appearance of security camera taping follows Kilroy as he strips naked in a shopping centre and runs around terrorising other shoppers, at one point stopping in front of the window of an electrical shop to urinate towards a television screen showing his own face (Figures 3.7, 3.8); he then climbs into a freezer cabinet at a supermarket before being pulled out crying and led away by police. This segment combines many of the qualities so far associated with grotesque, gross-out and uncanny visual imagery: the appearance of 'outward manifestations of insanity' and the doubling and repetition (arising from the celebrity impersonation being seen alongside genuine footage of Kilroy) are key features of the uncanny identified by Freud (1955: 234-236), while the middle-aged nudity and public urination (again, into someone's 'face') cover the other two categories.

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Figure 3.7.   Kilroy impersonated in *Jam*.   *Figure 3.8.*

Speaking of another Chris Morris programme, *The Day Today* (BBC 2, 1994), Dan North highlights and discusses the importance and effects of the use of 'corporeal language' in surreal phrases (like "News felch", for example) and their visual equivalents (2013: 69-70, 79-81). He also notes the programme's intermingling of human behaviour or performance with the technological and the mechanical: when Morris is in character as the news anchor, "…his disembodied head is superimposed onto reports, inserted into the videographic space, as are

those of other personnel on the show, including weatherman Sylvester Stewart (David Schneider), who crosses the border of second-order space to *become* his forecasts, and Collaterlie Sisters (Doon Mackichan), whose robotic mannerisms and intonation reflect a too-keen ingestion of the tone and form of her profession" (2013: 81). These techniques, wherein corporeal language seeps into unusual spaces, with the resulting surreality serving to draw attention to its presence and prompt laughter (especially if the word has a sexual connection), while non-corporeal qualities are fused with the human body to – in the case of Collaterlie Sisters, for example – prompt laughter at unusually-appearing behaviour, can be approached from a Freudian, Bergsonian and Bakhtinian standpoint. The phenomenon of slipping words (especially physical or sexual language) into places they are not normally considered to belong is, of course, one of Freud's most famous observations; he read these moments as exemplifying the circumvention of the ego by the Id, and as a means by which clues about repressed feelings may be identified and analysed.

However, if Freud's theory is taken more broadly, it is possible to see *The Day Today*'s unusual inclusions of corporeal language and imagery in the presentation of the news as providing a set of disruptive reminders of the actual, subjective, corporeal and embodied nature of everyone concerned – presenters and viewers alike – that is typically denied within the news genre (in which objective commentary and the distancing of the human subject within the act of reporting is traditionally expected). Effectively, Morris parodies the news by showing it Freudian-slipping its most unwanted elements into its broadcast, with a further element of parody coming from the highlighting and exaggeration of techniques used to try and portray professional objectivity. The fact that the genre and its personnel might attempt to aesthetically overcome the 'threat' of the subjective through converting the human into the digital or by adopting over-

compensatory robotic mannerisms is evidence of the discomfort over reminders of the physical creeping into unwanted places, and at its logical extreme this discomfort is the fear of mortality that has been seen manifesting in various ways in all the dark comedies considered so far. It is Bergson's assertion that observing evidence of such attempts to deny humanity and mortality (or evidence of simply allowing a detachment from them to occur) prompts laughter, as it does in the case of Collaterlie Sisters, and it is therefore possible to once again see dark comedy located in a combination of acknowledging and rejecting the physical, delivered through parody. Bakhtin's contribution to the analysis of *The Day Today*'s examples of course comes in via corporeal language, which reflects his 'language of the marketplace' and the coarse speaking of grotesque and carnivalesque; not only do phrases like 'News felch' invoke the body, they invoke its lower stratum.

Monsters, Psychopaths and Latent Threat

The aesthetics used in depictions of excessive and monstrous characters can be linked to the preoccupations of the societies and cultures from which they come – for example, horror actor "[Lon] Chaney's depiction of the body-monstrous may be read as a symptomatic instance of the anxiety surrounding masculinity and the male body during the postwar period of American culture. A theory of historical trauma might relate Chaney's grotesque construction of a deviant and deformed masculinity to the era's postwar anxieties in relation to the war and its horrific demonstration of the vulnerability of the male body" (Studlar, 1996: 210). Such postwar anxieties can also be seen reflected in the art, cinema and literature of European countries, for example through Surrealism, where mutilated, hidden, and rearranged bodies were a frequent motif across multiple media. Studlar suggests that this explanation is not nuanced enough by itself

as a reading of Lon Chaney and his work in its context, but it does express a potential that I would argue is relevant to contemporary dark comedies as well, in their depictions of characters with bodies that fail to measure up to popular culture ideals of the fashionable and fit, and whose appearances, movements or physical integrity have been affected by disaster, illness or violence. These portrayals reflect upon bodily ideals and fears surrounding them, in addition to fears about risk of harm or failure, and in doing so reinforce perceptions and boundaries concerning selfhood and the appearance of the 'proper person' (to borrow Tanya Krzywinska's term (1999: 189)). "In the early twentieth century, freaks could be read as exemplars of frightening biological imperfection within an era [... that] glorified physical perfection as proof of moral, spiritual, and finally, racial superiority. Freaks were stigmatized in a new way that made them not only odd and uncanny but beings whose very existence reverberated with current biological determinism and racist political fears centred on deteriorating races" (Studlar, 1996: 222). In a different climate, I suggest that depictions in the dark comedies under consideration here are typically physical manifestations and exaggerations of our conservative media's topical 'bogeymen', such as 'chav mothers', gay men, people who have mental health problems, vain women who get cosmetic surgery or promiscuously display their bodies, alongside depictions of perpetrators of the kinds of actual crimes that are frequently reported on in sensationalist ways, such as serial killing and paedophilia. These are all people whose greater visibility is often taken as a sign of moral and social decline, and dark comedies might be seen to encourage the policing of this decline by prompting laughter at such characters.

Some of the characters already mentioned above could be described as appearing monstrous in a way that is familiar from popular horror cinema: Cartoon Head from *Ideal*, a human psychopath elevated to the horror-monster league via his permanent plastic face, or *Psychoville*'s

Silent Singer who not only manifests a hybrid, horrific appearance, but fulfils a key horror trope of being a double of another character (or a multiple personality, or phantom 'thought' into existence... its exact nature is not quite clear). The Silent Singer can be seen as an excellent fit for Carroll's characterisation of monsters as incapable of neat categorisation, with physical – or incorporeal – features that mean they straddle definitional boundaries: "Things are adjudged impure when they present problems for standing categories or conceptual schemes, which things may do in virtue of being categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless" (1999: 152), and an essential feature of horror monsters is that they can provoke in the viewer "...the emotional response of abhorrence, disgust, or revulsion in consequence of the monster's impurity" (151). As a character around whose nature doubt is cast, and one that displays visual and performance characteristics associated with different 'types' of thing, the Silent Singer is readily capable of activating emotions surrounding horror.

Dark comic characters with less of an obviously monstrous appearance may also still be accommodated under the term if their murderous actions are juxtaposed with their 'everyday' appearances and expected social/professional roles: Jill Tyrell from *Nighty Night*; *Psychoville*'s Detective Finney and David and Maureen, and the character concerned in the following example – 'Paraside's Raymond Day' – are all responsible for and remorseless about the deaths of others, yet their category-troubling status stems not from outwardly obvious monstrous physicality but from the fact that their appearances (as, for example, a police detective, a little old lady, a cheesy television personality) connote the opposite, initially hiding their dangerous qualities and rendering them a latent threat. *Limmy's Show* has been mentioned above as a series that plays with ideas surrounding hidden horror in everyday life, and it also frequently incorporates generic features

associated with non-comedic programmes into sketches, seemingly in order to subvert them with uncanny, horrific or other dark inclusions for the purposes of humour. This is certainly the case with the 'Paraside' segments, which use the set-up of a personality-led spiritualist show (involving a medium contacting the dead and relaying messages to audience members) similar in style to *6ixth Sense* with Colin Fry (Living TV, 2002-). In his character of Raymond Day, Brian Limond pretends to make contact with the spirit world before asking whether anyone in the audience recognises either a name or other vague factual details that would suggest the spirit is attempting to reach them. Having established the relevant party, he proceeds to relay to them messages of an increasingly horrific nature. The humour of these segments may be seen to come from the subversion of usual expectations of medium readings; that comforting or amusing 'in-joke' messages will be passed on to grieving relatives. By passing on disturbing or dangerous messages instead, Limond perhaps draws attention to the fakery surrounding spirit-channelling shows (in pointing out how the messages received always appear to be very similar bland and light-hearted ones), whilst also critiquing the potential effects of taking them seriously upon real people.

An added aspect of the horrific nature of the messages received by Raymond Day is that he appears unaware (wilfully or otherwise) of how disturbing they really are: for example, passing on a communication to an obviously distraught and grieving male audience member from his recently deceased fiancée, Day informs him cheerily that she wants him to know how much she misses him, how wonderful life is 'on the other side', how she can't wait for them to be reunited and that 'he knows what to do.' Day then expresses his incomprehension at the message, remarking that he hopes the bereaved man can make some sense out of it, while the man nods and surrounding audience members shift uncomfortably. Contrary to his outward appearance, the performance

aspects given to the character of Day increasingly suggest that he is a cold-reader who is misrepresenting an ability to channel the dead in order to be a celebrity, and these disturbing messages and his flippant attitude towards them ultimately create the highly negative impression of him as an immoral and dangerous actor. Another Paraside segment involves him hinting to the grieving family of a deceased woman that 'the other side' is not a heavenly and comfortable place for her, before going on to confirm that she is in hell. The family break down in tears, but Raymond Day merely moves on happily to his next spirit messenger. These scenes evoke discomfort via the behaviour of Day, and are perhaps the best example so far of what could be described as very dark (or monstrous) comic behaviour taking place around a character and within an aesthetic (a bouncy, upbeat presenter; the bright, daytime TV-style studio show) that initially seems an unlikely site for the horrific.

Portrayals of influential or authority figures abusing their positions or failing to do their jobs correctly, with negative effects upon 'ordinary people', are a recurring feature of dark comedy programmes. Police and Intelligence workers in *Psychoville*, *Limmy's Show* and *A Touch of Cloth* (Sky 1, 2012-) are depicted simultaneously as incompetent and as wilfully neglecting or abusing their responsibilities, in much the same manner as the medical personnel in *Jam* and *Getting On* (see Chapter 5), or the medical and mental health professionals in *Psychoville* and *Nighty Night* are shown to behave inappropriately in their work. "In [Chris] Morris's doctors, we are presented with practitioners of contemporary medicine who are fallible, negligent or deranged" (Dean and Hand, 2013: 130), just as they are in contemporary medical dramas like *House* (Fox, 2004-2012) and *Holby City* (BBC 1, 1999-), which make heavy use of the concept 'physician, heal thyself'. Police and medical authorities are not the only ones called into disrepute in dark comedies: in the examples of the Shadowman from *Funland*, and

the (in some ways similar) antagonist Fist from *Ideal*, former religious personnel are shown as inhuman monstrous characters who are, like the Silent Singer, aesthetically complicated. After sustaining horrific burns, the former reverend of a Blackpool church (now known as the Shadowman) has regressed into a state whereby he moves like an animal and is covered by hooded clothing or hidden in shadow at all times, so that his face is never revealed. Fist, too, permanently hides his face by using a black ski-mask and staying in darkness, and is as equally a sinister figure as Shadowman; while both are threatening and shown to be capable of violence, they are also abject. These kinds of character – with their faces and bodies permanently hidden and left to the imagination of the audience to construct from a combination of movement clues and hints from the dialogue of others – can be seen as examples of bodies that are obscured and unknown, and horrific in part *because* of this. By essentially representing an absence of the visible body within a genre that is greatly preoccupied with showing the reverse, they become paradoxically excessive in their *lack*. Whether the fact that they are both former religious representatives who are in this state is significant, or can be seen as invoking horror tropes surrounding the demise or relative powerlessness of Christianity in the face of monstrosity/modernity, is not clear from the texts themselves; however, the general portrayal of religious and other traditionally authoritative professions such as teaching, medicine, and so on, in dark comedies certainly tends towards a negative in which even the characters who are trying to act for the best frequently do a poor job.

The idea that the very people who have power over or social responsibility for the well-being of others (even the potential to hold life in their hands) are ill-equipped for the task, or more likely to be murderous than caring, could be seen as parallel to the body-trauma TV trend in depicting fallible professionals, and the trend in police procedural TV for the investigators to be more morally questionable

than the criminals. In this way, dark comedies fit into the general 'dark turn' in British television that has seen murder and serial killing become a regular feature of primetime soap operas, and disaster documentaries, dramatisations of terrorist incidents, and apocalyptic scenarios become staple 'entertainment' subjects.

Conclusions

Referring to horror films, but applicable to horror in general, Freeland states that they specialise in "…addressing human fears and limitations, forcing confrontations with monsters who overturn the natural order – of life and death, natural/supernatural, or human/nonhuman. They depict vivid threats to our values and concepts, our very bodily and mental integrity" (2000: 273). In this respect, it can be seen that the frequent incorporation of horror aesthetics and situations into comedy programmes holds the potential to bring these serious and dramatic themes, and overarching questions about mortality, reality and the limitations of the human subject into the comic realm with them. Viewing the actions of monsters, murderers, and people in positions of authority who turn out to be fallible and unreliable provides a picture of a hostile and unpredictable world in which both latent and manifest threats are present, and in which we may perceive a whole variety of troubling visual cues for such threats; ones that are not necessarily straightforward, but characterised by ambivalence, composite and conflicting qualities.

Dark comedy's extreme and graphic scenarios remind us that, as embodied subjects, we are constantly at risk from the negligent, violent, or sexually invasive actions of other embodied subjects: "…we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt" (Butler, 2004: 29). The unpredictability of

such a sudden address is a key element of potential fears surrounding this vulnerability: it could happen at any time, in any way – a life-ruining event could occur suddenly to anyone, and while this fear is generally ignored in daily life so that we may go about our business, dark comedies can bring it to mind in their frequent depictions of such instances. Additionally, viewers who are familiar with the genre may well be anticipating the appearance of these events (as murder mystery viewers will expect the killer to strike again, or watchers of disaster shows will anticipate disaster to strike); a situation that the comedies can exploit to build up suspense or increase shock by playing with horror conventions – including joking at the expense of audience expectation and anticipation – or to provide pleasure by giving viewers exactly what they are waiting for in the most excessive ways possible. Prior anticipation through generic expectation, and the sense of 'knowing' that bad things are going to happen on screen might seem like a bleak form of enjoyment, but perhaps a feeling of foreknowing fostered in this way also gives a feeling of mastery over the 'sudden address from elsewhere' and attendant vulnerability that cannot be exercised in real life. We might not see the murderous attacker coming if it happens to us, but when we see Mr Lomax open the door to Detective Finney in *Psychoville*, we can be far less surprised when his death-scene ensues. It is a bit like the popular culture game of watching the first few minutes of a medical soap opera and predicting the various ways that the seemingly unconnected individuals shown performing everyday tasks will soon end up in the Accident and Emergency department; if we can spot these type of things in fiction, there is the comforting possibility that we could do so in real life… Except we simultaneously know that reality and our ability to accurately perceive likely events in real life situations cannot be as neat as what is presented in a television show in which signposts and hints are deliberately constructed as part of the narrative or mise-en-scene. The laughter at 'predictable' misfortunes in dark comedy is in part because

the joke is both on the characters and on us; the paradoxical sense of mastery over, yet true helplessness in the face of, life's disasters may be at the core of the darkness of dark comedy.

The idea that horrific content in dark comedies has the power to remind us of our vulnerability, yet through the humour and the fictional context also distance us from it, is plausibly supported by combining theories about horror, comedy and embodiment; the possibility that we are able to engage in a process of feeling our own embodied vulnerability through identification with situations depicted, before dismissing via an anaesthesia of the heart the negative 'reality' of this vulnerability and engaging in laughter at the 'unreal' excess of the imagery, is a tempting proposition. Recognition of the conflict of feelings inherent in such a process may account for a residual feeling of unease in such laughter, which accords with theories surrounding the uncanny, taboo, and the grotesque, and this may in turn be implicated in the *sensing* of dark comedy that has been identified as so central to it.

In short, it is clear that imagery and tropes borrowed from the horror genre help to generate the uneasy humour of dark comedy, often being subverted to create a different or even greater form of visual excess and spectacle. Yet it is not only through adopting and manipulating elements and aesthetics of horror that dark comedy is able to explore and represent fears about the human condition; the following chapters in this section will explore the use of other key aesthetics, beginning with those connected to sexuality.

CHAPTER 4

Dark comedy aesthetics of **sexuality** (gender and sexualised bodies, nudity, sex, fertility, grotesque, fake/mechanical appearance, age and gender-blurring)

> Ellie Grace: "I love you more than gummi bears."
>
> Mommy: "I love you more than puppy dogs."
>
> Ellie Grace: "I love you more than smiles."
>
> Mommy: "I love you more than raindrops."
>
> Ellie Grace: "I love you more than transsexual porn!"
>
> (*Little Britain USA*, Episode 1, 2008)

Introduction

What is an 'excessive' appearance? The previous chapter considered this with reference to the imagery of horror, gross-out, and performance techniques associated with highlighting extreme representations of one kind or another (the appearance and ways of moving of monstrous characters, for example). Many such characters – i.e., with horrific excessive appearances – can be seen in dark comedies, and point to a generally close association between them and horror, but horrific excess is by no means the only kind to be found in dark comedy. Furthermore, excessive appearances are (like the monstrous itself) resistant to rigid categorisation and open to interpretation in multiple ways. It is with this basis laid down that considerations of how dark comedies depict excess linked to sexuality, gender, and the display of sexualised and gendered bodies and actions

can follow, in a number of cases serving to draw attention to an overlap between these and horror aesthetics (as in the case of the grotesque). Of course, while this work deals with dark comedy, excessive performance of sexualised or gendered behaviour could be considered a feature of comedy in general, so differentiating the aesthetics of the excessive performance of dark comedy from other kinds will also be a necessary task.

When it comes to sex and comedy, it might be argued that dark comedy lies towards the 'hardcore' end of representation; not so much in the sense that real sex acts are depicted (although in some cases, simulated sex acts are performed and presented in a graphic way), but more in terms of the fact that dark comedy's 'fantastic', exaggerated, reductive, visual, bodily preoccupation is very similar to that of hardcore pornography, and their aesthetics can end up being accordingly similar. The incorporation of a pornographic aesthetics into a comedy text, with a focus upon the humorous potential of confronting viewers with taboo-breaking or perverse imagery, has an obvious precursor within American underground cinema of the 1970s, and it would be worthwhile to consider the parallels between the use of sexual material there and what is going on in contemporary dark comedies. It may be the case that the affective responses that certain aesthetic choices and techniques appeared to be seeking in the underground films can provide an insight into the ways dark visual sexual humour is working in this new context. As a cult cinematographer and influential figure in the areas of gross-out, 'bad taste' and sexual comedy, John Waters and his early films have received attention for "...their unforgiving embrace of the perverted, the obscene, the criminally insane, the monstrous and the pathologically unhygienic" (Breckon, 2013: 515). It is impossible to miss the concordance of this list with the typical features of British dark comedies that have been identified above, and the presentation of characters with unusual or grotesque appearances, engaged in acts

that appear designed "…to shock and disgust the audience" (Breckon, 2013: 517) is observable in films such as Waters's *Pink Flamingos* (1972), and series such as *Psychoville, Nighty Night, Tittybangbang* and *Tramadol Nights* alike.

What is particularly interesting about the aesthetic parallels between the two sets of texts is that as well as the appearances of Waters's regular performers such as Divine and Edith Massey being echoed in the grotesquery of a number of characters from the British dark comedies, the way that moments of excessive or perverse behaviour – those apparently included to 'shock and disgust' – are presented to and by the camera suggests a wider aesthetic accord. Discussing a moment in *Pink Flamingos* when Divine's overweight and immobile mother, Edie, ecstatically consumes a large plateful of soft-cooked eggs with her fingers, dripping yolk and egg pieces out through her uneven teeth and down her face and body, Breckon notes how "…the film literally moves the spectator in closer through a jump-cut from a medium-longshot to a medium-closeup" (2013: 526). The spectatorial position has the viewer confronted with her excessive body, excessively consuming, within a structured sequence that forces us closer at the very point where we might reflexively look away, challenging us to pay attention to what it is we are reacting to, and potentially not merely to feel 'grossed-out' by what is on the screen, but to find funny how egregiously, how *audaciously*, this physical act is being offered as a spectacle. There is a link to be made here between Waters's style and the excessive and spectacular displays of abject bodies, non-normative sexuality, and actions that appear designed to repulse or disgust in the dark comedies examined in this thesis, and it is feasible to consider that the same techniques of spectatorial manipulation and presentation of sexuality used by the cinematographers of the 1970s American underground such as Waters and Curt McDowell are being replicated by the contemporary creators in the service of similar comedy goals. Marc

Walkow, writing in *Film Comment*, describes McDowell's *Thundercrack!* (1976) as "lunatic and fascinating [... It] mashes together Old Hollywood-style melodrama, broad comedy, and horror elements with gritty sex scenes – gay, straight, and solo – to create a two-and-a-half-hour, black-and-white fever dream of sexual trauma" (2016: 76), and the ease with which this review could apply, with minor modifications, to a significant number of the dark comedies here serves to highlight how prevalent scenes with sexual content are in these programmes.

Constance Penley has suggested that pornography has had a 'trickle-up' influence on other media (2004: 324), and comedy is certainly one area in which this is the case. Additionally, since the early-2000s the popularity of handheld documentary-style filming in British comedies in general has strengthened the sense of intertextuality between the gonzo style of pornography and comedy. Indeed, some dark comedies borrow wholesale an aesthetics of gonzo pornography to depict explicit moments. This 'trickle-up' advance of the aesthetics of pornography into mainstream cultural texts has been identified as taking place at a similar time to that over which I am placing the rise of dark comedy on British television, and this is certainly not a coincidence. Brian McNair notes that: "If the trend [towards pornographic aesthetics] was clearly evident by the mid-1990s it has continued and intensified in the intervening period" (2002: 61). He terms the representation of porn in this way 'porno-chic', and places it into the context of a wider 'striptease culture', arguing that "...the rise of porno-chic reflects a legitimate *public* (as opposed to merely commercial) interest in the pornographic and its transgressive, taboo-breaking qualities" [italics in original] (2002: 61-2).

However, he also points out that employing porno-chic is a gamble: "Approaching too closely to the sexual intensity of the authentically pornographic can provoke amongst audiences the anxieties and inhibitions associated with consuming porn proper" (2002: 68). Freud

would consider such anxieties themselves to be rooted in taboo, and the fact that dark comedies so often present sexual situations that explicitly show taboo prohibitions being transgressed, such as incest, sex with the dead, and sexual situations with children means that in a number of respects the range of transgressive sexual material that is visually available in dark comedy is even wider than is legally possible in actual Adult film releases (which cannot depict material that is intended to suggest that any participants are underage, or that necrophilia is taking place, for instance). While dark comedy's sexual aesthetics may not provoke anxieties and inhibitions in exactly the same ways associated with McNair's 'consuming porn proper', I suggest that it nevertheless clearly does have the potential to invoke and effect an engagement with the main topics of taboo, and – as with horror content and its potential to allow viewers to 'safely' confront fears and ideas about vulnerability and mortality via a two-stage process of acknowledging yet minimising such threats – transgressive sexual content in dark comedy may be insulated by the comic context, with the programmes therefore providing the opportunity to 'safely' confront fears and ideas about desire and sexuality. It will be seen from the specific examples examined in the rest of this chapter that a key device used to create the comic insulation appears to be excess.

Excessive Appearances and Excessive Performances

Yvonne Tasker has discussed how the presentation of muscular male bodies in action cinema provides "an excessive parody of an ideal" (1993: 1), and I suggest that in dark comedy we can see a version of excessive parody of the *un*-ideal. The spectacular human bodies of dark comedy are not just flawed, they are excessively flawed. It is also the case that action stars (such as Sylvester Stallone) "have been represented by some critics as grotesque figures who are potentially

out of control, framed by images of the monstrous and the deviant"
(Tasker, 1993: 9), and the fact that any body – ideal, 'normal', flawed –
when taken to excess can be seen to become grotesque is important as
an indicator that it is excess itself that is the crucial factor. Whereas
the bodies in action cinema are characterised by having the necessary
strength, skills, or other positive qualities to get the characters through
challenging situations just when they are needed, the flawed bodies of
dark comedy have a habit of letting characters down just when they are
needed, proving themselves fragile, fallible, or not up to the requisite
standard in the first place. The bodies do embarrassing things, such as
becoming visibly aroused at awkward and inappropriate times, leaking
or exposing themselves, wobbling, falling over, and giving in to urges of
the lower stratum. This is exactly the grotesque physicality of
Bakhtinian carnival, and while we as viewers may be able to laugh at
these moments where a character's physicality gets the better of them,
the underlying reminder that we are similarly 'at risk' from the foibles of
our own bodies and must carefully attempt to avoid the same problems
lest we too should become laughable also inheres. We might not be
subject to such excessive and escalating embarrassments as are shown
in dark comedies, but the knowledge that in everyday life the
embarrassment of even comparatively tiny bodily mishaps can feel
enormous to the individual concerned may provide a powerful urge
towards the empathy then dismissal process that makes up the paradox
of the heart.

As with the aesthetics of horror discussed in the previous chapter, there
is a significant overlap with gross-out in the dark comedy presentation
of sexual bodies too, and I would like to forward the idea that this is
symptomatic of a kind of 'over-determination' of sexuality in dark
comedy; that audiences are consistently shown the visual evidence and
consequences of sexual feelings that the body can provide, and that
these programmes leave no room in their aesthetics *not to* see it. *Fun*

at the Funeral Parlour (BBC Choice, 2001-2002) and *Moving Wallpaper* (ITV, 2008-2009) are only two examples of numerous dark comedies that have shown male characters with visible wet patches in the crotch area of their trousers after situations in which they are obviously aroused, for instance, and clothed erections are another site of visual sexual humour appearing across multiple programmes. In these instances of arousal and orgasm, filming and editing choices frequently see the camera paying intimate attention to the most unequivocal bodily evidence (providing close-ups of tented trousers, and other shots that fragment the body so that the penis is foregrounded while the character it is attached to is otherwise out of frame, or centring a shot on the face of an orgasming character). In the police procedural parody *A Touch of Cloth*, the staple dark comedy partnership of sex and death can be seen combining with these techniques to create a visually excessive and escalating sequence of humour based upon the transgression of taboos that really exemplifies the approach of many dark comedies in displaying sexuality. A man is called to a crime scene, where he informs the police personnel that he "came as soon as he heard", leading to an explanation that he has a medical condition that causes him to orgasm upon hearing shocking news. The police inform him that the murder victim is his daughter, resulting in him immediately orgasming in front of them. In the next scene, the man arrives at the morgue with his wife, and they and the police solemnly proceed towards the examination table to formally identify the body. Upon seeing his daughter he appears to orgasm again, more subtly this time, but having leant down to kiss her gently on the forehead he seems unable to resist going further – French kissing the corpse (Figure 4.1), kissing his way passionately down her neck and arm, and sucking her fingers into his mouth as the police look on unmoved.

Figure 4.1   *A Touch of Cloth.*   *Figure 4.2.*

The next scene moves the murder investigation into an interrogation sequence, as the main suspect has already been identified. Watching the interrogation from behind a two-way mirror, Detective Jack Cloth becomes aroused as his partner confronts the suspect with an explicit description of the affair she believes was going on between the suspect's husband and the murdered woman, laying out a sexual encounter between the two in frank detail. When Cloth joins the interrogation, he has an obvious erection (Figure 4.2), and humour is clearly intended to be derived from its appearance in conjunction with his dialogue; finding the suspect's denials unconvincing, he tells her that, "You made a good fist of it, but you can't pull this off. Something's up, and everyone in this room can see what it is". This sequence of scenes, following immediately upon each other and presenting verbal and visual joking that depends on the transgression of taboos, illustrates excess in a number of ways: first, there is a sustained focus on sexual joking – multiple scenes with humour based upon the same theme – and more than one character experiencing 'inappropriate' arousal; secondly, there are multiple taboos being explored – the father is not only demonstrating necrophilia, but incestuous necrophilia; further, in the case of both characters their behaviour falls into the category of authority figures exhibiting a distinct lack of judgement and propriety (in allowing their aroused state to play out in the setting they are in) – Cloth could easily have delayed entering the interview room, for example, and the father could have been mindful of how disturbing French kissing and sucking on his

daughter's corpse would appear – yet their physicality appears to take precedence over their rationality, and thus the dark comedy is achieved. It should also be noted that throughout, the camera shows exactly what is going on, leaving viewers in no doubt as to what it is that they are expected to be reacting to in the scenes: close-ups on the father's actions, and the size and positioning of Cloth's erection, when taken alongside aural cues like the musical soundtrack of 'Je t'aime… moi non plus' accompanying the morgue kissing, and Cloth's innuendo-laden dialogue, signals the nature of the scenes as sexual in a way that is itself excessive and laughable.

A similarly excessive determination can be seen in *Nathan Barley* (Channel 4, 2005) during a scene in which the titular character – an adult man – receives fellatio from a female character who is thirteen years old (although played by an actress who appears older), the camera showing the movements of her head as she kneels in front of him in the style of softcore pornographic filming, and then his face as he orgasms. He finds out her age over the phone as he is being fellated, and the actor's performance signals a conflicted response to the news, leaving the awkward question of whether this knowledge contributes to or detracts from the climax he has seconds later. Additionally, as the girl is a cocaine addict who Barley is supposed to be helping film a music video as part of her therapy to work through issues surrounding childhood abuse and mental health, the circumstances emphasise a taboo transgression that is not merely him engaging in sex with a young girl, but a doubly-vulnerable one over whom he is in a position of authority and responsibility. Scenarios such as this show how dark comedies are capable of combining visually graphic portrayals of taboo sexuality that are in themselves excessive with narrative scenarios that are extreme and disturbing to create an overall effect of a situation that seems, on the one hand, too extreme to laugh at, yet on the other, almost too extreme *not to*. As with the horror scenarios in the above chapter, the sense of fictionality (with its attendant

permission not to take seriously) may be being aided by the excessive nature of the presentation.

The show *Funland*, marketed as a 'disturbingly funny thriller' (BBC Press Office, 2005), provides examples of character appearance and excessive behaviour that are also in line with those seen in programmes marketed as wholly comedic, and it is interesting to note that alongside disability and physical illness, and violence, it is overt sexuality that provides a key recurring visual theme in the show. The involvement of a number of the female characters with the job of stripping and lap-dancing gives the opportunity to see them with excessive heels, make-up and sexualised clothing, and a pivotal scene in the narrative is a strip performance by the main character, Lola Sutton, in which (having been forced to work in the strip club) she finds that she actually enjoys the act of stripping and dancing provocatively in public, becoming aware of a sexual side to herself that she had not previously explored. The scene is lengthy and the camera focusses upon her performance in a highly voyeuristic manner, with the portrayal of a 'straight-laced' character succumbing to or embracing their physicality and bodily pleasure appearing to be the major point of the scene. A second pivotal scene in the programme – an analogue to this one – shows Lola having sex with Shirley Woolf, the man who had forced her to dance in the club, while her husband watches from the side of the room (and, unbeknownst to them, two other characters view the event through a periscope lens hidden in exposed pipework). She has agreed to have sex with Shirley for the same reason she performs in the club: reducing a debt she and her husband have incurred to him, and the parallel relation between the three (of the instigator, the succumbing woman, and the observing men) cannot pass unnoticed. As with Lola's discovery that she gains sexual power and pleasure from stripping on the stage, while she is having sex with Shirley she cannot hide her unexpected physical enjoyment of the act, which her husband watches with a mixture of fear, disgust and arousal.

It is fascinating that this three-way relation maps almost exactly onto Freud's explanation of the workings of tendentious, smutty joking, in which the teller (male) performs the joke for the hearing of another (male) present, also in – or invoking – the presence of a 'violated' woman: "Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled" (Freud, 1960: 118). What is different in the case of the stripping and sex scene in *Funland* (and in fact highlights a feature of the smutty joking relation ignored by Freud in his considerations) is that the female participant also gains pleasure and a degree of power from the configuration, rather than being merely a passive bystander acted upon by the exchange between the male teller/instigator and hearer/observer. In this situation, all three of the participants experience a kind of sexual satisfaction from their involvement. In the context of the scene as a television moment, viewed also by the audience, the audience members – although they may be able to identify with any of the characters in the scene – are most explicitly aligned with the husband/hearer, and this may be seen to represent the role (following Freud, at least) of the dark comedy television audience in general. They are made observing parties to tendentious material that is characterised by being excessive, visually physical or sexualised, and often taboo, and it might be argued that Freud's conception of tendentious joking is particularly apt in the case of dark comedy formulations of humour. Something else interesting to note here is that speaking of humour situated *within* pornographic texts, Penley has asserted that something that has been "…difficult to recognize, because it so goes against the contemporary typification of porn as something done to women, is that the joke is usually on the man. And if the man is the butt of the joke, this also contradicts Freud's description of the mechanism of the smut joke, in which any woman present at the telling of the joke will inevitably be its

butt" (2004: 314). A parallel between what Penley has observed here, and what is going on in *Funland*'s Lola/Shirley/Dudley scene is evident.

An earlier sex scene between Dudley (the husband) and Lola is also notable for its explicit focus on the bodies of the characters, their movements, and the highlighting of diegetic sounds related to their movements and reactions to each other's movement. In contrast to the dramatic presentation of the three-way situation with Shirley, this scene gives a combination of Dudley's ineptitude and Lola's discomfort that provides overt comedy, but the overall aesthetics of both scenes in terms of filming and editing are the same, and both also obtain a sense of being – or of presenting something – 'excessive' from the length of time the characters are shown having sex and the close focus upon the act itself. Whilst the couple have sex with Dudley on top, it is clear from Lola's expressions that she is not finding his rapid pace and 'dirty talk' very satisfying (Figure 4.3); however, when his foot slips off the bed and becomes lodged in a plastic bucket his preoccupation with shaking it off means that his rhythm changes and he stops speaking (Figure 4.4). Lola then begins to enjoy the sex and appears to be on the brink of orgasm when Dudley finally dislodges the bucket and immediately resumes his initial unsatisfying rhythm, much to her dismay. This is both structurally and visually comedic, but an unusual stylistic juxtaposition is created by the fact that this comedic situation is presented in concert with filming and editing that utilises the aesthetics of the gonzo branch of pornography, including the appearance of handheld 'shaky' camera filming, framing at specific angles (bodies on the diagonal, for example), fragmenting close-ups, a focus on the woman's face for evidence of 'authentic' arousal, and the sense of the camera being close enough to the performers to suggest participation in the scene. There is also full-frontal male nudity in the scene, although only briefly, with the camera and the performer moving quickly past each other so that while the authenticity of his nudity is

provided it is not detailed. (The scene between Lola and Shirley shows full male and female nudity filmed according to the conventions of softcore Adult film – Figure 4.5.)

Copyrighted image	Copyrighted image
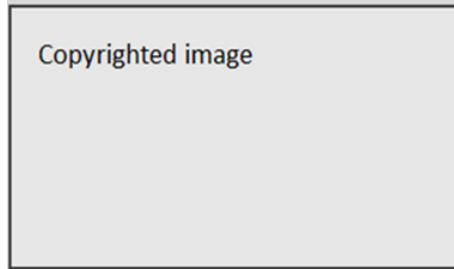
Figure 4.3.   Lola and Dudley.   *Figure 4.4.*

Copyrighted image	Copyrighted image

Figure 4.5.   Lola and Shirley.   *Figure 4.6.*

The close focus on Lola's face during her orgasm with Shirley (Figure 4.6), as well as once again reflecting the conventions of pornography, serves to strikingly highlight the physical, sensual 'reality' of what is being shown – unless viewers look away, they will be face to face with recognisably pornographic imagery and the spectacle of a naturalistically performed female orgasm – while the gasps and other verbalisations of pleasure from both actors give an explicit soundtrack. "The quality of access afforded to the body […] informs how we engage with it" (Fife Donaldson, 2013: 211), and although the fragmentation inherent in adopting a pornographic style and the necessity of using diegetic 'barriers' or other techniques to avoid revealing either too much nudity or the 'fakery' of simulated sex prevents viewers from taking in a full picture of the characters' bodies, the access to Lola given by *Funland* is particularly intimate. It is even possible to link the 'excessive' preoccupation of the camera with capturing close-up images of her

mouth, and the unequivocal portrayal of the act of sex, with Bakhtinian notions of the grotesque:

> The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world […]: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation (Bakhtin, 1984: 26).

Additionally, according to Gertrude Koch the pornographic aesthetic "relies on an underlying metaphor of the body as a machine" (1993: 35), so a link between this type of bodily performance and Bergson's ideas about the comic can also be seen.

Nighty Night constitutes a particularly interesting example of sexual aesthetics in dark comedy, and in order to discuss it, it would be instructive to refer to Stephen Marcus's analysis of de Sade:

> Given a limited number of variables – that is, persons of both sexes with their corresponding organs and appendages – and a limited number of juxtapositions into which these variables may be placed, time becomes a mathematical function and may be defined as however long it takes to represent or exhaust the predetermined number of units to be combined. This is why The One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom represents one kind of perfection in this genre. Pornography's mad genius, the Marquis de Sade, with psychotic rigidity and precision, and with psychotic logic, wrote his novel along strict arithmetical lines (1964: 270).

Nighty Night's second series is, strangely enough, the closest a comedy television text might come to being described as Sadian as is possible following Marcus's logic (and certainly, the programme appears to self-reflexively relish its cataloguing of as many sexual taboos as possible over the six half-hour episodes). Through vanilla sex to group lesbian sex with a large strap-on, via bestiality, rape, a variety of role-play

scenarios including BDSM elements, dirty talk, fellatio, masturbation, multiple partners, positions, and – to take the show as far as BBC boundaries would permit – the seduction and placing of a child into sexual situations by an adult character, *Nighty Night* effects its own span of Sodom. McNair notes that "Sade's work was […] a template for the kind of aesthetic revolt against established manners and rules which has driven many artists ever since" (2002: 170), and I would draw parallels between this idea and what might be going on in *Nighty Night* as well, and indeed in dark comedy aesthetics more generally: presenting a visual excess of sexual, violent or taboo content – or indeed any visual content designed to show a mocking excess of established techniques, as with the news graphics used by *The Day Today* – is to subvert existing expectations and 'rules' about how things should, or normally, appear. This excess draws attention to itself by its very nature, and it is not only the content, but the fact that it *is* over the top that is important to dark comedy. The subversive quality of dark comedy is therefore doubly determined, and it is not enough to say that the thematic content alone signals darkness, because it is inseparably through visual means that excess can be recognised. It might be questioned as to where this assertion leaves comedies such as *The Office* (BBC 2, 2001-2003), which is typically viewed as an example of stripped down or 'subtle' performances and visual style, yet is also dark. My answer here is that excess describes a multitude of things; the opening title sequence of *The Office* establishes its location as excessively bleak, for example, deliberately focussing upon the least attractive and vibrant sights possible; the performances of the actors (for example when reacting to Brent's cringe-worthy joking) are an exaggeration of 'subtle' that in fact functions to draw attention to the supposed subtlety.

As has been noted above, a recurring feature of a number of programmes which fall into the trend and time period under

consideration in this thesis is the incestuous relationship, suggesting a particular affinity between dark comic subjects and the Freudian theory of taboo. Two key examples of this kind of relationship can be seen in *Psychoville*, in the figures of David and Maureen, and in *Funland*, between Shirley and Mercy Woolf, in both cases mother–son pairings. The discovery, late in the series, that Shirley and Carter Krantz are actually brothers also retrospectively reveals Carter's romantic and sexual relationship with Shirley's daughter to have been unknowingly incestuous. *The League of Gentlemen*'s Tubbs and Edward are a brother–sister relationship, meaning that across these three programmes examples of mother–son, sibling, and uncle–niece sexual relationships are represented. Although the father–daughter situation shown in *A Touch of Cloth* is complicated by the fact that one of the parties is deceased, this configuration can also be added to the list, revealing that not only is incest a recurring theme, but that a wide (mixed-gender, at least) range is covered. Incest is therefore presented in a way that highlights the possibilities for taboo transgression as many, and the sense of excess or over-determination of a point is once again invoked.

Freud highlights the taboo nature of incest in various of his works, and it is interesting that it appears in dark comedy as what might be described (from the way it is presented) as a 'more serious' taboo than many of the others on display. The depiction or revelation of the incestuous nature of the relationships is not generally constructed to be explicitly comic and to be laughed at, unlike – say – the use of blackface, defiling of corpses, or linking of physical disability or impairment with physical humour (in fact, I believe that in the example from *A Touch of Cloth* the way in which the necrophilia is presented actually works to distract from the fact that the couple are related, with the former being positioned as so humorous that it overshadows the seriousness of the incest). Incest, along with male-on-female sexual

violence is typically portrayed in serious moments involving menace or horror. Complicated combinations of different dark thematic or visual content are often apparent in these instances, with one or more of the characters involved being either physically disabled, having mental health problems, or being incapacitated by some kind of physical illness as well. For example, Mercy Woolf uses a wheelchair, her physical frailty presented in strong contrast to the mental stranglehold she has on her eldest son, a victim of her sexual abuse while a teenager (and whom she paints as a willing participant). David and Maureen seem to represent a different type of situation, ambiguously-incestuous, where the boundaries of adult mother–son closeness have become blurred as a result of spending so much time primarily with each other, and by their apparent naivety in not recognising that their behaviour has slipped into being 'odd' by general social standards. It is possible to read David as having a developmental disability, and he seems confused about the 'correct' way to express his love for his parent, particularly once he is aware that she is dying of cancer, and this further complicates how their interactions can be considered.

In the case of male-on-female violence, *Psychoville* presents a scene in which an older male (a police detective, in keeping with dark comedy themes of authority personnel abusing their positions and the trust placed in them) murders one woman while another watches, unable to intervene. The murder itself and his behaviour towards the female witness is coded as sexualised through the use of visual metaphor as well as via more explicit means: he stabs the neck of his victim with a biro, through a medical neck brace, appearing to experience an orgasmic or highly aroused state as the blood spurts out and covers them. He then caresses her face and strokes the hair and cheek of the observing woman, who is unable to move or even facially react, as she is rendered immobile and in a wheelchair by Locked-in Syndrome. This scene is dramatic and horrific rather than comic, and again seems to

push viewers towards identifying with the figure of the observing character, unable to intervene. It seems that here in these examples we may be finding the hard-limits of what dark comedy is prepared to present as funny – or, at least, what is perceived by the creators as unable to be broadcast as comedic, even though it can be included in the wider context of a comedy programme. Incest and child abuse, and male (physical) sexual violence, especially in combination with other dark attributes such as disability, are treated seriously and used for plot purposes and effects. Even in the scenario from *Nathan Barley* where the female participant in a sexual encounter is revealed partway through to be underage, therefore making a situation that initially appeared consensual into one which is overtly abusive, the scene is played far more dramatically than other sex scenes in the same series, and there is a sense that it is self-reflexively aware of its status as the darkest and most controversial scene in the programme.

It is also interesting to note that female-on-male violation outside an incestuous context is not afforded the same serious treatment in dark comedy as its inverse. In *Nighty Night*, Jill's sexual actions towards Don while he is incapacitated in various ways are presented as highly comic in a manner that it seems very unlikely would be the case if their roles were reversed. Julia Davis notes in the DVD commentary to the series that the scene that provoked the most editorial concern over its sexual content was one in which she acted provocatively towards Don's underage son, rather than the scenes where she is shown attempting to have penetrative sex with Don while he cannot physically prevent her, and when she non-consensually masturbates and fellates him while he is anaesthetised. Similarly, in *Psychoville*, the character Hattie drugs and imprisons her friend's boyfriend, coercing and forcing him into having sex with her against his will, but these scenes are markedly more comedically presented than the scene between the male policeman and the two women. The gendered nature of what is

signalled as funny and what is not when it comes to sexual violence broadly aligns with general societal attitudes towards the seriousness of different combinations of gender and age status in those involved: male-on-female rape and abuse is afforded a more serious treatment in discourses surrounding the subject, while adult female-on-adult male abuse is regarded as unusual, unlikely and the source of joking comments as to the attitude of the victim.

It might be questioned as to why incest and sexual violence by men on women appears to be more of a 'serious' theme in dark comedy than the other taboos of necrophilia/defilement of the dead. This could simply be a factor of the differing contemporary context to that in which Freud was discussing taboo – within a more secular society, it seems reasonable to conclude that the fear of reprisal by angry spirits is less of a concern. Or maybe there is something in the fact that a television audience explicitly knows that the bodies being violated on screen are not dead, but are in fact consenting actors; however, this would be the case with depictions of sexual violence as well, so the situation does not appear clear-cut. Actors sometimes speak of their discomfort with performing such scenes, so perhaps reality is harder to suspend in some physical cases than others.

Unsettling Appearances and Gender-Blurring

A way in which actors (and characters) in dark comedy programmes can be made to appear excessive, confusing, unsettling or grotesque can be seen in the use of prosthetics such as fat suits, false breasts and genitalia, and facial prosthetics. The use of the former is generally seen in tandem with tight or revealing clothes to invite laughter at the character's size and the presumed inappropriateness of their body being on show in this way. Prosthetic breasts are a simple feature of costumes for male actors playing female characters, but they can also

appear on female actors; for example, *Tittybangbang* makes use of fake breasts on Lucy Montgomery when she is playing Maxine Bendix, a character who has undergone extensive poor-quality cosmetic surgery that has left her with grotesque and seeping features that are repeatedly revealed in detail to the viewer. It can also be noted that the use of prosthetics is an enabling factor in showing 'nudity' in comedy to a degree that would not be permitted were it genuine. *Little Britain* and *The League of Gentlemen* both feature extended scenes of full frontal nudity with prosthetics in place of genuine body parts. Sometimes, attention is drawn to the blurring of gender at such moments, and laughter is apparently invited at either the actor's inability to convincingly pass for a different gender, or (in the case of transgender characters) the joke is on the character themselves, as with Barbara the taxi driver in *The League of Gentlemen* (Figure 4.7) and Emily Howard in *Little Britain* (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.7. Barbara.

Figure 4.8. Emily Howard.

As Hutchings has noted, in the case of Barbara, she is typically shown in a fragmented way, the camera never revealing the character in full or with her face directly visible – instead her eyes are shown reflected in the rear view mirror of her taxi cab, feminine rings on large and obviously hairy fingers around the gearstick are filmed from a backseat passenger's point of view, as is a hairy leg in heels depressing the clutch: "It is as if Barbara's transgendered identity, and the very idea of a male becoming – anatomically at least – a female, is unrepresentable within the terms of the series" (2007: 9). This might also be seen as an interesting spin on the way women's bodies are shown on film in

general; fragmented and inviting an objectifying, voyeuristic gaze. The joke with this aesthetic applied to Barbara is therefore that what the audience sees is the opposite of that usually filmed in such a way, with the fragmented body parts being neither traditionally attractive nor, as the actor is not himself transgender, female. Emily Howard too activates joking around a mismatch: as with Barbara, humour is centred upon the fact that although her appearance is feminine in some ways, in others and in her actions she is unconvincing as a woman in the eyes of her observers. Her ability to engage in typically masculine-associated behaviour (such as fixing a car), during which she drops her Emily persona, and the Emily persona itself (apparently based on ideas of womanhood belonging to the historical past, rather than the modern day) render her ridiculous, and her repeated catchphrase, "But I'm a lady!" reveals this thwarted desire to be seen as a woman.

In *Limmy's Show*, the character of Jacqueline McCafferty presents a third interesting case, in that the programme does not make it clear whether the character *is* a transwoman, or if she is just another example of a male comedian playing a female character. Diegetically, no one ever reacts to her as though they perceive her to be transgender, her comedic social difficulties appearing to be class-based or resulting from her status as a recovering heroin addict instead. However, the performance of the character clearly does demonstrate a gender blur, with Brian Limond using a deep and obviously masculine voice at some points and a feminine voice at other times, and walking and moving in ways associated with male performance rather than female, both features which are apparently ignored by the other characters. Additionally, Jacqueline is the only female character in the show to be played by a male actor. This is an unusual portrayal in the context of general approaches to men playing female roles in British sketch comedy television shows.

Andrea J. Ivanov is here speaking about the comic performance of Mae West, but the key point she raises about parody facilitating not only generic excess, but excess in other areas of the parodic content – in this case gendered behaviour – can be seen to apply to performances in dark comedies: "Parody as a mode of comedy interacts with West's gender parody through modes of excess. The sexual identity of West's persona was alternatively questioned or 'confirmed' through forms of gender(ed) and generic excess" (1994: 276). Explanations like this go some way towards explaining the frequent appearance of the combination of parody and excess within dark comedy; they are allied, mutually inclusive things, and particularly relevant when it comes to the grotesque. Characters such as *Little Britain*'s Bubbles and Desiree (Figure 4.9, 4.10), whose prosthetic nudity is seen in every episode of series three, display an excessive, conflicting and – in many ways – composite appearance. The characters are female, although the actors are male, and the size and shape of their bodies, with huge protruding stomachs, enormous breasts and visible genitalia, recall aspects of pregnancy and giving birth. At the same time these women clearly also appear older, wearing unflattering wigs and cosmetics to disguise their age; as such this combination could be likened to Bakhtin's imagery of the senile pregnant hags of the grotesque (1984: 25).

Figure 4.9. Bubbles DeVere.   *Figure 4.10.* Bubbles and Desiree.

Mowatt has rounded upon *Little Britain*'s depiction of women in general, commenting that "…the most repulsive representations of femininity are probably Letty (David Walliams), vomiting WI ladies Judy and Maggie (Matt Lucas and David Walliams), and the visually nauseating pairing of

the grossly obese Bubbles DeVere and Desiree DeVere ([Matt Lucas and] David Walliams)" (2010: 27). It is interesting to note how his categorisation of the repulsive feminine appears to be very much bound up with gross-out qualities (the vomiting ladies; Bubbles and Desiree's 'nauseating' appearances), and in the case of Letty – a woman with an unusual speech pattern and an obsession with frogs – perhaps either her violent and unpredictable outbursts or her repetitive and fragmented way of speaking (in which she repeats back other people's words in multiples and different orders) has created Mowatt's unease towards her. In each instance, the appearance or behaviour of the women can be seen as excessive *and* as exemplifying either physical or mental transgression of what is considered desirable: Bubbles and Desiree have bodies that suggest out-of-control eating (as reinforced by the presence of over a dozen boxes of breakfast cereal on Bubbles's tray in the scene from Figure 4.10), Maggie is unable to control her bigotry-inspired vomiting in public locations, and Letty appears controlled by obsessive thought patterns and impulses.

To complicate matters, the use of prosthetics and make-up to create these characters exemplifies the same issue discussed above of visual confusion surrounding the difference between the appearance of the actors themselves and the characters they are playing. The marketing of shows and of celebrities means that many people watching will be aware that these two characters are Matt Lucas and David Walliams underneath, or that Don Peacock is really Lucy Montgomery, or Gilbert in *The Morgana Show* (Channel 4, 2010) is Morgana Robinson: essentially, these are known real people *in disguise,* and this forms one element of the visual humour in and of itself. As Bergson says, "A man in disguise is comic. A man we regard as disguised is also comic. So, by analogy, any disguise is seen to become comic, not only that of a man, but that of society also, and even the disguise of nature" (1956: 87). What he seems to be suggesting is that attempts to obscure, use

or represent one thing as another, are laughable because the attempts themselves simply draw attention to the disparity between the one thing and the other, the real and the tampered with; in other words, the human/natural and the altered/mechanical. The grotesque and uncanny qualities that come with the extremity of the physical appearance of many of the characters in dark comedies fulfil the function of allowing (either by coincidence or by design) attention to be particularly easily drawn to the disparity between the real and the disguise. It could be argued that this is one of the key ways in which the visuals of dark comedy differentiate it – both aesthetically *and* in how the visual humour works – from other kinds of television comedy.

Another eye-catching costume effect that draws attention to specific aspects of the body is revealing or too tight clothing, frequently coupled with a grotesque element connected to the size, age or skin/body hair of the character; again, the notion of what might usually be covered (or what society would prefer to be covered) being made visible is key. Characters such as Daffyd in *Little Britain* (Figure 4.11), who wears tight latex clothing and hotpants in an effort to perform what he has interpreted gay masculinity to involve, can attract multiple possible reactions: some viewers could find the clothing distasteful or laughable simply as a representation of stereotypical 'gay attire' (similarly to the way the revealing outfits of Maxine Bendix (Figure 4.12) might attract distaste for being stereotyped as 'common' or 'slutty'), but for other viewers it might be the *combination* of tight or revealing clothing with a body that is not conventionally attractive that is the important factor in promoting laughter or revulsion. In Daffyd's case, he is not slim or muscular and therefore the latex that is designed to highlight the sexual attractiveness of the wearer instead accentuates his flabby build and concomitant *un-*sexiness (and Maxine's bra tops do not show off a sexy beach-physique, but rather her misshapen and scarred post-cosmetic surgery breasts). It is, therefore, possible to suggest that humour

surrounding the grotesque appearance of these characters in their costumes is dependent upon audience awareness of what is considered in popular and consumer culture to be the 'ideal' physique and appearance for those who wish to wear such outfits in public, and hence to recognise that *these* characters do not have it, and apparently are not aware of their social faux pas in going out in this attire anyway.

Figure 4.11. Daffyd.

Figure 4.12. Maxine Bendix.

When seeing Maxine giggling and bouncing as her (prosthetic) breasts fall out of her bikini, or observing Daffyd's body in a latex body-con leotard, viewers might experience a dissonance between the association with such attire or actions with the sexual subjectification of the character, and the association of saggy or flabby skin, scarring, seepage and extra weight as unsexy. The situation is, in a sense, first positioning viewers to regard the characters sexually, as (short of looking away from the screen) the characters' imperfect bodies are unmissable in the scant or skintight clothing, and secondly to find amusing the mismatch between that position and what is actually there to see – an unalluring sight according to popular cultural 'ideals' of sexual attractiveness.

As has been noted above in the cases of John Waters's *Pink Flamingos*, and in *Funland* and *A Touch of Cloth*, filming and editing techniques can also draw attention to or frame the dark comic body so that

viewers are invited to see it in certain ways: extreme close-ups, zooming-in on and seeking out bodies/body parts, and making particular body parts the centre or focus of the frame can have the same effect as the worn items in forcing viewer attention towards imperfections. Having the camera pay close attention to things like deformities, injuries, blood, corpses, vomiting, and so forth also leads viewers to look at (albeit generally faked) grotesque physicality that they otherwise might avoid seeing in real life. The second aspect to these techniques, is that (like the revealing and voluptuous costumes/prosthetics described above) they can have the effect of making the viewer pay attention to the sexual appearance of the characters, by fragmenting the body and objectifying different bits, giving POV shots that focus upon bodies in a sexual way, and shooting things that outside a television context you might avert your gaze from through politeness or shock/aversion, such as nudity, sexual behaviour or gore. In grotesque aesthetics, "[t]he stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through which the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots" – such as the mouth, breasts or genitals (Bakhtin, 1984: 26). Beyond this it might also be said that open wounds, as apertures through which objects penetrate, or blood and interior contents evacuate, could be considered sites at which a body loses its integrity and "…transgresses its own limits" (26).

The sexual angle is of course primarily interesting in that it is frequently the case that the bodies we are invited to view sexually are grotesque, uncanny or otherwise not in conformity with popular standards of attractiveness. However, the general sexual content of dark comedy programmes can be seen to be greater and more graphic than is usual in television comedy as well, so it is not always in the presentation of

the grotesque that darkness is marked, but in the frankness or extremity of sexualisation or sexual content. The *type* of sexual content included also plays a part in distinguishing dark comedy. Take the following scenario: *Psychoville*'s Mr Jelly has inadvertently been handcuffed to an old lady, but he must continue his pursuit of rival Mr Jolly even so. Whilst travelling to intercept him, Jelly and the elderly woman stop to use a public toilet and she faints, leaving him unable to move away. A young boy comes into the toilets and Mr Jelly entreats him to hand over the chocolate bar he is carrying so that he might revive the woman. The boy is reluctant, so Jelly offers him money, telling him to reach into his trouser pocket to get it; of course, a cleaner enters just in time to witness this man dressed as a clown handcuffed to an unconscious elderly woman with her pants down, and a young boy apparently groping him via his trouser pocket (Figures 4.13, 4.14).

Figure 4.13.   Mr Jelly.   *Figure 4.14.*

This moment could be found humorous or shocking in a variety of ways, and what is most immediately interesting about it (its *specific* details aside) is how typical a comedy conceit it is: a hapless character getting into a physical scrape that appears unfortunately easy to be 'misread' by sudden onlookers. The dark comic elements here manifest in the placing of a sexually deviant visual tableau at the heart of the joke, and in the activation of taboos surrounding paedophilia and gerontophilia, as well as the mocking of a situation that would be in real life a serious risk for elderly diabetic persons. If the participants in the picture had instead been a man and a woman of the same age handcuffed, and a further woman of the same age assisting them, the

gag would be typical 'Carry On' film fare, but with the mix of ages and genders involved in the *Psychoville* version a very different tone is created. Circumstances like this serve to highlight how dark comedies differ from other types of comedy via the presentation of more extreme or excessive scenarios and visual imagery: thematically and aesthetically, their scenes are taken to a more extreme level, at which characters do not merely vomit – they vomit upon corpses, or upon becoming aware they have eaten jam made by a person of a different ethnicity; they do not merely have sex – they have sex with corpses, or with a family member, or loudly with three other people watching; they do not merely suffer a wardrobe malfunction resulting in suddenly exposed breasts or genitals – the exposure reveals silicone seeping out of a poorly-done augmentation, pubic hair that measures a square foot, and so on.

Another key aesthetic means by which parts of the bodies of dark comedy characters can be highlighted as both flawed and comic is through character-specific accessories or props. Frequently, the wearing or carrying of some kind of unusual item appears to draw attention to a particular area of the body, and hence to one or more imperfections linked to it. A good example of this is the near-ubiquitous 'extra-thick pair of glasses', an exaggeration of old NHS plastic framed spectacles connoting not only poor vision but a variety of other things such as poverty and a lack of fashionability. Sometimes also featuring a poor repair with sellotape or sticking plaster, the oversized glasses have the added effect of magnifying the character's eyes to an odd size and therefore enabling the actor's expressions to be seen more clearly. Although new trends in 'hipster' and retro fashion have now allowed for ironic reclamation of this type of glasses frame as desirable amongst some groups, they attain their cool only in combination with other signals of the wearer's fashionable and ironic stance; signals that are not evident in comedy portrayals of non-

fashionable wearers. Such 'dated' glasses can be seen in the work of Reeves and Mortimer (Figure 4.15), Lucas and Walliams, Leigh Francis (Figure 4.16), Morgana Robinson, and The League of Gentlemen (Figure 4.17), for example.

Copyrighted image	Copyrighted image	Copyrighted image

Figure 4.15. DI Fowler.   *Figure 4.16.* Craig David.   *Figure 4.17.* Pauline.

In a review in *Disability and Society*, Colin Barnes expresses his anger at the comic depiction of these glasses in the media: "As a special school survivor growing up wearing 'thick glasses' in an age where wearing spectacles of any sort was decidedly un-cool, I have always been aware of the power of the media in shaping someone's sense of self-worth. It is difficult to describe the anger I felt towards writers that produced comic characters [...] that make fun of people with limited vision" (2012: 730). His position clearly shows the status of the glasses as linked with impairment and 'special schools' in popular imagination, and it seems that the hurtful association between the frames and comic, clumsy or unfashionable qualities in the wearers is both a by-product of, and the very motivation *for*, their use as visual shorthand by dark comedy creators.

This notion of thick, NHS-style plastic framed glasses as being amusing not only for their physical qualities – being outsized and hugely magnifying – but for connoting learning disabilities and a lack of fashion sense as well, can also be seen in the use of costume features such as anoraks and bad teeth. In the space sitcom *Red Dwarf* (BBC 2, 1988-1999; Dave 2009-) repeated jokes are made surrounding the fact that Cat, a character whose fashion sense and performance of 'cool' is central to his persona, is through alien intervention occasionally

transformed into the unfashionable nerd character Dwayne Dibley (Figure 4.18); this character has large and protruding front teeth and wears an ill-fitting anorak and corduroy trousers, and the spectacle of the actor in this attire works in opposition to the character's usual excessively suave appearance to highlight Cat's vanity (and its thwarting) as humorous. Dwayne Dibley is also performed as clumsy and as having trouble correctly pronouncing words, and this seems to support the trend of such appearances being linked in comedy with notions of awkwardness, and difficulties in interacting and communicating. Examples such as Dibley demonstrate traditions in comedy of depicting certain character traits through the shorthand of visual means, and these are traditions that contemporary dark comedy programmes appear to draw heavily upon, and indeed exaggerate.

Characters such as Angelos Epithemiou (Figure 4.19), Andy in *Little Britain* (Figure 4.20), Tubbs in *The League of Gentlemen* (Figure 4.21), or Michelle in *Human Remains* (BBC 2, 2000), (Figure 4.22) more obviously demonstrate a link between certain kinds of physical appearance and apparent developmental disabilities; although part of the conceit of the Angelos character is that he makes unexpected witty or cutting remarks, his manner of speaking and frequent misunderstanding of others or of social situations mark his general behaviour as unusual or 'out of step' in comparison to expected social interaction, and his dated glasses, coat and plastic carrier bag accessory support a stereotype of unfashionability (at least when the wearer has un-ironically adopted the look). In the case of Andy, Tubbs and Michelle, their thick glasses and open-mouthed neutral expressions again connote a stereotyped appearance associated with learning disabilities, which is matched by their ways of speaking and acting.

Figure 4.18. Dwayne.　　*Figure 4.19.* Angelos.　　*Figure 4.20.* Andy.

Figure 4.21. Tubbs.　　*Figure 4.22.* Michelle.

These examples of costume and accessory choices illustrate the significance of things like anoraks, protruding teeth and dated hairstyles (in Dwayne Dibley's case, the pudding basin cut; in Andy's, a clown-like style of being bald on top with long hair at the sides) in connoting 'humorous backwardness'. This backwardness, or appearance of being out of step with contemporary social trends can be linked with theories of the comic; specifically, the ideas of Bergson. "Suppose […] some eccentric individual dresses himself in the fashion of former times," he says, "…our attention is immediately drawn to the clothes themselves; we absolutely distinguish them from the individual" (1956: 85). This is in contrast to seeing someone in contemporary fashion, which due to its currency and prevalence is less likely to be noticed as unusual, the garments passing as part of the *person* who is apprehended first and foremost. With – for example – *Little Britain*'s Emily Howard, her clothes can immediately be perceived as a century out of date and hence she becomes a figure to be ridiculed; it is the costume that first marks her out as comic, by drawing attention to an eccentricity. This works for any unusual attire, such as the unfashionable anorak, pudding bowl haircut and thermos flask accessory of Dwayne Dibley, or the 1980s-style make-up of Pauline. The eye is drawn to these things

by their status as outside current fashion, and the character's position as someone who is not keeping up, rigid or stuck in one groove is signalled.

Bergson's ideas about the comic being apparent in those who display a rigidity or preoccupation of mind that prevents them from keeping up with changing reality can be applied to a large number of the characters in dark comedy programmes; in some cases these characters can even be grouped together and classified according to the ways in which their isolation or rigidity manifests, such is the widespread nature of particular traits. To give an example of this, one such character type to have emerged is the awkward and isolated teenager who makes home videos in their bedroom (the camcorder's POV providing the lens through which viewers see them). This device appears in *The League of Gentlemen*, with Dean Tavalouris (Figure 4.23); *The Morgana Show*, with Gilbert (Figure 4.24); and *Burnistoun* (BBC 2 Scotland, 2009-2012), with Jolly Boy John (Figure 4.25), for example. These characters are startlingly similar in appearance to each other, and have a number of other shared qualities too.

Figure 4.23. Dean Tavalouris.

Figure 4.24. Gilbert.

Figure 4.25. Jolly Boy John.

In a variety of ways, these characters might be considered unsettling, with appearance-based factors making an important contribution to this: to begin with, they are all apparently teenaged, yet are being played by actors who are visibly beyond this age themselves; their physicality (and inability to 'pass' as the characters they represent) cannot help but be noticeable and discordant, especially when seen in concert with the children's bedroom setting with its bright colours and toys – there is perhaps also something both uncanny and uncomfortable about seeing adults pretending to *belong* to this space. Of course, some of the humour to be found in these portrayals may in fact stem from this mismatch, as with character/actor gender mismatches, but even the usual suspension of disbelief rules that sketch comedies enjoy with respect to actors playing multiple characters of different genders and ages cannot completely negate societal and psychological taboos surrounding mature adults regressing to childish behaviour. In the case of Jolly Boy John, it is actually not entirely clear whether he *is* supposed to be read as a slightly older man who just behaves very strangely, as opposed to a child/teen, but many aspects of the character and setting certainly suggest immaturity. It is also significant that (with Gilbert) Morgana Robinson is playing a boy; this particular character type appears to be perceived by comics as more humorous when portrayed as one gender than another, perhaps because awkwardness and geekiness are traits more stereotypically associated with teenage boys. Such as with the aged counterparts to these characters: old people who appear and behave unusually, always seen in one room of their house (like Don Peacock from *Tittybangbang*, for example, who is also played by a female actor), uncertainty and a sense of the bizarre is only heightened by viewer awareness of the composite nature of the person they are presented with.

As well as the suggestion of anachronism that comes from characters with an adult appearance acting as children, the interests, attire and

slang speech used by the three exemplar characters above also appear dated for the time they purport to belong to, giving a further sense of them failing to keep up with, and being isolated from, contemporary popular culture and society. Jolly Boy John, for instance, seems to make reference to a bewildering array of pop culture products and personalities of the last 40 years, editing footage of himself together using various techniques popular in music videos and amateur home-video filming from the 1990s. Further to the characters' apparent anachronism (and therefore, Bergsonian rigidity) in terms of their behaviour and place in the world, information in their scenes hints at the fact that they *aren't* well integrated with their peers, and that their lives are in fact rather miserable when they are not filming themselves and creating an imaginary/fantasy scenario in which people are interested in them and they are famous and successful. The gap between what is present in such fantasies, and the reality of the appearances and lives of these characters, is perhaps the gap into which the dark humour creeps.

Conclusions

Tanya Krzywinska, following Georges Bataille, notes that:

> …there are two areas of life that hover on the boundaries of a culture or an individual's identity which contaminate or rupture their coherence. These are sex and death, primary cultural sites of taboo and prohibition. […] For Freud and Bataille, taboos operate to protect the integrity of a culture and the individual from repressed aggressive and sexual desires which are produced and marginalised through the formation of the gendered, sexed, person. To become a clean and proper person within a particular culture is to sublimate aspects of desire that do not conform to the dominant norms of gender and sexuality in that culture (1999: 189).

Sex and death are thus sites which trouble the coherence and completeness of the individual subject, and the depiction of moments of transgression that relate to taboo sexuality in explicit sexual texts (such as pornography) brings with it the "tempting offer of allowing users to indulge in repressed desires" (1999: 191). This idea can be applied to transgressive material in dark comedies in a similar way: the programmes show, and allow for humorous engagement with, repressed content, but simultaneously this content is marked as deviant, and it is through this that sexual norms are reinforced. As with 'shock site' images considered by Steven Jones, the othering of the participants and practices shown is as much a feature of such material as it is an acknowledgement of their existence. He points out that 'shock sites' (that host images, videos and Internet memes in the style of goatse.cx, Lemonparty.org and *2 Girls 1 Cup* (Villanova, 2007)) "…exhibit bodies that are pushed beyond expected corporeal limits" (2010: 124), adding that witnessing "the driving of a body to extremes may provide an opportunity for the viewer to redefine their relationship with their own body's limits" (134). On the one hand, the shock, flinch or recoil we might have as a reaction to seeing such material may serve to draw attention to the undesired nature of a challenge to bodily boundaries or integrity in this way, implicitly reinforcing those boundaries; yet on the other hand, the imagery shows us that such challenges can take place, and invites us to consider the possibility of our own corporeality being challenged like this. This is arguably similar to what is invited by the presentation of excessive and 'perverse' sexuality or physicality in texts like *Pink Flamingos* and *Thundercrack!*, wherein the audacity of the spectacle not only suggests that excess itself is intended to be recognised and found laughable, but also that a self-reflexive acknowledgement of the spectator is taking place – as in gonzo pornography, the creators effectively signal that they know we are watching, and that they fully intend to treat us to a show. When audiences are confronted with challenging sexual material, there is a

possibility of curiosity, indifference, or even attraction manifesting in the viewing subject instead of (or even as well as) an initial reaction of repulsion, but what is most important to note is that a similarity can also be drawn between such 'shock' material and some of the content of the television programmes being discussed here; this kind of imagery and focus is exactly what is shown in dark comedy, too. Such imagery interrupts "the construction of civility by reminding us of the "obscenity" of our own beings – of the bodily urges and gratifications that are constructed as obscene, yet are inescapably part of our lived experiences" (Jones, 2010: 135).

By adopting the aesthetics of pornography, dark comedies move towards becoming another kind of 'body genre' entertainment, mediating physical acts "through visual and auditory means as movement, rhythm, and sound. This mediation creates a degree of "hygienic" distance while the other senses linger on as synesthetic traces and echoes" (Paasonen, 2011: 203). Further, some of the dark comedies under consideration contain a wide range of different excessive sexual presentations, and/or overtly combine the display of sex with violence or crime, increasing the sense of taboo surrounding such content and making it possible to read them as conforming to aspects of the 'Sadian text' – one that is characterised by the "accelerated repetition of obscene sexual crimes" (Studlar, 1988: 23). In short, the examples in this chapter demonstrate that depictions of sex acts and the sexualised body in dark comedy can now be added to the horror-inflected depictions of the fragility and vulnerability of the human body I spoke of in Chapter 3 to form a clearer picture of the range of repressed material we may engage with via this context; a context that is clearly signalled through excess as not only fictional, but comic too. By these means, an insulation against the shocking or forbidden nature of taboo sexual imagery is effected, and a way of passing off one's interest as being for another aspect of the text (the

comedy) is also possible. Incidentally, this might additionally account for the fact that such comedy is still viewed by some as shocking or distasteful and *not* funny, *because* it contains this kind of imagery: in these cases the insulation has failed, and the mis-placing of taboo content within the context of humour instead compounds the perception of inappropriateness.

CHAPTER 5

Dark comedy aesthetics of **illness and death**
(disability, injury, mental health problems, addiction, death rituals and moments of death)

> Brian Potter: "You sick animals, laughing at death!"
>
> (*Phoenix Nights,* Series 1 Episode 4, 2001)

Introduction

Mills asserts that "humour must necessarily work from an assumption that certain kinds of behaviour are normal – or at least, socially acceptable – and that deviation from that behaviour is not only funny but worthy of laughter" (2008: 61). This is the basis of dark comedy: that the behaviour of the characters is unusual, deviant, and thereby humorous to view. However, as has been seen above, it is not only in behavioural terms that dark comic characters might be viewed as in some way abnormal – the programmes of dark comedy seem to consistently make use of a bodily aesthetics that emphasises excessive, boundary-troubling, horrific, or sexualised appearances. The centrality of the body, its appearance and behaviour to dark comedy aesthetics can be linked to a preoccupation with the themes of sex and death – both bodily concerns – and the repeated engagement with taboos surrounding these themes suggests that part of the attraction (and discomfort) to be found in dark comedy may stem from it being a site where core human fears and desires may be exposed and 'safely' confronted, their seriousness mitigated by humour. There is one area of taboo that this thesis has not yet explored, but it is one that

continues to bear out these characteristics and to demonstrate this type of comedy's concern with the fragility and fallibility of the human body and mind: that is illness. "As we picture health and illness, we bring to the images an entire arsenal of aesthetic associations, and we see the world in terms of beauty and ugliness. These associations provide a means of placing ourselves as observers not only of these images but of our own bodies, bodies inherently in danger of illness" (Gilman, 1995: 50); the threat of bodily breakdown and seeing (and *feeling*) our own bodies fall into an undesirable state, away from the ideals and norms commonly established around health and beauty, and strength and capability, can be brought to mind by seeing such breakdown happening in others, and the rest of this chapter will seek to explore how dark comedy uses visual imagery to invoke this engagement with the failing body, and to create or enable humour concerning it at the same time. By considering representations of physical health problems, mental health problems, and of 'moments of death' (such as deathbed scenes or murders) and the funerals and burials that follow them, a picture of the extent to which dark comedy programmes can be seen as simultaneously a reflection of fears about mortality and a potential attempt to minimise them will become clear.

Stigmatising Symbols and 'Normal' Bodies and Appearances

The ways in which human bodies and appearances are perceived and categorised have been explored by a variety of authors, and a number of common themes can be identified that have relevance to the consideration of dark comedy. Erving Goffman points out that "[s]ociety establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of each of these categories" (1990: 11), while Judith Butler draws

attention to the fact that there can even be said to exist "…a normative notion of the human, a normative notion of what the body of a human must be" (2004: 33). Further, Mike Featherstone and Mike Hepworth identify that:

> [t]o be an embodied person and to become a fully fledged member of society necessarily involves developmental sequences of biological growth; the body has to grow to produce the physiological co-ordination necessary to facilitate movement, facial and bodily gestures and other interpersonal responses. There is also the need for a certain amount of cognitive development and the acquisition of language, memory and communicative competence, as well as emotional development or the capacity to control and regulate the emotions (1991: 375-6).

When a person – or, in dark comedy programmes, a character – displays behaviour or an appearance that contradicts these normative criteria, this is something that viewers can note and take into account in their understanding of that person, and many characters who are invited to be viewed as comic in the programmes I have been discussing have the potential to occasion this kind of noting. In some instances these appearances are artificially created by placing mechanical barriers to the full sight of 'normal' physiology (such as in the case of characters like Cartoon Head, whose rigid mask prevents the appearance of facial expressions), and in other instances by prostheses which mimic physical disabilities that affect appearance or impact upon physiological co-ordination. The appearance of 'non-normativity' can also be effected by casting actors who are disabled (as with Warwick Davis in *Life's Too Short* (BBC 2, 2011-2013), where the difficulties he experiences in performing various actions due to his size are positioned to be found amusing), or by having able-bodied performers simulate physical disabilities. Additionally, some dark comedy characters appear to be written and performed to emphasise a lack of competence or regulation of emotions, as in the examples of *Psychoville*'s David, or Michelle from *Human Remains*. All these

individuals display what Goffman terms as 'stigma symbols': "signs which are especially effective at drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual" (1990: 59). The prevalence of such characters in dark comedies, combined with the points above, starts to suggest some interesting things with regards to the way humour and aesthetics of the body may be working in these programmes.

If it is accepted that for a given society, certain appearances, forms and behaviours, will be naturalised and expressed in media, medical contexts, everyday discourse, and so on, as 'normal', and that (following Butler) deviation from these can, in that same society, open up particular groups or individuals to being considered figuratively, or even literally, as in some way being incomplete or not 'properly' human, then the fact that viewers are being invited to laugh at these groups or individuals implies both the idea that these characteristics are worthy of laughter, *and* that the ability to engage in that laughter is assisted by a sense that the status of the characters is not fully human – a sense that is aesthetically-derived. Butler indeed suggests that it is easier to perpetrate violence and disregard towards those perceived as not 'properly' or 'really' human (2004: 33), in a way that opens up questions about relative acceptability and accountability. Of course, viewers generally watch fictional television shows in the full knowledge that they are being acted, so in this way any violence or ridicule depicted there is always upon those who are not really 'real'; however, presenting scenarios that accord with existing social stereotypes relating to status, and playing them for laughs, can be thought of as highly problematic. As has been seen above in Colin Barnes's attitude towards comedies that use the 'extra thick pair of glasses' to connote humour, fictional comedy content has the potential to contribute towards the belittling of people in real life, and Reid *et al* note that

although "[d]isabled and non-disabled comedians increasingly frame humor so that laughter is thought-provoking and disability is yet another interesting way to be alive [...,] disabling humor still flourishes, disseminating stereotypes and perpetuating isolation" (2006: 640). It is therefore tempting to wonder whether the prevalence of humour surrounding characters who display stigma symbols, despite its potential negative impact, is indicative of a kind of perceived disconnect or disassociation between the joking and reality, in which the negatives are psychically mitigated by idea that those with such stigma symbols are themselves not 'properly real'. In other words, it may be the case that the laughter at the misfortune of particular characters that appears to be expected by dark comedies is predicated upon the idea that such individuals have qualities that make them harder to perceive as 'properly' human, in Butler's terms. An additional possibility is that some dark comedies deliberately choose to employ character types already considered vulnerable in order to increase the 'offensiveness' or shock value of seeing them brutalised or ridiculed (i.e., the audacity of the comedy – the excess – becomes a feature not just of the content but of the programme itself), but even if this is the case, the idea that unreality/non-seriousness is being signalled by some means, and that this assists the humour, still pertains.

Stigma symbols can also be attached to ageing, where "...the loss of cognitive and other skills produces the danger of social unacceptability, unemployability and being labelled as less than fully human. Loss of bodily controls carries similar penalties of stigmatisation" (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1991: 376). The depiction of such losses of control can be seen in dark comedies, for example in sketches featuring the incontinent character Mrs Emery from series three of *Little Britain*, which prompted critique from a number of quarters (notably the Royal College of Physicians, who complained that the scenes promoted laughter at a situation that causes real pain and upset to many people,

and encouraged stereotypes of aged people that contribute to their social isolation and status-loss). Interestingly, these critiques prompted the BBC to mount a defence that accords with the argument I have been making about excess as a signal of fiction: "[T]he Little Britain characters have been deliberately magnified to cartoonish proportions. This particular sketch is exaggerated to such an extreme level it's clear that it has no grounding in reality" (Unknown Author, 2005). The implication is that dark comedy content assumes appearances and behaviour that carry markers of stigmatisation are capable of being found laughable, and that excessive presentations can activate (or enable) the ability to laugh. So far in this thesis, I have discussed the idea of laughing at dark comedy in terms of the importance of the notion of ambivalence (i.e., the content is inherently capable of being read as both serious and comedic) and in terms of involving a two-stage process (of feeling the seriousness of something yet dismissing it to focus upon a comic reading: the anaesthesia of the heart). These complimentary conditions are evident in the Mrs Emery example and the BBC's reaction to critique about it: the spokeswoman's remarks that the sketch is so extreme as to have "no grounding in reality" choose to locate excess as the signifier that the content is not to be thought of as real and serious but instead humorous, yet the possibility that Butler's conception of stigmatised persons as being considered incompletely human (and therefore 'not real') may be an underlying contributory factor to viewer ability to find the scenario comedic, is also present. In short, the ambivalent imagery of stigmatisation may be combining with the excessive aesthetics characteristic of dark comedy to promote laughter.

Another feature of dark comedies' promotion of laughter at the theme of being 'out of control' that is worth taking a closer look at is the fact that some characters are depicted as deliberately choosing to engage in acts that would be otherwise associated with a loss of control. This

circumstance can most obviously be seen in the example of *Tittybangbang*'s Don Peacock and his attempted construction of scenarios in which he can wet himself or urinate on others. As an elderly man (albeit in this case played by a young woman), if Don's urination was involuntary it would be considered a sign of his increasing inability to marshal his ageing body into behaving in a socially acceptable way, and would also be expected to occasion shame on his part. However, Don appears instead to enjoy playing with the social taboos surrounding the proper time and place for urination, and perhaps to be playing around with the ideas about ageing and incontinence-taboos by not only choosing to 'lose control' but also to either feel a lack of shame (or to enjoy feeling shame) about it. There does seem to be something different in the tone of the scenes with Don Peacock as compared to the *Little Britain* scenes with Mrs Emery. Is this simply due to the deliberate/undeliberate nature of the characters' urination, or is it also inflected by the different genders of the characters? They are both performed cross-gender, perhaps in an attempt to increase humour via the excessive performance rule I discussed earlier, but maybe this also functions to distract from the 'reality' of the situation they are depicting. The cross-gender performance of an older woman by a man has another dimension to it, as well: in the social hierarchy, a young male performer has significantly higher status than incontinent elderly women, and creating and performing a comedy sketch in which the latter group becomes the butt of gross-out humour is, to echo a critique frequently levelled at shock comedians, to 'punch down', and it may be that part of the criticism of the Mrs Emery sketches is informed by a sense of exploitation that is simply not present in the depiction by a younger woman of an old man with urophilia.

It is additionally possible that the degree of humour that might be experienced by viewers of these scenes is affected by the reactions of

the characters who are witness to Don's or Mrs Emery's urination. In the case of Don, the younger women who are made subject to his sexual urination desires are invariably disgusted by his 'perverted old man' demeanour, while in Mrs Emery's scenes a range of people are shown reacting with differing degrees of embarrassment and sympathy at her situation. Invoking the sensations of embarrassment and sympathy is the antithesis of the temporary hardening of the heart advocated by Bergson as necessary to laughter, and concurring with the disgust of Don's unsuspecting visitors and laughing as they thwart his plans is likely to be an easier position. It is harder to see Don as a victim, although the stereotype of the dirty old man is one that also negatively affects the perception of elderly men, arguably also resulting in them regulating their activities in a way that decreases their social integration (so as not to accidentally appear like a 'sex pest' or paedophile by visiting the swimming baths alone, for example). However, to return to Featherstone and Hepworth's point that failure to display the appropriate level of cognitive and other skills invites the risk of being labelled less than fully human (and indeed, they further assert that "[t]he loss of real social power through decline in these competences may induce others to feel confident in treating the individual as less than a full adult" (1991: 377)), it may be the case that dark comedy's preoccupation with populating its texts with characters who routinely fail to conform to those competences, in the context of a culture disposed to thinking (however consciously) of such failures as indicators of 'less than' status, contributes to its ability to create humour at the expense of these characters. As with the subjects of the Internet memes and images on 'shock sites', the depersonalisation and de-humanization has the potential to influence the affective reactions of laughter and/or disgust.

Tramadol Nights offers another example of a depiction of a person with visible stigmatising features as laughable and abject, in a sketch about

a fictional disabled stuntman, Chuck Wochek. He is presented as the subject of a biopic and is seen being taken advantage of by unscrupulous film producers, the makers of the biopic, and his own family. Chuck's visual appearance – using a wheelchair, having severely limited mobility in his limbs due to impairment and injury, having drips and other medical equipment attached to him, coupled with a performance by the actor (Tom Stade) that gives him a twisted and stiff frame and stance – marks him out as being physically, bodily, compromised. The irony inherent in his continuing to pursue a career as a Hollywood stuntman, a profession in which (although vulnerable to injuries and temporary recovery time) the active participants are generally at a peak level of fitness and skill, whilst using a wheelchair and being severely injured creates part of the humour of the sketch. The unlikely nature of this situation allows Wochek's ongoing accumulation of injuries to be read as exaggeratedly comic rather than sickening, and much of the discomfort in the sketch comes more from the clear display that he is being taken advantage of by those around him. This character also provides an example of the kind of extra features dark comedy adds to visual jokes based on the body, over and above what might be expected from more mainstream portrayals of slapstick; falling from heights is not a rarity in shows where humour is centred around the physical accidents of hapless characters, but observing a disabled man being pushed from a height activates much more extreme and violent associations. An overhead shot down onto Chuck as he lies injured on the ground additionally reveals that he has fallen into the shape of a swastika, demonstrating a further level of dark visual humour (Figure 5.1).
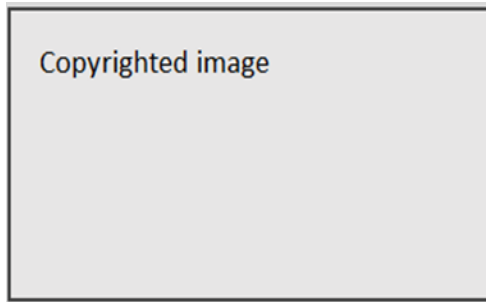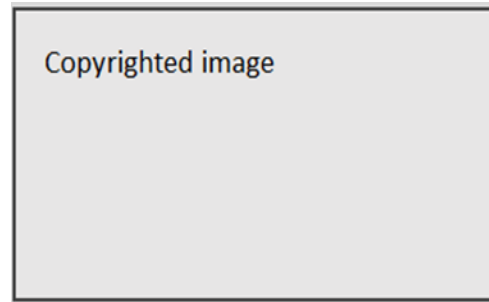
Figure 5.1. Chuck Wochek. *Figure 5.2.* Robin Atkins.

It is interesting to compare the Wochek sketch with the other spoof biopic in the series: that of Robin Atkins (a fictionalised version of the real actor, Robin Askwith). It concerns another profession in which the performers rely upon their physique and a genre which is firmly considered a 'body genre' – softcore pornographic films. The Robin Atkins sketch makes ample use of the displayed flesh of the performers (Figure 5.2), showing them in sexual situations and using excess and gross-out techniques for its comedy, much as in the way Wochek's mangled and medically invaded body is copiously displayed in his biopic. The difference between the two may be observed in the fact that characters performing pornographic pop-shots and scat scenes constitute a celebration of basic bodily functions that (being employed in the context of sexual intercourse and enjoyment) can be seen as highly Bakhtinian in nature, while this celebratory attitude towards the debased body is not available in Wochek's case.

Implied or explicit links between visible physical injuries or impairments and comic appearance can be seen in a wide variety of comedy texts, and theory concerning comic physiognomy's roots in physical impairment can be found in the work of Bergson. Setting out to explain why some facial appearances seem inherently comical, he swiftly detours into speaking about 'deformities'. He asks, "What is a comic physiognomy? Where does a ridiculous expression of the face come from? And what is, in this case, the distinction between the comic and the ugly?" (1956: 74). He considers these questions awkward,

eventually deciding that the solution is to imagine ugliness exaggerated to the point of deformity and then apply the following rule: "*A deformity that may become comic is a deformity that a normally built person could imitate*" (1956: 75) – in other words, a physical appearance or state that can be replicated in performance by another individual. Bergson can be seen here making an implicit distinction between a humorous version of deformity and a presumably non-humorous one, differentiated by whether the person being viewed is genuinely deformed or merely imitating a deformed state, with the implication being that it is acceptable to laugh at one but not the other. It is also notable that his words reflect the social understanding of deformity as ugly (as highlighted by Sander L. Gilman in his discussion of the links made between health and beauty (1995: 50)). To appear comic is incompatible with appearing normal, which might go some way to explaining the reliance upon unusual appearance as a shorthand signal for a character intended to be funny that can be found in all types of comedy. Bergson, writing in 1900, could not anticipate the visual effects technology or special effects prosthetics that now make it possible for a complicated variety of appearances to be created or closely imitated (on a screen, at least) in performance today. However, his thinking forms the basis of another useful idea: if physical deformities or ugliness can be convincingly performed by those who are not naturally deformed or ugly, then when a viewer laughs at such performances, the actual individual behind the performance is not a figure of fun in a negative sense, but is in effect, being praised by the laughter for appearing authentic and skilled. This, Bergson appears to acknowledge, creates a rather different situation than if the viewer were to see a person in a context where it would not be assumed that their appearance was an imitation, and laugh at them. This circumstance may therefore illuminate another way in which a focus upon the fictional status of a viewed dark comedy scenario allows for

the anaesthesia of the heart to take place and laughter at certain appearances or situations to proceed.

The appearance of (imitated) disability as an often-recurring type of imagery in dark comedy is clear, and it is this frequency that might explain the width of the variety of impairments and disabilities that are depicted, as creators seek to innovate and avoid repeating their or other's earlier work. Innovation or boundary-testing might also account for the increasingly eccentric nature of characters with disabilities or other stigma symbols in the later dark comedies, such as *Tramadol Nights* and *Psychoville*. Some of the most visually-arresting examples can be found in *Psychoville*, which also depicts a wide variety of mental health problems thanks to the central tenet of the plot (that the characters all know each other through their shared time in a secure hospital). Children's entertainer Mr Jelly (Figure 5.3) is missing a hand, and Mr Lomax (Figure 5.4) is missing both eyes, for example. In both these cases, these characters *lack* something; they are incomplete. This is a theme that runs through the series in general, and also manifests in the mental lives of the characters – Mr Lomax is a sufferer of Paradise Syndrome, for instance – but it is through visual imagery that their incompleteness is most clearly conveyed. Here, a bridge between the horrific qualities and aesthetics discussed in Chapter 3 and the aesthetics of disability or impairment can be seen, as this notion of 'lack' or incompleteness is something that can be directly linked not only to the ideas at the beginning of this chapter about bodily norms, but also to the grotesque and to various elements of Freudian theory in relation to horror aesthetics and the uncanny. Grotesque images "...are ugly, monstrous, hideous from the point of view of 'classic' aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed" (Bakhtin, 1984: 25). It is interesting to note that the Classical aesthetic of the completed, rigid and fixed article that Bakhtin positions in opposition to the grotesque (and therefore in opposition to the comic) in his work is

seen in Bergson's *as* a feature of the comic, with the notion that any human should see themselves as complete like a work of art being considered ridiculous and undesirable (1956: 73). This disparity may be accounted for by Bergson's aligning of complete and finished articles with objects and the mechanical, as opposed to humans who have the capacity to grow and adapt to changes. Incidentally, from a Bergsonian point of view, it is also rather apposite that the character of Mr Jelly *literally* has a mechanical hand…

Figure 5.3. Mr Jelly.   *Figure 5.4.* Mr Lomax.

Another crucial example of a disabled character in *Psychoville* is that of Jennifer, who goes from able-bodied in the first series (in which, ironically, she is assisting Mr Lomax because of his disabilities), to using a wheelchair in series two. When viewers first see her in the second series, it is via a visual pull-back-and-reveal joke. Joy Aston is seen in her suburban kitchen, speaking to an off-screen character who viewers appear to be intended to assume is Freddie Fruitcake (the plastic baby doll Joy treats as a son). Joy uses childish language and has a large bowl of mashed-up swede, suitable to be eaten by a baby. As she crosses the room to feed it, however, the camera reveals an adult in a wheelchair, staring blankly into space: Jennifer. After the traumatic events that took place at Ravenhill Psychiatric Hospital in the final episode of the first series, she now has Locked-in Syndrome. This is a purely physical disability, meaning that she cannot move to interact with the world around her, but is fully aware of everything that is going on. This element of her character is indicated in the way the scene has

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been put together: as Joy and her husband converse, the camera includes reaction shots of Jennifer – not appearing to react, of course – but suggesting that she *is* an involved party. It is important that this is established, for what happens later in the episode, when she witnesses (and is framed for) Joy's murder. Jennifer's appearance, as a person who does not move, speak or react to stimulus, fits with the uncanny; she is a human who does not behave as the majority of humans do, and the unmoving expression of her face is also reminiscent of a mask, linked by both Bakhtin and Bergson with the comic.

Joy's behaviour towards Jennifer is highly inappropriate, treating her as if she were a baby (as Joy, in a manifestation of her own mental ill health, is clearly struggling not to see her *as* Freddie). This is a dark situation, as the position Jennifer has been placed in is horrific: Joy's dialogue suggests that although Jennifer's family are travelling from China to collect her, she is going to find a way of keeping her. As well as presenting a set-up of psychological horror, Jennifer's predicament might be seen as compelling to viewers as a 'What if…?' scenario. In terms of bodily integrity and the fragility of the human physical form, Jennifer represents a kind of nightmare situation, whereby her body traps her in a horrific and degrading circumstance that she is fully aware of, in this case at the mercy of a character who – appearing to believe in a fantasy that is detrimental to providing appropriate support – will continue to mistreat her until and unless someone else is moved to intervene. So far, however, Joy's husband has only made a half-hearted effort, and (as is seen later in the same episode) other people are more likely to stare and try to leave the vicinity of her and Joy than to actually step in. Considering that these characters exemplify two possible kinds of socially-isolating ill health, physical and mental, in this respect *Psychoville* might be seen to be making a social comment about attitudes to disability, but it is also likely that it is the darkness of the horror angle of Jennifer's situation that provides its compelling nature.

This scene additionally provides a clear example of the use of gross-out humour in the series. Despite Jennifer's utter stillness and non-swallowing of the swede Joy is feeding her (as was also the case with plastic doll, Freddie, in the previous series), Joy continues to push more into her mouth and it smears her face and runs out. Joy then switches to a pot of ready-pureed banana baby food and piles the liquid on top of the swede so that this too runs out of Jennifer's mouth and down her face and front (Figure 5.5). So, this scene presents a form of body horror, visual gross-out, and verbal content that combine to give some very dark comedy. Joy's actions and dialogue towards Jennifer can be read as comical; treating one thing as if it were another is, theoretically, a comedy technique (Freud, 1960: 197; Bergson, 1956: 123). However, in the precise situation given here, it is also given a horrific angle, as Jennifer is doubly imprisoned with a possibility that she will continue indefinitely to be subject to Joy's inappropriate treatment.

Figure 5.5.   Joy and Jennifer.   *Figure 5.6.*

Another similar pull-back-and-reveal visual joke occurs in a later scene, as a shot of a young mother pushing a baby in a pushchair along the pavement and apparently being disturbed by someone walking alongside widens out to show Joy pushing Jennifer, also crammed into a pushchair (Figure 5.6). The image is comic, but also potentially disturbing on multiple levels: as another indication of Joy's fantasy behaviour towards Jennifer, which highlights her mental illness and the horror of Jennifer's situation simultaneously, and as a potential social comment on the equation of physical disabilities such as Locked-in

Syndrome with learning disability (the comparison of Jennifer with a baby being rendered particularly clear by the visuals).

Less extreme indicators of physical injury or limitation can frequently be seen in the characters of Leigh Francis, such as with Keith Lemon's hand bandage and Avid Merrion's neck brace, and the widespread use of injuries to enhance a comic appearance in both dark and lighter comedy does seem to indicate the presence of a kind of 'common sense' link between the two – perhaps along the lines of the evidence of injury indicating that slapstick clumsy behaviour is a constant (amusing) possibility for a character. But there *is* also a theoretical link between injury and the comic that could be invoked here. Bergson has suggested that a comic injury is one sustained through a fault of the individual concerned that he refers to as 'mechanical inelasticity' (1956: 67) – a person, moving on autopilot, fails to pay adequate attention to the circumstances around them and how they might need to adapt their physical behaviour to avoid mishap, and thereby falls over an unnoticed object, walks into something, spills boiling water on themselves, et cetera. Failure to adapt or react to unexpected surroundings because your mind is elsewhere is a relatively common accident cause, but the key element of Bergson's intervention on this matter is to highlight a link between absence of mind or inadequate thinking and the mechanical inelasticity. The impression that the victims of such accidents have (either temporarily or generally) failed to perceive the reality around them 'correctly' allows for possible allied impressions of the presence of mental health problems or developmental disabilities to be evoked. In the case of Francis's characters (and indeed in many other, darker comedy characters), this quality is also perhaps the factor that allows them to say certain things and behave in certain ways towards other people that would be seen in a different light if they were presented as coming from a different type of character. Contrasts between Avid Merrion and Dennis Pennis's red-carpet interactions with

celebrities could be seen to illustrate the above via the differing ways the celebrities react upon first encountering them, for example.

Representations of Mental Health and Drug Use

An examination of dark comedy programmes' representation of mental ill health reveals something that I regard as particularly significant about the way that their humour is signalled and how inescapably important the visual aesthetics of the body are to this. Despite the fact that mental processes and the interior world of characters could be conveyed via a huge array of means, from very subtle actions, and hints in dialogue, all the way to having a person engage in highly visible actions on a grand scale, there appears to be a noticeable tendency towards depicting mental health problems graphically through situations that overtly involve the characters' bodies, or the bodies of others. Television is a visual medium of course, and to a certain extent it seems logical that creators would be focussing upon making moments that play well visually, especially within episodic and sketch comedy where there is a tradition of visual and physical humour providing punchlines alongside verbal gags. However, I would argue that the specific types of visual depictions involved in signalling mental health problems (and deriving humour from them) in dark comedy are distinguished by their graphic nature and the degree to which they also incorporate excessive appearances, and aesthetics linked to sexuality or violence. A striking example occurs in *Little Britain USA* (HBO, 2008), with the characters of Phyllis Church and 'Mister Doggie'. In a series of sketches David Walliams plays a middle-aged lady taking her dog for a walk; in each instance the dog 'tells' her to engage in embarrassing acts in public, such as defecating on the grass in a park, throwing a brick through the window of a shop, and stripping off her clothes. As she converses out loud with the dog, it is apparent that she is providing both 'voices',

speaking the dog's lines to her in a deep, gruff voice, while her own voice is higher and more feminine. The precise implication is unclear, but it seems that the audience is intended to assume that the dog's voice she vocalises is in her head and symptomatic of mental illness where she believes either that he sends her messages that she channels, or that it really is him speaking (and she is unaware that it is actually her) – at any rate, the presentation of the scenario does not make it possible to read the dog as *actually* speaking. In the first episode, they are walking in a busy street when Mister Doggie tells Phyllis to remove her clothes.

> Phyllis: "No, Mister Doggie! It's cold, and you aren't allowed to take your clothes off in public or they'll take you away and lock you up."
>
> 'Mister Doggie': "I said, 'Take 'em off.'"
>
> Phyllis: "Now listen here, Mister Doggie, Mommy's had quite enough of your silly ideas – you're going to get Mommy into trouble."
>
> 'Mister Doggie': "Take them off!"
>
> Phyllis: "No."
>
> 'Mister Doggie': "If you loved me you'd do it."

This persuades Phyllis and she takes off her dress, showing Walliams wearing prosthetic breasts clothed in a white brassiere, and matching underwear with flesh coloured tights (Figure 5.7). The tightness of the tights makes the outline of his penis unmistakeably visible, and the laughter track indicates a clear audience reaction at this moment – apparently finding it very humorous. Phyllis asks Mister Doggie if he is happy now.

> 'Mister Doggie': "No. Go and stand in the trash."
>
> Phyllis: [agitated] "No!"
>
> 'Mister Doggie': "I won't tell you again."

Phyllis climbs into the near-by bin as onlookers gather in the background.

> Phyllis: "Is this what you wanted?"
>
> 'Mister Doggie': "Why on earth would anyone want you to do that? Lady, you're out of your fucking mind."

The police arrive and escort Phyllis out of the bin and begin to take her away. They appear to recognise her (Figure 5.8 – note that the shopfront behind the police vehicle bears a sign with the words 'dog gone crazy', and a paw print alongside).

> Phyllis: "Oh, my dog [will be left behind]!"
>
> 'Mister Doggie': "I'm not with her. She's one crazy bitch."

Figure 5.7.   Phyllis Church and Mister Doggie.   *Figure 5.8.*

This is a scene which, without the laughter derived from the physical appearance of Phyllis/Walliams, would potentially be quite difficult to read as comic, containing as it does the indication that this woman has repeatedly been 'taken away' for behaving in unusual ways because of her mental ill health, and that the character she attributes to the dog belittles and emotionally manipulates her into acts that diminish her esteem. Additionally, the comedy of the scene (insofar as the recorded audience perceived it) is created by the sight of her body in underwear and the fact that a visible sign of male genitalia can be observed. Again, it is unclear whether viewers are supposed to put this together with the masculine voice Phyllis uses for the dog and read her as a

transgender character, or if it is Walliams whose appearance is intended to be available for humour here; either way, the laughter is apparently prompted by a body on show, with concomitant gender-blurring and some lower bodily stratum phallic humour, while the mental health problems of the character are made visible through an act that involves graphically revealing a body conformant with Bakhtinian grotesque. The character's behaviour and appearance therefore combines to signal her mental ill health in a graphic way, complete with the escalation that has been noted in previous chapters as a feature of dark comedy sequences (for example, Phyllis does not merely take her clothes off, she also climbs into the trash, in front of a crowd, and the police arrive), and the comedy element of proceedings depends upon viewers being able to make an ambivalent reading of the situation (in order to find it laughable); one that is significantly aided by the visual component. In all these respects, the scene is highly reflective of the workings of dark comedy that I have been pointing towards so far.

Content like this is also a hallmark of *Limmy's Show*, with a focus upon the mental anguish of various characters being an apparent preoccupying theme. One linked series of sketches features a man (played by Brian Limond) visiting the canteen at his workplace. On one day, he orders the 'soup of the day' – French onion – and as he is eating it, hallucinates a surreal image of himself floating in a rubber ring in the soup as though it was a swimming pool, holding a fruit-filled cocktail drink complete with umbrella (Figure 5.9). This provides him with a mental escape from the apparent pain of his day to day working life, allowing him to tune out his boss who has approached to encourage him to seek support for any problems and stress he is experiencing. When the man returns to the canteen the next day, the soup of the day has switched to tomato and he instead hallucinates the figures of the colleagues sitting around him as murdered corpses, with

tomato soup covering their bodies and dripping from their staring eyes (Figure 5.10). The way the hallucination of the dead co-workers is presented makes it uncertain as to whether it really *is* (or will remain) only a hallucination, and whether it really *is* soup and not blood; doubt is cast upon the mental health of the man, and there is a suggestion that he may have murdered them.

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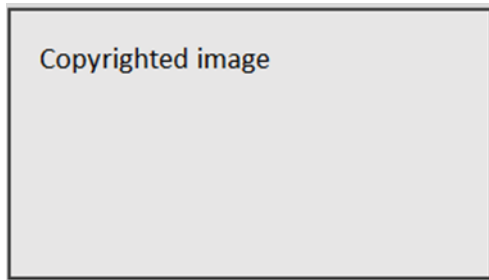
Figure 5.9. Limmy's office worker.   *Figure 5.10.* Soup becomes blood.
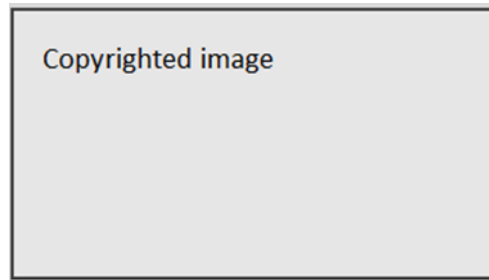
On one level this is an unsympathetic portrayal of mental illness in line with other dark comedy examples such as the *Inside No. 9* episode, 'Tom and Gerri' (BBC 2, 2014), which also suggests a link between experiencing hallucinations or intrusive thoughts and committing murder. However, on another, the portrayal uses as its basis the familiar or common situation of feeling unhappy and isolated in the workplace, yearning for something more and becoming increasingly disenchanted with the facile behaviour of colleagues. By linking these feelings in a portrayal that presents a logical possible next step of 'going mad' and committing murder, the sketches explore the fear of how easy it might be to break down or lose touch with reality, or to 'snap' under pressure. Even if viewers cannot identify with the figure of the disenchanted employee themselves, the sketch raises the possibility that these figures (with invisible mental health problems, perhaps) exist, and that maybe the seemingly isolated and unhappy person in *their* office canteen has the potential to act murderously in this way. *Limmy's Show* presents a plethora of situations and characters that exemplify the traditional notion of 'there but for the grace, go I',

seemingly uncovering or highlighting a latent undercurrent of danger of mental breakdown or victimhood running through modern everyday life. Further, from an aesthetic point of view the canteen scene – like the Phyllis Church example – uses a graphic aesthetics of the body to represent a character's mental state: the office worker first hallucinates his own body complete and in an ideal state, floating in a ring with an umbrella drink, as a positive mental image; in contrast, the negative image, representing his stress, consists of the damaged, bleeding and exanimate bodies of his colleagues. Once more, the apparent concern of dark comedy with filtering all content through a bodily aesthetics is clearly visible.

A second strand of such situations and characters in *Limmy's Show* centres upon people whose lives are affected by drug addiction, with a frequent pattern in the sketches being that of the characters getting tantalisingly close to achieving a positive step towards improving their lives, only to sabotage it at the last moment and begin the cycle again. In one sketch, drug addict Dee Dee nearly manages to access help to leave the house and get involved in a supported work programme, only to wake up the next morning having forgotten the efforts he had made in this direction the previous night; he tells the support worker who has phoned him to follow up with the arrangements that he is not interested. Similarly, recovered heroin addict Jacqueline McCafferty is seen constantly on the verge of finding a job, finding love, or otherwise achieving happiness, only to self-sabotage her chances by dwelling upon her past status as an addict and bemoaning the fact that other people (and society in general) will never give her a chance or let her move on. The sketches suggest that it is McCafferty's own unresolved feelings about her past addiction that affect her success, rather than the attitudes of others, which (whilst problematic as a depiction of the barriers to success of those in recovery) effectively depicts the location of human failure as squarely within the mind/body of the individual: in

fact, a key feature of fear surrounding failure, as it is typically explored by dark comedy, is that it centres mentally and physically upon the self.

Tramadol Nights, alongside physically disabled characters such as Chuck Wochek discussed above, presents a number of characters whose behaviour and everyday lives are affected by mental health problems, addiction, or a combination of the two. Parody and the spoofing of certain types (and specific examples) of programmes and films is used, further demonstrating the trend of dark comedy to take existing television and film formats and move them to ridiculous or dark extremes for the purposes of humour. In one such sketch, the TV show *Knight Rider* (NBC, 1982-1986; 2008-2009) is parodied, and instead of being a man who solves crime with the aid of his speaking car, Michael Knight is portrayed as a Glaswegian with mental health problems that lead him to hallucinate and believe that his car is talking to him. His problems are compounded by addiction to various types of drugs, and while he thinks he is waging a war against drug crime in the city, he is actually committing drug-related and violent offences himself: car-jacking, drug dealing, obtaining illegal firearms, and murder. The extremity and tone of the crimes he commits (believing that a pregnant woman is an enemy agent and rationalising that he must effect justice by shooting her twice, "one in each tit", for instance) is notable even within the context of similar dark comedy programmes as focussing upon scenarios that could be considered particularly controversial for sites of humour. This extremity and type of language reflected the stand-up persona used by Boyle at the time of the programme, and as has been mentioned above, *Tramadol Nights* became specifically controversial for his making reference to the real-life disabled son of model Katie Price, in a joke that suggested the child was a sexual threat to her. Violence against pregnant women, linking the threat of rape with a disabled child, and joking about incestuous rape involving real people lies at the boundaries of what might be considered

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acceptable to be broadcast on television in the context of a comedy programme, and fulfils Hunt's conception of dark comedy as "…testing the boundaries of what is permissible on broadcast TV" (2008: 25) and Hutchings's as pushing "…the boundaries of taste and acceptability" (2007: 3). However, in less extreme versions, similar scenarios occur frequently in other shows, and this highlights again the problematic aspect of dark comedy's representations of behaviour and appearances that can be considered to diverge from the norms that have been socially constructed: the extremity and excess that dark comedy representations typically involve may be able to signal 'fiction' (and therefore 'permission to laugh'), but in employing this technique they are nevertheless still invoking negative images of vulnerable groups. For example, a link between mental health problems or physical disabilities and violence is often perpetuated, and disabled or mentally ill characters are generally either shown as perpetrators (or potential perpetrators) of violence, as victims of the sadistic or unhinged behaviour of others, or – more complicatedly – a combination of both.

It is important to note that characters who have mental health problems, addiction problems or physical disabilities are often also presented as tragic figures: in the case of Michael Knight, the sketch shows his father attempting to reach out to him and exhort him to access professional support and start taking the medication he has been prescribed to control his condition, but Michael does not recognise him, believing him instead to be the man who issues his crime-fighting assignments every week. Beyond *Tramadol Nights*, Boyle has spoken in support of campaigns against the cutting of support for mental health and addiction problems, and against the stigmatisation of disabled people, so his position in relation to creating these characters seems complex, and it may be that the programme is intended to make a point about the perceptions and stereotypes surrounding illness, or about the lack of support for sufferers. If this is the case, it highlights another

difficult aspect of this type of comedy – its relentlessly negative tone and excessive aesthetics is very unsubtle, and the comedy is already reliant upon recognising ambivalence and dismissing the 'serious' reading with an anaesthesia of the heart in order for laughter to take place; to retain the sense that a 'serious' message is underlying the content, the capacity for a laughter response may be compromised, and the serious reading risks rendering the dark comedy a failure *as* a comedy. It is easy to see how competing interpretations could result in the less obvious or more nuanced ones slipping out of sight under the weight of viewers' psychic haste to minimise taboos through laughter or to respect taboos via displeasure/offence.

Another parody in the show concerns *The A-Team* (NBC, 1983-1987), with a sketch imagining a darker version of the series, in which the team's experiences in Vietnam have left all of them with PTSD, other mental health problems, addictions to prescription drugs such as Valium, and to PCP. Instead of helping to bring justice to the oppressed as a renegade gang of mercenary fighters, they bring chaos wherever they go with their erratic behaviour and use of weapons and physical violence against innocent bystanders. Once more, this depiction could be read as a serious comment upon problems faced by war veterans, and an extension of the critique the original series appeared to offer about the effect of serving/subsequent lack of support, and the implied link between mental health problems and violent behaviour seen elsewhere in dark comedy is also repeated. Further notable is that this parody, being of a show which fits into a genre (and concerns a profession) in which the bodies and physical capabilities of its participants are of great importance and focus, adheres to the wider dark comedy trend of parodying such material *and* of centring upon the fragility of the human subject. As Fife Donaldson has noted, "[v]iolence and physical action are a main concern of the Police Series genre, which leads to an emphasis on the body, both as an object of violence and as

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the vehicle for expression of action and effort" (in Jacobs and Peacock, 2013: 210), and this is true not only for the police series but for allied kinds of action series such as *Knight Rider* and *The A-Team*. Dark comedy programmes which take these types of shows as a base for parody have a ready-made physical aesthetic to assume (and subvert) which particularly lends itself to exploring and joking about physical capabilities and violence. The frequent popular perception of such shows and their characters as well-loved and heroic also means that revisionist parodies which prompt their audiences to consider them in another, altogether more depressing light particularly exemplify the nature of this type of comedy as one filtering everything it presents through a 'dark lens'.

Representations of Disease and Death

It is not only disability and mental health problems that are shown as recurring examples of the fragile nature of the human body and mind in dark comedy; illness – particularly cancer – is another feature used to generate humour and pathos. One of the most obvious examples is Maureen's pancreatic cancer in *Psychoville*, but the illness is also a key player in *Nighty Night* and *Phoenix Nights* (Channel 4, 2001-2002). Interestingly, in those two cases the cancer is ultimately rendered unthreatening: in *Nighty Night*, Jill's husband Terry goes into remission, whilst in *Phoenix Nights*, despite his obsessive worrying about it and uncomfortable symptoms, hospital tests confirm that club compere Jerry St. Clair does not have bowel cancer. However, the performance of the characters and the behaviour of those around them still highlight fears about the fragility and mortality of the human body: Terry and Jerry are seen struggling with the idea of death, and the intervention of hospitals and medical equipment into their bodies and their lives. The worries might be seen to reflect very general human fears, and their

position here in a comedy context becomes as fascinating as the presence of the opportunity to 'see' the experiences of characters who are on drugs or having intrusive visions (discussed below) in terms of raising the possibility that dark comedy actually functions as a safe space – one effected by excess and comedy's traditional perception as 'non-serious', entertaining, escapist, funny – for viewers to observe and engage with the ways in which the body and mind *could* be compromised. The lack of sympathy of the characters (aside from David's for Maureen) around the sufferers, who repeatedly use the cancer of their fellows to try and achieve some kind of gain for themselves could be seen to reflect catastrophising fears about worst-case scenarios surrounding cancer. Jill takes the opportunity to perform the role of the grieving wife in a cynical way, for its potential to make her the centre of attention, as well as allowing her the freedom to pursue a relationship with her neighbour, whilst Brian Potter (the manager of the Phoenix Club) uses Jerry's supposed cancer as an opportunity to persuade the organisers of the 'Talent Trek' competition to hold their money-spinning final at his venue, ostensibly to give Jerry a last chance to host the show. In these scenarios, the worst-case fears that a spouse will move straight on to someone else, or that friends' concern is a self-aggrandising sham, on top of the fear of being diagnosed with the disease to begin with, are displayed and made into a source of humour.

Jerry's dread that his hospital tests will confirm bowel cancer leads him to a near mental breakdown, resulting in a tense sequence during which he is MC-ing on stage and harangued by hecklers while apparently in no fit state to counter the situation; viewers see him visibly struggling to keep body and soul together. It is uncomfortable to watch, as is another sequence elsewhere in the programme where Jerry's stress at the pressures in his life leads him to exceed the dose of his prescription and herbal medication in a combination that causes him

to hallucinate and behave increasingly erratically on stage. It seems no coincidence that (on both occasions), being on stage, he is in an exaggerated state of public display while he breaks down; not only does this intensify the embarrassment already inherent in the scenes, it also brings the notion of appearance and visibility to the fore. Once again the *spectacle* of a character breaking down in front of others [us], portrayed in close-up, excruciating detail is offered here by dark comedy, ostensibly for the purposes of laughing at. If we were to observe a person in real-life behaving in the way that Jerry, or Michael Knight in *Tramadol Nights* does, it is likely that we would be concerned for (or maybe wary of) them, and not motivated to laugh, but seeing them in the context of a comedy removes the immediate presence of the situation and the potential requirement to do something about it, and enables us to engage with it in a different way. In other words, dark comedy allows viewers the opportunity not to take serious things seriously. Herein might also lie the explanation for the preponderance of parodic content in dark comedy programmes: while the shows being parodied would have been – by and large – created and performed to suggest sincerity, they are subverted in the dark comedies by being re-performed in ways that highlight comic potential.

The character of Jill's neighbour, Cathy Cole, in *Nighty Night* is potentially 'tragic' to viewers in multiple ways – not only does she use a wheelchair as a result of Multiple Sclerosis, but this has prompted exceptionally poor treatment from her 'friend' Jill (who acts out many of the "ableist interjections" identified by Loja *et al* (2013: 193-5), such as expressions of pity, remarks about heroicism, invasion of personal space, and assumed incompetence). Further, her husband is seen seeking romantic relationships elsewhere, cheating with his co-workers and with Jill: the combination of outcomes for Cathy, as with Jerry and Terry above, seems to represent a worst case scenario that viewers might fear when they consider or imagine what it would be like to

become ill or disabled. Jennifer's situation in *Psychoville,* where her Locked-in Syndrome is taken advantage of by a serial killer to frame her for murder, can be read as an even more extreme case.

Another opportunity for dark comedy viewers to confront through humour the theme of illness and mortality can be seen in the BBC Four show *Getting On*. Set in a geriatric ward at an NHS hospital and following the humorous situations its key staff members become involved in whilst surrounded by a constant stream of injured, ill and dying mature patients, the series uses a location that appears carefully designed to look like a genuine hospital, familiar in its details to viewers who have visited a real-life version or seen television documentaries about them. The fact that the programme features a setting that is so evocative of the real thing in terms of design, costuming, props, and so forth, might function to lend a sense of authenticity to the backstage activities of the staff as they are portrayed as well; this is a comedy which makes ample use of aesthetics and techniques originally associated with documentary and reality-style programming, including handheld cameras that track the characters and the action as it unfolds (often swinging around or zooming in wildly to catch unexpected events) and naturalistic diegetic background noise. Under cover of this aesthetics of 'reality', the dark comedy can also seem particularly acute: for example, in one scene the ward staff are having difficulty in getting a translator to come and interpret for a patient who does not speak English, and have to resort to a phone service whereby a translator first listens to the patient over the phone and then speaks the translation to the staff. This is a situation that seems believable in the contemporary context of a lack of funding for NHS services, and in which translation phone lines are increasingly relied upon in many public service professions, and when the translator informs the staff that the patient is repeating, "I want to die, please kill me," this too seems strangely everyday, particularly as the staff merely resolve the situation by

'putting it down in her notes', referencing popular understandings of the NHS as bureaucratic and hamstringing staff with paper obligations ahead of patient care. The joke and the message is clear, and the fact that a central aspect of it is the serious presence of an elderly woman who wants to die is somehow simultaneously impossible not to react to (in order to even get the joke) *and* yet quite simple to gloss over, as the characters do. In this respect, it follows closely the two-stage process involved in perceiving the inherent comedy and tragedy in the same scenario, and passing quickly over the tragedy to engage more fully with the comic aspect. That the theme of the joke, of mortality, and isolation/helplessness at the end of life, can be thought of as a serious fear means that the process on this occasion is offering the opportunity to engage with that fear, whilst also providing the ability to 'laugh it off'.

Death happens frequently in dark comedies, meaning that such programmes offer many examples of 'moments of death' either in the form of deathbed scenes, scenes where murders or executions take place, or where characters succumb to injuries or illnesses in ad hoc locations. All these deaths mean that dark comedies show many injured, dying and dead bodies, medical settings associated with death (such as morgues and pathology labs), and funerals taking place, as well as characters mourning the dead in other settings. As they *are* comedies, these things are frequently shown in ways that play as funny and signal that laughter is intended, and something to be considered is the idea that what is set up to be the target of laughter are actually the rituals and codes of behaviour surrounding death; more specifically, how these codes can seem as though they produce a *performance of grief* according to a set of approved social standards that simultaneously results in 'secret' or taboo thoughts, feelings and behaviours remaining unseen. The propensity of these scenes to draw attention to the performance-producing codes, either through

ostentatiously breaking them and revealing the secret thoughts and behaviours, or by adhering to them in ways that simply appear ridiculous, could allow viewers not only to recognise and derive humour from the highlighting and breaking of taboo onscreen but also to participate in the breaking of taboo inherent in laughing at funerals and deaths themselves.

In dark comedy scenes such as the interment of Mr Jolly the clown, in *Psychoville*, and Terry's funeral in *Nighty Night*, the basic presentation of events in ways that invoke familiarity (using conventions of funerary practice that are likely to be recognisable to viewers from either their own experiences of attending such events, or through their representation on television) is employed, but the added inclusion of disconcerting dialogue and actions that are not normally associated with such events then functions to render these familiar scenarios uncanny. In the case of Jolly, circus paraphernalia and attire at the funeral transforms it into a strange and aesthetically contradictory situation (Figure 5.11); at Terry's funeral, Jill's dramatic entrance on horseback (Figure 5.12), her performance of a contemporary dance, and an unflattering revelatory speech she gives about Terry and about her childhood abuse challenge traditional conventions of funereal behaviour. The expectations audiences might have concerning 'normal' funeral practices are thus confounded by dark comic inclusions that render them strange and unfamiliar. The strange inclusions may also be regarded as excessive, and functioning to draw attention to conventions of funeral and graveside behaviour by having them distorted or over-performed (in the sense that standard expressions of grief are exaggerated by the people involved, with added elements of theatricality). By such means, not only is the uncanny invoked in this representation of the familiar unfamiliarly, but this unfamiliarity is a product of extreme embellishment of the norm. This broadly aligns with the techniques observed in other ways in dark comedy, and

provides further evidence of the centrality of this kind of excessive presentation to dark comedy television.
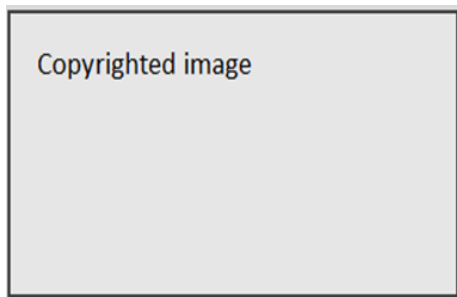
Figure 5.11. Mr Jolly's funeral.

Figure 5.12. Jill enters Terry's funeral.

Alan Friedman has pointed out that, "More than any other manifestation, narratives of death and dying reflect a culture's symbolic and mythic truths. Artifacts of death – rituals of dying and funeral, graveyards and tombs, wills and death certificates, the corpse itself – are as much communal constructs, dramatic and narrative performance, as are the texts that contain them" (1995: 5). He goes on to say that funerals "…seem to shape and regularize transitional processes, to 'tame' death, which always threatens to become anarchic" (117). In *Psychoville*, Jolly's funeral scene plays with this threat of the anarchic and carnivalesque (linked so strongly to Bakhtinian ideas about comedy), something that is highlighted through the involvement of actual clowns. The portrayals draw attention to the constructed nature of the events, by showing things being done 'wrongly'. The specific ways in which moments are framed and performed allows attention to be drawn, through the errors and differences in funeral practice as compared to 'norms', to the constructed nature of the rituals and behaviours commonly participated in during real-life scenarios without much thought. It is also interesting to consider a line that Mr Jelly delivers at the end of the interment scene, when the formal part of the burial has concluded and mourners have dispersed around the area close to the grave. Jelly takes out his mobile phone to call and berate the florist responsible for the funereal floral tribute, as they have

erroneously shaped the flowers to spell out *his* name instead of Jolly's: "No, *I'm* Mr Jelly – I'm not dead, I'm alive!" He is very plaintive in this declaration, and perhaps here he echoes something that scenes like this might do for viewers: remind us of death, whilst reassuring us that we are still alive.

The deathbed scene might be regarded as an even more taboo or controversial site of humour, and another interesting avenue for exploration lies in the ways dark comedies invite laughter at particular Western cultural ideas of 'ideal' or 'good deaths', and how the dying and the bereaved should behave during them. It is possible to see how the same principles identified above about funeral scenes apply to portrayals of deathbed scenes in dark comedy programmes as well. Essentially, dark comedy appears to portray death and the attitudes surrounding it as ridiculous, inviting viewers to laugh at them, and this can often be seen operating via the involvement of parody or subversion of generic qualities belonging to other types of text. A relevant example occurs once again in *Psychoville*. In series two, episode five, Maureen's terminal pancreatic cancer has entered its final stages, and she has come home from hospital to die. Hunt has described David and Maureen as a couple who "…combine the macabre and the taboo (incest and murder) with childlike pathos" (2013: 183), and these qualities can amply be seen in her deathbed scene. It begins with a shot locating her in bed with David kneeling by her side, a set-up familiar from many media representations of poignant death scenes, before proceeding in a manner that parodies the dramatic conventions of such scenes. Initially, the aesthetics do not appear unusual (aside from the fact that Maureen is being played by a younger man in prosthetics), and it is by way of the dialogue bringing in a variety of scatological and sexually-inflected references that the presence of the persistent themes of the bodily lower stratum in dark comedy humour can first be seen.

Maureen: "I'm so proud of you, David. You need to know that. Never left me, have you?"

David: "Only to go to the toilet."

Maureen: "But even then I was watching you. Never knew that, did you?

David shakes his head, before leaning down and starting to cry (Figure 5.13).

Maureen: "Don't start getting upset. [Pause] Good job I'm not religious, I'd be shitting myself now. Was it wrong to kill all of those people? Didn't seem wrong."

David: "You were doing it to help me."

Maureen: "Yeah, I was."

As Maureen alludes to their past actions as serial killers, the staple dark comedy theme of violence is added (to a moment that is already, of course, about illness and death).

David: "I wish I could kill death. Then he wouldn't be able to kill you."

Maureen: "Can't have a world without death, David. He finds you in the end."

David: "'One short sleep past, we wake eternally. And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die'."

Maureen: "Have you just made that up?"

David: "No, John Donne."

Maureen: "John *did*, David. It's 'John *did*.'"

She dies, her head falling to one side, eyes open. David stares uncomprehending for a moment, whispering, "Mum?" Then he checks her breathing, closes her eyes, and kisses her on the lips, before beginning to cry with his head on her chest. Finally, he lifts Maureen into his arms and moves to the carpet in front of the bed, sitting her down and taking up a position behind her. He then presses 'play' on a tape machine beside him, and dances with her body to the pop song 'Oops Upside Your Head' (Figure 5.14).

Figure 5.13. Maureen's deathbed.   *Figure 5.14.* Oops Upside Your Head.

So, by the end of the scene, visual comedy involving the corpse and David's divergent interpretation of grieving behaviour has escalated to again demonstrate the breaking of taboos, and provide the opportunity to laugh at a comedic excess created at the expense of the theme of mortality. Conventional ideas about a 'good death' or 'ideal death' may be reflected in the scenario: dying at home in bed with a loved one present, having a poignant last conversation with some kind of philosophical and reflective content, slipping away gently and having the eyes closed, being wept over; yet these features are all systematically subverted. David's choice to emotionally commemorate Maureen's death by dancing to their favourite song creates a jarring but comedic crescendo, while the poignant speech between them is also undercut comedically with scatology and the wordplay of misunderstanding, for instance. Once more, conventions are drawn attention to and subverted, and the reality and seriousness of death is minimised in the invitation to laugh.

Margaret Gibson notes that, via television and films, "The real deaths of strangers or the fictional deaths of characters inhabit the private sphere, albeit as flickering and transitory images on a monitor. Death is practised through representation, scripted and rehearsed through performance" (2001: 308). In other words, viewing these fictional deaths gives us the opportunity to engage with mortality, and while we watch, "the background of consciousness provides an escape route from facing death, our own and others', in the knowledge that these

are just actors, this is just fake blood—all this is make believe" (311). The fact that the *Psychoville* scene contains such features as cross-gender performance, actors who play other characters within the same programme, humorous wordplay, parody and an excessive and unusual crescendo, means that the fictional status of the moment is particularly heightened within the text itself, and I suggest that this trait of dark comedy means that it could in fact be said to be a perfect vehicle for confronting things with which we are morbidly fascinated, yet which require a cushion of fictionality to ease the psychic discomfort of taboo, fear, and so on.

Psychoville not only represents the incidence of death (through a variety of causes, natural and unnatural), but also explores the act of killing; it provides an interesting subversion of the tropes of serial killer narratives, for example. Dyer notes the explosion in television series and made-for-TV movies of serial killer stories that took place in the late-1990s and early-2000s; many more than there were being made before this time (2002: 70-71), while Steven Allen states that "...the serial killer is regarded as a synecdoche for the fears of contemporary society" (2013: 99), implying that a connection between the increased representation of killers, and contemporary concerns that relate to bodily vulnerability, is possible. As I have been suggesting, the graphic aesthetic of dark comedies appears to be influenced partly by a move towards such display in other media texts, and also serves as a reflection and exploration of deeply rooted human fears that may seem more apt or concerning at particular times (as in the late-1990s and early-2000s). This places *Psychoville* as a good example of dark comedy using the material of 'serious' genres in similar ways to those genres, at the same time as pastiching and parodying them in a way that comments upon both the genres and the fears. In *Psychoville*, serial killing is represented on the one hand by David and Maureen, a dysfunctional family unit presented as anachronistic in a number of

respects (a feature reminiscent of slasher narratives such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977)); their acts of killing seem badly-planned, slapdash and lacking the clinical dimension often associated with serial killer depictions, and the programme encourages viewers to sympathise with and root for the pair, who are positioned as victims of ill-luck and corrupt authority. In an opposition to this, the series depicts its second serial killer (Detective Finney) as cold, precise and methodical in the setting-up and carrying out of his executions, and as deriving sadistic, sexualised pleasure out of the killings he effects – a portrayal that is much more typical for dramatic film and television texts. However, the fact that Finney is a police detective himself, and that his pursuers are not high-flying investigators or profilers with experience and technology at hand, but an old woman and a disabled clown, turns the traditional dynamic on its head and emphasises the relative lack of power and expertise the heroic characters can bring to bear against Finney's insider knowledge, particularly as he is backed by the shady Andrews Nanotech corporation.

Allen argues that a cycle can be seen whereby the serial killer films of the 1990s moved away from the aesthetics of their earlier counterparts – concerned with presenting the act of killing in detail – to focus more upon investigators seeing and piecing together what has happened to victims *after the event* of death itself (in such films, viewers would see a crime scene for the first time along with the detectives: "The spectacle of the wet death was marginalized, or completely removed, in favour of the tableaux of the dead, where the body was aesthetically displayed" (2013: 97)). This focus was "once again subsumed by sadistically-imposed suffering as the first decade of the twenty-first century took hold" (2013: 2). In *Psychoville*, the scene in which Finney murders Joy and frames Jennifer for the crime shows not only a spectacular ('wet') death, but also the crime scene tableau being carefully positioned; the murder highlights Finney's skill and calculation

in killing. He visits Jennifer and Joy at home, ostensibly to follow up on the explosion at Ravenhill Psychiatric Hospital, giving no indication that he is anything other than an ordinary detective investigating the events; he is friendly and unassuming in his conversation with Joy, and enquires politely after Jennifer's health (specifically, whether she can understand what is going on). This is an occasion where a character's behaviour appears darker in the light of further information – by the end of the scene it will be clear that he is actually interested in Jennifer's abilities as a witness to the murder he will commit. Under the pretence of seeing if Jennifer can write down any answers to his questions (which, of course, she cannot), Finney is able to stab Joy in the carotid artery of her neck and wait for her to bleed to death, before setting up the pair so it seems as though Jennifer is responsible. Not only does this further Jennifer's 'nightmare scenario', but it also spectacularly reveals Finney as an antagonist and a violent psychopath who appears to take great pleasure in killing. Figures 5.15 and 5.16 (showing Finney during the murder) demonstrate the extreme close-ups that are used to capture the attack, specifically getting the actor's facial reactions into the same frame as his victim and her injuries.

Figure 5.15. Finney kills Joy.   *Figure 5.16.* Taking pleasure in it.

The intimate nature of this filming brings viewers right into the action, but (as with Jennifer's situation) without any means to intervene, perhaps highlighting the horror of her situation further. The editing certainly highlights a sexual angle to the killing, and Finney's proximity to Joy, his facial expressions, and the stroking of her face afterwards are made explicit by the close up. The scene may be described as

Freudian in this respect, and also borrows some of the conventions of pornographic filming, further signalling its sexualised nature.

In contrast, David and Maureen's crime scenes are presented as ridiculous: for example, when they murder Cheryl (Janet McTeer) at the unusual location of her busy office in the middle of the day, they arrive in very poor disguises and are highly unconvincing as the make-up experts they are purporting to be, only managing to complete the crime successfully through luck. This further demonstrates the subversion and parodying of serial killing for comic effect, made all the more stark by the counter-example of Finney. Such subversion and parody ties into other crime scene humour seen in dark comedy texts; for instance the behaviour of *Tittybangbang*'s Parker and Harris and the vomiting police of *Cardinal Burns*, which subverts the 'artistry' and investigation of such sites commonly seen in other genres. The 'Burnistoun Butcher', a serial killer in the *Burnistoun* series, is also portrayed in a way that parodies traditional dramatic narratives, with the character repeatedly revealing himself to the police and local press in ways that clearly should result in his apprehension, only to be ignored or mistaken for a real butcher by incompetent staff. *Psychoville*'s representation of murder and murder investigation is therefore reflective of wider joking on this theme across dark comedy texts, while the programme also selects and combines bizarre or excessive elements from different horror and thriller killer tropes into one product that consequently becomes more of an aesthetically strange and hybrid text in itself.

Additionally, it is relevant to dark comedy's preoccupation with mortality and bodily failure that the series shows Mr Jolly to have been involved in organ harvesting, and the Andrews Nanotech Corporation engaged in projects to cryogenically freeze bodies, re-animate a Nazi doctor, and generally using technology and science in attempts to preserve and prolong life: this rehearses fears about mortality and elevates the mind and intellect over the limiting body, reflecting the "...modern age where

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reason is valorized in a scientific, technological form. It becomes the instrument for conquering nature, expunging disease, vastly increasing the human lifespan" (Leder, 1991: 141). The television trend towards more graphic police-focussed TV programmes that proceed from the discovery of a corpse to using police and forensic investigation, scientific and medical techniques to examine the body and determine the truth of the circumstances, demonstrates the same impulse to use rationality to discover knowledge and overcome the silence/problem of the physical body. Similarly, programmes in medical settings reinforce the idea of investigating the body rationally in order to prolong life, or to explain the reason why death will or has occurred in particular instances. In other words, these programmes seem to reflect human attitudes to mortality as something to be feared, and that acceptance of death is eased by the notion that if it *must* occur, at least the whys and wherefores should be understood so that perhaps in the future similar mortality may be prevented (because murderers are behind bars or are discouraged by the police work becoming more adept at catching them, or because risky behaviours can be recognised and guarded against, or medical breakthroughs can be made, and so on). It should also be noted that the prevalence of depictions of secure hospital or therapy session locations in dark comedy texts such as *Psychoville* and *Nighty Night* reflects a concern not only with representations of the problematic body, but the problematic mind – again, messages about overcoming (or, in fact, *failing* to overcome) problems through professional intervention are evident, and the theme of psychoanalysis, or at the very least the acknowledgement of troubles of the psyche is implicated in this motif.

Conclusions

Freud characterises the human attitude towards death as a fundamentally dishonest one, leading to a death denying culture in which we typically try to sequester away signs of dying, weakness and disease in hospitals and morgues, and to isolate old people: "We have shown the unmistakable tendency to push death aside, to eliminate it from life" (2005: 183). The reality of the situation is forced upon us when someone close to us dies, however, and Freud argues that this makes us risk averse, unwilling to participate in dangerous activities and nervous for loved ones who do so, for fear of death, "so we have no option but to find compensations in the world of fiction […]. There we still find people who know how to die, indeed, who are capable of killing others. That, too, is the only place where we see the fulfilment of the condition under which we might reconcile ourselves with death" (185). Thus, depictions in fiction of injury, illness and dying have become rife: "Medical soaps, representing heroic dramas in which battles of life and death are fought, are a long-established [TV] genre, though only one of several in which death, dying and grieving figure strongly" (Searle, 1998: 123). Jacobs has charted the growth of these kinds of programmes – 'body trauma TV' – highlighting their increasing proliferation from the mid-1990s onwards and suggesting that "[f]or the audience, these dramas connected with and nurtured a popular fascination with decay, death and the destruction of the body. They presented a 'morbid gaze' – the visualisation of the horrible but routine body trauma – within a context of procedural and ethical rules, and the professional language of science and medicine" (2003: 1). Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is exactly concomitant with this that visceral dark comedy programmes began to appear with more frequency and to include more graphic visual detail of violence, illness and dying within them, as well as representing moments of death and conventions surrounding burial and funerary practices. Firstly, with parody being a

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key mode in dark comedy, adopting the new generic conventions of the material to be parodied was necessary in order for the parodies to seem accurate. Additionally, as increasingly graphic special effects and ways of editing that allowed viewers to see more vivid death, blood and injury spread through TV's 'serious' dramas and horror output, it seems predictable that at least some areas of comedy would begin to adopt and play with a similar style.

Further, Reid *et al* have commented that, "Currently and historically, what societies construe as impairments serve in the popular and fine arts and literature as a trope – a nonliteral, emblematic 'short-cut' representing negative aspects of the human condition" (2006: 636). In the dark comedy examples considered above, in some cases mental health problems are used to signal and 'explain' the evil or anti-social behaviour of various characters (relying upon stereotypical assumptions about mental health that are problematic, and reinforcing mental health difficulties as stigma symbols), and disabilities and impairments are often ascribed to characters to make them appear more abject, more helpless, and susceptible to social isolation and mistreatment by others. In one way, this echoes the problem seen in Barnes's dismay over the effects of linking negative stereotypes with thick glasses: portrayals like this potentially reinforce particular attitudes in viewers that have social consequences. Indeed, there is a disturbing underlying feature of attitudes towards disabled people and others who display what Goffman terms 'stigma symbols' that may help explain why they frequently become targets of humour in dark comedies, and why viewers may feel it is acceptable to laugh at misfortunes experienced by them: this is the idea that societies establish norms of appearance and behaviour that – if they are not adhered to – indicate an incompleteness or inability to be categorised as a 'real' and proper person. It should be noted, however, that in some cases the depictions of problems faced by disabled people found in dark comedy do

comprise either serious moments or moments in which humour is signalled to be intended at the expense of non-disabled characters who engage in poor behaviour towards disabled people instead, providing an implicit judgement of such behaviour as ridiculous and undesirable.

Gilman draws attention to the persistence of medical aesthetics that associate the appearance of a person with their state of health, with illustrative examples of psychiatric patients from text books providing "…access to the perpetuation of a fantasy of 'beauty and health' and 'ugliness and illness'" (1995: 33). This is an aesthetics and a fantasy that is seen reflected more widely than in medicine's own texts, and can be associated with the grotesque and gross-out, and with media representations of desirable appearances versus undesirable ones. There is an underlying history to the valorisation of certain appearances and disgust at others that is tied to markers of health, and it is notable that in dark comedies, when characters are depicted as physically grotesque (or have specific 'undesirable' elements of their physical appearance exaggerated or drawn attention to by costuming, such as with Daffyd's weight accentuated by skin-tight latex wear, or the extra thick pair of glasses of Gilbert or Jolly Boy John) they may be subtly reflecting and reinforcing the 'attractive bodily aesthetic = good bodily health' versus 'unattractive bodily aesthetic = bodily fragility/poor health' binary, even when the exaggerated facet of the appearance itself is only indirectly related to health (i.e., Daffyd's weight is, indirectly, a health concern; Gilbert and Jolly Boy John's glasses indicate that they have bad eyesight). Maxine Bendix's botched cosmetic surgery provides a more direct example of this link: the poor quality surgery that is evident in a trail of industrial silicone running out of her sagging breasts signals that her body is in direct need of medical attention, and it is of course ironic that her surgery was undertaken to make her appear more beautiful, and therefore more healthy, in the first place. The fact that so many of the characters who have some

kind of exaggerated or unusual (prosthetic) physical features simultaneously also have an ailment of one kind or another perpetuates the fantasy of which Gilman speaks, and the 'permission' for exaggeration that is granted by the comic, rather than serious, context allows for 'ugliness', and therefore unhealthiness, to be especially visible in dark comedy.

Bergsonian theory aligns with this, in his assertion that comic appearances are linked to 'abnormal' appearances, including exaggerated ugliness and deformity; crucially, though, it is implied that these appearances can only be acceptably regarded as comic in so far as they are capable of being imitated. It is true that in some cases (such as Francesca Martinez's appearance as a woman with cerebral palsy in *Extras* (BBC 2, 2005) and Brian Limond's portrayal of men with depression in *Limmy's Show*) actors genuinely embody the disabilities or mental health problems they portray in dark comedies, but it is far more likely that the performers seen playing such characters *are* imitating traits associated with particular illnesses or using prosthetics, costume and make-up to appear authentic. This might be a significant contributing factor in enabling viewers who would not consider such things to be laughable in the context of real life to laugh at them in this 'non-real' context. This work has already considered Freudian models intended to explain how repressed attitudes or fears can be seen or faced via psychic strategies embedded in joking in the previous chapters on the horrific and sexuality, but they are also relevant in this case. As with the other 'performed' situations, viewers' assumptions that they are not observing *actual* disabled people, actual funerals, actual corpses, and so on, could create a feeling that they are therefore not *actually* laughing at these taboo sites of humour, whilst at the same time, this false presentation of the taboos is nevertheless allowing mental confrontation with (and laughter at) those very things. Additionally, the presence of characters in worst case scenario-type

situations of illness or disability in a context of comedy may both reflect human preoccupations with fears surrounding bodily and metal fragility, and enable consideration of them in a 'safe' space. Much as the Channel 4 programme *24 Hours in A&E* (2011-) explicitly reminds us every week that a life-changing physical incident could happen to anyone at any time, whilst reassuringly showing competent and stoic medical staff helping the people for whom that has really happened, dark comedy portrayals of feared situations can be seen as sites which allow for the soft-confrontation of mortality. In other words, the safe 'unreality' of fictional texts enables a confrontation and engagement with mortality that fear would otherwise prevent; the fictional texts demonstrate a return of the repressed, and dark comedy – with its particularly strong emphasis on excessive and 'unreal' appearances and scenarios – is especially well-placed to signal fiction and thereby to enable such safe engagement with it.

CHAPTER 6

Non-bodily examples of dark comedy aesthetics, visual excess, and boundary-breaking (filming and editing techniques, hybridity, intertextuality, pastiche and parody, language)

> Charlie Brooker: "With the sound off, as long as there's not one of our big silly visual jokes in the frame, you could definitely think you were watching an authentic 9pm moody crime mini-series."
>
> ('Making Of…' DVD Extra, *A Touch of Cloth: The First Case*, 2012)

Introduction

When analysing moving-image media, Richard Dyer makes a useful differentiation between 'representational signs' – actors, characters, situations in the plot, et cetera – and 'non-representational signs': "colour, texture, movement, rhythm, melody, camerawork" (2002: 20). He goes on to suggest that when it comes to analysis, people tend to be very quick to discuss the former, and "much less used to talking about" the latter (Ibid.). Alongside the representational signs of bodies and their appearances, these types of non-representational signs play an important role in establishing the overall aesthetic style of the dark comedies under consideration here. The nature of non-representational aspects of aesthetics, concerned not with objects but with intangibles, seems such that they would be ideally placed to contribute to the 'sensing' of dark comedy that has been demonstrated to so often be a point of reference for this type of humour: tones and rhythms and camera movements have the potential to create an overall noticeable

effect on a text without their individual mechanics necessarily jumping out at the viewer, and even slight colour alteration, or other minimal digital effects may result in the visuals of a programme starting to appear subtly unusual or 'unreal', while certain camera angles or editing choices might have the effect of disorientating a viewer without it being obvious as to the cause. Filming from odd angles, using effects which distort the light or clarity towards the edges of the frame, or framing shots so as to fragment and obscure things and make the viewer fill in the blanks themselves are all techniques evident in the aesthetics of *Psychoville*, for instance. Of course, other choices vis-à-vis non-representational signs in dark comedy programmes are very bold and easily apparent as markers of a distinctive aesthetics, and the example of *Jam*, amongst others, will demonstrate this below.

As well as considering these non-bodily aspects of dark comedy aesthetics, this chapter will examine the ways in which parody and pastiche are used in more detail; intertextuality appears to be a major feature of many dark comedy programmes, and the effects of this deserve close attention. Such techniques create what Tasker has referred to as 'Aesthetic fragmentation' – something that "has […] a central significance for thinking about the functioning of contemporary popular genres. Generic production and criticism, after all, depends on the construction of boundaries between forms" (1993: 54-55). Genre characteristics and expectations that are signalled through particular aesthetics can affect viewer understanding of texts, and genre-hybridising innovations in the aesthetics of comedy in general have taken place over the time period I am placing the rise of dark comedy into here. Contemporary television comedies are a prime site of parodic humour and other kinds of intertextuality, relying upon viewer recognition of references, or of the meanings carried by certain aesthetics, in order to draw significance from them in their new setting. This may be seen to affect the way that such comedies work, tapping

into audience associations and 'televisual literacy' to create meaning and humour, but also challenging viewer ideas of how 'comedy' looks; *Jam* "…is shot using a variety of techniques – jump cuts, bleached images, extreme lighting, an intermingling of grotesque and naturalistic performance, slowed down and speeded-up sequences – which do not often find a home in entertainment programming" (Mills, 2007: 180). Mills argues that this deviation from the ways in which comedy has traditionally been presented has concomitant effects on the perception of the programme *as* comedic, complicating the expectations of viewers used to their comedy appearing in accordance with certain aesthetics, distinct from those associated with 'serious' genres. Additionally, Morris's "…series often adopt the aesthetics of other forms, in order to demonstrate how easy it is to appropriate and recreate them. The pleasure in such comedy becomes a mixture of admiration at the accuracy of the recreation coupled with enjoyment in their being exaggerated and perverted" (2007: 184). Once more, exaggeration is identified as a quality associated with the aesthetics of dark comedy, but also relevant for this consideration of its workings and potential audience responses to them is that not only is a mixture of reactions possible, but a contradictory and expectation-confounding combination of aesthetics is also taking place. These characteristics reinforce the importance of ambivalence to dark comedy.

The previous chapters have mentioned in passing the possibility of some dark comedies deliberately being structured, filmed and edited in such a way as to position viewers in a point of view that echoes some of the effects felt or seen by characters within the shows, and this highlights that even visual aesthetics which are not directly representing bodies may still be indirectly exploring embodiment (and, particularly, the experience of a fallible or breaking-down body) through the creation of perceptual positions using non-representational signs. Thus, although this section of the thesis ostensibly concerns aesthetics

that invoke excess and boundary breaking in relation to form and stylistic techniques, it can be seen that underlying reminders of embodied status are sometimes still implicit in the ways these appear on the screen. The chapter will consider programme moments which mimic elements of the point of view of intoxicated people/drug users, dreamers, or others experiencing altered mental states; for example, the occasions when viewers are positioned to see the Silent Singer in *Psychoville* through the eyes (in fact, the *mind*, as the Singer is a hallucination) of Jeremy Goode. This will be followed up – with further recourse to work on techniques of intertextuality, and Freudian ideas about dreaming, fantasy and fears – by examining the possibility that dark comedies have a distinctive preoccupation with visual indicators of fragmentation and unreliable or confused perception. It may indeed be the case that the placing of the viewer into these precarious subject positions is another one of the ways in which dark comedies draw attention to and play with notions of the fragility and fallibility of the human body and mind. In conjunction with structural features and story elements that centre on unease around familiar scenarios and objects, and humour stemming from catastrophising and humans breaking down, such aesthetics point towards dark comedy as a site of reflection both *of* and *upon* human fears.

Finally the chapter will discuss self-reflexivity further, considering how dark comedies, by bringing together techniques of comic pastiche and parody and pulling the viewer into unreliable points of view that invite them to view failure and breakdown at its extreme as laughable, promote a kind of distancing and a sense of unreality surrounding particular negative scenarios that might work to lessen their threat. Viewers, having considered or confronted uncomfortable fears about the position of the human subject in modern society, may be better placed to dismiss them through the fact of their location in comedy.

Points of View

In *Psychoville*, Jeremy Goode (a librarian who appears overly concerned with the safe and orderly return of books) is shown pursuing a customer to extreme lengths for the return of volume two of '*The Fifty Greatest Coastal Walks of the British Isles*', becoming agitated at the prospect that the book might have become lost and will not be returned in a timely manner. Jeremy's increasingly agitated reaction upon learning that the book will be overdue initially suggests that he might have an obsessive compulsive or anxiety disorder, but as he surveys the gap in the bookshelves where the volume should be, visual indicators of something more appear. The camera shows the shelves from his point of view, followed by a reverse shot through the gap, into which he pokes a finger, frowning. Then, the camera reverts to his point of view, and computer editing is used to show the book's empty space widening and subtly undulating, becoming larger and larger. A white-noise sound effect is heard, and Jeremy appears to become aware of something on the other side of the shelves; he peers around the corner and sees an unusual figure at the other end of the shelving corridor: the Silent Singer (Figure 6.1). The appearance of the Silent Singer follows the trend of some characters seeming very visually out-of-place in their current surroundings. The character is of indeterminate gender, although as the Silent Singer is played by Reece Shearsmith (who also plays Jeremy), the face is reminiscent of him. The character wears red polyester trousers and a pale blue jumper, white gloves, tan tights and ladies court shoes, with thick dark-framed glasses and a blonde wig with two plaits hanging down on either side of the Singer's face, ostensibly made of wool. The Silent Singer mimes belting out a tune into the top of a walking stick, contorting his body into a variety of half-crouching poses as he does so. The character's movements are also distorted by editing effects, with the footage being played backwards so that his gestures and the swinging of his plaits are

rendered strange and unnatural. The Silent Singer's unusual appearance is increased by the context of the library and the other characters that have been shown there already, all wearing unremarkable everyday fashion that contrasts with the Singer's ensemble. The vision of the Silent Singer is in fact an indication of the wider mental health problems for which Jeremy received treatment at the same psychiatric facility as the other main characters of the programme; he is "…a manifestation of Jeremy's inner turmoil" (Hunt, 2013: 189). The character's hallucinatory nature is indicated immediately in the library scene by the fact that when Jeremy squeezes his eyes shut and then opens them again, whispering "Not now, Silent Singer," the figure disappears and the white noise abruptly stops (Figure 6.2).

| Copyrighted image | Copyrighted image |

Figure 6.1. The Silent Singer.   *Figure 6.2.* Jeremy Goode.
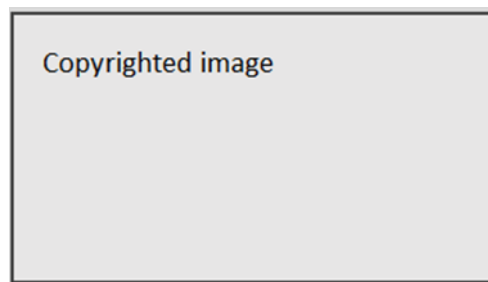
Jeremy's obsession with the missing book later takes a sinister turn when he visits the home of the customer to ask if she has found it yet, offering to come in and look for it himself when she says she has not. On this occasion, the Silent Singer appears across the road (Figure 6.3), and Jeremy ends up shouting out at him: "Not now, Silent Singer, NOT NOW!" A passer-by witnesses this and, seeing nothing in the space at which Jeremy is shouting, makes a face of confusion and disgust (Figure 6.4). This reaction to seeing 'strange' behaviour by a person in the street may once again provide an example of the stigma and attitude towards people who have mental health problems and their presence as visible members of the community.

Figure 6.3. Jeremy sees the Singer.   *Figure 6.4.* Passers-by do not see him.

The Silent Singer, in both his attire and in his strange backwards and inhuman movements, appears monstrous. As a facet of Jeremy's psyche, he also evokes an element of the monstrous about *him*: Jeremy commits crimes on the encouragement of the Silent Singer, his behaviour diverging from its normal path while the Singer appears to him. At a core level, however, the situations Jeremy gets into as a result of his disordered thinking (visually manifested by this Silent Singer urging him to carry out inappropriate behaviour) begin from a very basic and everyday starting point, and one that might be seen to reflect quite a mundane human concern: that a problem at work – in Jeremy's case, the tardy library book – will not be easily resolved. The fact that the volume might have become lost is essentially trivial, and it is Jeremy's mental health problems that lead him to catastrophise the scenarios surrounding the book, but once the out of control momentum is established the storyline firmly becomes another incidence of dark comedy viewers being shown a steadily spiralling worst case scenario. Not only does Jeremy end up playing the roles of some of modern society's most feared or abject characters: the man who sneaks into a young girl's bedroom and intimidates her while her parents are oblivious downstairs, and the disturbed man shouting at invisible enemies in the street, but he is also placed into situations where he can be seen as vulnerable. When he is taken into police custody and interrogated about his intentions in harassing the library patron and her family, viewers can recognise that the officer questioning him is Detective Finney, the contract killer responsible for the murders of

several other key characters. At this point, it is possible to compare Jeremy's crimes against his and to in fact feel some sympathy and trepidation for this misguided character who has ended up in circumstances where his life may be threatened, ostensibly all stemming from an overdue book. As such, Jeremy may function as a character through whom viewers can reflect on just how quickly – with a little sidestep into disordered thinking – someone's apparently secure life can unravel.

The fact that the programme uses techniques such as point of view shots and the soliciting of pathos to lead viewers into aligning or empathising with Jeremy's position rather than with (for example) the woman library patron or the man who is discomfited by seeing Jeremy acting strangely in the street marks a visual difference between dark comic presentation and other types. Instead of allowing audience members to easily identify with the non-aberrant characters caught up in a situation, the show places them *as* the troubled subject and directs them to imagine what it would be like to experience his problems. "The comic character is often one with whom, to begin with, our mind, or rather our body, sympathises. By this is meant that we put ourselves, for a very short time in his place" [before we can anaesthetise our hearts and turn to laughter] (Bergson, 1956: 186). The fact that Jeremy's dire situation initially begins from such a small trigger: something going slightly wrong at work and eliciting panic, makes the scenario once more seem like 'a short step from here to there' in terms of personal breakdown and life-destroying actions, and when taken alongside other examples already discussed (such as that of Jerry St. Clair in *Phoenix Nights*) supports a view of an overall preoccupation with such presentations in this type of comedy.

This kind of situation, coupled with the visual device of an unreliable point of view has been previously discussed in the example of the soup-eating man in the canteen in *Limmy's Show*. There, a man under

stress at work and exasperated by his colleagues hallucinates – and it does appear to be a hallucination as opposed to a daydreamt fantasy – unusual sights that are eventually difficult to tell apart from reality (for the viewer, as well as perhaps for him). We see through his eyes, just as in *Ideal* we see Moz's drug-induced dreams from his point of view and as though they were reality. In *Shameless*, the unreliable reality of the central character is again made the audience's perspective. Analysing this series, Beth Johnson argues that:

> Seen through rapid camera movements, lurching tilts and visual distortions, this type of fantasy vignette is employed in the series […] to signal a new model of the real in which the fantastic, surreal and other-worldly fragments of life (the drunken illusions, anxiety inspired dreams, grief stricken episodes of insanity or inertia, unexpected moments of revelation) can be understood as important and underrepresented aspects of real human experience. Moreover, the habituality of these types of experience is conveyed through the transformation of everyday spaces – the kitchen, the pub, the street, neighbour's lounge, the hospital. Indeed, it is these recognisable spaces, these fragments of normality that become all the more powerfully transformed when suddenly rendered strange and alien (2013: 230).

This notion of such moments drawing attention to aspects of real human experience that are typically not openly examined and discussed again suggests the potential for programmes which employ them to function as a 'safe' context to consider the kinds of situations that social and cultural conventions normally render repressed; it is unlikely that experiencing a murderous vision (such as that of Limmy's office worker) would be something openly and sincerely discussed – i.e., in a comment that did not appear to be a joke or to otherwise gloss over the seriousness – outside a therapeutic context without fear of being regarded with concern or suspicion, for example. The stigma attached

to experiencing things that are stereotypically associated with mental health problems can be considered a deterrent to such openness, and points towards a complicated role for television depictions of these experiences: as simultaneously a reassuring *and* disturbing reminder that they occur for others and could be experienced by viewers themselves. The fact that these experiences are depicted within mundane settings, rendering those places "strange and alien" , recalls the uncanny and only serves to potentially allow viewers to initially identify more easily with the onscreen POV; it is noticeable that the setting for many British dark comedy programmes is presented as contemporary and, if not naturalistic in terms of furnishings and costumes (exaggeration and unusual appearances having been identified as common to the humour), at least proceeding from a recognisably contemporary and naturalistic jumping off point.

Like the 'shaky-cam', handheld camera point of view shots of many horror films which seek to position the viewing audience as the victim being chased down by the killer or monster (a scenario that is actually replayed for the purposes of parody in the dark comedy *Catterick*, as characters are stalked and then chased through woods, *Blair Witch Project*-style, by a threatening assailant. Figure 6.5, 6.6), sequences that give viewers these in-character perspectives can be used not only to put them visually into the place of a person under threat, whether from outside sources or from tricks and inconsistences originating in their own state of mind, but also into the place of the (imagined, or actual) assailant. In the *Catterick* example, the character with whom the audience is visually aligned when taking up the 'assailant POV' is a solvent addict whose perception is affected by ingesting chemicals, and whose situation leads him to commit unusual and threatening acts; he is presented as abject and horrific, meaning that viewers are positioned to 'experience' the pursuit scene from multiple perspectives that are

both disorientating and reflective of victimhood, monstrosity and the body/mind breaking down.
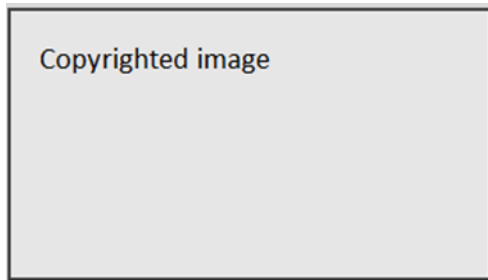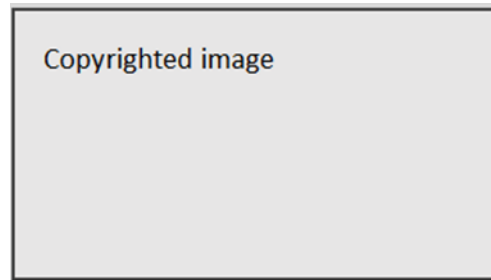

Figure 6.5.   *Figure 6.6.*

Blair Witch Project-style handheld and shaky-cam footage in *Catterick*.

The propensity for dark comedies to explicitly give their viewers the point of view of vulnerable or fallible characters, under threat or engaging in behaviour and experiencing the world around them in ways that can be considered as awkward or embarrassing, or as deviating from perceptual and societal 'norms', is something that may be seen to mark this type of comedy out as distinct from other kinds. *Peep Show* (Channel 4, 2003-), for example, uses sustained first person point of view accompanied by an overheard internal thought process as a key technique for aligning viewers with the awkward experiences of characters, overtly supplementing the traditional mixture of omniscient and bystander point of view over funny incidents (such as observing a physically hapless character falling over in public, destroying a shop display, et cetera) with the first person positioning that highlights a more obvious invitation to explore or confront the possibility of personal failure or disaster. In these cases, instead of the audience only being situated as onlookers to failure, drawing a response from viewing the misfortune of others, the 'failure point of view' sequences make the initial empathic position direct, and thus the feelings that the viewer must (according to Bergson) anaesthetise in order to laugh – and the laughter itself – may have the potential to feel like more personally-inflected affective responses as well. In other words, the feelings and the laughter subtly become more aligned with and directed at the

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possibility of the viewer themselves being in such a position and exhibiting such behaviour.

Disorientating Editing, Parody and Pastiche

Sexton has discussed in detail the ways in which the Chris Morris series *Jam* attempts to bring the viewer into a position where the visual appearance, ambiance and tone of the show could function to mimic aesthetics that might be experienced while in a drugged, or other kind of, altered state: *Jam* contains scenes "…which seem to emerge from, and tap into, the subconscious and move us away from the more rational domain of consciousness. They can therefore be linked to various forms of altered states: dreams, hypnagogic and hypnopompic states, delirium, depression and the drugged condition" (2013: 144). He goes on to describe the show as having a 'drugged aesthetic', elaborating that "[s]ome of the effects, such as ghosting, polarisation, visual and audio speed manipulations, can be seen as attempts to create aesthetic analogues of the drugged state" (147). In Figures 6.7 and 6.8, examples of colour alteration and the creation of a blurred appearance can be seen, and in both cases the viewer is positioned as the 'source' of the discrepant visual (that is, the programme does not suggest that the scene in 6.7 takes place in a universe in which people's speech comes out slowly and they naturally appear blurred – the location of the effect is positioned instead in the sense perceptions of the observer, and in 6.8 the viewer is aligned with the point of view of a character who is heavily intoxicated). The viewer is not only temporarily positioned as a person perceiving the world in an altered way, but is also subject to a disorientating viewpoint that requires a different kind of attention or concentration in order to make sense of the scenes in front of them than might ordinarily be required in watching a programme.

Figure 6.7. Visual distortion and blurring.   *Figure 6.8.* Alcoholic POV shot.

The aesthetics fits in with the thematic content of *Jam* as a whole, and the idea of the dark comedy viewer being drawn into and positioned by visual elements of a series as if *they* too exhibit and experience the characteristics of a dark world full of horrific and troubled characters (at the same time as experiencing the contradictory remove created by the fictionality, the presence of the screen, and so on) appears particularly well demonstrated by this series.

Other dark comedy shows can be thought of as attempting similar, although not as pronounced, affects/effects with their structures and visuals, in some cases making use of parody or pastiche to activate the uncanny or to engage in disorientating genre-blurring. *Tramadol Nights* is one such programme where a mixture of sketches and stand-up segments exaggerate familiar genres and TV programmes until they become extreme (or dark) versions of themselves, as seen in its *A-Team* and *Knight Rider* parodies which present alternative explanations for the characters' behaviour that centre around mental health problems and addiction (Figure 6.9 shows Michael Knight's iconic car strewn with empty medicine bottles and unlabelled bags of pills, for example), and in its re-imaginings of a more realistic *Angelina Ballerina* (CITV, 2001-2006) in which the little mice of the children's cartoon are noticed by humans and graphically exterminated, and *Five Children and It* (BBC 1, 1991), where the magical creature is mercilessly treated by the children: kicked around and forced to fight a dog (Figure 6.10). The title itself, 'Tramadol Nights', whilst apparently a reference to the show *Phoenix Nights* which went out on the same channel, also

suggests the idea of a night spent in a drugged state – dreaming or watching television, perhaps – in which these visions of popular shows overwrite their real counterparts.

Figure 6.9. Knight Rider parody.   *Figure 6.10. Five Children and It* parody.

In situations where a dark comedy programme makes visual reference to another text or genre, the technique of pastiche (or – if the original appears to be being humorously or satirically critiqued – parody) comes into play, and it is worth highlighting Dyer's note that "the artistic imitation involved in pastiche is of other art, not of life or reality itself […]. Pastiche is always an imitation of an imitation; it may be the case that there is an infinite regression in such thoughts, that one never arrives at a point where an imitation is an imitation of life but is always ineluctably an imitation of art" (2007: 2). Crucially, he goes on to describe this as a "rather giddying perspective" (Ibid.) and it is certainly possible to see dark comic pastiche and parody as another contributing factor towards programmes being read as unsettling, disorientating and uncanny. Dyer further speaks of cover versions and tribute acts as copies. In the case of the latter, and especially when the original acts themselves are dead, "people performing exactly like other people is often felt as a more fundamental difference than copying in paint, creating a sense of the uncanny and bringing the copy more evidently into the orbit of the version" (2007: 33). In other words, the spectres of the originals being copied in newer versions can seem to haunt those versions and draw an attention to their 'copy' nature that can feel somehow strange. It is not only in the performance of tribute acts that this takes place, and this idea can be applied to a variety of pastiche

and parodic content where viewers may be conscious of previous versions with other humans in the same roles. For example, in the case of the *Knight Rider* parody from *Tramadol Nights*, viewers familiar with the original series – and thus the appearance of David Hasselhoff as Michael Knight – must negotiate the text with his spectre in mind; the awareness that Frankie Boyle is highly unlike him in appearance and accent may enhance the comedy, but at the same time this awareness of a dual and contrasting presence of 'Michael Knight' could contribute towards a feeling of the uncanny in the sketch.

When actors *do* have a close appearance to the original they are copying, the uncanny is evoked in a different way; one which can also be used to describe situations where one actor plays multiple characters across one programme (a staple of both dark sketch and episodic narrative comedy): "Two faces that are alike, although neither of them excites laughter by itself, make us laugh when together, on account of their likeness. [...] The truth is that a really living life should never repeat itself. Where there is repetition or complete similarity, we always suspect some mechanism at work behind the living. Analyse the impression you get from two faces that are too much alike, and you will find that you are thinking of two copies cast in the same mould" (Bergson, 1956: 82). Further to this, the appearance of the actor themselves, within their character, can be seen to form one level of a composite image that reminds viewers of the acted, unreal nature of what is being seen – something that dark comedies often do not attempt to disguise, even highlighting it for humour. In *Little Britain*, for example, "[Anne] appears to be a man in drag; no attempt is made to disguise David Walliams's body shape, features, hair, demeanour or voice" (Montgomerie, 2010: 121). While an actor playing multiple roles, or one originally played by another, can evoke a sense of copying and unreality, other non-corporeal copied/repeating elements within pastiche or parody that evoke their original in their present appearance

(such as sets, props, costumes, et cetera) can similarly draw attention to an unoriginal, doubled, unreal nature. Where this aesthetics is present, it is presumably easier to 'see' the fiction and thereby achieve the insulated enjoyment of dark comic themes that might be less likely to be considered humorous in a real-life context. When doubling takes place, "the actors themselves seem transformed into lifeless automata" (Bergson, 1956: 83), and maybe this makes it easier to see those actors/characters transgress, have violence enacted upon them or misfortune befall their bodies, and still to laugh: their unreality is highlighted by their appearance, and this quality permits the response.

Dyer suggests that the two major 'aesthetic possibilities' of pastiche are "vitality and richness. The contrasts and clashes of style, the pushing at and beyond the boundaries of balance and structure, the sense of surprise, shock, chance and disorientation, propulsive flow heightened by rupture, all these can feel energetic, exuberant, tonic" (2007: 20). This can be applied to shows like *Tramadol Nights* and *Limmy's Show*, where animation, digital graphics, live action, stand up, music, sketches, and so on are all juxtaposed. The individual segments each stand on their own, but together their interactions and juxtapositions can work to create new meanings and an overall whole that has a particular tone and affect. Additionally, linking the thematic content of altered mental states from shows like these with this aesthetic demonstrates another type of affect. Many comedy shows, particularly sketch shows, provide unusual ways of viewing the world, but *Tramadol Nights* and *Limmy's Show* create a patchwork that focusses upon all the negative possibilities and horrific scenarios, somewhat like a bad dream or bad trip, giving versions of the world that are relentlessly dark. If these shows are contrasted with, for instance, *The Fast Show* (BBC 2, 1994-1997), it can be seen that the latter is far more up-beat, bright and positive in both thematic content and appearance, emphasising the 'energetic, exuberant, tonic' qualities in its pace and style, whereas the

dark comedies are more exemplar of Dyer's 'shock, chance and disorientation'. *Limmy's Show* borrows generic features of children's programming, daytime soap opera, horror or even late-night premium rate phone-in quizzes, but these familiar (and generally non-disturbing, aside from the case of horror) programme forms are made strange and uncomfortable by the introduction of, or drawing attention to, disturbing possibilities within them – a technique that stands out as especially uncanny in the case of the genres which are normally associated with very cheery or positive escapist qualities. The result is a dark imagining of these genres, in which all the things that could go wrong are shown. Indeed, *Limmy's Show* could be described as a systematic presentation of pessimism and the fear of failure; that things are only ever a hair's breadth from falling apart.

Dyer further comments that *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 1997-2001) "…deployed both exaggeration and inappropriateness" (2007: 41) as part of their aesthetics. For example, the opening credits for *The Day Today* were "…entirely accurate in reproducing the brash, high-speed, explosive style of contemporaneous news programme credits, but in the exaggeration also highlighting their willed excitement, false connections between elements and self-importance" (Ibid.). In other words, the parody was able to expose usually-hidden/passed-over negative elements in contemporary news presentation, much as the sad state of the A-Team in the *Tramadol Nights* parody highlights the negative consequences of warfare on veterans in a more overt way than the original series, and the parody of a substance abuse drama, 'The Drugs', in *Burnistoun* foregrounds the melodramatic and patronising tone frequently taken by such films. In all these cases it is exaggeration or excess, especially of bad qualities, that creates both the joke and its commentary, reinforcing the strong presence of this device in dark comedy. It is also notable that while Dyer suggests the differentiating factor between reading something as pastiche or parody is excess (2007: 48), he highlights that they both

work in a way that "deforms the style of its referent" (56). Deforming something in order to create humour is a technique that has wide applicability to dark comedy in terms of its visual style; deformed bodies have been discussed at length already, and the deformation of traditional temporal and spatial structures can now be added to the list of significant features of the dark comedy programmes under consideration here.

Non-Visual Comic Elements, Dream Work and Joke Work

This thesis has already considered the possibility that Bakhtin's 'language of the marketplace' (familiar and frank cursing and coarse speaking that took place in a delineated and carnivalesque space, full of references to the bodily lower stratum and conveying a sense of performance and community) is applicable to dark comedies, but this aspect can be examined in more detail in relation to how it works in conjunction with aesthetics. The strategy of creating humour via an increasingly excessive chain of dark comic content is evident across all the programmes under consideration here, and a key means by which excess (and a sense of over-determination) is constructed is combining language and visuals in ways that repeat and represent the same material in different but complimentary ways. One instance of this has been seen above in Chapter 4, in the interrogation scene from *A Touch of Cloth* during which Cloth's words amplified the joking around his prosthetic erection, and the important feature to note is that the verbal element itself contained clear reference to physicality and a bodily aesthetics (an aesthetics that was also excessive).

This is further exemplified in the *Modern Toss* sketch 'Village Rebrand', in which the recurring character of Mr Tourette the sign-painter is commissioned to provide the signage for a place that intends to bid for

Village of the Year status. He first constructs a banner for the church fete that reads 'Spunk Drinking Festival', and calls the vicar a cunt when he complains; Tourette then creates a sign for the Punch and Judy show that terms it a 'TRADITIONAL WIFE BEATING DISPLAY', before making an aerial banner for the vintage air show that reads 'HITLER'S COCK'. He dismisses the organiser's dismay by saying, "It works for me. I saw one of those crash into a bus last year." Finally, the main sign for the village is revealed at a public ceremony: 'TOURIST ASS FUCKING CENTRE'. As a local dignitary exclaims, "Oh my goodness, that's not what we asked for!" the 'HITLER'S COCK' banner does a fly-by (Figure 6.11). It is notable that the verbal joking here is not only firmly around the theme of the body, but also around sex and violence/death, with references to domestic violence, an air disaster, and Hitler activating a variety of associations around mistreatment and destruction. There are a number of taboo transgressions including reference to sex acts, to an intersection of religion and sex, and the disrespect of religious officials, plus the frank descriptions and swearing that is characteristic of grotesque and carnivalesque speech. As can be seen from listing the features in this way, they add up to present a wide range of the topics common to dark comedy in the space of one sketch, escalating the content towards a crescendo in which multiple visual and verbal jokes are taking place at the same time. The overall excess of this scenario is created in large part by the language (and by language juxtapositions/combinations – not just anyone's cock, but *Hitler's* cock), yet this language also has a bodily aesthetics inherent to it that is not only evident in the meaning that is heard, but unequivocally written on the screen in the animation, and its subtitles – which are a feature of the sketch rather than an added option (Figure 6.12).

Figure 6.11. 'Village Rebrand'.   *Figure 6.12.* Unequivocal, corporeal
                                                          language.

There is an interesting underlying theme of an excess of language being itself laughable, indicated in the fact that the sketch is about a character named Mr Tourette. A prosaic description of Tourette Syndrome might be 'an excess of communication', and the fact that Mr Tourette is given this moniker and a job as a sign-writer (in which he has the opportunity to literally excessively signal his words to the world) is in itself a dark over-determination of circumstances. Additionally, by invoking the neurological condition, the sketches conform to the dark comedy propensity to derive humour from disability.

Such comic excess in language usage can also be seen in the example of the characters of Ellie Grace and Mommy from *Little Britain USA* (whose game of finishing the sentence "I love you more than…" with an increasingly saccharine list of things is invariably disrupted by young Ellie Grace coming out with phrases related to sex and pornography), and once more the dark comic preoccupation with the body that leads even non-visual content to involve a graphic bodily aesthetics is evident. In the case of both Mr Tourette and Ellie Grace, the humour involves the inappropriate nature of their language given the context they are in, and Ellie Grace causes embarrassment for her mother via the fact that bystanders overhear the young girl making sexual remarks; yet, these sketches also follow the pattern of having built in insulation against overstepping boundaries beyond which viewers may feel too uncomfortable about laughing at the content. Ellie Grace is played by Matt Lucas and visibly does not resemble an actual small girl.

Therefore, when she exclaims to her Mommy, "I love you more than… black cock", although it still has the capacity to sound shocking via its sexual nature (and its reflection of racist stereotyping), the scenario is presented in an abstracted way that may be easier to find amusing than if viewers could see that an actual young girl actress had to use the sexual phrases. Mr Tourette is animated, and the further fact that the words of his sketches are mumbled in inaccurate French and subtitled in English means that there are a variety of distancing strategies between the implication of people with Tourette Syndrome being a source of laughter, and the laughter of the viewers at the segment itself. Once more, the notions of excess and demonstrating fictionality (or unreality) through visual means can be seen as important to dark comedy even when the basic content of the jokes is being most obviously signalled through language.

There is a type of Freudian language usage that is also relevant to dark comedy: the kind of misuse of speech that sees someone deliberately mispronouncing, mixing up or inventing new words or phrases for the purpose of being humorous, which may be read as a way of finding "enjoyment in the attraction of what is forbidden by reason" (Freud, 1960: 153-4). This can occur not only in relation to speech but also in terms of imaginative misunderstanding, demonstrating illogical thinking, and deliberately confusing fantasy and reality: "The rebellion against the compulsion of logic and reality is deep-going and long-lasting" and represents a reaction to the pressures of having to conform to critical reasoning in our usual, everyday dealings (154). These kinds of rebellions are often what is seen in the speech, behaviour and attitudes of comedy characters, and part of the pleasure derived from observing their antics could be ascribed to the same thing. Seeing critical reasoning overcome and nonsense or illogic focussed upon instead, especially if the viewer can identify with the transgressing characters and laugh with them rather than superiorly laughing *at* them, could be

thought of as a liberating experience. At the same time, the knowledge that the situation is fictional and that this is 'permitted' enjoyment of deviation from critical and rational thinking insulates and distances the viewer from the real-life application and consequences of that deviation. It is a way of experiencing, testing, or confronting ways of thinking and being that are typically deemed 'unusual' under the everyday constraints of critical reason, in a safe way that preserves the integrity of the viewing subject in terms of both their own perception of their mind and body, and the perceptions of others. Freud suggests that certain states of mind allow the subject more easily to overcome the pressures of critical reasoning and to take pleasure in nonsense; as will be seen, dreaming is one such state, but another that he names is induced by alcohol, which "reduces the inhibiting forces, criticism among them, and makes accessible once again sources of pleasure which were under the weight of suppression" (1960: 155). So here a link can be seen with Freudian theory and the apparent strategy of dark comedy to employ visual and verbal qualities that mimic states of intoxication or other altered mental states. By giving viewers something to listen to, or a point of view, that recalls these states of mind, maybe the suggestion of being able to safely or permissibly overcome criticism and take pleasure in the humour is also given.

It is not only through 'pleasure in nonsense' that dark comedy uses language to its advantage; the status of the speaker can affect how the humour of their speech works, as in the case of naïve characters: "The naïve occurs if someone completely disregards an inhibition because it is not present in him – if, therefore, he appears to overcome it without any effort. It is a condition for the naïve's producing its effect that we should know that the person concerned does not possess the inhibition; otherwise we call him not naïve but impudent" (Freud, 1960: 225-6). Many dark comedies create naïve characters in order to get laughter from displaying their naivety; in a sense, they falsify the state as a joke

itself, and it may also be the case that hearing characters 'unintentionally' produce unexpected humour (for example, cutting remarks or smut from a small child) elicits a different kind of response to hearing similar remarks come intentionally from non-naïve characters. In other words, people without internal censorship produce jokes that hearers might accept more readily precisely because they are naïve. In fact, it might be suggested that joke-makers "often represent themselves as naïve, so as to enjoy a liberty that they would not otherwise have been granted [without censure]" (Freud, 1960: 229). A key element in such humour is that viewers themselves *do* have the inhibition not possessed by the naïve character, and therefore perceive what is funny about their behaviour or remarks; if laughter is successfully elicited, it is the viewer who has revealed their 'dirty mind' or nasty sense of humour, while the naïve joke-maker enjoys insulation from the same criticism. Obviously, this insulation is only fleeting and illusive in the case of scripted dark comedy (where the naïve character has been deliberately written in this manner by non-naïve creators, to take advantage of the effect), and a second reaction to such humour is to recognise this and respond to the egregiousness.

A feature of naïve characters in dark comedy is their propensity to say things, or to be a key part of situations, that have the potential to be considered offensive or taboo by viewers, as seen with the above example of Ellie Grace, whose potential offence was mitigated (albeit in a way that brought its own grotesque and uncanny elements with it) via the young girl character being played by an older man. However, Freud has noted another aspect of joking that can, like the other techniques for insulating dark comic content, help to circumvent criticism: "We are inclined to give the *thought* the benefit of what has pleased us in the *form* of the joke; and we are no longer inclined to find anything wrong that has given us enjoyment and so to spoil the source of a pleasure. If the joke has made us laugh, moreover, a disposition

most unfavourable for criticism will have been established in us" [italics in original] (1960: 162). This has implications for the debates that surround dark comedy and offensiveness, perhaps explaining the tendency on the part of people to overlook potential offence in the content of humour that has made them laugh; it is not necessarily the specific content itself that causes humour or offence to be taken from it, but how well the form of the presentation succeeds in eliciting laughter in the first instance (after which it becomes harder for people to criticise the content due to the inherent self-criticism that would come with it). If this is indeed the case, the formal techniques discussed above – all potentially working to make it easier to laugh at the material of dark comedy – are even more important to this type of programme in terms of its broadcastability, avoidance of censure/censor and criticism than ever.

This chapter has already considered some of the ways in which dark comedies can be seen employing aesthetics suggesting hallucination and a sense of unreality by taking up the point of view of characters with mental health problems that manifest these symptoms. Bergson points out that there is a further mental state that can function in a similar way, and it is possible to see an aesthetics linked to this in dark comedy as well: "Now, there is a sane state of the mind that resembles madness in every respect, in which we find the same associations of ideas as we do in lunacy, the same peculiar logic as in a fixed idea. This state is that of dreams. […] *Comic absurdity is of the same nature as that of dreams*" (1956: 180). Bergson's thinking here reflects the same connections made by Freud when he linked the dream work of *The Interpretation of Dreams* with the joke work of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Freud believed that the contents and aesthetics of dreams accorded with those of jokes, in a way that is particularly visually apparent: "…the process of condensation, with or without the formation of substitutes, of representation by nonsense and

by the opposite, of indirect representation, and so on, which [...] play a part in producing jokes, show far reaching agreement with the processes of the 'dream work'" (1960: 197). As has been discussed above, in terms of aesthetics these concepts have obvious applicability to comedy conventions such as one actor playing a number of roles in the same text, and to the presence of the actor as a visual 'layer' of the character they are playing, the evidence of their own shape, size, voice, gender, age, and so forth being amusingly visible as contradictory to those of the character. Similarly, both verbal and visual humour in dark comedies is often derived from the circumstance of one thing sounding/appearing somewhat like, or standing in for, another (typically sexual) thing. Phallic humour typifies this category, and an example from *Catterick* can be seen in Figures 6.13 and 6.14, in a scene where two characters consummate their relationship with each other through the metaphor of a jumbo Swiss roll (note how in 6.14 the viewer is given the POV of the character offering up the Swiss roll, and how the aesthetics of pornography are imitated here). The Freudian dream and joke work concepts of substitution and representation by other both pertain.

Figure 6.13.   Visual sexual metaphor in *Catterick*.   *Figure 6.14.*

The accordance between the dream work and the joke work is used by Freud to explain that both circumstances provide the opportunity for repressed material to circumvent the usual prohibitions and restrictions of the super-ego (via such mechanisms as representation by other or representation by nonsense, et cetera) and the visibility of what appear

to be these techniques in dark comedies indicates that the programme creators are at least following the traditions of joking that Freud sought to psychoanalytically categorise through those terms. However, I have already suggested that there is value in following Freud and considering that the high degree of taboo content joked about in dark comedies *is* a reflection of comedy's ability to allow engagement with transgressive topics, and the fact that there is a parallel between dream work and joke work that can be seen to manifest visually becomes even more relevant here: by using aesthetics that borrow the qualities of dreaming, the dark comedies have a further strategy by which to signal 'unreality' to viewers, and thereby to highlight that the content need not be taken seriously. At the same time, the confused and unreliable perception that characterises dreams and hallucinations, and helps to signal unreality in texts that adopt these aesthetics, can be played with by those texts so that viewers are unsure as to whether what they are seeing is supposed to be read as in a character's dream/mind, or their reality (as happens frequently in *Limmy's Show*, for example). At these times, the viewer's knowledge that they are watching a fictional text works against them, as they know that fiction *can* include fantastic things *as* reality if it so desires. Thus a sense of uncertainty and disorientation that once again draws attention to the limitations or fallibility of the human mind and perception can be obtained from dark comedies that use the aesthetics of altered mental states as part of their visual make-up.

Recall Leder's position on the dys-appearing body: "In dys-appearance, the body is thematized at times of dysfunction or problematic operation" (1991: 85). He counts perceptual difficulties as an area that can bring about dys-appearance, causing us to become aware of a difficulty in seeing (and therefore aware of our eyes and the physical element of vision), or, if we see something that leads us to think we are *not* perceiving correctly (i.e., an 'unrealistic' thing) we may be reminded

of the potential for hallucinating or dreaming, and hence that our body can mislead us. Perceptual doubt causes us to become aware of our corporeality, and accordingly I suggest that comedies which seek to replicate faulty perception, and force us to try and make sense of what we are seeing or hearing – such as *Jam* does – also function in this way to draw attention to our corporeality (and corporeal failure).

Conclusions

The aesthetic of dark comedy programmes like *Tramadol Nights* and *Limmy's Show* is, partly as a result of their heavy use of parody and pastiche, highly varied in some ways yet consistent in others: the spoofing of many different types of existing show – from children's animation or puppet shows, to daytime television, foreign news channels, biopics and documentary, action and adventure shows, and horror films – means that the programmes themselves have a hybrid appearance, moving between live action and animation or scenes involving puppet characters, and between sketches and traditional stand up or monologues directed to the camera/studio audience. With *Tramadol Nights*, the title may be of some use in shedding light on one possible intended effect of this hybridity: recreating a kind of hallucinogenic or drug-induced fantasy/dream-sequence on screen (and therefore directly co-opting viewers into this style of perception). In this way, these shows can be seen as similar to *Jam*, in which the perspective of the viewer appears designed to ally with the perspective of intoxicated or otherwise-affected characters who perceive reality in a compromised way, or to simply provide an analogue to what taking certain drugs or experiencing a mental illness-induced fantasy might be like, as entertainment. The BBC show *Ideal* also makes use of drug-induced fantasy sequences, as does *Shameless*, and the dark comedy

status of both of these programmes further supports the idea that this might be an important feature of the aesthetics of this type of humour.

The fantasy/hallucination device can be seen again in *Psychoville* in scenes where David apprehends a song and dance number performed by waxwork serial killers, and Jeremy Goode sees the Silent Singer, for instance. Unlike with segments such as that of the soup-eating man in *Limmy's Show*, and the man who becomes concerned that peoples' faces are changing to swirls, doubt surrounding whether what is being seen is (in-universe) reality or a result of compromised perception is not a feature of these *Psychoville* sequences, and camerawork that positions the viewer as taking the perspective of the characters co-opts them via the experience of seeing these hallucinations into the position of the mentally compromised subject. This is not to say that a sense of doubt as to the reality or provenance of certain events or visions is not effected in the series at all: the apparent animation of Joy's plastic baby in the first series makes use of horror tropes to suggest that the murderous pursuit of Joy the toy enacts is supernaturally prompted, allowing the audience to wonder whether the baby is possessed, before hidden human intervention is revealed to have caused Freddie's movements. Situations like these illustrate the basis of Freud's ideas about pleasure in nonsense, illogical thinking and fantasy, a pleasure that is traded upon in dark comedies in conjunction with techniques that highlight the fictional status of the texts (through parody and pastiche, through excess in language, and through techniques associated with dream work) to produce both viewer enjoyment and to circumvent critical reasoning without penalty. Another technique that seeks to render surprising or shocking taboo transgressions both amusing and palatable can be seen in the dark comic reliance upon (faux) naïve characters as sources of potentially offensive content, and this may help to explain the high proportion of these characters in dark comedy programmes.

Moments of intertextuality that may prompt the recognition of doubling, copying, echoing and repetition in the appearances of characters, actors, sets and props, have the potential to work with these other aesthetic techniques of disorientation and temporal fluidity set up within dark comedies to support an overall experience of a viewer subjectivity that is confused and unstable, which might in turn increase the possibility of viewers identifying or aligning with characters in the programmes who are experiencing the same fragile state. This is a situation that draws attention to what might be the most important element of what is offered by engagement with dark comedy: the ability to experience/explore or confront fears about the fragility and fallibility of the human body and mind at a safe and minimising remove from 'real' life, and it appears therefore that the (simultaneous) competing sense of reality and fiction created by the aesthetics of these dark comedies may help to prompt feelings of the uncanny, or of disorientation and uncertainty, that give the programmes their distinctive 'sense' to viewers. Dark comedies appear to provoke moments of uncertainty and ambivalence regularly, not only through presenting situations that thematically would not normally be found funny using structural and aesthetic conventions that typically signal comedy, but also by taking content, form, and juxtapositions between them to such excessive or bizarre lengths that one might start to wonder if indeed *that* itself is the joke (as in Chris Morris's work, for example).

Finally, throughout this analysis, even aspects of dark comedies that initially seem to be focussed away from a bodily aesthetics – either through having little to do with aesthetics, as in the case of language, or being unrelated to the body, as in the case of non-representational signs – can be seen on closer inspection to in fact link back to corporeality and physicality in various ways. This means that the absolute centrality of bodily aesthetics as a theme of, and the fragile

and fallible body as a marker of, dark comedy has been further cemented here.

Conclusion

> Limmy: "Do you ever get the feeling that you don't really know what you're doing, in general? Has anybody ever asked you, 'What did you do that for?' and you're like, 'I don't know'? Have you ever owned something that you thought looked good and everybody else thought looked crap? Have you ever said 'Aye' to something to which you should have said 'No', something you really didn't want to do? You were asked a question and you thought, 'No way', but said, 'Aye, alright. Aye, why not!' In fact, do you ever get the feeling that from the day you were born to the day you'll die, you haven't got a clue about what you're doing? Do you? Aye, well here… join the club!"
>
> (*Limmy's Show*, Series 2 Episode 6, 2011)

Sex, Death, and the Strangely Familiar

Laura Kipnis explains the process of sublimation as when "socially unacceptable impulses and contents are channelled through and buried in [something else]" – for example – "in the artistic work for future critics and historians to elicit and decode" (1993: 136). I suggest that it is possible to see dark comedies as one such repository in which these impulses and contents have ended up, destined to reveal something about contemporary anxieties in Britain in the very late twentieth century and early twenty-first. Taken in the context of a darker turn toward, and within, other specific kinds of television texts (for instance, the medical drama, apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic drama, or police procedural drama) a pattern of sublimated fears about social, moral or personal destruction starts to become visible, and the individual preoccupation with loss of control over one's self, represented through

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depictions of the body, becomes its key motif. In displaying repeated incidents of characters experiencing pain or illness, or sexual arousal, or feeling nauseated, or needing to use the toilet, and framing humour around these feelings and incidents, perhaps it is the case that dark comedy programmes are unusually committed to drawing viewer attention to the corporeal and dependant nature of our bodies. As I have argued, they are certainly adept at drawing our attention to the appearance of bodies or physical actions.

If it is the case that attention is consistently drawn towards bodily functions and sensations, then it might also be said that the particular displays of such functions seen in the programmes – usually involving excess, things going wrong, gross-out or unexpected or unusual behaviour – show this dependence upon and unavoidable tie to the body as embarrassing, limiting or otherwise negative, and as impacting upon the ability to present ourselves to others as we would really wish. After all, our "…social performances are threatened by the possibility of perpetual failure; performances may be disrupted by forgotten lines, embarrassment, misinformation and discrepancy" (Turner, 1984: 111). In other words, dark comedy has the potential to remind us of anxiety surrounding failure, particularly with regards to discrepant physicality, and of the state of being 'trapped' as an embodied individual; "Our bodies are an environment which can become anarchic" (1984: 7), and we cannot escape a whole variety of crude and potentially embarrassing or distressing needs and urges. However, the fact that the dark comedy programmes additionally encourage the idea of finding humour in these moments could also work to diminish the power of bodily anxieties by presenting them in a context of non-seriousness (and here is where the carnivalesque sense of revelling in and celebrating the base or grotesque can really be applied). Therefore, scenes like the interrogation sequence in *A Touch of Cloth*, showing Jack Cloth with an unwanted erection, may be seen as both

uncomfortable yet liberating at once, and this dual effect is a key contributor to the distinctive tone and feel of this type of comedy.

Historically, the concept of mind-body dualism has always assigned greater status to the rational and incorporeal mind and relegated the body to a lesser position: "In the West there has been a tendency to identify the essential self with the incorporeal mind, the body relegated to an oppositional moment" (Leder, 1991: 69). This is a divide that can be seen replicated in the perception of wit, wordplay, and other 'high-minded' areas of comedy as more sophisticated and complex than those comedy forms that are centred upon the body (such as gross-out, pratfalls and slapstick). Dark comedy, as I have been discussing it here, may be seen as a curious paradox in that while its visual elements appear compulsively obsessed with bodies and physical exaggerations and failings, it is also considered as a type of comedy that can be sophisticated, requiring a certain way of thinking in order to 'get' the jokes. Indeed, it might take a mental leap to translate *prima facie* serious scenarios into something to feel comfortable about laughing at, but I am tempted to suggest that the tendency towards casting dark comedy as an acquired or highbrow taste is more about deflecting and disguising the fact that the content it invites laughter at is frequently actually puerile, unsophisticated and open to interpretation as offensive.

This kind of deflection can be seen through William Paul's consideration of the Charlie Chaplin film *City Lights* (Chaplin, 1931), in which he notes that many critics and analyses have ignored the sexual content and innuendo within the film and focussed instead upon satirical readings of scenes and events. He uses the opening scene as an example, in which Chaplin is surprised while asleep on a statue that is about to be unveiled; speeches take place and the statue is uncovered, along with Chaplin. As he attempts to climb down and out of the way he becomes impaled up the arse through a convenient hole in his trousers by the

sword of a figure in the statue's tableau. "At one point during his struggles to free himself, the national anthem is played, which compels him to stand rigidly to attention until he can resume his struggle" (1994: 58). Chaplin further manages to sit on the face of the sword-bearer, and then steps on his crotch, leading Paul to remark that "[i]f all this anal and genital imagery represents satire, it is hard to see exactly what is being satirized. Something else is going on here, and quite insistently so" (Ibid.). Paul identifies something very important here in noting the insistence and consistency of lowbrow imagery in the scene (and, more widely, the film as a whole): there is a message being conveyed that is not satirical – at least, not in the sense that the critics ignoring the sexual imagery are identifying – but is apparently that there is humour to be found in viewing a person getting into sexually-inflected, risqué and taboo scrapes. There is even the suggestion of an intermingling of sex and violence in the presence of the sword and in the crotch-stepping. There is repeated humour around this specific theme, much as in *Nighty Night*, and it seems as though the prevalence of these kinds of repetitive variations upon a theme are indeed signalling something about what is found interesting (and funny) about bodies. At the same time, the fact that there appears to be an impulse towards locating the interest and funniness of comedies that display these elements elsewhere – i.e., as being satirical and requiring sophisticated comedy taste to 'get' – suggests that, for some, a degree of denial about this is at work: perhaps reflecting a desire to repress any reminders of the state of embodiment once more.

The examples considered during this thesis have demonstrated that the themes of sex and death, inextricably tied up with the body, are central to dark comedy programmes, often providing a core around which the narrative and its humour revolves. *Psychoville* can be seen as an extended exploration of the subject of death and its relation to violence and mental and physical illness, for example, and *Nighty Night* as an

extended exploration of the subject of sex and its relation to the same things (and, for that matter, to death as well). It is in turn possible to see this obsession with death as reflective of a variety of factors: as much as we hide death away from view in real life, and avoid our own mortality, we appear thirsty for mediated depictions of death. "It is as if the growing removal of actual death from the public sphere has stimulated a demand for an anaesthetized 'knowledge' of death. Perhaps the thousands of deaths we see on television each year stand as an empty testament to our continued existence" (Shilling, 2003: 165). After death we lose control of our bodies, and dark comedy habitually shows dead bodies having terrible things done to them. If contemporary preoccupations with health-consciousness, careful presentation of the self, and so on, are all geared towards prolonging and controlling our bodies in the best way possible, death is feared because it gives up control (of that body) to others whilst simultaneously absenting/erasing the work and worth that is inscribed on the physical component of ourselves. Dark comedy programmes frequently show worst case scenarios that play upon insecurities and fears surrounding this. Yet again, while the humorous treatment of these scenarios may be read as a reminder that it is the dead people who effectively have the last laugh (as however a corpse is treated, the efforts of the incompetent undertakers or sexual defilers are only acting upon what is now an inanimate, unfeeling object), and viewers' ability to laugh is assisted by the fact that the comedies are fictional, there is nevertheless a potentially unsettling message in the fact that the topic and inevitability of death is so compelling that it can even be located – in extreme ways, no less – within an overarching genre that is typically associated with entertainment, frivolity and fun.

"Everyone will die, the argument goes, and the only way we can deal with death is by constructing categories that deny dying – such as 'beauty/health'" (Gilman, 1995: 119). Dark comedy, however, uses

graphic visual content to throw a spanner into the works of these categories by presenting instances of failure of such attempts at denial. For example, in the character and appearance of Maxine Bendix from *Tittybangbang*, viewers see an ageing woman who has attempted to continue to visually adhere to popular media ideals of beauty and health by getting a variety of cosmetic surgeries. Unfortunately, these have been unsuccessful in achieving her aim in a number of obvious ways; silicone leaks out of splits in the skin of her breasts, her lips are oversized and her cheeks and forehead are also bulging and taut, giving the impression of an allergic reaction to something instead of suggesting a youthful healthy appearance. Other characters are horrified and uncomfortable upon viewing her rather than perceiving her as beautiful and healthy, and her predicament exposes the futility of human attempts to deny ageing and mortality in this way. A person's belonging to the constructed categories of health and beauty cannot be faked, the message comes: health and beauty are only temporary states. Characteristic of dark comedy particularly is the excessive nature of the visual presentation, of course; Maxine is an extreme case – the point is being overtly made.

It could be suggested that by looking for the humour in dying and deadness, dark comedies enable viewers to confront the power of illness and death, maybe in a way that – having first been reminded about it by the visceral jolt of suddenly being faced with the visual imagery on the screen – enables us to relegate it to the back of our minds again as something less serious through its location within a comedy. However, once again, it is precisely this location and sustained presentation of themes and aesthetics of illness and death (such as violence, gore or the breakdown of bodily boundaries) in comedy *at all* that I have demonstrated is the more significant point upon which to focus: the fact that the presence and excessive aesthetics of this type can be seen not only in television programmes in

which they might be considered 'correctly' situated, such as police procedural dramas or hospital-based documentary shows, but here in programmes from an overarching area traditionally understood not to be a typical location for the horrific or disturbing. It is indeed this that has led to the moniker '*dark* comedy' apparently becoming needed in the first place – to acknowledge that the content is not what might be automatically expected of plain 'comedy', and of the half-hour sketch show or sitcom style formats it inhabits.

The aesthetics of the body that dark comedy makes use of so heavily can also be implicated in the ability of this type of programme to simultaneously signal mundanity and then disturb it to evoke the uncanny. Karen Lury suggests that the heavy use of the close-up shot in television can be accounted for by more than just the practicalities of being able to see details on a relatively small screen: "The frequent proximity of the face and the emotions displayed means that the close-up on television is both sensationalist and, oddly perhaps, mundane. Our intimate proximity to the face would seem almost hysterical (alarming and/or funny) in another medium, such as cinema. On television, however, although the impact may be excessively emotional at times, this is not always the case, and, even in these more extreme instances, it rarely seems peculiar or threatening" (2005: 30). In dark comedy programmes, viewers are certainly treated to facial (and other body part) close-ups that are excessive and sensationalist, and I would argue that the unusual or excessive appearances of the faces and their expressions seen in close-up works against the mundanity Lury has identified in other contexts, providing that peculiar or threatening characteristic. If this is the case, the stylistic choice to focus upon facial close-ups can be read not only as a function of the comedy (in that character reactions and humorous facial expressions constitute a key element of how comedy is shot and conveyed anyway), but also of the darkness, in that the close-ups typically reveal something strange or

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unnatural. For example, a tight and lingering close-up on the face of Maureen in *Psychoville* or Margery Dawes in *Little Britain* enhances the ability to see the make-up, false hair and prosthetics that attempt to transform Reece Shearsmith and Matt Lucas, as well as allowing glimpses of their own physiognomy underneath the disguise; in antithesis to naturalistic appearance, the components facilitating the transformation of actor to character are available to be perused in detail, and imperfections and 'unreal' elements can be identified. A close-up of Cartoon Head provides nothing but his bizarre and inexpressive mask where a human face should be, while the 'Burnistoun Butcher' serial killer offers a face covered in blood and sellotape. Close-ups may be a conventional shot in British television, but dark comedy often makes use of them to bring viewers face to face with unconventional visages, once more making the familiar unfamiliar.

"Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe" (Butler, 2004: 32). It is understandable, therefore, that British dark comedies are overwhelmingly set in the exact milieu in which many of their viewers will live, and the vulnerabilities of the characters reflect problems relevant to this context; the ability to recognise and easily identify with the settings on screen is crucial to the workings of the comedies in terms of how they express and explore the fears and vulnerabilities of that audience. Limmy's depressed office worker in the company canteen is likely to be an identifiable figure for British audiences; he can thus substitute for viewers in a more effective way than depictions situated in less mundane or recognisable locations. Lury, following Mills, also speaks of British comedy television's move away from theatrical-style studio sets and towards comedy verité stagings, noting that the "…movements of characters in such sets are often looser and more mobile than in a conventional sitcom shooting style" (2005: 157). This may be of benefit to dark comedies (and

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indeed, many of the example programmes discussed here are heavily non-studio based, or filmed to show that there is an actual fourth wall to rooms) in that as well as allowing for less theatrical blocking, any unusual or exaggerated mannerisms can be seen within/juxtaposed with real streets, shopping centres, pubs, et cetera. This is all the better to produce a sense of dark comedy's characters existing in a twisted version of the real world outside the audience's door, as opposed to being sequestered away in obviously set-like spaces. Indeed, dark comedy programmes often reflect the television version of everyday spaces (such as the living rooms of houses, city streets and municipal buildings) back to viewers, showing domestic and familiar locations with subtle – and not so subtle – unusual additions to the décor, and with unusual activities taking place in those spaces. Like horror, dark comedy can effect to make familiar places strange and draw the eye to unusual features, in contrast to other television formats which attempt to construct a familiarity within their settings that will allow them to pass as anything but unusual (as, for example, in soap operas). The duality in dark comedy programmes of invoking the familiar and then making it noticeably strange chimes with surrealism and the uncanny.

The addition of online features accompanying programmes, and the ability to view television via computer or mobile devices in a variety of locations, contributes another angle to this; familiar technological devices that are used for a variety of personal tasks, and familiar personal routines of travel or waiting, can now supplement the traditional domestic television screen as a site where a programme's content and aesthetics can be experienced, and this may be able to insinuate the uncanny further into a range of the viewer's own everyday spaces. *Psychoville* made good use of this technique, for example, via online content in which viewers could access websites that appeared 'normal' (although comedic), but were programmed to deliver

unexpected jump-scares to those navigating them. It is interesting to consider therefore whether dark comedy programmes may be able to derive some of their affect from the fact that they bring particular types of experiences to viewers whilst they are situated in their routine or personalised spaces – spaces that are also visually reflected in the aesthetics of the programmes themselves.

In discussing the uncanny horror of *The Shining* (Kubrick, 1980) and *Eraserhead* (Lynch, 1977), Freeland notes that they present "a picture of the world as an evil and forbidding place. Using narrative and cinematic features they in a sense argue that the world is uncanny and hence horrifying: They create a convincing vision of an uncanny world parallel to, perhaps congruent with, our own" (2000: 215). She highlights how they "describe a world dominated by a foreboding of fate or doom that has no clear, obvious explanation" (216), and it is clear that a number of the dark comedies under consideration – particularly *Limmy's Show*, for example – do the same thing. It is also notable that reactions to human disasters are often characterised by discourses of 'non-understanding' in their aftermath, with people struggling to make sense of why they came to happen, and it seems that uncertainty and an inability to explain, whether linked to specific incidents, or to an overall sense of foreboding that such incidents contribute towards, can be an important component of what is represented or explored in dark texts.

The Un-topia of Dark Comedy

In the first episode of the second series of *Phoenix Nights*, the following incident occurs: the eponymous Phoenix Club is burning down, and a close-up of a child-shaped charity collection box that owner Brian Potter has been using to fraudulently obtain donations shows it melting in the flames. In the aftermath, his friend Jerry rescues it and brings it to

Brian. "I've got your disabled boy, look!" Brian, in his wheelchair, cradles the container as if it were his real child and cries, "My little disabled boy! His face has all melted." "My hands have all melted," adds Jerry sadly, smelling his badly injured palms (Figure 7.1). To my mind, it is scenes like this one that perfectly illustrate the thematic and visual attention dark comedies pay to bodily fragility, and their use of horrific and uncanny imagery for humour and pastiche. There is an excess – an over-determination – in the imagery presented, and part of the humour itself comes from this excess. Brian is in a wheelchair because he is paralysed, his livelihood is in burnt out tatters behind him, his friend beside him is burned; not only this, he is cradling a destroyed item which is both a charity collection and also the uncanny representation of a disabled child (which is now horrifically disfigured). Not only *that*, but Brian's mixture of sadness and relief at the state of the collection box is clearly prompted not by its pathetic state but by the fact that it contains destroyed money, which further *wasn't* actually being collected for charity, but for his own holiday fund; while Jerry believes he has been injured in the cause of rescuing something dear to Brian due to his disability and his desire to help children, he has unwittingly sacrificed his skin for an unfeeling scam. The humour in this set-up is dark even without the visual imagery, but with the blood, burns and soot graphically visible, and the melted visage of the plastic child rescued from a fire and being held as if real on show (Figure 7.2), there is another set of associations, recognitions and audacities for audiences to encounter.

Figure 7.1. Phoenix Nights.   *Figure 7.2.* Dark and uncanny imagery.

There are wounds on show here, but in terms of wound culture as laid out by Mark Seltzer, this dark comic context actually makes fun of the trauma and injury in the aftermath of a fire. Imagery of a burned disabled child being rescued is subverted by substituting a horrific plastic replica and making it a symbol of greed and fraud, and the emotion of the central character is a parody of grief for the child. In wound culture, "[o]ne discovers again and again the excitations in the opening of private and bodily and psychic interiors: the exhibition and witnessing, the endlessly reproducible display, of wounded bodies and wounded minds in public" (Seltzer, 1998: 253). *Phoenix Nights* originated as a mockumentary and elements of this survive into the final aesthetics of the programme, highlighting the sense of exhibition and witnessing of the frequent disasters and mental and physical breakdowns suffered by the characters. As has been shown in the preceding chapters, many dark comedies make use of this combination of style and content, and by these means the programmes – and this type of comedy television in general – become part of 'the endlessly reproducible display' themselves.

Seltzer's description of "the excitations of the torn and opened body, the torn and exposed individual, as public spectacle" (1998: 253), central to wound culture, has obvious parallels to what McNair has observed concerning sexuality in striptease culture: "…people talking about sex and their own sexualities, revealing intimate details of their feelings and their bodies in the public sphere" (2002: 88). The rise in the number of programmes with confessional content in which real people publically display elements of their private lives has allowed viewers to see intimate, taboo or unedifying behaviour in increasingly detailed and graphic ways, and this has given dark comedies another familiar aesthetic to borrow from and reproduce for humour. Given the propensity for the original programmes themselves to film, edit or provide commentary upon their content in a way that suggests there

may be humour to be found in what is on show, the extra step taken by dark comedies – to exaggerate every element to a level at which the excess itself becomes appreciable, and thereby funny itself – is not even that large. The rise in general usage and familiarity of these reality style documentary aesthetics can be seen running parallel with a rise in the production, popularity and distribution of gonzo and amateur pornography, and the adoption of a toned-down pornographic aesthetic into a variety of types of contemporary television programme has also been noted (McNair, 2002: 61). Once again, dark comedies – with their frequent presentation of graphic or 'excessive' physicality, sexual or otherwise – are a case where this is particularly visible. The display of nudity (either real or prosthetic), acts, clothing and objects associated with fetish or extreme sex, and a candid approach to sexual joking runs through a number of the comedies considered here, and even sexual violence, abuse and paedophilia are visually and verbally presented. While the inclusion of such material has readily been critiqued as lazy as opposed to funny, and designed only to shock, it is this shock that – like the visceral jolt upon seeing a graphic and bloody scene – signals that something that has *gone further* than is comfortable, and highlights the necessary role of excess in characterising darkness.

It is also the case that:

> those things that threaten the boundaries of bodies or bodily norms […] are frequently also those things that are threatening in terms of sexual difference and desire. They become objects of horror and fascination in cultural rituals and in forms of representation, particularly in horror and porn texts where images that play with the body and its borders take up the burden of representing the significance of the body, sex, and gender for the culture at large (Härmä and Stolpe, 2010: 117).

The impulse to joke about these same things is reflected in the appearance of elements of bodily boundary-breaking horror and porn aesthetics in dark comedy programmes: images that play with the body

and its borders are played with in turn, and parody and pastiche therefore become key modes within them. Indeed, the frequency of parodic scenes in dark comedy is in part explained by its preoccupation with depicting the same imagery found in other body genre entertainment, but layering humour on top; the parody is a straightforward way of doing this. The notion of dark comedies as presenting a version of the world where everything is excessive or abundant in a negative way (as opposed to in the positive or celebratory way uncovered by Dyer in his reading of the world presented by musicals as utopian, for example (2002: 18)) explains the other part of this recourse to parody. Parody is in itself marked by excess, and whilst the idea of a 'negative utopia' exists in the term dystopia, this is not quite a descriptor of what is portrayed in the dark comic re-imaginings of texts found in the programmes discussed, nor of the 'worlds' in which scenario-based sketches or ongoing plots are situated in British dark comedies (which largely appear to be approximations *of* contemporary Britain). In these texts, settings generically associated with dystopia and science fiction such as post-disaster, or future fascistic/technocratic societies are not represented, and instead the imagery used focusses upon excesses in meaning in an uncanny sense. Something familiar to audiences: (a television representation of) contemporary everyday life and locations, is layered with something else that renders it strange and disturbing; or a version of a familiar programme (as in parody) or of a celebrity (in sketches involving impersonation) is presented in a way that draws attention, frequently by repetition and exaggeration, to particular negative features until they become the thing that appears dominant. To lift imagery from Freud's example of the uncanny from Chapter 2: this is the crocodile, not the coffee table, and it is *this* unreal parallel 'non-place' that is shown in dark comedies.

Lury has adapted Dyer's analysis of the utopian qualities expressed in filmed entertainment to her own consideration of *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* (ITV, 2002-2009; 2013-), highlighting the show's ability to "…create an audio-visual narrative which blatantly combines both the unreal and impossible with a version of the familiar and known world of the everyday (Dyer, 1992: 25)" (Lury, 2005: 178). Both authors demonstrate their sources' characteristic presentation of the no-place/good-place where things are abundant and felt to be better, and the analysis of programmes I have undertaken here shows that adapting this in turn for dark comedy entertainment, where the unreal and impossible are also routinely combined with the familiar and everyday to produce an excessive and ultimately strange version of the world, produces a no-place/bad-place where things are abundant yet worse, but not one that activates dystopian associations. Dyer speaks of the way in which the utopian sensibility often displayed in entertainment texts counteracts conditions of tension, inadequacy and absence in society (for example, the experience of poverty, or disharmony); depictions of excess and affectivity counteract scarcity and boredom, displays of energy counteract exhaustion, and community counters fragmentation, for example (2002: 26), and I suggest that dark comedy's bastardised approach to this dichotomy is to (instead of seeking to distract or provide a temporary escape from everyday problems with utopian solutions) depict the very problems themselves to such a ridiculous and excessive degree that they paradoxically begin to feel minimised and fictionalised via a feeling of utopian abundance, transparency and affectivity motivated by over-determination. A kind of *un*-topia, as it were.

It is interesting to note that Lury's account of *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* identifies some sections that are bordering upon 'dark', and some aesthetics that I have shown are frequent in dark comedy (such as the uncanny doubling of Ant and Dec by the child characters

Little Ant and Dec, who are small boys dressed in suits like the presenters, employed to use their disarming position as children to embarrass celebrities and cross boundaries in ways that their adult counterparts would receive censure for (2005: 182), and adult Ant and Dec's portrayal of "…the 'unfortunate' (bedridden, slow or desperate characters)" (182-3) in their 'Undercover' segment involving the pranking of celebrities who are forced "to reveal the extent of their tolerance for the public and their fans" (183)). Yet the programme as a whole certainly falls within the light entertainment genre; so what is the significance for understanding and differentiating dark comedies that these features can also appear in a light comedy show? It is worth firstly remembering that the presence of some dark humour and dark aesthetics in a British light entertainment programme can be considered as symptomatic of a tendency for dark humour to show up, generally briefly, in many different types of pop culture texts (and indeed, in everyday life) anyway, whether courtesy of the presence of an individual with an acknowledged dark sense of humour, or simply because – as with striptease culture and porno-chic, and wound culture and the spectacle of suffering – it reflects a wider trend in content and aesthetics in general. However, there is clearly a history of techniques like doubling and using naïve characters to 'reveal the truth' of a situation (or achieve other humorous results that are dependent upon their status) in non-dark comedy as well. In answering the question of what it is that is 'different' or significant enough in the case of certain programmes to enable their categorisation as a whole as dark comedy, it is the overall presence of a coherent (negative) message that becomes crucial. Does a programme repeatedly offer, in different ways, the same messages and experiences for the viewer, and are those messages dark in nature?

The overall message to be drawn from *Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway* might be said to be something like, 'people are good sports,

celebrity culture is entertaining and fun, and it is nice to buy and own consumer goods'. In repeated ways, via different kinds of segments in the show, these consistent ideas seem to underpin it. In this context, it is comparatively easy for the 'Undercover' set-ups to be read as examples of the two former messages, rather than as, say, a highlighting of the pitiable status of the 'unfortunate', or a commentary upon authenticity and cynicism surrounding certain types of celebrity self-promotion. Ultimately, Ant and Dec are not out to really 'show up' the celebrities they invite onto their programme, and viewer expectations and readings are likely to take this into account, consciously or not. This can be contrasted with the undercover duping of celebrities by Chris Morris during *Brass Eye*, or the red-carpet ambushing of celebrities practiced by the Paul Kaye character Dennis Pennis, in which the set-ups were embedded alongside consistent messages about the inability of people towards whom respect or importance is usually afforded to exercise common sense or good judgement, or surrounding the idea that it is entertaining to see high-status celebrities taken down a peg or two by having their own failures brought up to them in public. The differences in the messages offered about characters and their life situations (and perhaps about humans and human behaviour more widely) in dark comedies, in contrast with other types of comedy, can be seen in the example texts discussed across these chapters.

The sketches in *Tramadol Nights* highlight the abject status of, and extreme failures experienced by, their subjects without offering the possibility of a lighter reading of these figures or allowing for a brighter future for them to be imagined: Robin Atkins's increasingly desperate biography ends with the information that he died of AIDS; the 'poor wee hing' is tortured by the children and a dog until he is booted (to death?) out of his final frame; Chuck Wochek is left as an entirely paralysed cash cow for his uncaring family; Michael Knight is last seen

overdosing on heroin while driving. In *Nighty Night*, Cathy Cole has been arrested for murder; Don has apparently sustained a serious head injury that has rendered him incapable of resisting Jill's kidnapping plans, and stuck on a boat to Spain with her and Glen. *Psychoville* kills its characters off one by one in horrific ways, and any survivors are left in uncertain circumstances – Jeremy is in police custody and apparently becoming further controlled by the Silent Singer, for example. Even those who are allowed some kind of triumph, such as Jennifer (who is able to take revenge on the serial killing Detective Finney for framing her for murder), still have significant and ongoing difficulties – Jennifer is still paralysed, for instance. The world of dark comedy is not an optimistic one, and its slippery slope-style presentations of the ways in which lives can go badly wrong play exactly upon both contemporary and perennial fears about the risks of becoming a victim of violence or disaster, and about the fragility of the human body and mind.

The lack of a (readily perceptible) way to read the negative excesses shown by many of the dark comedies considered here in an ultimately positive or celebratory manner supports Bakhtin's comments about the original ambivalence of grotesque imagery becoming less evident in the contexts in which it is often employed today. It appears that the contemporary dark comedy programmes that use grotesque imagery in the appearances of their characters are generally doing so to signal or highlight their status as abject, vulnerable, disgusting, horrific or ridiculous, in part to facilitate laughter at them. Fat people, old people, sexually promiscuous people, 'ugly' people… are frequently positioned to be read as figures of derision instead of being celebratory and powerful. Indeed, laughter at these figures contributes to keeping the power structures that disadvantage those groups in place, so the invitation to 'anaesthetise the heart' and laugh at them has to be able to counter any reservations viewers might feel in relation to this. I have thus argued that the representation of grotesque characters as

diverging from socially constructed 'norms' of behaviour and appearance that signal the status of a complete and 'proper' human may make hardening the heart against empathic feelings (and therefore being able to laugh at them) easier.

There is also a basic paradox within carnivalesque concerning the idea of community, and about the sense of the self (as an individual) as an important unit. With its focus upon collective revelry and cooperation, as well as the highlighting of a birth-death-renewal cycle that emphasises the ongoing nature of the world, carnival initially appears to show destruction or death to oneself as merely "the "other side" of birth rather than a source of terror which irrevocably separates the individual from all others" (Rowe, 1995: 33), and as a sign of contribution to a greater process. However, the grotesque aesthetics that go hand in hand with carnival emphasise incompleteness not only in terms of individual lives forming a totality, but in showing individual bodies as incomplete, leaking or losing pieces. Attention is drawn as much to the missing elements as it is to the idea that their absence should not matter, and the missing wholes of individual subjects are effectively spectres that haunt any more positively-inflected possible readings of them, detracting from the 'greater good'. Similarly, when corpses are defiled as though taboos surrounding them do not exist, the missing 'animation' of the living is notable by its very absence, and the joking involved in breaking taboos cannot exist without invoking them even as they are dismissed. In this way dark comedies appear to allow viewers a glimpse of the traditional reading of carnival grotesque as celebratory and positive, before ultimately demonstrating – through the negative and pessimistic circumstances characters are left in – that this is a fleeting or incorrect reading and instead it is the worst possibilities that should be recognised as true.

Bakhtin points out that some kind of moral meaning imposed upon the positive grotesque image is the thing that has the power to erase the

positivity and highlight the negative: he cites the example of celebratory extra-large sausages that "were carried by dozens of men during the Nuremberg carnivals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries" being given "a negative connotation of indecency" by grobianist moral and political ideas that were designed to inspire "disgust or fear" (1984: 63). The laughter provoked by such imagery therefore becomes the laughter of mockery, rather than celebration, dependent upon this moral inflection – a negative judgement of the images – coming into play. In terms of how an updated version of this may apply in contemporary dark comedy, it is certainly the case that disgust and fear are the two major responses that grotesque-appearing characters seem intended to invoke alongside humour in these programmes, and it certainly also seems feasible that an underlying element of this laughter may be mockery produced by a moral climate that cautions against and regulates through undesirability grotesque characteristics (such as being overweight, or having gnarled and pointed teeth, or displaying sexuality too openly, et cetera). Individual viewers can thus have subjective responses that prompt mocking laughter at the sight of particular characters, and the creators of dark comedy can include such appearances in the knowledge that they are capable of prompting the fear or disgust laughter response.

Of course, this is not the only possible response to such imagery; not all viewers would consider it laugh-worthy, nor may all those who do laugh be subscribing to a set of moral conditioning that would explain this laughter as being mocking, and it is plausible that creators could include grotesque visual imagery with the intention that it will be funny, yet without the intention that the laughter should be mocking (*they* might consider it celebratory, for example). It is a complex situation, but since the intentions and motivations behind including or laughing at certain imagery cannot be definitively known, the closest it is possible to come to an answer on whether humour surrounding the grotesque in

contemporary dark comedies appears to be working in the way Bakhtin discusses it is to, as above, make links between such imagery and the overall trend in aesthetics and messages that these programmes contain. Bakhtin's general point is that grotesque imagery is capable of being read both positively and negatively, that Rabelais and his contemporaries would not have found it difficult to read it positively (which is, for Bakhtin, the 'proper' way to view the grotesque), but over subsequent time the imagery has become generally negatively understood due to extrinsic factors that are ideologically grounded. By considering what ideological messages dark comedies might be sending as a whole, the question of what the grotesque is there to support starts to answer the question of how the grotesque is working: the simplified answer is that dark comedies demonstrate a highly pessimistic and negative view of society, culture and the human condition, therefore suggesting that the negative 'incorrect' grotesque is dominant. The possibility of more positive, celebratory readings is not precluded, but the dominant reading must be negative.

For Bakhtin, negation and destruction are a necessary prelude to rebirth and an ultimately positive new beginning, but in modern dark comedies, the new beginning does not come (or if it does, consists of more awful destruction and negativity than before). It is significant that what could be a positive aesthetic is functioning in the most pessimistic possible way in dark comedy, as this ties in with the overall pessimism and negative 'un-topia' of this type of comedy, and shows aesthetics and ideology in harmony with each other (potentially, with ideology affecting the reading of the aesthetic, too). In a similar way that Ant and Dec's celebrity-tricking moments and portrayals of 'unfortunates' can be read as all in good fun in that context thanks to the overall messages of the programme and its comedy, the grotesque appearances and instances of mocking in – for example – *Tramadol Nights* are unlikely to be read in the same positive way, because the

overall message of the programme is one of Nihilism and despair at the state of society and culture. These aesthetics are, essentially, being shown in a bad light by their context, and in the case of dark comedy this is often supported by playing on viewer knowledge of other genres in which similar aesthetics are also used to signal negative things (such as adhering to editing conventions familiar in horror, or presenting the kinds of sets that are familiar from crime thrillers, and so on).

Bergson offers an additional perspective on this by highlighting that aesthetics which suggest non-natural or non-human qualities can promote anaesthetisation of the heart in respect of empathic emotions and allow laughter at 'unreal' appearances and behaviour via a tendentious function (in Freud's terms), or the introduction of an abstract idea (in Bakhtin's), that includes as part of the humour a judgement of the mechanical or excessive features as undesirable. Dark comedies can therefore invoke these negative judgements in respect of transgressive characters and behaviour, and reinforce taboos and fears around being subject to similar failings at the same time. By presenting a world in which such failure is abundant and inescapable – as the programmes do – the excessive un-topia is at once both capable of being recognised as exaggerated and fictional (and hence laughable) *and* capable of conveying underlying pessimistic messages about the precarious and fallible position of the human subject; messages that may be diminished by the laughter, but never entirely eradicated, because they are themselves inherent in it.

A Summary of the Workings of Dark Comedy

What has been noticeably significant through this thesis is that dark comedies seem to do something extremely interesting surrounding the empathic stage of the two-stage process that enables laughter at things that should generate negative emotions; namely, using techniques

which appear designed to draw viewers *into* feeling empathy for, and initially identifying and aligning with, the position or perspective of transgressive characters. This might be considered counter-productive (after all, identifying with a character under threat, in pain, experiencing perceptual problems, and so on, does not seem conducive to laughing at the situation). My analysis of a number of examples has demonstrated that this is where the ambivalence that Bakhtin found sadly lacking in modern interpretations of grotesque instead comes in, and that Freudian theory further illuminates what is taking place. I suggest that dark comedies are a means through which viewers can engage with topics that would ordinarily be repressed or avoided, particularly those around which taboo restrictions and prohibitions have evolved (such as violence and death, illness, and transgressive sexuality). These areas typically have a strong connection to the body and its physicality, and are also ones which occasion negative feelings of unease and denial around them that are connected to fears about mental and corporeal fragility and fallibility. Accordingly, dark comedies present themes and aesthetics that are very much focussed upon this, drawing viewers into acknowledging such fears (for example, about the possibility of being subject to mental and physical breakdown or transgression, or to the effects of it happening in others) through creating moments that align them with characters experiencing the same, using techniques that have the potential to remind viewers of their embodied status and the ease with which personal equilibrium can be lost. These techniques include using graphic aesthetics of the body that may occasion a 'visceral jolt', positioning viewers with the point of view of a character, and using familiar contemporary settings and common scenarios as the jumping-off points for revealing latent threat or the potential for spiralling disaster. A viewer who has been invited to feel empathy in this way is able to consider uncomfortable ideas and possibilities by proxy, and it is around these themes and this stage that

the sense of darkness in dark comedy stems. The first stage of the two-stage process is thus effected.

The dark comedies are, however, aiming for humour to be drawn from the content, and for that to happen, the anaesthetising of the heart has to take place; the viewer must move past the empathy and engagement with the uncomfortable reminders of mortality, failure, being 'out of control', and so forth. So, the material being presented is made to appear highly excessive and 'unreal', emphasising the fictional status of the situations and characters being viewed; having been reminded of the 'dark' content, viewers are encouraged to laugh at it through overt signals that it is permissible to do so and that laughter is an appropriate response. Via performance techniques and excessive and 'unreal' aesthetics, Bergson's wet blanket is thus thrown on the empathic feelings and the ridiculous and laughable nature of the imagery is what remains. Further, in laughing, viewers are in effect engaging in a kind of dismissal of the serious nature of the topics concerned, and a diminishing of the fears surrounding them. In other words, dark comedies provide a space where viewers may confront and ultimately minimise concerns about the human condition that are otherwise avoided or hidden through repression, enabling a safe exploration of them that can be enjoyed as humorous. This could explain both the attraction of this type of comedy, and – when the insulating techniques are ineffective and viewers are not sufficiently convinced of the 'unreality' or non-seriousness of a scenario or joke – why instances of controversy and lack of enjoyment also occur.

There are two particularly important elements to note: one is that the dark subject matter is (and must be able to be read as) inherently ambivalent; it has to be recognised as dark/negative/taboo/et cetera, but also seen as comic, aided in this by exaggeration or other indicators of fiction. The other is that while the seriousness of the topics, and fears surrounding them, is played down by dark comedy, the

programmes nevertheless still maintain the relentlessly negative and pessimistic worldview noted above, acknowledging that they are features of the human condition that are inescapable. As Maureen in *Psychoville* points out, 'We can't have a world without death', and awful, embarrassing, awkward, injurious, upsetting situations happen to people all the time. The centrality of ambivalence, the uncanny, and the dissonant juxtaposition of this pessimism with comedy and laughter is what I suggest is responsible for the 'sense' of dark comedy that appears characteristic in identifying it (as seen in the introduction to this thesis).

The End?

The prevalence of dark comedies on British television is not as great now as it was during the first decade of the 2000s, and whilst it seemed to have grown up alongside the move towards more graphic and visually excessive displays of human physicality, sexuality and fragility in other genres, it has not continued alongside them. To consider why this might be, it is primarily relevant that "British broadcasting is in a period of recession and transition and the early signs are that this is not going to be a congenial environment for [...] risk-taking" (Hunt, 2013: 232), and that press reactions to a number of Frankie Boyle's jokes, to jokes by Jimmy Carr, and surrounding Sachsgate, prove that there are certainly risks to broadcasters in hosting 'edgy' humour (214-218). But it is also worth considering what the typical content and inherent features of dark comedy might contribute to its ability to be so easily criticised and hence shied away from, and whether its content (and the specific fact that it is 'challenging' to treat this material comedically, as opposed to employing it in the context of a medical or police procedural show) can only – inevitably – result in its decline. William Paul has asked similar

questions of gross-out, seeking to explain why it faded out in the early 1990s:

> Perhaps the gross-out mode is always doomed to burn itself out by its very excesses until we can no longer embrace the contradictions of its discourse but must confront in their stead either/or choices. If gross-out is based on an aesthetic of challenge, with each new work daring to see how much more it may dare, then the mode itself must ultimately be self-consuming, reaching a point […] in which its challenges are so excessive they become self-defeating (1994: 430).

Is that the equivalent fate of dark comedy? There *was* a marked downswing in the dark content produced by the BBC in the wake of the Sachsgate and other 'edgy joking' media events, and it seems that the crossover between 'offensive' comedy and dark comedy is enough that the boundaries of taste and decency surrounding both types became more scrutinized and policed in the late 2000s. During that decade however, dark comedy had become darker and more excessive, so perhaps the fate of gross-out is an applicable comparison point. If this type of comedy was moving towards a self-destruct sequence, then it merely so happened that the panic button was pressed sooner rather than later. This said, the taboos, fears, and preoccupations surrounding sexuality, mortality, and the fragility integrity of the body and mind that dark comedy reflects and explores are unlikely to cease their importance for a mortal race whose continuation depends upon reproduction… and comedy is particularly well-placed to enable that exploration in a 'safe' and 'permissible' way. Thus, while various factors may be coalescing to keep such programmes a minimal presence on broadcast agendas for the time being, their basic content always has the potential to find expression again in another form of return of the repressed. Additionally, as long as graphic aesthetics and references to human physicality, fallibility and fragility remain a feature of non-comedic areas of television, the impulse towards pastiche and parody will have attractive potential. It is tempting to speculate that seeing

another uptick in dark comedy production is only really a matter of time.

By way of some final words: I invoked the concept of shedding light on dark comedy from the outset in my title, intending the subsequent analysis to illuminate various aspects of this type of programme, but it has emerged that this was not the only light pun I could have made, because a key element of dark comedies is their relentless commitment to showing everything in a bad light – in fact the worst light – possible. Further, dark comedies are visually distinct from other types of comedy. Containing apparently humorous expectations around themes and imagery that may not normally be thought of as funny, they constantly invite viewers to confront *their* expectations surrounding comedy and perceptions, and by doing so find yet another way of drawing our attention to the potential fallibility of our own bodies and minds, just as they do in explicitly showing bodies and minds failing in the excessive aesthetics of the programmes. They carry an overall message that viewers cannot trust themselves, and that the rest of the world around them is terrible anyway, presenting a relentless pessimism which, combined with humour and supplemented by a variety of other kinds of ambivalence and uncertainty, helps the distinctive aesthetics to create a distinctive 'sense' affect. Given this finding, I cannot help but return to a previous quotation to end this work: via sustained analysis of contemporary British dark comedy television, uncovering the graphic and complex visual mechanisms that characterise it, it has become clear that there is a distinct and distinguishable excessive aesthetic that underpins and enables the phenomenon of recognition that surrounds this type of humour, so poetically expressed by Jacques Vaché as "…a sensation – I was almost going to say a SENSE – so – of the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything" (Sorrell, 1979: 107).

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