

British Dark Comedy television and the bodily aesthetics of the ‘Proper person’.

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Drawing upon *Little Britain* (BBC Three, 2003-2004; BBC 1 2005-2006), *Tittybangbang* (BBC Three, 2005-2007), *Psychoville* (BBC 2, 2009-2011), and *Tramadol Nights* (Channel 4, 2010), this article highlights dark comedy television depictions of characters failing to measure up to contemporary ideals of capability and health; whose appearances, movements or physical integrity are affected by ageing, disability, illness or accident/violence. It argues that such portrayals reflect and perpetuate various perceptions and boundaries concerning the appearance of the ‘proper person’, relying upon such perceptions for the comedy to succeed. Certain appearances, forms and behaviours are naturalised and expressed in media, medical contexts, and everyday discourse as ‘normal’. Therefore, deviation from these can lead to particular groups or individuals being considered figuratively – or even literally – as in some way incomplete or not ‘proper people’. That viewers are invited to laugh at these groups or individuals implies the characteristics are worthy of laughter, and that the ability to engage in this laughter may be assisted by a sense that the characters are *not fully human*. The article explores this in relation to the idea that dark comedies and their distinctive bodily aesthetics allow viewers to engage with, then dismiss, fears surrounding physical fragility and mortality.

Keywords: dark comedy; television; the body; grotesque; stigma; disability

Introduction

Dark comedy, under one name or another, has long been a feature of various forms of entertainment. However, it was the first decade of the 2000s that saw a notable rise in British television comedy programmes displaying the kinds of themes and characteristics that have become associated with “dark comedy” as a categorising term. These include ‘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’ (Bucaria 2008, 218-219), with the humour involved often constituting ‘a mixture of the “Black” and the “sick”, sometimes vaguely satirical but rarely attributable to an especially noble agenda’ and sometimes functioning to

‘[test] the boundaries of what is permissible on broadcast TV’ (Hunt 2008, 25). It has been described as ‘a genre that discovers humor in pain, suffering, and even terror. An edgy, disquieting mode, it has no truck at all with decorum or sentiment’ (Meszaros 2003, n.p.), and the link between dark comedy and cringe comedy has also been noted: ‘[They] overlap in many areas, particularly those determined by matters of taste – both trade on unacceptable behaviour, comic transgressions and gross imagery or language’ (Hunt 2013, 167). Indeed, this type of comedy can be defined by its relationship to ‘the boundaries of taste and acceptability’ (Hutchings 2007, 3). The dark comedy programmes that emerged during this time period encompass a variety of formats, including animated series like *Monkey Dust* (BBC Three 2003-2005), episodic comedies such as *Phoenix Nights* (Channel 4 2001-2002), *Nighty Night* (BBC 2 2004-2005), *Ideal* (BBC Three 2005-2011), and *Psychoville* (BBC 2 2009-2011), and sketch shows like Chris Morris’s *Jam* (Channel 4 2000), *Tittybangbang* (BBC Three 2005-2007), Frankie Boyle’s *Tramadol Nights* (Channel 4 2010), and *Limmy’s Show* (BBC Two Scotland 2010-2013), as well as dark comedy’s most mainstream success, *Little Britain* (BBC Three 2003-2004; BBC 1 2005-2006); a show whose status as popular and mainstream interestingly seems to work against people initially recognising it as “dark”, in spite of its content.

A striking feature shared across these dark comedy programmes is that their depictions of violence, suffering, comic transgressions and unacceptable behaviour are firmly centred upon an aesthetics of the body that foregrounds its grotesqueries, its fallibilities, and above all its fragility. The comedies repeatedly and graphically expose the vulnerability of bodies to injury, ridicule, sickness, or disease, and highlight a huge range of ways in which human physicality can become a source of embarrassment, horror or weakness. What is additionally striking is that a number of the characters whose bodies are presented in this way are disabled people, and elements of their disabilities are shown as contributing to incidents

and situations which are clearly positioned by the shows to be found humorous by viewers (such as a man's prosthetic hand coming off in the act of shaking hands, a blind person holding up a chocolate bar to his ear instead of his phone, or an adult woman with Locked-in Syndrome being pushed in a baby's pushchair, for example – all situations taking place in the second series of *Psychoville*). Tom Coogan and Rebecca Mallett have noted that 'among the handful of references to humour in key texts in disability studies in the humanities, "black comedy" is often mentioned, but seldom analysed' (2013, 249), highlighting Meszaros (2003) as a welcome exception. Therefore, it is hoped that the following analysis, focussed as it is on a significant form of contemporary black comedy, may go a little way towards illuminating the link between dark comedy television's representations of disability and the workings of dark comedy itself. This link is necessarily contextualised within a wider examination of the relationship between the dark comedy and the distinctive bodily aesthetics on display in the British television programmes considered here. The analysis considers how the precise nature of the aesthetics themselves may help to enable viewer laughter in this context, and the article explores how the preoccupation with humour surrounding transgressive bodies and fragile physicality may be seen to explicitly accord with Tom Shakespeare's idea that a fundamental process involving the 'denial of our own vulnerability, or incompetence, or frailty' underlies the impulse to laugh in the face of reminders of mortality that may be prompted by confrontation with impairment and illness (1999, 49).

Stigmatising Symbols and "Normal" Bodies and Appearances

The ways in which human bodies and appearances are perceived and categorised have been explored by a range of authors, and 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). Furthermore, 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 British dark comedy programmes 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 from *Ideal*, who wears at all times a rigid plastic mask which prevents the appearance of facial expressions), and in other instances by prostheses which mimic physical disabilities that affect appearance or impact upon movement (as with Mr Jelly from *Psychoville*, who uses a prosthetic hand). The appearance of “non-normativity” can also be effected by casting actors who are disabled (for example, 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 non-disabled performers simulate physical disabilities (like Rebecca Front performing the character of Cathy Cole, a person with multiple sclerosis, in *Nighty Night*). 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* (BBC 2 2000). 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 becomes important. It not only implies that these characteristics are worthy of laughter, but also opens up the possibility that being able 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). The prevalence of humour surrounding characters who display stigma symbols, despite its potential negative impact, suggests a perceived disconnect or disassociation between the joking and reality, in which the negatives are being mitigated by idea that those with such stigma symbols are themselves not "properly real". While viewers generally watch fictional television shows in the knowledge that they are being acted (and so in this way any violence or ridicule depicted is always upon those who are not really "real"),

it is still the case that presenting scenarios which accord with existing social stereotypes relating to disadvantaged status, and playing them for laughs, can be thought of as problematic. An additional point to raise is that some dark comedies may deliberately choose to employ character types already stereotypically considered “vulnerable” in order to increase the potential 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.

Tramadol Nights offers a clear example of a depiction of a person with visible stigmatising features as laughable and abject, in a sketch about a fictional disabled stuntman, Chuck Wocek. 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. Wocek’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 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 physical fitness, whilst using a wheelchair and being severely injured creates part of the humour of the sketch. The unlikely nature of this situation allows Wocek’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. While Wocek's story can be seen to highlight via extremity the disabling and iniquitous interactions with employers, strangers, and even family and friends that disabled people may routinely experience, the humour of the scenes is positioned around Wocek's abject predicament and appearance rather than at the expense of the other characters.

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 Mrs Emery, a character with incontinence, from series three of *Little Britain*. These scenes prompted critique from a number of quarters, including the Royal College of Physicians, who complained that they promoted laughter at a situation that causes real pain and upset for many people, and encouraged stereotypes of aged people that contribute to their social isolation and status-loss (*The Guardian*, November 25, 2005). Interestingly, these critiques prompted the BBC to mount a defence that accords with the idea of 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' (*The Guardian*, November 25, 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.

In their analyses of horror, Noël Carroll and Cynthia 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 be applied to comedy via its relation to Henri Bergson’s similarly cardiac-inflected idea that ‘[t]o 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); the enjoyment of observing misfortune, failure, other people’s embarrassment, and so forth, 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 dual viewer standpoints appear to depend upon people doing contradictory things with their hearts. However, if the reactions are considered to be part of a near-instantaneous process by which viewers can feel yet dismiss the “negative” (as Bergson says, ‘for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity’ through rationality [1956, 63]), the parallel between the ability to enjoy dark comedy just as horror viewers are intended to enjoy being horrified can be observed. Furthermore, perhaps 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 effect, societal pressure not to laugh at bad things in real life is technically rendered irrelevant by the fictional aspect of proceedings (following 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, following Bergson) in order for laughter to take place. So, when it comes to laughing at dark comedy and characters displaying stigma symbols, it appears that the visual imagery on display must first have something about it that makes it capable of being read as both serious and comedic, and then the two-stage process (of feeling the seriousness of something yet dismissing it to focus upon a comic reading: the anaesthesia of the heart) can occur. These complimentary conditions are evident in the Mrs Emery example discussed above and the BBC's reaction to critique about it. The spokesperson's remark that the sketch is so extreme as to have "no grounding in reality" chooses 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 underlying viewer ability to find the scenario comedic is also present. In short, the ambivalent imagery of stigmatisation can be seen combining with the excessive aesthetics characteristic of dark comedy to promote laughter.

The concept of ambivalence additionally allows for a link with Freudian theory to be made. Freud notes of taboo, 'This power is inherent [...] 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). When such taboos are included in dark comedy, they have the potential to create a feeling of discomfort or uneasiness via the presentation of something that is traditionally considered necessary to avoid, and to observe taboos being broken is to observe prohibitions and restrictions being ignored. 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 like this 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 content parallels the ambivalence of the real/unreal, human/not-fully-human complexification – that the same thing is capable of being regarded simultaneously in contrasting ways – and dark comedy is able to use ambivalence in various ways to “permit” the open indulgence in a (laughter) response that would otherwise be repressed as inappropriate. This highlights dark comedy as an especially clear form of tendentious humour, circumventing inhibition in the way that Freud identifies in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905 [1960]). Freud’s further assertion is that in being enabled to laugh at taboo topics, the psychic energy that would have otherwise been used in the act of repression is directed to the laughter instead and pleasure is obtained in this process (1960, 164; 182), suggesting that dark comedy’s manipulation of taboo is an important part of its workings *as* comedy.

The Grotesque, and Beauty and Ugliness

The appearance of (imitated) disability as a recurrent type of imagery in dark comedy is notable, and its very frequency might explain why such a wide variety of impairments and disabilities are depicted, as creators seek to innovate and avoid repeating their own or others’ earlier work. Innovation or boundary-testing might also account for the increasing visual eccentricity 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*. For example, Mr Jelly, the children’s entertainer who has a prosthesis in place of one hand, wears a complete clown costume and make-up at all times despite there being no apparent reason for this when he is not at work. Mr Lomax, who uses a wheelchair and has had his eyes removed, is shown living in the faded grandeur of a large gothic house, with furnishings and clothing reminiscent of vampire narratives. In both cases, the characters are presented as overtly combining the aesthetics of disability or impairment

with traditional horror aesthetics, and as individuals who are lacking something; they are “incomplete”. The visual association between horror and disability, alongside the notion of “lack” or incompleteness, is something that can be directly connected not only to the ideas above about bodily norms, but also to the grotesque, a visual aesthetics which acts as a challenge to “classic” aesthetics, that is, the aesthetics of the ready-made and the completed’ (Bakhtin 1984, 25).

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. In *Rabelais and His World* (1968 [1984]), Bakhtin 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. He 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 dark comedies, the frequency with which attention is specifically drawn by some means towards the features on Bakhtin’s list, and the extremity (or excess) of the appearances or circumstances surrounding their display, suggests that the grotesque is a crucial aesthetics within the form. For instance, in *Tittybangbang* viewers are introduced to Maxine Bendix, a character whose extensive and poor-quality cosmetic surgery has left her with grotesque and seeping features that are revealed in a series of embarrassing wardrobe malfunctions and failed romantic encounters; close-up camera shots fragment her body to focus upon the detail of her silicone-leaking breasts and lips. *Tittybangbang*, *Little Britain* and *The League of Gentlemen* (BBC 2 1999-2002) all feature extended scenes of nudity

either with or without prosthetics in place of genuine body parts, and in the case of *Little Britain*'s Bubbles and Desiree DeVere, 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).

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. 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. However, 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. 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 the dark comedy programmes. Consider the characters of Bubbles DeVere or Mrs Emery: they have various grotesque qualities which *Little Britain* 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 alternative readings in how the grotesque imagery is viewed is reduced in these examples in favour of the negative, and this is reflective of the kind of usage that Bakhtin is unhappy with. Cynthia Barounis identifies that '[m]uch of the disability studies scholarship on humor and comedy has focused on comedy's double-edged nature with regard to disabled subjects, constituting them as laughable spectacles in some circumstances and as empowered agents of humor in others' (2013, 306). In the case of British dark comedy television, it seems that the excessive portrayals that are so central to the aesthetics of this form, and which

are equally applied to disabled characters as they are to those who are ageing, fat, scarred, ill, and so on, very much lead it to constitute the subjects as spectacles within, rather than as agents of, the intended humour.

Sander L. Gilman has discussed the persistence of a medical aesthetics that associates 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 more widely than in medicine’s own texts, and can be related to the grotesque and to 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 significant 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 Daffyd from *Little Britain* having his weight accentuated by skin-tight latex wear, or the extra thick pair of glasses of *Psychoville*’s David), they may be 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; David’s glasses indicate that he has difficulties with his eyesight). Maxine Bendix’s botched cosmetic surgery provides a more direct example of this link: 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 she underwent the surgery in the hope that it would make her appear more beautiful (and therefore more healthy, according to the binary). The fact that so many of the characters who are presented as having exaggerated or unusual physical features simultaneously have an ailment of one kind or another conforms with the fantasy highlighted by Gilman, and the

permission for exaggeration that is granted by the comic context effectively allows for “ugliness”, and therefore unhealthiness, to be especially visible in dark comedy. Bergsonian theory aligns with this, in the 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 (1956, 75). 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 conditions they portray in dark comedies. Nevertheless, it is far more likely that the performers seen playing such characters *are* imitating traits associated with particular conditions or disabilities, 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. Viewers’ assumptions that they are not observing *actual* disabled people, *actual* “ugliness”, et cetera, 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 a mental confrontation with (and laughter at) those very things.

Drew Leder picks up on another aspect of human physicality that has relevance to the idea of the fragile body as a key motif within dark comedy, and highlights a potential connection to be made concerning 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 ‘[i]t 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” and initially

uses it to describe the reminders of a person's 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 towards other passions such as anger and shame, function to bring the body to our awareness (1990, 37). 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, and this is a point worth considering further in conjunction with Mark Seltzer's ideas about mediated representations of bodies and their effect/affect upon viewers.

Seltzer has considered the way in which viewers may actually be enabled temporarily to *forget* their own corporeality when scenes of bodily catastrophe, violence, and fragility, are viewed through a mediated means. He argues that viewers are offered 'the "containment" or parrying of death by representation: the distancing of bodily violence by visual technologies' (1998, 36). This, in turn, affords a kind of safety and a feeling of being non-corporeal and uninvolved, helping viewers to forget their 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,' he adds (36), and one of the complications *is* the concept of dys-appearance and the possibility of empathic physical responses to fiction that draw attention to a person's own embodied state. A position that brings the ideas of Leder and Seltzer together, however, seems to echo something of the "anaesthesia of the heart" process discussed above, and potentially illustrates what might be going on with the bodily aesthetics of dark comedy, in that viewers may first *feel* something, prompted by the content on the screen, before the

recognition of distancing signifiers (such as the presence of visual technologies, and the fictionality signalled by excess) allows for rationality to dismiss it. In this way, viewers may be enabled to engage with their own corporeality in relation to, for example, bodily violence, *and* to swiftly move past it. When taking into account the high visibility of the body in dark comedy programmes, and their preoccupation with depicting violence, “base” natural urges, physical limitations, weaknesses and uncontrollable reactions, the possibility of dark comedy offering an opportunity to engage with fears about human fragility, couched within the “safe” parameters of comedy and fiction, is definitely raised. As 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’ (2004, 26), and fear concerning corporeal fragility and fallibility appears key in what is being represented and explored in the visual aesthetics of dark comedy programmes.

Conclusion

Coogan and Mallett have stated of dark humour: ‘Arguably, opportunities to understand the role that this form of humour plays in disability’s challenge to the normal are not being fully explored’ (2013, 250), and this article has been an attempt to grasp one such opportunity. In so far as dark comedy has the potential to be an empowering form that highlights disability in more diverse ways than as a state of lack in comparison with ideologically-created “norms”, the British dark comedy television programmes under consideration here might be said to demonstrate this only in a limited way. Mallett’s reading of the language and behaviour around disability used by David Brent in *The Office* (BBC 2 2001-2003) highlights it as an effort to perform the “tolerant subject position” that functions to demonstrate the precarity of that position (Mallett 2010, 9), and similar moments in which the laughter being invited appears to be at the expense of characters behaving inappropriately towards disabled people,

or at flaws in measures intended to reduce discrimination, can be seen in some of the other dark comedies from the time period considered here. Moments in *Tramadol Nights*, *Psychoville*, *Jam*, and *Limmy's Show* can be read as making comment on medical, social and bureaucratic structures that create barriers for disabled people in comparison with non-disabled people, and as highlighting specific types of behaviour towards disabled people that make the perpetrators appear unthinking and rude. In interactions with her neighbour Cathy, Jill, the main character in *Nighty Night*, carries out many of the “ableist interjections” identified by Loja et al. (2013, 193-5), such as expressions of pity, remarks about heroism, invasion of personal space, and assumed incompetence, for example. Furthermore, Sharon Lockyer has discussed the “reversed disability discourse” adopted by some disabled comedians which ‘switches the comic gaze outwards towards disabling social norms and critiques disabling stereotypes’ (2015, 1406), and times where such norms are brought to view and critiqued are also evident in the programmes, albeit in these cases usually with the discourse being adopted and engaged with in performance by non-disabled people. However, it is the case that the instances of critique within the shows ultimately appear either outweighed or undermined by a fundamental element that characterises and visually defines dark comedy television as a category: the aesthetics of excess (and, particularly, its presentation of a bodily aesthetics that draws attention to physical fallibility). In relation to disability, this aesthetics accentuates stigma symbols and makes links between them and the grotesque, horror, abjection and embarrassment.

With regards to the question of where dark comedy might figure within the idea of confronting and denying fragility and mortality, this analysis is broadly able to support the conclusions drawn by Meszaros about black comedy on stage. Following analysis of the work of playwrights Beth Henley and Martin McDonagh, she ‘contend[s] that black comedy is not about survival, evasion, or coping; rather, it provides a mechanism whereby an audience is

lured into grappling with matters it has heretofore deemed unthinkable. In essence, black comedy is a literature of intense engagement that pretends to do otherwise' (2003, n.p.). This is an important point in terms of framing the potential experiences of dark comedy television viewers; the process of anaesthesia of the heart which enables laughter at material that gives the "reminder of mortality" identified by Shakespeare *can* be read as a 'denial of our own vulnerability, or incompetence, or frailty' (1999: 49), but also, simultaneously as an engagement with that fear, via comedy. By positioning disability as one of the recurring themes in dark comedy, creators are providing explicit opportunities for audiences mentally to grapple with imagery, ideas and anxieties surrounding it in a way that is far more complicated than evasion, even if an eventual outcome of the engagement is to feel the fear as reduced. Much as the dys-appearance of the body of a character has the potential to echo in the body of the spectator before a dismissal of it takes place, the anaesthesia cannot be administered to the heart until it is recognised to be required. The problem is this, however: because the "permission to laugh" that dark comedy has to provide in order to be successful *as* comedy is signalled by the emphasis of fictionality via an aesthetics of excess (and a resultant implication that the characters at which laughter is invited are somehow "unreal", or not conforming to "proper personhood"), depictions of disabled characters as spectacles are presented, and associations with fragility and being 'less than fully human' (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991, 376) which reflect deficit models of disability are rehearsed.

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