

News and Comic Affairs

**The audience reception of British Television Political Comedy
1962-2012**

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Matthew Crowder, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated. This thesis has not been submitted for a degree, either in the same or different form, to this or any other University.

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Abstract

This thesis researches the reception of British television political comedy from 1962 to 2012, exploring the continuities and contrasts in viewers' definitions, interpretations and evaluations of the genre. Television comedy scholarship has privileged the text but this first in-depth study of British political comedy conceptualises television genre as a cultural category, and adopts the method of qualitative historical reception research to explore the different ways that viewers have written about the genre.

Political comedy's reception is dominated by discourses of power, and the genre's comedic references to news and current affairs are consistently invoked in accounts of its effects upon everyday life. The research highlights viewers' emotive responses in four case studies that place pleasure and displeasure, cultural distinctions, and social affiliations in their historical contexts, arguing that judgments about political comedy's value, meaning and social effects are related to hierarchies of aesthetics and taste, and their relationship to public issues defined as socially significant.

The chapter on *That Was The Week That Was* discusses beliefs that irreverent comedy could affect British institutions. Work on *Yes, Minister*, *The New Statesman* and *The Thick of It* highlights the relationships between different definitions of realism, quality, and British political culture. Attitudes to *Spitting Image* demonstrate how evaluations of satirical value depend upon comedy conforming to highbrow cultural hierarchies. *Brass*

Eye is explored via the moral panics around the trivialization of issues defined as 'serious'.

Qualitative historical reception research into television political comedy gives insight into how people categorised and attributed meaning to comedy, politics, public life and the media. It shows how people thought political comedy intervened in British culture, and gives glimpses into the sometimes passionate debates about the definition of television texts, television genres, the medium of television, British political culture, British media culture, and British society itself.

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for Jackie

(1926-2010)

Chapter One

Qualitative historical reception research and the cultural classification of British television political comedy

T.W.3s SPORTING !!!! attack, on a defenceless man.

The stink of this programme is still in my nostrils, presented with a vicious spleen & in a similar vein to the Nazi pattern of broadcasts we heard in wartorn Britain in the dark days of Lord Haw Haw.

Who censors, & who condones, such a vicious & malicious attack, on a British Prime Minister? by a young rat like David Frost, who is not fit to clean Lord Homes shoes, & who writes this script???

TW3 should have been taken off long before, it is now being used for lying political propaganda, its influence is only for the bad, it savoured too much of a gang attack on a lone man, by the build up it got.

(JLC to the Chairman of the BBC, 19 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3)¹

Although written fifty years ago, JLC's letter still carries an emotional punch. The multiple exclamation marks stand out, his reference to the Second World War is an arresting hyperbole and the olfactory metaphor of disgust represents his anger as an

¹ This and many of the sources feature odd or erroneous spelling and grammar. This has been preserved throughout this thesis where it does not confuse the source's general meaning.

instinctive response to a toxic intrusion. Smaller details are also suggestive of JLC's emotional state: the erratic punctuation indicates agitation; and the letter itself is typed on a slip of paper, perhaps all there was to hand in his furious urgency. Here is a man deeply upset by a television programme, and, to be precise, a political comedy programme that has acquired a canonical place in British television history. *That Was The Week That Was* (BBC 1962-63), or *TW3* as it became known, was dominated by comedy referencing politics and news and current affairs, and it prompted passionate responses from supporters and detractors.

This thesis looks at how viewers have responded to six British television political comedy texts since 1962. It has a dual focus, exploring the cultural status of individual texts in their historical contexts, and identifying commonalities across the reception discourses to suggest how television political comedy has been understood as a genre. It will argue that 'political comedy' is a fertile site of research, as JLC's dramatic rhetoric suggests. His reference to Nazi propaganda shows he regarded *TW3* as a politicised broadcast of a particularly pernicious nature. But which aspects of the series prompted him to compare the BBC with National Socialist propaganda? In what cultural context was David Frost seen to make broadcasts for which William Joyce was hanged? JLC was clearly afraid that *TW3* was exerting significant negative power over British culture but how can we account for this in the context of television history, *TW3* and the genre of political comedy itself? If this letter was an isolated case, these questions would warrant only a footnote. However, JLC was not alone in writing to the BBC about *TW3* and more than 300 other letters are stored at the BBC Written Archive Centre. Six

television series and hundreds of other written sources allow this thesis to examine how different people have responded to different texts at different times. As will be shown, they praised, condemned and equivocated, they wrote and they typed, and they predicted disaster or anticipated better things.

This research therefore asks the following question: how have viewers responded to British television political comedy since 1962? Using a case study format and qualitative analysis, it addresses the written responses to six canonical texts to identify the shared cluster of meanings with which the genre of television political comedy has been defined, evaluated, interpreted, enjoyed and not enjoyed by viewers. Much comedy scholarship hypothesises that comedy influences individuals, and it cannot be denied that *TW3* appears to have affected JLC powerfully. However, this thesis will not argue that political comedy has a particular social effect or influences certain people in specific ways. Instead, it is hypothesised that people writing about television political comedy texts have articulated their thoughts, distinctions, opinions and feelings about the genre, as well as referring to other matters suggestive of their worldview, as JLC's dramatic comparison between *TW3* and Nazi propaganda suggests. The case study format allows this thesis to explore the genre of political comedy itself by identifying the common reception discourses across the six generic texts. These will be used to infer how people defined the genre of political comedy as a cultural category and to suggest how other political comedy texts can be used by historians to research people's attitudes towards British political culture, comedy, current affairs, television, and society.

This is a valuable project for several reasons. British television political comedy is under-researched, surprisingly so given the politicised aims of television studies and the growth of television comedy scholarship. This thesis is the first major contribution to the study of the genre in Britain. Audience reception research is also absent from much work on television comedy (see Mills 2005, 139) and this provides the first sustained examination of how viewers wrote about it. Finally, the historical emphasis is a departure from dominant approaches to television reception, which is generally explored through contemporary audiences. This project will explore the varied ways viewers have made sense of six television texts from one genre over five decades, looking for contrasting and comparative reception discourses, and relating text and historical context to viewers' own words.

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Television, text and power: comedy, genre and audience

Unless we have some ideas about where to begin and why to begin there, we may literally condemn ourselves to going on forever. (Skinner 1974, 280-1)

Television studies begins with the founding principle that television has played a significant part in British culture since it became a mass medium from the late 1940s onwards. In her overview of the field, Charlotte Brunsdon writes, “Generally, the ‘television’ of television studies is a contemporary, politicised television analysed because it is understood to be a powerful medium” (1998, 109). As Brunsdon continues,

television studies' dominant concerns are "the definition of the television text, the textual analysis of the representations of the social world offered therein, and the investigation of the television audience" (105); form, representations, and audiences are used to increase our understanding of television's role in modern society. This raises the complexity of studying television; its definitions are multiple and the aspect of television selected will in turn define how it can be researched and the conclusions that can be drawn. The use of JLC's letter demonstrates that this thesis addresses the last of Brunsdon's trio: the audience. We begin with the viewers because they too, like the practitioners of television studies, considered television to be a powerful medium. This research adopts the approach, expanded upon below, that viewers' responses are expressions of wider discourses, invoking the "cultural power relations" (Mittell 2004, xiv) and distinctions that television studies is most concerned with. In doing so, this work does not make essentialist claims about the power of television or the influence of political comedy - the very notion that texts or technologies 'possess' cultural power in themselves is deeply problematic - but proposes historical hypotheses about how individuals interpreted the genre within their cultural landscape.

Four key texts inform the method and theory of this research; three relate to audiences and the other to genre. These are Nick Couldry's (2000) ethnographic research into people's interactions with sites of media production and how viewers' beliefs and practices lead to 'media power'; Ang's (1985) investigation into how viewers of *Dallas* (CBS 1978-1991) wrote about the series; and Staiger's (1992) work into how film reception can be used to trace wider historical debates; and Mittell's theorisation of

television genre as a cultural, rather than textual, mode of categorisation. Each will be discussed below and together they exemplify the productive use of people's words and behaviours about texts and media as evidence of cultural beliefs and historical moments. Therefore, qualitative historical reception research does not regard JLC's letter as a curiosity but as an historical fact (Carr 2001, 4) that is part of a wider historical discourse about television's development as the dominant medium in British culture. That letter, alongside the writing in other letters, newspaper articles, internet reviews, and fan comments, is the evidence used in this thesis' arguments about how television political comedy has been understood between 1962 and 2012. Apropos the quote from Quentin Skinner, we begin with the words of individuals because these are the small-scale practices through which discourse and culture are produced and reproduced. This stands in contrast to a significant body of work on comedy and genre that focuses on the analysis of textual representations and form, a practice that cannot provide well-founded conclusions into cultural history. The following section will now provide a critical overview of the theorisation and research into comedy, audiences and genre, and explain how this thesis' method relies on a synthesis of the three texts cited above. It will then explain how this research defines 'political comedy', and account for the selection of case study texts and sources used.

Comedy and culture

Philosophers have interpreted comedy as a social activity since antiquity and this has continued into media scholarship, where the critical study of television comedy is a well-established, if small, part of television studies. Dominant trends in comedy theory

can be distinguished into those relating to superiority, relief and incongruity (Morreall 2009), but they all lead back to the general conclusion that comic responses are contingent upon, and can therefore inform, their historical and cultural contexts. This section will now give an overview of comedy's history and relate it to this thesis' objectives.

The earliest writing on comedy accords it negative effects. In Plato's utopian republic, "decorum demands that there must never be loud laughter" (B. Russell 2004, 112). The Old Testament regarded laughter as an "act of hostility" (Morreall 2009, 4), and some monastic traditions saw laughter as "the greatest dirtying of the mouth" (Palmer 1994, 44). Morreall groups these under Superiority Theory, which associates laughter with an aggressive desire to diminish another through humiliation. This has modern proponents but is most clearly expressed by Thomas Hobbes who described laughter as a "sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves" (1889, 42). Pleasure arises from identifying yourself as superior to another and Hobbes continues that such laughter is a sign of poor character. This aspect has been reframed with a more optimistic attitude; Sir Philip Sidney argued that the flawed characters of comedy narratives possessed an educative quality by representing vice as ridiculous, encouraging appropriate behaviour, whilst the notion of laughter providing necessary social correction through humiliation is echoed by Henri Bergson (1911) and also associated with satire (Hodgart 1969).

Relief theory replaces superiority theory's interpersonal power with internal psychological energy. Early ideas relied on proto-medical notions of laughter as the release of excess nervous energy (Morreall 2009, 16-17) but this trend is dominated by Freud. He links comic pleasure to comedy's ability to avoid the psychic effort of repression or other emotional work. We laugh at slapstick comedy because our psyche prepares us to feel anxiety for the tumbling clown - but we enjoy this energy as laughter when they are unhurt. In another example from Freud, we laugh when a derogatory comment about a mutual acquaintance is contained within a surprising conceit because appreciation of wordplay sidesteps moral judgement of the insult. Psychic energy required for repression or effort is freed from anticipated work: "this gain in pleasure corresponds to the saving of psychical expenditure" (Freud 2002, 116) normally spent "on inhibition or suppression" (117), analytical thought, or emotions. Comedy thus creates a context where norms of social behaviour are modified. A politicised version of relief theory informs the work of Soviet critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) who related some forms of comedy to the chaotic carnivals of the medieval world where official norms were replaced by a popular culture of laughter and excess.

Incongruity theory focuses on the structure of comedic material itself and argues that comedy is an idea, object or situation that in some way "violates our normal patterns and normal expectations" (Morreall 2009, 11). This approach is found in Kant, Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer (Morreall 2009, 83, 130-1), and is the most widely accepted of the trends. This formalist approach still relates to culture, with anthropologist Mary Douglas arguing that jokes occur when "one accepted pattern is confronted by something else...It

brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another” (Douglas 1978, 95-96). While the theory emphasises the formal attributes of the comic trigger, comedy’s internal operations, incongruously interacting with expectations, rely on the social norms that must be violated for comedy to occur.

None of these theories are strictly self-contained; Freud’s description of verbal jokes as “logic-chopping” (2002, 47) suggests incongruity, anxieties about comedy’s disruptive social power suggests it was seen to release repressed behaviour, and incongruous comedy must rely on the social norms that are then contradicted. Each focuses on different aspects - social, psychological and formal - but they agree that comedy invokes and involves individuals’ relationship to society and social norms. Each theory is ahistorical at its highest level but they suggest that comedy will always be an expression of its contemporaneous period because what we laugh at or refuse to laugh at is an index of historically contingent attitudes, as argued in Medhurst’s (2007) study of comedy and British culture. He argues that comedy can be a community-forming act based upon the division between those who appreciate the humour and those who do not, or those who do or do not accept the frames of reference offered by the jokes. Comedy is therefore a very useful way to begin inferring social norms from numerous perspectives.

Research also considers television comedy a socio-cultural phenomenon, exploring its relationship to culture, history and audiences. This is dominated by the situation comedy and generally done through analysis of television texts, using them as “collections of

meanings to be decoded, analysed, and potentially critiqued” (Mittell 2004, 4). Such interpretations rely on two general hypotheses: television texts are evidence of contemporary and historical trends in culture and society; and television texts provide evidence about reception, often framed by how audiences are affected or influenced. This dominates much early work on the sitcom (see Cook 1982a; Marc 1989; Hamamoto 1989) and is evident in work on television political comedy too. For example, Wagg (1992) argues that the genre began as a response to a heightened awareness of human suffering produced by television news and current affairs from the 1950s onwards, and that political comedy increased political apathy in its audience. In contrast to the work of Couldry, Ang, Mittell and Staiger, these cultural/historical claims are based almost solely on analyses of the television text. This method, that will be referred to as ‘textual analysis’, is useful for making claims about aesthetics and form. Adams (1993) discusses *Yes Minister*’s use of social realist conventions; Williams and Carpin (2011) ask if *The Daily Show with John Stewart* conforms to journalistic standards; and Mills (2007) evaluates *Brass Eye*, as ‘experimental television’.² However, the television text is a flawed source for evidence about the reception and influence of television comedy.

The use of textual analysis to draw socio-cultural conclusions occupies a significant place in the history of film and television studies in the form of Screen Theory. This asserts that, to varying degrees, forms of communication and representation have a determinate relationship with culture and individuals, particularly social and political attitudes. Screen Theory is “part of the ‘linguistic turn’ in dominant versions of

² See also Hight (2010) for a transnational description of news parodies and Keighron (1998) on how political comedians define their own work.

structuralism” (Tulloch 2000, 6), following, amongst others, Althusser’s work on state ideology and interpellation, Lacanian psychoanalysis’ rejection of the unified self and the conception of hegemonic culture as part of the maintenance of capitalist class relations and white, patriarchal norms (see Tulloch 2000). It tends towards the hypothesis that form and discourse structure individuals’ subjectivity. Television comedy research within this trend tends to uses genre overviews of the sitcom to link key texts to historical moments or social trends. Hamamoto (1989), Haralovich (2003) and Marc (1989) link the US sitcom directly to its national culture, with Hamamoto arguing that the sitcom is a “virtual textbook that can be ‘read’ to help lay bare the mores, images, ideals...of the American public ” (1989, 10). Langford (2005) also draws a similar conclusion in relation to the British sitcom and class in British culture.³ The weakness of using such textual analysis to explore culture is that it adopts a theoretical position developed in the analysis of large scale systems, for example human language or subjectivity, in the investigation of a single comedy text or group of texts. It does not take into account or look for corroborating evidence from the wider context of social, psychological and interpersonal factors that philosophers have considered in relation to comedy.

Another significant trend in this body of work uses television comedy to make claims about its effect and influence upon society and individuals. Audience studies is methodologically diverse but it does focus on gathering evidence originating from individuals. In contrast, Wagg’s claim that British satirical comedy elevated “the private

³ See also Haralovich (2003) on US suburban life.

sphere...at the expense of the public realm of parliamentary and ‘party political’ deliberation” (1992, 255) is proposed with reference to only three television series and some brief historical context (see also Wagg 2002). Similarly Grote (1983) argues that sitcom’s repetitive situation produces conservatism in the audience by denying the possibility of social change; and Newcomb (1974) described sitcom’s weekly resolution as a ritual of pacifying reassurance. This approach also dominates television political comedy research. Oakley (1982) argues that *Yes Minister* represents political attitudes similar to those of the Conservative party during the 1980s, meaning “the viewer watching the programme *can hardly help but see* the role of the Civil Servant through distinctly Thatcherian eyes” (73, my emphasis). The viewer is depicted as unable to avoid the text’s ideological position.⁴ Work on US television political comedy, predominantly *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Comedy Central 2005-ongoing), takes this position, with one collection titled, *The Stewart/Colbert Effect* (Amarasingam 2011).⁵ This highlights that television political comedy’s effects are consistently assumed to relate to politics, with critics praising texts interpreted as promoting political activity or representing progressive, left-wing attitudes.⁶ This politicised critique can also be seen in work on television comedy’s representation of subordinated social groups, for example, women (Rabinowitz 1999), gay men (Castiglia and Reed 2004; Healy 1995) and African-Americans (Real 2003). These follow the Hobbesian view of comedy as a tool of humiliation and subjugation, locating negative

⁴ See Eaton (1978) and (1981), Kirkham and Skeggs (1998), Rabinowitz (1999) and Rowe Karlyn (2003).

⁵ See also Tally (2011) Van Heertum (2011) Gray, Jones and Thompson (2009)

⁶ Other book-length studies are similarly dominated by claims about the relationship between political comedy texts and viewers’ engagement with politics. See also Day (2011), Fox (2011), Gray (2009), Jones (2010) and Wisinewski (2011).

social effects in texts' use of stereotyped representations (see Mills 2005, 103 and Dyer 2002b).

However, scholars have identified a methodological mismatch in the practice of drawing conclusions about culture and audiences from television texts. Corner warns that the habit of “shadowing sociology” using textual analysis “carries the heightened risks of the overstated and underevidenced claims which [television studies] has quite often been happy to ignore in favour of free-wheeling judgements” (2007, 366). Justin Lewis complains that “academics often behave as if textual exploration and cultural meaning were the same thing. They are not” (1991, 46) and Tony Wilson (2009) criticises Screen Theory because it “excludes from the model of the media recipient the latter’s past as a person in society” (11). De Certeau makes the point most clearly:

The analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behaviour) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during the time and with these images... The presence and circulation of a representation...tells us nothing about what it is for its users. (xii-xiii, 1988)

A number of comedy scholars implicitly admit that their textual analysis of comedic representations produces uncertain or contradictory results. For example, Lipsitz writes, “It is certainly *possible* that...[*Mama* (CBS 1949-1957)] served the interests of patriarchy, capitalism, and the state, but it is also *possible* that it exposed contradictions

conducive to resistance to those institutions” (2003, 24, my emphasis). The equal weight given to the interpretations shows textual analysis supports contradictory conclusions and that texts cannot offer sound conclusions about which reading dominates.⁷ Even more clearly, Mellencamp’s (2003) study of Gracie Allen in *The Burns and Allen Show* (CBS 1950-58) admits the defeat of psychoanalytical textual analysis: “the contradiction of the programme and the double-bind of the female spectator and comedian...are dilemmas which, for me, no modern critical model can resolve” (48). Textual analysis is not so much a dead end but a constantly forking path.

Ambiguous textual interpretations are exacerbated by the nature of comedy itself, repeatedly described in ways that emphasise its indeterminate semiotic nature. “[C]omedy is contradictory” (Stott 2005, 147) and “a divided experience” (9); “it is quite possible to respond consciously [to comedy] in two distinct ways” (Cook 1982b, 17); “humorous amusement involves...multiple perspectives” (Morreall 2009, 79). Incongruity theory explicitly defines comedy as the combination of the unexpected or contradictory, and the history of comedy theory also shows comedy’s multifaceted nature, with overlapping theories of superiority, relief, incongruity, and community. Indeed some have argued all texts are polysemic,⁸ further problematising the value of textual analysis in arguments about cultural influence or reception. Empirical studies of sitcom audiences suggest that far from being determined by the text, viewers’ responses are contingent: “what you find...is a function of what attitudes you bring to it” (Husband 1988, 162). Hypotheses about comedy’s cultural significance, influence and reception

⁷ See also Real (2003).

⁸ For example, de Certeau’s description of readers as poachers of meaning (1984, 174), and Fiske on television’s polysemic nature (1987).

based on textual analysis alone are thus inconclusive, and similar scepticism can also be inferred from recent work where critical overviews of the field (Mills 2005 and 2009) discuss comedy in a holistic way, referring to text, representation and culture, alongside history,⁹ production,¹⁰ and reception.

This is not to say that television comedy cannot inform an understanding of culture. The unifying aspects of comedy theory show that comedy is a deeply social practice produced from our relationships with other individuals, from an internal dynamic within ourselves, and from structuring social norms. Cultural power or significance is never intrinsic to texts but found in the practices and discourses that surround them. This thesis proposes that claims about comedy should select facts that reflect this: the television text and reception sources. The audience is an under-researched aspect of television comedy, as Mills' asserts: "debates about representation which infringe on virtually everything written about sitcom are usually removed from the experiences of its viewers" (2005, 135). He concludes, "it would seem that analysis of audiences is the next logical step in the understanding of sitcom" (2005, 139).¹¹

⁹ See Crisell (1991) for a historical evaluation of *TW3*'s institutional and production contexts. Historical work on sitcom includes Godard (1991) on *Hancock's Half Hour* and Gitlin (1994) on changes in US sitcom. A narrative history approach can be seen in popular accounts of 1960s satire (Carpenter 2000; Wilmut 1980), 1980s Alternative Comedy (Wilmut and Rosengard 1989), accounts of individual series, such as *Spitting Image* (Chester 1986a), and auteurs, such as Chris Morris (Randall 2010). These tend to replace the text with the author as the principal site of explanatory power; see Keighron (1998) too.

¹⁰ A three-year AHRC-funded project 'Make Me Laugh: Creativity in the British Television Comedy Industry' started in 2012 at the University of East Anglia.

¹¹ Recent work on the comedy audience includes Mills (2010), Medhurst (2007, 153-8) and Bore (2011).

Audience

Research into television's viewers features a variety of methods and approaches, so this section will give a brief overview of audience studies as it relates to television and cultural studies and the media more generally, highlighting the different emphases within the field and engaging with how these methods relate to different beliefs about television and its audience. They are united in their use of sources derived from individuals responding to television texts, though the continuing significance of textual analysis is demonstrated by the inclusion of Screen Theory articles in *The Audience Studies Reader* (Brooker and Jermyn 2003).¹² Some work that describes itself as audience studies is in fact textual analysis, such as the 1960s literary theory of the 'implied reader' (Holub 1984, 84) where responses were inferred from the text. More recent work has also seen media scholars making claims about viewers based on authorial intention,¹³ cognitive textual analysis,¹⁴ or box office receipts.¹⁵ Indeed, the project of empirical audience research is presented as simply too problematic by some (see Plantinga 2009, 13 and Smuts 2009, 231) or unworthy of the effort: "it must be added that as objects of study, film texts are inherently more interesting than film reviews or fan magazines" (Plantinga 2009, 16). Having already critiqued this method, the thesis will now turn to research that uses sources derived from individuals responding to television texts. There are different ways of gathering such sources and each is useful for different kinds of research. This is reflected in the varied trends in the

¹² Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' and Hansen's 'Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American silent films' (in Brooker and Jermyn 2003).

¹³ See Gorton (2006).

¹⁴ See Plantinga (2009).

¹⁵ See Smuts (2009).

history of audience studies which have addressed: how texts affect people; how people interpret texts; the role of texts in everyday lives and communities; and the wider role of the media in culture.

Early academic enquiries into media audiences were a response to anxieties about the role of propaganda during the First World War and the rise of broadcasting. Especially influential is the pessimistic work of Adorno and Horkheimer (see Morley 1992, 45 and Alasuutari 1999, 9), who fled from Nazi Germany to the USA in the late 1930s. They argued that the collapse of democracy in Germany and rise of Nazism could be replicated in America, supported by the capitalist mass media that induced political, intellectual and creative passivity in its audience. The central question posed here is 'How does the media influence its mass audience?' with the former having a negative political and psychological impact on the latter, who are accorded little or no agency. Adorno and Horkheimer relied on textual analysis but other work within this trend used qualitative research or anecdotal observations to make similar claims about how some social groups, for example young people (Wertham 2003) or the working classes (R. Hoggart 1958), were vulnerable to the media. The theorisation of the audience as passive tends to lead to the interpretation and voice of the critic being privileged, with little emphasis placed on audience responses that are incoherent with the central thesis. This has become known as the 'media effects' model or more derisively as the 'hypodermic' model, as if texts injected themselves into helpless individuals, and is the assumption behind media moral panics (see Chapter Five).

These anxieties were countered by research that rejected this as simplistic and sought evidence for whether messages in the media actually affected behaviour. Several works from the 1950s used interviews with individuals to demonstrate how personal contexts influenced political perspectives and responses. Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet argued that “Personal influence is more pervasive and less self-selective than formal media” (2003, 15) during elections and that local opinion-formers were more influential than adverts. Similarly, Merton (2003) found that people buying war bonds during a radio campaign did so for a variety of different personal reasons, from mothers of servicemen alleviating their sense of helplessness to fans of the female broadcaster fronting the drive expressing attachment to her star persona. These findings undermined the stimulus-response theory that the hypodermic model relied upon by claiming audiences were active and varied with different groups responding “in a manner consonant with its own tendency system” (Winnick 2003, 10). This work represents the beginnings of the ‘uses and gratifications’ model which asks how and why people use the media to achieve different personal and psychological goals (see Schröder 1999 for a summary and critique). The works from the 1950s cited above show continuity with the effects model in addressing the relationship between politics and the media but they emphasise the value of individuals' qualitative responses as primary sources.

Quantitative methods have also played a role in understanding relationships between politics, television and audiences, and US political comedy audience research is dominated by the mass communication method¹⁶ where statistical correlations between

¹⁶ See Morley (1992, 46) and Brooker and Jermyn (2003, 6).

media consumption and behaviours or beliefs are used to infer the impact of the genre.¹⁷

This has some echoes of the effects model, asking if the audience as a single mass is influenced in specific ways, for example looking for “learning effects” (Compton 2011, 12-13) or studying “whether jokes about issues on *The Daily Show* lead less politically interested viewers to seek out additional information about the issues from other news sources” (Kim and Vishak 2008). This method is useful in making claims about patterns in data, for example, “the relationship between satirical news use and attentiveness to science” (Feldman, Leiserowitz and Maibach 2011), but correlation does not imply causality, leaving conclusions of effect or influence under-evidenced. Neither does it address viewers’ social situations because the method conceives the audience as a mass, and offers hypotheses about group behaviour or belief. Similar empirical research motivates a significant proportion of humour studies, which looks at the role and effects of humour in everyday interactions,¹⁸ though a body of this work also includes analysis of the joke text.¹⁹

The effects and uses methods both contrast with what Morley calls the ‘interpretative paradigm’ (1992, 50) and Alasuutari divides this into three trends: the semiotic; the ethnographic; and a third generation exploring the “cultural place of media in the contemporary world” (1999, 7). The interpretative approach moves from the assumption that texts “impinged directly onto passive minds...[and instead looks at how] people in fact assimilate, select from and reject [texts]” (Morley 1992, 51). It is associated with

¹⁷ The origins of the method lie in anxieties about the effect of mass media upon American democracy and individual agency. See Amarasingam (2011) for an overview of this significant body of work.

¹⁸ See Raskin (2008).

¹⁹ See C. Davies (1988) and Benton (1988).

key Cultural Studies works, such as “Encoding/Decoding” (Hall 1980), *The Nationwide Audience* (Morley 1980), *Crossroads: The drama of a soap opera* (Hobson 1982) and *Watching Dallas* (Ang 1985). These acknowledge the agency of individuals, following the uses and gratifications theory, but are based on a critique by Hall (1980) that this over-estimated texts' semiotic potential and that individuals' actually interpret media within the parameters of the text and their own ideological position.

The semiotic turn theorised meaning-making as a politicised process whereby the creators of texts encode an intended or ‘dominant’ meaning and viewers decode the text to produce a dominant, negotiated or oppositional interpretation. This was a political project to explore how individuals from different social backgrounds responded differently to the ideological positions represented within texts. The method used in Morley’s classic *The Nationwide Audience* (1980) was to show episodes of a current affairs series to small groups and then hold structured interviews, identifying different interpretations. This was not a project that identified politicised texts but politicised readings from viewers occupying different ideological positions. A noteworthy example in work on television comedy is Jhally and Lewis (1992) where responses to *The Cosby Show* from white and black Americans were contrasted with racial and class inequalities in US culture to describe the series as prompting an ‘enlightened racism’ in its viewers.

The interpretive paradigm reacted to the ‘uses and gratifications’ model by emphasising the ideological content of interpretation above personal concerns but the ‘second generation’ moved away from the method of controlled viewing and interviews

towards an ethnographic approach. Alasuutari argues that the former method focused on “the particular strategic moment when the encoded media message enters the brain of an individual viewer” (1999, 4), while the ethnographic turn addressed how people responded to texts more widely, often related to cultural identity. This challenged the cognitive focus of the encoding/decoding model: “It becomes possible to question the relevance of the concept of decoding, with its connotations of analytical reasoning, for describing the viewer's activity of making sense of a text, as watching television is usually experienced as a 'natural' practice, firmly set within the routines of everyday life” (Ang 1996, 21).²⁰ The dominant question of this ethnographic work is: 'How do a group of people respond to texts in their own terms and what can this tell us about that group?' This uses in-depth accounts of viewers' responses to texts as part of their everyday lives, either through interviews, letters or internet forums, to address issues such as television's social role within the family and domesticity (Morley 1986) or in everyday life (Silverstone 1994). It dealt with generic texts often considered of low aesthetic value; and often focused on the experiences of those identified as socially marginalised such as fan audiences, female audiences, and audiences with specific national and ethnic backgrounds.

A third generation of audience studies (Alasuutari 1999 and Tulloch 2000) challenges the notion of the audience as a stable object of research, instead theorising them as “shifting constellations” (Alasuutari 1999, 7) where being a television viewer is one of many social roles (Bird 2003, 4). Rather than addressing viewers' decodings, or how

²⁰ See also Bobo (1995), Radway (1984) and Hobson (1982).

groups use texts, this trend addresses individuals' sense of themselves as 'the audience', the "cultural place of the media in the contemporary world" (Alasuutari 1999, 7) and "to contextualise and to draw connections between media/audience and the larger culture" (Bird 2003, 5) by attention to viewers, texts and contexts. It inherits the ethnographic tendency from its forbear but instead of focusing on the cultural experience of a social group, it theorises the role of the audience and the media more widely. Couldry (2000) combines ethnographic observation, textual analysis of news, and interviews with protestors to theorise how individuals perceive themselves as television viewers and participants in media events, and the cultural power of media representations. This thesis is best located within this third category due to its goal of showing how individuals understand political comedy - genre and texts -, the variety of sources used and the theorisation that this can inform our understanding of aspects of British culture and society.

One missing element within audience research is very significant for this thesis: history. Historical audience research does not receive significant attention in Alasuutari (1999), Brooker and Jermyn (2002) or Tulloch's (2000) overviews of work on audience research. As Brunsdon signals, television studies has focused on "contemporary, politicised television" (1998, 109). A few examples of historical audience research can be found and they use a variety of historical reception sources to address questions about cultural history.²¹ Qualitative historical reception research "seeks to understand textual

²¹ Memory is not part of this research because it addresses relationships between the past and the present, rather than the historical moment itself. A conference paper discussing the challenges of researching wiped television series using viewers' memories was provocatively titled 'When the Blind Interview

interpretations as they are produced historically” (Staiger 1992, 9), theorising that discursive trends in historical reception sources are evidence of past cultural assumptions and norms: “interpretations-in-history become politicised since they relate to historical struggles, not to essences” (1992, 18). In *Interpreting Films* (1992), Staiger looks at film reception historically, for example, discussing reviews of *Rear Window* (Hitchcock 1954) over a period of almost thirty years (Staiger 1992, 85-95). This method uses reception sources to identify trends over time, and she identifies the dominance of psychoanalysis, authorship, generic conventions and social issues at different moments, demonstrating shifting trends in the discourse of film interpretation that allows for arguments about their cultural origins and implications. There is also work that addresses conflicting interpretations from one historical moment: Cripps (2003) uses letters to broadcasters to explore the different responses from middle class and working class African American viewers to a sitcom about African American characters. He focuses on the politicised nature of their pleasure and displeasure and how individuals’ position in a social hierarchy influences their claims about the cultural power of television.²² Another aspect of this reception research relates to the importance of viewers’ emotional experiences, and it will address how reception sources express attitudes to culture and society, particularly referring to emotive discourses to discuss how they *felt*, following the use of emotion in historical²³ and cultural studies.²⁴ Above

Liars: researching television memories’ (Bourdon 2007, Video Active Conference, Kings College, University of London, 19-21 April).

²² See also Bodroghkozy (2003).

²³ See the history of mentalities (see Burke 1973; 1997, 162-182). White (1998) discusses of anger as a historical source and Gorton (2006) researches the role of emotion in television writing and its representation in texts.

²⁴ See Gonzalez’ (2012) edited collection, *The Emotions and Cultural Analysis*.

all, meanings and cultural categorisations produced by viewers are historical facts because “interpretations-in-history...relate to historical struggles” (Staiger 1992, 18).

Studying media audiences includes different theorisations about the relationship between the media text and the individual: passive or active audiences who are controlled by, use or interpret texts in relation to politics, identity, or culture from an historical or contemporary perspective. Each uses different kinds of reception sources to explore different hypotheses. This research combines qualitative historical reception research with the media/audiences/culture trend of the third generation to investigate the cultural role of television political comedy between 1962 and 2012 using a wide variety of reception sources, and we now turn to the notion of genre and how it has been understood and researched.

Genre

This thesis conceptualises television genre as a discursive formation that is a product of a historically contingent context. This is reflected in some work on genre in literary, film and television studies, and this section gives an overview of the major debates. If “genre is a means of constructing groups of texts and then discriminating between them” (Turner 2001, 4), genre theory varies between a text-centric approach where a genre is a set of formal rules and a context-focused approach that sees genre “as a function of reading” (Frow 2006, 102). The different approaches see genres as either self-contained or inherently relative concepts, and locate their significance in the essential nature of

human expression, the critics' desire to create order, the need for successful communication or an articulation of ideology.

The history of genre theory begins in Ancient Greece and establishes one of the field's long-standing concerns: to define and classify the nature of a creative text. Plato and Aristotle established the formal approach adopted by Neo-Classical scholars from the Renaissance onwards, identifying three forms of poetry that became known as the 'Natural Forms' into which literary genres were sorted. In *The Republic*, Plato identifies three forms of performance and associates them with different types of poetry: narratives told through imitation of speech and actions, associated with theatrical comedy and tragedy; narratives told solely through the voice of the poet, likened to the dithyramb; and those that combine the two. Aristotle continues this textual focus, further classifying types of poetry according to their 'means of imitation' (form, rhythm, meter, etc.), their 'object of imitation' (subject matter) and their 'manner of imitation' (adopting the three forms of Plato).

These three forms became the basis of Neo-Classical literary genre theory, renamed lyric, dramatic and epic, and they were treated as genre archetypes that all forms of literature were expected to conform to or else be considered aesthetically imperfect (Frow 2006, 59). The three ur-genres were treated as fixed and objective standards, and Roman critic Horace is attributed with further defining other literary genres with the assertion that to stray from prescribed formulae was a breach of decorum or an aberration of nature. These genres were seen as subsets of the Natural Forms which

became the basis of interpretations about their essential capabilities of expression. Hegel saw the epic form as "the vehicle of an objective discourse on the external universe" (Frow 2006, 60), Joyce's Stephen Dedalus describes the lyric form as enabling the poet to be "more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling the emotion" (Joyce 1960, 213), and Lukacs described the novel as a 'degraded epic' (quoted in Frow 2006, 62). Such conclusions emphasise the critic's aesthetic responses to idealised and static forms within literature, and these approaches do not have significant currency within film and television studies.²⁵

This view of genre as an unchanging, quasi-objective set of rules was not sustained, and literary criticism began to explore the overlap between and mixing of genres, even of the Natural Forms. Guerard (1940) proposed that the forms could be sub-divided and combined into style and genre, suggesting that the hybrids of 'epic lyric' and 'lyrical epic' could be identified. Similar developments can be seen in the changing analogies used to describe genre. Fishelov (1993) shows how twentieth century genre critics use biological comparisons to 'species' and 'families', as well as the culturally contingent idea of an institution with conventions and norms. Beebee (1994) also records a similar shift since the Renaissance, with critics moving from describing genre as a set of rules to an organically developing species to a set of reading conventions. There was a growing critical awareness that genres changed over time and influenced each other.

²⁵ Though A. Williams (1984) matches the epic, lyric and dramatic onto narrative, documentary and avant-garde films.

Following literary studies, film and television genre studies is dominated by the method of defining and interpreting genre aesthetically, looking for a genre's textual elements and with a particular focus on narrative. Unlike the literary tradition though, film and television studies does not have centuries of texts to call upon but a much shorter history and a set of generic terms provided by the industry. Todorov (1975) draws the distinction between 'theoretical' genres - relying on critics' definition of genre, for example, the Natural Forms - and 'historical' genres that rely on popularly recognised terms in common usage. However, the practices of literary studies persisted with scholars seeking to reach definitions of film or television genre through its textual elements. Feuer describes the method: the critic "builds a conceptual model of the genre, then goes on to apply the model to other [textual] examples, constantly moving back and forth between theory and practice until the conceptual model appears to account for the phenomena under consideration" (1992, 141). There are actually few examples of this; Neale and Krutnik's *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (1990) defines comedy's constituent textual aspects, including detailed analysis of sketches and jokes.²⁶ This inverts the approach that informed the Natural Forms argument; instead of critics classifying texts within a genre, the critic's work is to define a genre using its texts. This model approaches genre as an aggregate of its generic texts, and Mittell describes this as the "textualist assumption" (2004, 2) that informs much work on film and television genre.

²⁶ See also Lacey for discussion of the “repertoire of elements” (2000:133) that define the quiz show and N. Carroll (1990) on horror.

Much as was seen in relation to comedy studies, genre studies is influenced by the practice of drawing conclusions about reception and culture from genre's textual definitions. Noel Carroll's (1990) work on horror defines the genre through the appearance of a "threatening and impure" monster (1990, 35), and concludes that viewers enjoy horror films *despite* being scared, rather than because they *enjoy* being scared. Other work includes Structuralist-inflected research summarised by Altman (1999) as falling into two trends; a ritual analysis that sees generic narratives as a cultural negotiation²⁷ and an ideological analysis that sees genres imposing dominant ideology on the audience.²⁸ As critiqued above, socio-cultural conclusions inferred from textual form are weakly evidenced.

Other work also theorised genre's role within culture, looking at how genre aids successful communication by helping individuals to select and recognise texts and providing context that helps us understand what we are seeing. This body of work has different emphases: genre as the result of an "intertextual relay" (Neale 2000, 39-43) of industrial practices that label, promote, advertise texts to attract viewers; that genres activate a horizon of expectations (Jauss 1982) through which viewers understand texts; comparing genre to speech acts (see Neale 2001, 2); or that we make sense of texts through "generic verisimilitude" (Neale 2000, 31-39) whereby genre's unlikely aspects, particularly in fictional narratives, are considered normal due to generic familiarity. Altman (1996) also refers to 'generic audiences' as those with sufficient knowledge to enjoy and anticipate the pleasures of particular genres, and Roberts (1990) identified

²⁷ For example, Cawelti (1971) and Wright (1975) on the Western, and Newcomb (1974) on the sitcom.

²⁸ See Grote (1983).

how different people possess different generic knowledge and preferences. This moves genre studies away from defining textual elements and towards addressing genre in its relationship to individuals and culture. It also changes the role of critics, traditionally seen as arbiters of generic definitions, but here researchers of how individuals use genres.

Seeing television and film genre in a contingent relationship to culture inevitably leads to the conclusion that genre definitions are historical. This was acknowledged in ritual/ideological analysis; Hamamoto described the US sitcom as a 'virtual history textbook' (1989, 10) and Wright relates changes in the narratives of Westerns to US economic developments. Their textual/narrative analyses were augmented with historical and industrial contexts by later critics; Feuer gives a brief account of the sitcom, suggesting in one section that changes in setting and characters are a reflection of changes in broadcasting practices, identifying a "cyclical rather than linear" (1992, 155) development. She also theorises that television genre develops inter-generically, with different genres changing each other through combination and quotation. Altman also gives the example of the film biopic, arguing that the genre was recognised by the late 1930s but only after producers had spent the decade experimenting with different narratives that were only retrospectively classified as 'biopics' (1999, 38-44). Altman proposes a method of genre history focusing on how semantic and syntactic changes in texts relate to changes in culture and industry. Such an approach uses extra-textual historical sources, such as production practices, but still makes texts the focus of study. Feuer takes the same approach, distinguishing between factors she describes as 'internal'

and ‘external’ to television genre, identifying industrial and cultural developments as external and the text as internal (1992, 151).

The textual focus of television genre has thus been contested and in its place is the hypothesis that genre is a product of cultural activity: reader’s expectations, the reading context, popular discourse, cultural knowledge, and textual form. It rejects the idea that “genre is an intrinsic property of texts” (Mittell 2004, 7) and proposes Derrida’s statement that text’s ‘participate’ in genres (1980, 230) in a non-permanent and multivalent fashion: Tudor writes, "Genre is what we collectively believe it to be" (1976, 139) and Mittell (2004) describes television genre as a “cultural category”. From this perspective, genre is a cluster of cultural definitions, interpretations and evaluations that includes but extends far beyond textual features. For example, Mittell demonstrates that while the ‘talk show’ is understood by audiences as possessing clear formal characteristics, individuals’ most potent way of categorising the genre is through an evaluation of ‘trash television’. Instead of a theoretical or industrial construction, genre is a product of discourse: "anyone who uses generic terms is participating in the constitution of genre categories" (Mittell 2004, 13).²⁹ Mittell relates genre-as-cultural category to Foucault's theory of 'discursive formations'. These are ideas such as sexuality or madness that appear to be intrinsic and natural but are actually constructed through small, everyday cultural practices: practices “that systematically form the object of which they speak” (Foucault 1989, 40). The method of genre research demanded by this theory demands a catholic attitude to sources, including reception, scheduling, and

²⁹ See also earlier work by Radway (1984) and Allen (1985).

production practices, taking into account "the breadth of discursive enunciations around any given instance...and situating them within larger cultural contexts and relations of power" (Mittell 2004, 13). The goal is to define what genre means for particular people at particular times by looking at a range of their particular practices.

This view of genre is far-reaching and relates to the theory that every form of communication requires conventions that delimit and shape interpretation: "No speaking, writing or any other symbolically organised action takes place other than through the shapings of generic codes" (Frow 2006, 10). Classification allows successful communication to occur. Frow demonstrates this power by pointing out that a text will be interpreted differently depending on the genre with which someone classifies it, using the example of a tabloid newspaper headline. He describes how a range of cues - from capitalised typeface to its physical location outside a newsagent - lead us to classify the text within the genre of 'tabloid headline' and that this evokes specific ways of understanding. He proposes that the same words presented in the same typeface would be interpreted very differently if included in a poetry book. His argues that physical contexts are part of genre but that it also operates by demanding different sets of knowledge and predisposing us to different responses. Frow argues that understanding a tabloid newspaper headline will "construct a world that is generically specific" (2006, 7) with "a different structure of address, a different moral universe, and different truth-effects" to other genres (9). The way people describe and respond to generic worlds will be suggestive of a worldview (see also Jauss 1982), echoing the socio-cultural claims of the ritual and ideological methods; genre can help us understand culture, ideology and

history. A genre's definition - individuals' expectations, beliefs and practices - is valuable because it reflects, partially, the historical and cultural contexts and conflicts of those individuals.

II

Historical qualitative genre reception research

This thesis therefore takes a long-overdue look at British comedy audiences, moving away from textual analysis towards a method that could be described as 'historical qualitative genre reception research'. It combines key texts cited above, taking particular inspiration from the work of Mittell (2004), Staiger (1992), Ang (1985) and Couldry (2000)³⁰ to produce an historical account of how people have made meaning from television political comedy.

'Television political comedy' is a term that evokes a wide range of cultural meanings rather than formal characteristics. As Mittell argues, genre is a set of definitions, interpretations and evaluations that stretch far beyond the confines of the television text and are the product of social practices. This reflects Couldry's description of media power:

Media power – by which I mean the construction in media institutions of the symbolic power of 'constructing reality' (both factual representations and credible fictions) – is a social process... [the] complex outcome of what social

³⁰ And on a smaller scale the historical reception research of Cripps (2003) and Bodroghkozy (2003).

actors (including audience members) do and say... we believe in the authority of media discourse in countless local contexts because we believe that most others believe the same, and because we act on the basis of these beliefs on countless specific occasions. (Couldry 2000, 4)

The theory of media power uses Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power, described as the outcome of shared "forms of cognition and beliefs" (Thompson 1991, 23) where the arbitrary nature of social hierarchies are misrecognised as legitimate and real, compelling individuals to submit to them even when it does not serve their interests. Media power is therefore not generated by media texts but through individuals' beliefs, practice and discourse, and the words of individuals are one type of evidence that can identify them.

Mitell and Couldry inform each other: Couldry's notion of media power is one way the media are culturally categorised, and Mittell's work can be extended to argue that genres acquire symbolic power through cultural categorisation. For example, Frow argues that 'history books' are culturally defined as discourses of truth and will therefore be read in this way. The following work seeks to establish the dominant ways that people define television political comedy.

Mittell and Couldry also argue that cultural artefacts can be explored through the words of individuals, and the method used here follows Ang's work on responses to the US soap *Dallas*, particularly her description of qualitative analysis:

the central question is how these letter-writers experience *Dallas*, what it means when they say they experience pleasure or even displeasure...To do this they will have to call upon socially available ideologies and images, which channel the way in which such a television serial attains its meanings. It is by tracing these ideologies and images in the letters than we can get to know what experiencing pleasure (or otherwise) from *Dallas* implies for these writers. (1985, 11)

This thesis adopts Ang's definition of qualitative analysis to explore the meanings, pleasures, emotions and 'socially available ideologies' articulated in relation to political comedy texts, using viewers' writings to hypothesise how they understand television political comedy.

This will be done by exploring how people have understood a number of generic texts, a method that differs from Mittell's audience research but which is still coherent with his theorisation. Mittell directly asked individuals for opinions about a specific genre, showing that responses extended far beyond textual description. As an historical work this thesis cannot replicate this and so looks for two things in written sources: people's explicit definitions of television political comedy and its cognates, and recurring discourses that are shared across different texts at different times. This extends Mittell's method, theorising that the cultural categorisation of a genre can be inferred or reverse engineered through viewers' shared discursive practices in writing about texts commonly labelled with that genre.

Generic study is not only the goal of this thesis for, as Mittell states, the role of cultural studies is to explore relations of power (2004, 13) and this research will explore how the genre of television political comedy has been implicated in cultural conflicts. As Staiger argues, qualitative historical receptions research “seeks to understand textual interpretations as they are produced historically” (Staiger 1992, 9 and see also 2000). She theorises that “interpretations-in- history become politicised since they relate to historical struggles” (1992, 18), arguing that reception sources give access to the practices and beliefs of the past. It is likely that the reception of political comedy can explore how people respond to representations of politics and discourses of power.

The following work also borrows from history of mentalities and its emphasis on emotion as an historical source, such as expressions of anger in medieval politics (S. White 1998). This is particularly pertinent because comedy is a genre that particularly relies upon emotive responses: laughter. Following the history of mentalities, historical qualitative genre reception research treats emotional responses as equal to the cognitive ways of making-meaning emphasised by the encoding/decoding model. Indeed, the division between cognition and emotion has been challenged within psychology; emotions are not random but “the results of an appraisal of some kind...relative to one’s goals,...to one’s standards...[and] to one’s attitudes or tastes” (Clore 1994, 185,187). This approach allows the pleasure of comedy - or indeed lack of pleasure - to be seen as a historical fact (see Carr 2001, 4) that can give access to how people perceived the relationship between themselves, the television text, and their position in culture and society.

Defining television political comedy

Following Mittell's theorisation of genre as a cultural category, this thesis defines 'political comedy' as 'the historically contingent set of definitions, evaluations and interpretations with which culture defines television political comedy'. While this definition may seem perverse, one of this thesis' goals is to find these cultural definitions. But where do we begin this work? The literary-aesthetic tradition of genre studies would have us to-ing and fro-ing between individual generic texts and a formal description until we arrived at a coherent description (see Feuer 1992) but this inevitably creates a textual definition of genre that reproduces the criteria with which the critic first selected the texts. If television genre is a cultural category, the text does not play the central definitional role, so formal descriptions are a category mistake. So how to identify the texts that will be studied if we are relying on a cultural definition that is as-yet unknown? Mittell's method sidestepped the need to select case study texts by asking questions directly relating to genre rather than texts (2004, 105-6). However, as historical research this thesis must rely upon found sources and cannot ask direct questions. Mittell's suggestion is to identify and explore texts that are "culturally linked to the genre label" (Mittell 2004, 103) and I interpret this as meaning selection should be based on the generic nomenclature used by viewers in relation to texts. This therefore requires discussion of how the term 'political comedy' will be used to identify appropriate case studies.

The term 'political comedy' is widely used by broadcasters, viewers, journalists and academics both in general and in relation to all the texts selected here, and its wide usage

demonstrates that people understand there is a genre called 'political comedy'. Channel 4's *30 Best Political Comedies* (2006) includes all the case studies, and the term is used within television studies.³¹ However, it must be admitted that the term does not have popular usage equal to genres such as Westerns or soaps, potentially leaving 'political comedy' open to criticism as a 'theoretical' genre (Todorov 1975) that has been created by this thesis and is not part of an historical process within culture. This can be rebutted by arguing that the phrase 'political comedy' is not a dominant term for two reasons: the genre itself is relatively small compared to those cited above; and there are a collection of cognate terms also in popular usage and which refer to the same set of texts. Just as genre itself is not a fixed definition but rather a cluster of assumptions and associations, so they can be described using a cluster of terms: 'political comedy', 'satirical comedy', 'political satire' and 'satire'. While each can be used with different inflections that must be historicised - 'satire' both refers to a literary genre and the creative output of a group of people during the 1960s - they are used interchangeably in relation to the same texts: for example, *Spitting Image* in Chapter 4 is described as satire, political comedy and satirical comedy by different people. The purpose is not to argue that there is a definitive object called 'television political comedy' but to show that a cluster of cultural classifications are associated with a cluster of related texts and that these are described using a cluster of related terms that include 'political comedy'. This reflects the essentially 'messy' and unfinished quality to cultural categorisations because they are the result of human activity in process. This thesis uses 'television political comedy' for the sake of brevity because it adequately communicates a sense of the issues under

³¹ For example Peterson (2008), Cao and Brewer (2008), Gaughan (2010), Jones (2010), Amarasingam (2011) and Gray, Jones and Thompson (2009).

discussion. 'Satire', a term that is also often used, has deliberately not been used because this work is not related to the long-standing history of cultural classifications and academic writing that the term evokes.

While textual form is not the dominant aspect of genre as a cultural category, television texts cannot be ignored for the text is a key part of how generic expectations are triggered and a key stimulus that individuals respond to. The terms identified above have a common usage that refers to textual content and style, describing comic material referencing news and current affairs and those in positions of power. Cao and Brewer (2008) define political comedy as: "humorous coverage of current issues and parodies of political figures" (2008, 90); Wagg defines modern 'satirical comedy' as based on the belief that "the world of politics and public life *per se* is necessarily open to ridicule" (1992, 258); and 'satire' has a long history that will be discussed in Chapter 4 but it is commonly articulated as the ridicule of those with power (see Jones 2010 and Gray, Jones and Thompson 2009). These textual definitions establish that this cluster of terms are cognate and represent a shared understanding of the genre that this thesis calls 'political comedy'.

Case studies

The case studies selected are therefore texts that meet the criterion of having been described as political comedy or its cognate terms. It must be noted that case studies have been criticised for supporting potentially unrepresentative conclusions, and reproducing textual canon (Bignell 2005). This is to some degree unavoidable but

several mitigations are offered. The first is pragmatic; research cannot do everything and case studies should be seen as spot checks at specific moments.³² These may not prove typical but they allow initial arguments to be made. The second mitigation is that canonical texts were deliberately chosen. This cultural status makes finding reception sources easier because the longevity and cultural significance of canonical texts is likely to have produced more responses, increasing the culturally representative nature of findings. Focusing on canonical texts is also coherent with theorising television genre as a cultural category; canonical generic texts are considered exemplary of the genre and are more likely to evoke responses indicating the dominant cultural categorisations of the genre.³³

Television texts described as political comedy display formal variety with different modes, styles and formats of comedy deployed. This is reflected in each case study's focus on a different comedy format and acts as a corrective measure by researching texts beyond the sitcom, which has dominated television comedy scholarship, and repeats the practice of spot checking by preventing discursive distortions that a single textual format might bring to the study's generic scope.

These factors all produce additional selection criteria for case study texts: those with a significant number of reception sources; canonical status; coverage of the fifty-year period under study; and a range of comedy formats and styles. The chosen series were

³² See Johnson (2005).

³³ This is not a rejection of non-canonical texts based on cultural value but they are less useful in identifying genres' dominant cultural categorisations because they have already been subordinated in cultural practices.

That Was The Week That Was (BBC 1962-3), *Yes Minister*³⁴ (BBC 1980-1984, 1986-835), *The New Statesman* (ITV 1987-1994), *The Thick of It* (BBC 2004-2012), *Spitting Image* (ITV 1984-1996) and *Brass Eye* (Channel 4 1997, 2001).

That Was The Week That Was was consistently defined as satire by contemporaneous viewers, specifically in relation to the movement known as '1960s satire'. This has been described as an expression of the social change occurring during the early 1960s (Carpenter 2000 and Sandbrook 2005) and referred to examples in television, stage and print. *TW3* should be seen as an example of 'television political comedy' because it has been described as such by historians (Wagg 1992) and broadcasters, because it is the earliest television text described using the term's cognates, and because it features the textual definition of a providing comedic material about public life and those in positions of power. It also provides a contrast to sitcom via its revue/sketch format. *TW3* possesses canonical status due to its historicisation as the first example of television political comedy, and this is partly linked to the polarised nature of its reception and over 300 letters are stored at the BBC Written Archive Centre, representing a significant body of evidence to explore how viewers from more than 50 years ago defined, interpreted and evaluated *TW3*.

Yes Minister is defined as 'television political comedy' in reception sources with journalists and internet reviewers using the specific term and cognates, and the representations of politicians and civil servants in comic situations reflects the textual

³⁴ I include *Yes Minister* (BBC 1980-1984) and *Yes Prime Minister* (1986-1988) under the single title. The 2013 series is not included.

definition. It is also regarded as a canonical text, winning awards and described by viewers and broadcasters as a 'classic', leading to 150 reception sources from journalists and internet reviewers. It represents the BBC's classical mode of studio-based production, and was produced over the course of the 1980s with a re-boot in 2013.

The New Statesman was also described by many as television political comedy or its cognates, though the series also displays a generic multiplicity that will be discussed, and, like *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It*, its narratives fulfil the subordinate textual criterion. It was awarded Best Television Comedy Series at the 1991 BAFTA Awards and came eighth in the *30 Greatest Political Comedies* poll (Channel 4 2006), though the series never reached the levels of acclaim given to *Yes Minister*, and this is perhaps reflected in the smaller number of reception sources found: 50. The series is still available on home video and the main character, Alan B'stard, featured in a later book and play, giving the series longevity beyond its run from the late-1980s to mid-1990s. The text thus originates from a different time period and broadcaster from *Yes Minister* and its comic style is of a different order through actor Rik Mayall's association with the Alternative Comedy movement.

The Thick of It was described by the BBC as "dark political comedy" (BBC 2015) and the variety of terms related to 'television political comedy' are used consistently throughout reception sources. It is also described as a classic and was the recipient of many awards, and its popularity is testified by its movement from the niche channel BBC4 to the more mainstream BBC2. Over 80 reception sources were gathered and

more than half of them were newspaper articles. The *Thick of It* is also a text from a different period to the other two sitcoms and reflects contemporaneous trends in sitcom production and style, filmed on location and using hand-held cameras. It is also devised by Armando Iannucci, a comedy producer that journalists and internet reviewers associate with other political comedy texts, including *Brass Eye*.

Spitting Image was frequently described as satire, as Chapter 4 will discuss, by academics, journalists and internet reviewers, and its generic relationship to television political comedy is also demonstrated by comparisons to other texts, including *TW3* and *The New Statesman*. The text's focus on public figures and politicians also meets the textual criterion. It was a long-running series, broadcast over 12 years that spanned the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in an audience of millions and a broad sweep of journalistic sources originating from its period of broadcast. It was very successful and span off into a range of other media including songs, books, adverts and novelty toys, and the cultural penetration of *Spitting Image* can also be seen in over 300 newspaper sources. It provides a significant formal contrast to the other texts, as a sketch show featuring caricatured puppets and a style of comedy that emphasised visual and physical humour.

The reception of *Brass Eye* is also dominated by terms relating to 'satire' alongside descriptions as 'political', though as will be discussed its status as comedy was much debated. It adopted a parody of current affairs programme, providing formal contrast with the other case studies, and included the ridicule and hoaxing of public figures and politicians. Compared to the other case studies, the series was short-lived, with six

episodes broadcast in 1997 and one in 2001, but it made a significant impact and over 250 sources were gathered. There was much controversy in the press and it is frequently described as a key piece of British television by internet reviewers, television comedy fans and scholars.³⁵ The series' principal figure, Chris Morris, is accorded auteur status by many of the sources, so textual comparisons are largely limited to his other work, predominantly current affairs parodies, though producer Armando Iannucci is also referenced, drawing a connection to *The Thick of It*.

Despite inevitable short-comings and omissions, this selection offers six series that have been described as 'television political comedy' in reception sources, have longevity, have met with public success and/or controversy, have acquired canonical status and exhibit relationships to each other. Thus while there is a seventeen year hiatus between *TW3* and *Yes Minister*, this was considered unavoidable given *TW3*'s status as the first key text in British television political comedy, and the lack of canonical texts in the intervening period.³⁶ The last thirty years of the genre are thus covered in more detail; this is considered an artefact of the thesis' approach and acknowledged as a potential for further study. Furthermore, this bias towards more recent British history overlaps with my own lifespan and, as Alasuutari points out, this offers certain research advantages, acting as "long personal field experience" (1999, 8) in British television and culture.

³⁵ See Mills (2004a) and (2007).

³⁶ Several series followed *TW3*, including *Not So Much A Programme, More A Way Of Life* (BBC 1964-5), *BBC3* (1965-6), *The Frost Report* (BBC 1966-7) and *Up Sunday* (1972-3) but they are a continuation of 1960s satire, so run the risk of repetition, and declined in popularity and canonical significance. For more on these see Daniels (2011) and Carpenter (2000).

Reception sources

Another distinctive characteristic of this research is the scale and range of sources used. Ang (1985) used 42 letters, Jones (2010) looked at 95 letters, and Lockyer and Attwood (2009) refer to 80 newspaper articles; this research has examined over one thousand individual sources.³⁷ Similarly most audience studies focus on evidence of one type, for example, letters,³⁸ newspaper articles,³⁹ discussion groups⁴⁰ or questionnaires,⁴¹ whereas this thesis uses written evidence from a range of sources: correspondence between viewers, broadcasters and newspapers; public documents and publicity from broadcasters and regulators; internal documents from broadcasters; newspaper articles; internet reviews; and internet discussion. The thesis' historical scope also demanded use of archives and other such locations.⁴² This catholic approach is based upon the theorisation that cultural categorisations are produced and reproduced throughout culture in discursive practices from “media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical

³⁷ 394 letters about *TW3*; 89 newspaper articles and 250 internet reviews about political sitcoms; 303 newspaper articles about *Spitting Image*; and 172 articles, 69 internet reviews and 33 fan discussions about *Brass Eye*.

³⁸ See Ang (1985), Bodroghkozy (2003), Cripps (2003), Gauntlett (1995) and Hallam (2005).

³⁹ See Lockyer and Attwood (2009) and Feldman (2007).

⁴⁰ See Morley (1980), Liebes and Katz (1990) and Jhally and Lewis (1992).

⁴¹ See Nelson (2005).

⁴² The work of gathering sources from different locations comprised the initial work of each chapter; the BBC's Written Archive Centre, the British Film Institute National Library's Cuttings Collection, internet review sites, and internet fan forums. The ITA/IBA archive at the University of Bournemouth was searched for correspondence relating to *Spitting Image*, and enquiries were made at Ofcom regarding *Spitting Image* and *Brass Eye* but neither yielded notable results. Given the political aspect of the research, it should be stated that *Hansard*, the record of parliamentary debate, was not used because of the thesis' emphasis on writing, rather than oral records, and politicians attitudes to political comedy has been recently researched by Daniels (2011).

contexts” (Mittell 2004, xii)⁴³ and such a theory demands a method that calls upon a wide range of sources.

This resulted in a significant number of sources in different locations and work was assisted by a digital camera, scanners, photocopiers, computers and online archive access. Each source was added to a database, and qualitative data, such as themes, topics, pleasures and meanings, was logged for each source (see Saldana 2011, 95-109). For example, the entry for JLC’s letter records his negative response, use of the discourse of national attack, and reference to World War Two; this was done for each source. While not used in a quantitative fashion, this allowed thematic overviews to emerge during content analysis (Berg 2008, 338) and made the handling of hundreds of sources a more manageable proposition.

Unsurprisingly, the distribution of reception sources was not equal across the texts, and the thesis does not set out to provide detailed comparisons and contrasts between case studies. Each case study is based upon a different set of sources, each with different origins, contexts and purposes. Gaps and contrasts do raise questions that the thesis cannot answer but they also provide an excellent way to test Mittell’s theory that television genre is a cultural classification; if television genre is a cluster of cultural categorisations produced in a variety of contexts, then such categorisations should be expressed through all reception sources, albeit with different clusters appearing in different ways and affected by the different contexts. This method thus looks at what can

⁴³ A similar wider range of written sources are used in history of mentalities research, for example Richard Overy’s *The Morbid Age* (2009, 1-2, 6) and proposed in regard to film studies by M. Barker (2004).

be generalised across the different sources, tracing discourses shared between letter writers in the 1960s and internet reviews in the 2000s, and uses the varied range of sources as discursive spot checks to triangulate (Berg 2008, 5) the cultural categorisation of the genre through how different people, in different contexts, and at different times made meaning from different television political comedy texts.

The use of written archive material means that, unlike much audience research, the evidence was unsolicited.⁴⁴ While Ang's (1985) letters followed an invitation that asked them to write to her, the use of sources gained through unobtrusive measures (Berg 2008, 268) means that viewers' meaning-making is not influenced by the researcher's presence, a set of questions or the pressures of a focus group or interview. The wide scope of the thesis also means that unlike much audience research it does not address specific groups as delineated in the contents of Booker and Jermyn's collection of audience research (2003), for example, fans, female viewers, and viewers from different nationalities and ethnicities.⁴⁵ The thesis does not attempt a sociological analysis, such as comparing reception to class or race, and engages with the dominant meanings produced by individuals, rather than the individuals themselves. Indeed there has been "a deconstruction of the very unity and solidity of the 'audience' as an object of analysis" (Ang 1996, 1; see also Bird 2003), with 'the audience' seen as an artefact of the research itself where "users are cordoned off for study" (Radway 1988, 363). This research therefore addresses reception texts, rather than 'the audience' *per se*. In the words of de Certeau, "the question at hand concerns modes of operation or schemata of

⁴⁴ With the exception of one email in the sitcom case study.

⁴⁵ See also, Hallam (2005), (Stacey 1994) and Ang (1985) on gender, Morley (1980) on class, Husband (1988) on race and Doty (1993) on sexuality.

actions, and not directly the subjects (or persons) who are their authors or vehicles" (de Certeau 1988, xi). This means the range of sources gathered demands some initial comments and justification to explore how I have approached and defined the variety of forms and contexts within which viewers wrote; letters, newspaper articles, internet reviews, internet forum discussions.

Letters

Viewers' letters are a long-standing part of audience research and have been used in historical studies of comedy (Cripps 2003 and Bodroghkozy 2003); they are used in the *TW3* case study. Letters are overwhelmingly communications from a single individual, occasionally from organisations, intended to influence key decision-makers at the BBC. Letter writing is not a typical way of responding to television, and responses from this self-selecting group are likely to be positioned in the extremes of pleasure or displeasure, while the polemic or persuasive aims could potentially distort or exaggerate individuals' writing, as JLC's letter suggests, making letters to broadcasters a difficult historical source that cannot be seen as typical of a majority view. There is also the ethical issue of using sources intended for another purpose; a discussion of this is below.

Despite these difficulties, letters do give access to contemporaneous concerns and symptomatic reading (Ang 1985) allows them to be seen as emotive responses that express some of the 'available ideologies' circulating within that historical context. For example, a symptomatic reading of JLC's letter does not conclude that he genuinely wanted to see David Frost hanged but that he found *TW3* very offensive, believed it had

negative effects, and the references to propaganda and the Second World War were comparisons that were available and felt appropriate. Gauntlett (1995) has argued in relation to one specific reception project that letter writers are concerned individuals; the historical task is to explain why they wrote as they did and what they were concerned about. Letters are not expressions of the viewing experience itself (see Staiger 1992, 79-80), where the encoding/decoding model attempts to intervene, so this thesis researches how people articulate their response to texts within the cultural categorisations of political comedy. The letters are therefore best seen as a group of sources, with recurring discourses used to draw conclusions about the dominant attitude to the text, using an accumulation of responses to propose how people interpreted, evaluated, defined and enjoyed political comedy.

Newspapers

Newspaper articles are a very different kind of source, produced within a professional context and with authorship distributed between one or more writers through an editorial process for a large public readership. Journalistic sources will be determined by the political and cultural demands of the specific newspaper, including assumptions about the content that readers want. Newspaper research must take into account the variety of contexts for different newspapers, tending towards the left or the right politically, and reflecting the cultural standards identified with the quality, mid-market or popular press (Franklin 2008, 6). Newspapers are not unified texts and combine different types of content, from headlines to editorials and cartoons to adverts (see Franklin 2008). Different types of article have their own generic qualities that must be taken into

account, and the following work found four types dominated: the news article, television review, opinion editorial or comment piece, and feature article.

News articles emphasise factual accounts and are less likely to offer material useful for symptomatic readings, however events reported as news show publications' definition of importance and value. TV reviews tend towards subjective evaluations of television texts from a first-person perspective, providing access to personal attitudes to television though this may be limited by editorial oversight, meaning reviews will be significantly influenced by the newspaper's position within cultural hierarchies. Comment or opinion-editorial (op-ed) pieces also adopt a first-person perspective, often presenting a polemic argument from a well-known journalist that echoes the newspaper's position. Features tend to report a journalist's encounter with political comedy production personnel, presenting a personal view behind-the-scenes, often accompanied by photographs. The difficulties of newspaper research lie in the varied types of sources, though this can be identified, and the lack of detailed knowledge about each newspaper's context. However, this thesis emphasises the value of all reception sources as practices contributing to the cultural categorisation of political comedy and its texts, and the variety of journalistic styles provides more ways to triangulate discourses of genre. They are also written for mass appeal and are likely to deploy discourses that editorial staff believed would meet with general understanding. This may not necessarily be successful but newspapers are a useful source for accessing popular and common sense discourses that are reproduced widely.

Press sources were gathered from the British Library's Newspaper Archive, using Google searches, the internet ProQuest archive and, most consistently, the British Film Institute Reuben Library's Newspaper Cuttings Collection. These cuttings were selected and compiled by the BFI's library staff from a wide selection of regional and national newspapers until April 2011⁴⁶ and while not exhaustive provides excellent access to the press sources.

Fan forums

Internet sources have been used in audience research, notably in regard to fan communities (for example Hills 2002 and Jenkins 2006) where fans have been shown as active communities that exhibit relationships to texts different to that of non-fans. This thesis used 'Cookd and Bombd', a Chris Morris fan site. Fans are theorised as "self-organising groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations and fantasies" (Jenkins 2006, 158) about texts or genres. The difficulty of using such forums in a historical project that seeks *dominant* definitions of political comedy is that fans tend to feature performative displays of "specialised fan knowledge" (Hills 2005, 79), expressing subcultural positions within a space of perceived privacy (Lotz and Ross 2004). Fan writing has also been found to address others fans who can, via the forum, reply to "rapidly indicate [their] approval or disapproval" (Hills 2005, 79). This means fan discussion acquires a dialogic and subcultural aspect that neither letters nor newspapers possess, making comparisons complex. They also present ethical issues, discussed below.

⁴⁶ The scope of this decreased; at some point in the 1990s the major regional newspapers were cancelled and tabloids were not taken after around 2005.

The usefulness of fan forums lies in this complexity. The cultural categorisation of genre is produced in many ways and through innumerable instances; fan forums give an opportunity to symptomatically explore a different kind of audience and examine the extent that the reception from a group of fans relates to other definitions of genre produced in other sources. The dialogue between fans also allows for opinions and attitudes to be contested and clarified within a group, where specific ideas about texts or genres may be explored in significant detail through displays of fan knowledge. In the same way as the other sources, the forum will demonstrate the horizon of expectations of fans, allowing comparisons and contrasts to be drawn across types of sources. The fan context thus provides an outlier for inferring the cultural categorisations of genre through the reception of its texts.

Internet reviews

Internet reviews are a different type of source to fan forum discussions, and while their scholarly use is not widespread, it is growing.⁴⁷ Internet sources obviously exclude anyone who cannot use the internet; however, access has increased significantly over the past decade and widened the demographic of users (Office of National Statistics 2009), so that the discourses evident in internet sources may be more representative than has been in the case in the recent past. The reviews used in this thesis are those hosted on commercial websites that invite customers and members to submit their own review. This is dominated by Amazon, an international internet retailer, and this thesis focused on the British site Amazon.co.uk to bias towards British cultural discourses. A slightly

⁴⁷ See Church (2009) and Dodds (2006).

different source is IMDb.com, a reference site for film and television, that also hosts publicity material, such as trailers and promotional photographs, links to journalist reviews, and invites user reviews. While there is not a UK bias here, the site is English-speaking and thus keeps the subject within a more general Anglophone community.

The complexity of these sources lies in their multiplicity. Internet reviews have been conceptualised as “private criticism in the public sphere” (Steiner 2008), where the often-anonymous or impersonal context of the internet allows for feelings to be expressed with heightened intensity (Katz and Rice 2002) to a wide audience. They are a self-selective group of writers who may adopt different writing styles depending on the text they are reviewing,⁴⁸ for example reviews using a journalistic style have been seen as writers attempting to maximise readership through a professional discourse (Bore 2011). Internet reviews do not exhibit a unified cultural position, making reception sources heterogeneous and inconsistent. This is also true between sites: Amazon.co.uk reviewers write in the commercial context of retail, reviewing products for other consumers, while IMDb.com is largely defined by film and television PR and promotion. As before, the heterogeneous nature of internet reviews is part of the value. This research is not looking to define the essential nature of 'internet reviews' but rather access the range of meanings that they generate in relation to generic texts. Having conceptualised internet reviews as complex and multiple in principle, it will be explored how continuities and contrasts are expressed by writers. The range of cultural standards

⁴⁸ See Steiner 2008.

and writing positions provided by internet reviews gives a site to explore the cultural categorisations of genre in its potential variety or uniformity.

The ethics of using these sources

Qualitative historical reception research's use of found sources written by individuals for purposes other than academic study raises questions about the ethics of such a practice. Decon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (1999) summarise the risk: "investigation inevitably intrudes on the privacy of those concerned" (377). It is the responsibility of the researcher to evaluate the extent of this inevitable intrusion, and devise a method to ensure that it is minimal and mitigates any risks posed. The central tenet must be to "uphold a standard of protecting participants from harm as the guiding factor in making methodological decisions" (Lotz and Ross 2004, 504). The most common way of ensuring ethical research practices is by gaining informed consent (Decon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock 1999) from subjects of research. This is most pertinent in relation to studies where individuals are recruited and become involved in a controlled event, for example a focus group. Secretive observation or deception of individuals is considered an unethical way of gathering data⁴⁹ (see Erikson 1967 or Dingwall 1980).

Much of the debate around informed consent relates to medical or psychological contexts where data is gathered via direct interventions. In contrast, qualitative historical reception research uses found sources that originate outside of the research context and

⁴⁹ This was one of the complaints about *Brass Eye*. See Chapter Five.

found in archives or on websites. Ethical considerations of consent and the risk of intrusion into someone's privacy therefore relate to publishing sources that were not originally intended for public dissemination: publishing private documents without the permission of the author or recipient intrudes on privacy and risks harming an individual. Definitions of public and private documents are therefore important here, though not straightforward, and they raise various questions about the status of the archived letters and internet writing, particularly on forums. A key principle for researchers must be to look at the context that sources originate from and "consider how contributors experience these spaces" as either private or public (Lotz and Ross 2004, 503).

The *TW3* letters from the BBC Written Archive Centre are now public documents owned by the BBC, though access is limited to researchers. Many are complaints or congratulations about *TW3* and were written in the hope that they would influence decision makers to cancel or continue the series. These are therefore not personal communications between two individuals but were written with the purpose of being shared with others at the BBC and acted upon. However, this cannot be said to amount to informed consent because sharing in a professional context is not equivalent to being republished in a thesis. Two things must therefore be taken into account; the age of the documents and the extent of any potential harm. Sources dating from over fifty years ago still originate from individuals but there must be a pragmatic acknowledgement that the historical period they refer to is no longer contemporaneous and that many of the authors will have since died. There are therefore fewer people from whom to gain

consent and to cause harm to. Further, considerations of potential harm must take into account the research topic. Sharf (1999) and Lotz and Ross (2004) both argue that research methods must be contingent upon the seriousness of the issue, such as protecting the privacy of research subjects who have suffered from sexual abuse. The issue of political comedy is a topic that has a small potential to cause harm to individuals if their privacy was intruded upon.

The issue is therefore whether to use sources and how to use them, with emphasis upon the ability of citation to create a direct link between source and author. In this case, the BBC WAC is a national archive used by historians and there is clear precedent for the use of the sources. In relation to intrusion of privacy through source attribution to an individual, references will only refer to the author by initials. Sources could only be linked to authors by visiting the BBC WAC, reducing the risk of a harmful intrusion, assuming that the author is alive and considered the attribution of their private response to political comedy harmful.

Amazon and IMDb reviews invite a different discussion; the debate over whether “online is private or public is unclear” (Hastall and Sukkala 2013, 183; see also Berry 2004). However, online sources are not a unified type. Internet reviews offer evaluation and comment on a public site where writing is requested and submitted with the expectation and desire that they will be published and be read by others who are unknown to them. Many address the reader as someone looking for information and some imitate the style of professional journalists. While research re-purposes their writing, it is also

coherent with the public sphere through which these internet authors experienced their role as writers (Lotz and Ross 2004). Hastall and Sukkala also report, “it seems current practice perceives informed consent as not necessary when data in public forums, websites and communities is analysed” (2014, 183). Just as this thesis does not look for consent from journalists in quoting their work, these internet reviewers are treated as having already published their work with informed consent: for example, Amazon has terms and conditions that grant it non-exclusive rights to publish user reviews.

The same treatment cannot be given to sources derived from internet forum posts. These sources fall under the notion of ‘perceived privacy’ (Lotz and Ross 2004), where authors write on a website that requires a username and password to contribute and where the limited number of authors address the other members of the forum directly, engaging in sociable dialogue. It is entirely likely that the authors experience this as a private space. As suggested by Hastall and Sukkala (2013), their privacy will be maintained through anonymised referencing, though relevant URLs will still be used, despite Lotz and Ross’ (2004) point that sociological fieldwork uses unverifiable observations. This thesis will aim for verifiability wherever possible, with the users’ anonymity and the low sensitivity of the topic of political comedy mitigating the risks of intrusion and harm.

Closing comments and overview

The aim of this thesis is therefore to identify the interpretations, definitions, evaluations and dis/pleasures that are used to categorise television political comedy. However, the

identification of television political comedy's cultural categorisation is not an end in itself; the theoretical basis for this thesis and the method used has implications for media research. In each case study, it is hypothesised that historical reception research will draw in issues that textual analysis alone could not discover about how the text is understood. Mittell (2004) has demonstrated that viewers refer to other generic texts, other television genres, and society and culture more generally when responding to television. Individuals' responses are hypothesised to stretch beyond the text and into other aspects of culture, allowing arguments to be made about the cultural role of television and other media at different historical moments. The work also contributes to audience reception that explores emotion, and goes beyond the generalisation of 'pleasure' to interrogate how viewers describe both their pleasures and displeasures,⁵⁰ exploring how these emotional discourses are also useful as historical evidence that contribute towards understanding how individuals felt about the world they lived in.

This research does not set out to provide or prove a theory or model of reception or demonstrate the influence of texts upon individuals, aside from asserting that some texts prompt some viewers to write about the experience. Rather, this research gives an overview of the ways that some individuals have made meaning from political comedy, showing how the genre has been perceived and what this suggests about British culture. The next chapter goes on to address the negative reception of *TW3* as seen in the letters preserved by the BBC. It looks at the dominant ways in which the series was understood to be damaging Britain, with attention to the aspects of the nation that people believed to

⁵⁰ See Mills (2005, 138) on the lack of research into sitcom's pleasures.

be under threat and how this damage was supposedly caused. It explores how comedy was perceived to undermine support for traditional institutions, and that this was seen to risk the future of Britain as a prosperous country. This reception is evaluated as an anxious reaction to what was then a new form of television – political comedy – in the context of the apparent erosion of traditional British culture and society, showing how reception is a product of the specificities of both television text and historical context.

Chapter 3 looks at the reception of three sitcoms, *Yes Minister*, *The New Statesman* and *The Thick of It*, discussing the dominance of realism as a key discourse in evaluations, with many writing about the series as true and authentic. The strength of the realist discourse is used to argue that audience responses give partial access to individuals' political beliefs, while also showing how the criterion of realism depended on viewers' interpretations of the series' comic style. Comedy that was associated with notions of quality tended to be interpreted as realistic, while texts judged to be lacking realism tended to feature lowbrow comedy described as unsophisticated and unsubtle. This is used to argue that the response to political sitcom as realistic is not only dependent on the interpretation of the text in regard to the context of political culture, but also that of comedy culture and the value of different comic styles.

Chapter 4 focuses on the press response to *Spitting Image*, with particular attention to the controversies that punctuated its earlier years. It looks at how evaluations of *Spitting Image* divided visual content from the written/spoken content, with different discourses deployed in each discussion. It will also address how responses express the

incompatibility of popular entertainment forms with politics, proposing a definition of satire that associates successful political comedy with the highbrow cultural values of the literary and the sophisticated. It then goes on to demonstrate that another set of cultural standards was operative in both text and reception of the series, particularly in the tabloid press: the carnivalesque.

Chapter 5 looks at the response to *Brass Eye*, focusing on the press controversies and later viewer reactions, particularly to the *Special* and its references to paedophilia. It addresses the definitions of comedy used during the controversy, how comedy style was related to offense and satirical power, while also providing insight into discourses about the ethics of comedy, comedy's power over individuals and wider discourses of media power, tabloid media and the debasement of current affairs in British culture during the 1990s and 2000s.

The thesis engages with different periods in different ways, from Lord Home to Thatcher to Blair and David Cameron, from black and white transmissions to digital television channels, and from sitcom to sketch show. What remains consistent throughout is how individuals write about television: their interpretations, definitions, evaluations, pleasures and anxieties. It sets out to show how comedy scholarship can engage with television in ways that go beyond the text to explore culture and the practices of those who reproduce culture: that is to say, human beings.

Chapter Two

That Was The Week That Was: Ridiculing the Nation

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Satire and its Discontents

I feel so deeply about this matter, because of the tremendous harm it is doing this country, that I am writing to my MP, my Bishop, to my daily and Sunday newspapers and to the man finally responsible to the Government – the Postmaster General. (BW to Sir Arthur fforde, 27 October 1963, BBC Written Archive Centre R/41/289/21)

On 24 November 1962 BBC Television broadcast the first edition of *That Was The Week That Was* (1962-1963) as the final programme in the Saturday night schedule. A team of performers were led on-screen by David Frost, the show's twenty three year-old compère, and off-screen by director Ned Sherrin. *TW3*, as it became known, included sketches, parodies, monologues, songs and interviews based on topical material and contemporary politics and current affairs. It was very successful: by the end of the first series in April 1963 *TW3* was attracting an audience of up to 12 million viewers (Crisell 1991, 145), returning for a second season in the autumn. However, it was abruptly cancelled only weeks later. *TW3*'s popularity had been accompanied by significant controversy and the BBC received hundreds of letters and phone calls of complaint about the series, with many requesting *TW3* be cancelled or controlled. Newspapers also commented on the growing controversy (see Carpenter 2000, 245), reporting on the

scale of correspondence received by the BBC as if it were a competition between supporters and detractors. Although many viewers wrote in support of the series and it continued to attract a large audience, the last episode was broadcast on 28 December 1963.

This chapter looks at the reception of *TW3*, focusing on the letters of complaint received by the BBC, and now preserved at the BBC Written Archive Centre, to explore how viewers made meaning from the first canonical series of television political comedy. There is no extant work addressing these sources in detail, although *TW3*'s production (Goldie 1977; Briggs 1995; Crisell 1991; and Carpenter 2000), cultural context (Sandbrook 2005) and its reception from politicians (Daniels 2011) have been discussed. Through the theorisation that “interpretations-in-history become politicised since they relate to historical struggles, not to essences” (Staiger 1992, 18), the letters will be used as evidence of how correspondents perceived cultural power relations in British culture between 1962 and 1963. This will demonstrate the role of these letters in the cancellation of the series and argue that claims about the negative effects of *TW3* upon individuals and the British nation were expressions of anxiety about changes in British society. This will also be argued to be evidence of viewers' shock at the new television genre of political comedy and their conservative expectations of entertainment, television and the BBC in the early 1960s.

Using letters from the BBC Written Archive Centre

The key sources for this chapter are the correspondence files relating to *TW3* at the BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC): R41/289/1-22. These contain 394 letters written to the BBC between November 1962 and January 1964. Approximately one quarter of these include positive comments, though some praise certain aspects while complaining about others, making a clear distinction between a positive letter and a letter of complaint difficult. This is a significant number of sources but they only give partial access to *TW3*'s reception. The total number of letters or telephone calls received by the BBC exceeds 394 considerably; a memo from late 1962 records 2037 positive letters or phone calls and 1082 negative response about the first four editions,⁵¹ another note records the first eight editions of the second series resulted in 207 positive and 1040 negative telephone calls or letters,⁵² and a typed sheet accompanying the BBC Audience Research Report into the entire first series records 1870 responses 'for' and 1604 'against' the programme (VR/63/274, 30 May 1963, BBC WAC T66/103/1⁵³). The WAC files are therefore an incomplete record of *TW3*'s reception but this is an unavoidable aspect of historical research (Carr 2001, 7).

Analysis of the sources was adapted from the methods of quantitative content analysis (Hansen et al. 1998, 91-129) and used a database where notes and observations could be

⁵¹ From Head of Secretariat to The Secretary, memorandum, 19 December 1962, BBC WAC T66/103/1. It also reports that following the edition of 8 December 1962, "Since, for a time, all telephones lines to Broadcasting House and Television Centre were jammed it is likely that a number of people who wished to express a view were unable to do so."

⁵² Anonymous, memo, circa 25 November 1963, BBC WAC T66/103/1

⁵³ This is not where most Audience Research Reports are stored but the *TW3* TV Press Office file. This was its location in May 2008.

made about each letter.⁵⁴ While each letter only truly represents the individual who wrote it, it is theorised that such writing does not occur within a cultural vacuum and that dominant discourses are indicative. This collection therefore carries evidential weight in making conclusions about the “socially available ideologies” (Ang 1985, 11) through which people made meaning from *TW3* and about a formative moment in the cultural categorisation of television political comedy.

Chapter outline

The first part of this chapter focuses on the letters in detail, proposing their historical significance by demonstrating their role in the cancellation of *TW3* and identifying the dominant discourses through which correspondents wrote about *TW3*. This will show that while the series’ political references were controversial, complainants wrote about many aspects of British society and were dominated by an emotive discourse of national attack. Part two will show that these deeply emotional responses were related to correspondents’ specific expectations of television entertainment. It will argue that complaints about *TW3* can be seen as an anxious response to a new television genre – political comedy – that contradicted the existing cultural categorisations of light entertainment, providing a range of displeasures that were both aesthetic and ideological. Part three will then discuss how criticisms of *TW3* expressed anxieties about the BBC’s role as a national broadcasting institution, historicising this in relation to changes in broadcasting during the early 1960s. It will conclude by demonstrating that the reception

⁵⁴ Tagged with the following topics: Positive, Youth, Saturdays, Royal family, Smut, Politics, Blasphemy/religious threat, Police, War, No specific.

of *TW3* contributes to an understanding of how some people perceived comedy, television and British society in 1962 and 1963 in a way that textual analysis could not.

II

Not so much their politics, more their way of life

This decision has been taken for one reason only; 1964 will be General Election Year, and political activity will be mounting as the date of the Election nears. In these circumstances - as controversy grows over issues which the electors will be called upon to decide - the political content of the programme, which has been one of its principal and most successful constituents, will clearly be more difficult to maintain. Rather than dilute that content, and so alter the nature of the programme, the BBC thinks it is preferable that *TWTWTW* should continue as present until the end of the year, and then cease.

(13 November 1963, Press Release, BBC WAC T16/589)

Hyena howls and a red herring

On 28 September 1963 *TW3* returned to the BBC's television schedules for its second season accompanied by a promise in the press from Stuart Hood, Controller of Programmes, Television from 1962-1964, that there would be no more 'smut'; a recurring criticism of the first series.⁵⁵ This was immediately referred to in the pre-titles

⁵⁵ A number of letters complained the promise had not been kept, for example, MM to Stuart Hood, 29 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/11 and RWS to Hugh Carleton Greene, 29 September 1963, BBC

sketch: cast members Roy Kinnear and Millicent Martin are sat in front of the television, deciding what to watch next. Martin looks in the *Radio Times* but doesn't recognise the next item, reading it out in stilted confusion: "*That Was...The Week That...Was?*" Kinnear, chuckling to himself, attempts to jog her memory: "I'll tell you something...and when I do it'll bring it all back to you..." He pauses.

KINNEAR: Bum.

MARTIN: [brief pause] Po! [sic] Oh yeah! [laughs]

KINNEAR: Yeah, *That Was The Week That Was*: the bum and po show [sic]!
[They laugh] Take your knickers off! [They laugh again, and then drily aside]
Ah, they said that every week without fail, yeah...

MARTIN: Here, do you think they'll say it again?

KINNEAR: Well, they've got to haven't they, if they want to make a comeback.
They've set a standard now. They can't disappoint the Great British public...
[audience laughs and applauds]

And with a brassy riff from the in-house band the theme tune begins, cutting to the animated title sequence superimposed over shots of the audience. Then a cut to Martin, in medium shot, now stood on a small stage, singing the theme song direct-to-camera, with lyrics referencing events of the past few days:

WAC R41/289/16. Hood repeated the claim in letters to complainants, for example, to WSP, 24 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14.

That was the week that was!

It's over let it go. We're pleased to write it off

But not as pleased as one or two Prime Ministers we know...

Macmillan's been reading Lord Denning⁵⁶ in bed

He'd have found it much livelier with a Trollope instead...

As was the norm, the music abruptly stops at the end of each verse for a short sketch, quick gag or asides, typically from David Frost, before striking up again after the punch line. This lasts four minutes and on the final refrain the image cuts to a crane shot pulling back from Martin to reveal the studio cameras, the set and the applauding audience, which then cuts to a similar shot on the other side of the studio moving in towards the desk where the rest of the cast are sat, and as the music concludes, cuts to Frost in medium close-up.

Much of this particular edition relates to the Denning Report.⁵⁷ The first seven minutes parodically reviews the publication as a spy thriller and also features a photomontage of Profumo, Keeler and Harold Macmillan set to the recording of Frank Sinatra singing ‘I Could Write A Book’. This is followed by several shorter pieces, lasting five minutes in total, including a song parodying The Beatles, a pointed joke about the police treatment

⁵⁶ Lord Denning's report into the Profumo Affair was published in September 1963. John Profumo, Secretary of State for War, had an affair with Christine Keeler in 1961 and the same time Keeler was in a relationship with a Soviet military attaché. Profumo denied the affair in Parliament but in June 1963 admitted he had lied and resigned.

⁵⁷ See note above.

of suspects in custody, and Frost reading out ridiculous-sounding excerpts from radio and the press. Next up, a four minute monologue from Robert Lang dressed as a judge, bemoaning the high divorce rate and concluding that the couple before him had committed the crime that led to all divorces: matrimony. Frost continues this theme, delivering a three minute monologue critiquing the distortions and exaggerations in media coverage of remarks about premarital sex, before introducing a debate between Bernard Levin and Sir Cyril Osborne, a Conservative MP, on the topic of morality. Lasting ten minutes, their conversation borders on ill-tempered and both men disagree with each other vehemently. Frost delivers another short anecdote, Millicent Martin then sings a jazzy song about middle-class gossip, and Kinnear reads a piece about the banal content of the *Radio Times* lasting three minutes. Back to Frost, who introduces another song, performed by Lang and David Kernan, about *The Representative*, a new play that criticised Pope Pius XII for his perceived apathy towards Nazi Germany's anti-Semitism. Five minutes later, Frost delivers a few anecdotes about the excesses of advertising, before introducing a new member of the cast, Irwin C Watson, for four minutes of laconic stand-up with reference ranging from fear of flying to his experience of racism in the USA as a black man. We return to Frost who announces the end of the show.

As well as the promise of no smut, the BBC tried to stop *TW3* overrunning by placing an episode of thriller serial *The Third Man* (BBC 1959-65) immediately afterwards. *TW3* responded irreverently; Frost points out the new scheduling and explains he will summarise the plot for anyone wanting to go to bed: "Marta the fascinating girl spy, is in

fact working for the enemy... So why bother really, I mean...?" Cue laughter, then one final joke about Macmillan and the Denning Report, and the band strikes up. As the credits roll along the bottom of the screen, the cameras linger over the smiling audience and the performers shaking hands, pointedly and obviously deliberately turning their backs on Irwin C. Watson, the only black performer, in a presumed joke about his race.

Despite its large audience and considerable approval from many, it was only a few weeks after this edition that the BBC announced *TW3*'s cancellation. The explanation provided in the press release, quoted above, was that a general election was scheduled for 1964 and it would be too difficult to retain the BBC's standards of political impartiality and balance while producing *TW3*. Some viewers suspected the cancellation was the result of political interference,⁵⁸ wondering, "From which quarter was pressure exerted on the BBC...? Were any requests made by either the present government or the Conservative Party?" (RWH to Director of Programmes, November 16 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7). Denials were issued from different levels of the Corporation; a speech by Kenneth Adam, Director of BBC Television from 1961-1968, rebutted the claim and was also published as a BBC press release,⁵⁹ and a press announcement emphasised the decision did not involve external pressures.⁶⁰ The archived copy of the press announcement even carries an unsigned handwritten note that insists upon this again:

⁵⁸ See also RH to Stuart Hood, 14 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7 and MLN to Hugh Carleton Greene, 17 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/10.

⁵⁹ 15 November 1963, press release, BBC WAC T66/103/1.

⁶⁰ It included prepared answers to anticipated questions, such as 'Will *TW3* return?' and 'What will David Frost do next at the BBC?' (13 November 1963, press release, BBC WAC T66/103/1).

Diana, If anyone asks for complete total of viewers calls on prog the answer is No, we don't ~~keep~~ make a point of keeping these – it would mean a lot of work, and anyway we don't ~~place~~ attach a great deal of relevance ~~on this~~ to them. (13 November 1963, press release, BBC WAC T66/103/1, crossings out in the original)

However, despite the denials, viewers' complaints did play a key role in the cancellation of *TW3* and this alternative narrative demonstrates the significance of the series' negative reception in both the cultural categorisation of television political comedy and the history of the BBC.

Diana's anonymous correspondent asked her to tell journalists there was no complete record of calls made about *TW3* and that the Corporation did not consider such information to be very important. This is not a convincing claim given that records of calls and letters are scattered throughout the *TW3* archive files and sustained attention is given to the series' reception. The correspondence files show BBC staff wrote hundreds of replies in an attempt to mollify complainants, the Audience Research Department produced reports on individual episodes and a lengthier summary of the entire first season, and there is even a summary of the 207 letters written to Sir Cyril Osborne after his debate with Bernard Levin.⁶¹ Furthermore, the archived files are full of press cuttings. A number of people within the BBC attached some importance to the reception of *TW3*. However, records of complaints, polite replies and official reports do not

⁶¹ Described by its author as "not...a very edifying experience" (BCW to the Secretary, memorandum, 22 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/13).

necessarily lead to the conclusion that *TW3*'s cancellation was directly influenced by public opinion. More persuasive evidence can be found directly relating to the man ultimately responsible for the decision: the Director-General of the BBC, Hugh Carleton Greene.

The BBC Governors had discussed *TW3* many times during 1962-3⁶² but when they met on 7 November 1963, Greene informed them that *TW3* was to be cancelled. The minutes of the meeting suggest he attached a great deal of importance to *TW3*'s effect on popular opinion about the BBC. Greene claimed that *TW3* had become a

‘gigantic red herring’, which was diverting attention from the real achievements of the BBC and prejudicing judgement of broadcasts on important but difficult social themes, which tended to be dismissed as still further aspects of ‘negativism’ in the BBC such as was alleged to be proved by the irreverence of ‘TWTWTW’. The programme had assumed exaggerated importance both in public, and in the BBC... The fact that 1964 would be an election year, and one of hot political argument and acute sensitivity, seemed conclusive in that the political balance which had to be achieved by the BBC at such a time was inherently impossible in ‘TWTWTW’. (Minutes of the Board of Governors, 7 November 1963, BBC WAC R1/31/2)

⁶² See Minutes of the Board of Governors, 22 November, 6 December 1962 (BBC WAC R1/30/1), 10 January, 24 January, 7 March, 4 April, 25 April, 9 May (BBC WAC R1/31/1), 4 July, 26 September, 10 October and 24 October (BBC WAC R1/31/2).

Greene does refer to the BBC's official reason for the cancellation – the pressures of the general election - but he presents politics as a supporting factor, with the phrase ‘seemed conclusive’ suggesting the argument for cancellation was already persuasive. The minutes subordinate the political argument to Greene’s assertion that *TW3* was affecting people’s attitude to the BBC in undesirable ways and he thus cites the audience in his decision to cancel *TW3*, including those who had taken the time to write and complain about the series.⁶³

The minutes of the meeting provide evidence that rather than political pressure from the Establishment⁶⁴ or the practical difficulties posed by the upcoming election, *TW3* was dropped because the increasingly passionate outrage appeared to be damaging the BBC. This reading of the minutes is supported anecdotally in a letter to Greene from the ‘Save *TW3*’ organisation citing a *Daily Telegraph* article on 4 December 1963: “you [Greene] said the real reason was ‘the hyena Fascist-like howls of the general public’ (SR to Hugh Carleton Greene, 21 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/15. The phrase is also in Briggs 1995, 353). It was the volume of the hyena howls that had made *TW3* such a red herring and convinced Greene the show was harming the BBC as an institution. Public opinion about *TW3* cannot therefore be ignored in any historical appreciation of the series, and with approximately three quarters of the 394 letters containing negative responses, the BBC WAC correspondence files are an echo of those

⁶³ Goldie claims Greene told her it was because he feared a number of BBC governors would resign *en masse* if *TW3* had continued (1975, 234) but their attitudes are likely to have been influenced by the popular controversy.

⁶⁴ Daniels (2011) gives an account of the letters sent to the BBC by MPs and peers.

howling hyenas and a useful source for exploring how people complained about the series.

Dominant discourses: Politics, Christianity, Smut and Institutions

As might be expected in the reception of television political comedy, there are letters referring to British party politics and politicians. However, viewers also complained about *TW3*'s references to Christianity, to smut and dirt, and to other British institutions, such as the monarchy and the army. Several agreed with the viewer who praised the cancellation but wrote, "I was surprised that the reason given for *TW3* being discontinued was political, not moral. The criticisms were always of the lack of moral standards" (RC to the BBC, 17 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3). This stands in contrast to the narrative of political controversy that dominates academic writing about *TW3*. Crisell (1991) emphasises its political content by opening with a lengthy quotation from a particularly controversial sketch where David Frost dressed as Benjamin Disraeli to deliver a stinging critique of the new Prime Minister, Alec Douglas-Home, and he emphasises *TW3*'s relationship to current affairs magazine show *Tonight* (BBC 1957-1965). Wagg (2002) emphasises *TW3* and 1960s satire's ridicule of politicians, discussing its effect upon political discourse. Though Briggs refers to comic material about religion and royalty, he records "The political angle was the most awkward" (1995, 360), also mentioning the Disraeli sketch (370) and that the only edition that met with universal praise was the tribute to the assassinated President Kennedy on 23 November 1963 (374). Popular accounts also privilege political content; Channel 4's *30 Best Political Comedies* (2006) placed *TW3* seventh and the BBC's own website

highlights the political by referring to the Profumo scandal, the Kennedy tribute edition and re-stating that it was cancelled to avoid bias during the election year of 1964 (BBC 2008).

There was of course a significant amount of political material in *TW3*. Footage of the Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, was re-edited for comic effect; a sketch highlighted MPs who had spoken the least in Parliament; there were impressions of politicians; and the notable editions mourning Kennedy and critiquing the appointment of Alec Douglas-Home as Prime Minister. However, the term ‘political comedy’ and these canonical textual moments run the risk of distorting the historical record by culturally classifying *TW3* as a series dominated by political content and political controversy. Instead,

No target was deemed out of bounds: royalty was reviewed by republicans; rival religions were subjected to no-nonsense ‘consumer reports’; pompous priests were symbolically defrocked; corrupt businessmen, closet bigots and chronic plagiarists were exposed; and topical ideologies were treated to swingeing critiques. No one was spared. (McCann 2006, 314)

Complaints about political issues were balanced by those who angrily wrote about the way *TW3* referred to Christianity, smutty behaviour, and British institutions.

Politics

Complaints about politics fall into two groups; those who felt *TW3* was inordinately disrespectful towards politicians, and those who felt *TW3* was politically biased. The former group appeal to ideas of politeness and appropriate behaviour; a sketch about the career of Labour MP Anthony Greenwood was described by Honiton Constituency Labour Party as “sheer unadulterated and UNWARRANTED rudeness” (ELE to Hugh Carleton Greene, 5 Oct 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7). Another wrote that the comic treatment of the hospitalised Harold Macmillan “showed an inexcusable lack of the most elementary principles of decent behaviour” (DRH to the BBC, 13 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7). These all argue *TW3* was failing to treat politicians with the respect due to them; “To ridicule politicians who...are, after all, Ministers of the Crown is not satire but treason” (CHH to Director of Programmes, 20 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7).

Writers were also distressed by what they interpreted as *TW3*’s ideological bias, relating their complaint to expectations of impartiality at the BBC. This ranged from hyperbolic rhetoric, wondering if “the BBC are preparing the way to take over the Government” (CHH to Director of Programmes, 20 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7), to straightforward engagements with standards of broadcasting, asking why “an item of such outrageous bad taste, with such political bias should have been permitted by the BBC” (GHNT to the BBC, 21 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/18). Some expressed this in specific anxieties about propaganda, as seen in the Introduction

in JLC's reference to Lord Haw Haw,⁶⁵ and regarding the promotion of Communism and Socialism,⁶⁶ given a particular intensity after the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962.

It is evident that in the past few years fanatical members of the Communist and Socialist Parties have infiltrated into key posts in [the BBC]... behind this programme there is vicious intention to discredit the Conservative Party and to bring down the present Government at the next election. (PAJ to Hugh Carleton Greene, 20 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/8)

Christianity

A smaller number of complaints criticise the series for its reference to Christianity. Such letters occur with regularity, accusing *TW3* of blasphemy or of hurting and insulting Christians. This is often accompanied by the assertion that Britain is a Christian country,⁶⁷ while some also chafed at mention of the Pope.⁶⁸ Many define *TW3*'s error as spiritual and define comedic references to religion as entirely unsuitable, agreeing with SW that "there is much in our life today that can be fairly pilloried in this way but religion is in a different category" (letter to the BBC, 14 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/4).⁶⁹ Notably, the only letters from Lord Reith, first Director-General of the BBC, discuss religion, though he was asking for Greene's advice on what he should

⁶⁵ Nazi propaganda is also mentioned in ARM to the BBC, 21 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12.

⁶⁶ See also EGSH to Sir Arthur fforde, 13 May 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/16 and WRJS to Chairman of the BBC Governors, 4 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/17.

⁶⁷ See GM to Stuart Hood, 30 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12 and DP to Sir Arthur fforde, 2 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14.

⁶⁸ See JEMT to the BBC, 2 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/18 and PW to the Postmaster General, 30 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/19.

⁶⁹ See also VK to Hugh Carleton Greene, 19 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/9 and DM to Hugh Carleton Greene, 10 March 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12.

say to journalists and worried about the potential damage caused to the BBC by the “derivative whoompmongeree” (Lord Reith to Hugh Carleton Greene, 31 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/15). In general, letters claim *TW3* was insulting to Christians and Christianity, and caused negative social effects.⁷⁰

Smut and dirt

References to party politics and Christianity are relatively clear but the many complaints about ‘smut’ and ‘dirt’ deserve elaboration. The terms are generally used in relation to jokes about sex or sexual innuendo, although the idea of ‘dirty jokes’ is also used to refer to bad language and inappropriate physical humour. Such complaints are more frequent than those concerning Christianity, though they often use religious discourses, with the North West Look Listen Committee protested that the BBC was “violating its charter...by permitting the broadcast of material... [that is] immoral; eg. ‘sex jokes’ (these are an insult to God and offense to family life)” (MDS to Hugh Carleton Greene, 10 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/10). Despite religious language, complaints about smut do not refer to religious institutions or beliefs, instead addressing institutionalised behaviours, such as family life or chastity, that are felt to be threatened by *TW3*’s smut. These are analogous to the discourses of politeness and respect already seen and reflect correspondents’ definitions of appropriate social behaviour, in general and in relation to gender⁷¹ or younger viewers.⁷²

⁷⁰ See also CMFW to the BBC, 15 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/20.

⁷¹ For example, the man who complained that “‘dirt’ coming from a female in a television show makes matters even worse” (RSS to Stuart Hood, 20 September 1983, BBC WAC R41/289/17). See

I know that we are told that if we don't like it we can switch off – I do! – but it's a bit much to have to do this, just because one doesn't like to have 'smut' thrust at one in such a manner. (WSP to Stuart Hood, 19 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14)

The intrusive nature of the smut is evident in WSP's use of the aggressive term 'thrust', and this intrusion relates to behaviour categorised as socially deviant. As shown, this included references to sex and bodily functions, while the general anxiety around issues of sex and morality can also be seen in complaints that *TW3* referred to homosexuality and illegitimate children.⁷³

National institutions

The category of national institutions includes the government and church but there are numerous complaints about how *TW3* treated other institutions, aspects of the state or public life. FD enumerates the institutions that *TW3* referred to and interpreted such behaviour as damaging and disrespectful to those who died during the Second World War.

Today the very men who gave their lives that England might be free, are being debunked by the BBC, and in my opinion people who do this are traitors... [*TW3*

⁷² See SRR to the BBC, 29 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/15.

⁷³ For the former see JAM to the BBC, 11 February 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12, EP to the Home Secretary, 31 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14 and RSS to Stuart Hood, 20 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/17. For the latter see record of phone conversation from GH, 22 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7 and RH to the BBC, 5 February 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/18.

is]...undermining the faith of people in everything we hold dear – Parliament, the Church, the Armed Forces and all who serve the Queen... (FD to Dame Patricia Hornsby-Smith MP, 30 Sept 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7)

Devotion to British royalty can be seen in many comments⁷⁴ and similar complaints refer to representations of the police,⁷⁵ the Scouting movement,⁷⁶ the public executioner⁷⁷ and trade unions.⁷⁸ Again and again, complainants express offense at comic material that refers to institutions seen as central to British public life.

Offense and the discourse of national attack

Many complainants expressed their offense with emotive language and some write with barely contained rage. The series is described as “slimy...garbage” (EP to the BBC, 17 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14) that was “most appalling” (TFM to Alderman Lever MP, 10 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/10). Others wrote with strongly worded decorum,⁷⁹ exemplified by GJC, who described her complaint as a “heartfelt appeal to the Governors of the BBC” (letter to the BBC Governors, 14 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3).

⁷⁴ See also CH to the BBC, 22 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7, BRM to Hugh Carleton Greene, 8 February 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12, RAP to the Prime Minister, 29 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14 and NVB to Kenneth Adam, 28 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2.

⁷⁵ See BW to LG Thirkell, 31 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/21 and CH to Hugh Carleton Greene, 15 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7.

⁷⁶ Regarding the implication that Lord Baden-Powell's founding of the Scouts was sexually motivated. See RSS to Sir Harry Hylton-Foster MP, 6 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7.

⁷⁷ See CCK to the BBC, 20 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/9 and BM to Stuart Hood, 11 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12.

⁷⁸ See AAR to Kathleen Haacke, 5 January 1964, BBC WAC R41/289/15.

⁷⁹ See WSP to Stuart Hood, 28 April 1963, WAC R41/289/14.

In his initial pitch for *TW3*, Ned Sherrin included the ambition that “The programme must necessarily be an irritant to some” (Sherrin to AHTTel, memorandum, 27 February 1962, BBC WAC T16/589). As is clear, it did far more than just irritate and complainants’ repeatedly interpret the series as attacking and harming vital aspects of British society, such as religion or democracy, resulting in concise jeremiads about the consequences of *TW3*.⁸⁰

[*TW3*’s] whole tone is utterly cynical and which appears to deliberately aim at destroying the faith, moral values and integrity on which our nation has been built... (RCSH to the BBC, 7 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/16)

It is a dominant discourse throughout the negative reception that *TW3*’s comic material was a powerful and disgusting broadcast attacking British society.⁸¹

Young devils and moral panics

The interpretation of *TW3* as an attack on the nation fits the definition of a moral panic, where a “condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (Cohen 2002, 1). This is often associated with harm and social deviance, such as paedophiles⁸² or drugs, and the letters repeatedly

⁸⁰ Among the scores of letters that repeat this, see CH to the BBC, 21 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7, MWW to the Chairman of the BBC, 16 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/22 and RJM to the BBC, 24 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12.

⁸¹ Often using this and similar terms, comparisons to filth (AAR to the BBC Governors, 20 October 1963, R41/289/15), sewerage (IEP to the BBC, 3 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14 and EP to the BBC, 4 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14) and obscene graffiti (AF to the Postmaster General, 21 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/5).

⁸² As will be seen in relation to *Brass Eye* (Channel 4, 1997, 2001) in Chapter 5.

express concerns about *TW3*'s baleful influence on British values and the well-being of Britons; the series is hyperbolically described as promoting social deviance or as attacking socially positive behaviours, some identifying young people as particularly vulnerable.⁸³

More commonly people argued that references to national institutions in a comic context were a deviation from the norms of British society and broadcasting, describing *TW3* as disrespectful, vulgar and indecent because it was attacking aspects of British society that were benign and/or should be protected from comedy. Many believed these references broke the BBC's content standards and demanded that the Corporation enforce these rules more stringently.⁸⁴ These letters and others that defined *TW3* as a deviant broadcast, promoting inappropriate and “un-British”⁸⁵ values (HBR to Hugh Carleton Greene, 17 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/16) explain Greene's fears that *TW3* was becoming counter-productive for the BBC. They express profound anxieties about *TW3*'s effect on the future of the British nation, not just its politics.

These anxieties are located in aspects of *TW3* that combined comedy with national institutions. Complainants are attempting to maintain a cultural division between the unserious and the serious; this is coherent with long-standing trends in post-medieval European culture that separates pleasure and popular forms from official culture

⁸³ For example, MM and EMG to Hugh Carleton Greene, 16 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12, EP to the Home Secretary, 31 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14 and MR to the BBC, 11 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/15.

⁸⁴ For example, DM to Hugh Carleton Greene, 10 March 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12 in relation to the Bible and CSD to the BBC, 29 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/4 in relation to Royalty.

⁸⁵ See also BM to Stuart Hood, 1 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12.

(Bakhtin 1984).⁸⁶ Some television viewers in the 1960s also demanded the separation of the serious and significant institutions of official British culture from the discourses of television comedy, describing the combination as able to produce negative social effects. Concerns about the combination of the serious and the popular had been operative at BBC television during the early 1950s, where news bulletins were initially little more than a voice and an image of Big Ben, because

moving news pictures and their association with entertainment media [eg. cinema newsreels] were seen as a phenomenon that would trivialise the high values of the Corporation. (Harrison 2005, 121)

Such policies were changed by competition with ITV and the more populist approach of ITN, leading to the informality of the current affairs magazine *Tonight* and then *TW3*. Only a few letters make direct reference to BBC news and current affairs⁸⁷ but it is clear that many expected that official culture, public life and serious issues, normally the preserve of the news and current affairs, would be treated with respect, balance and accuracy, and separated from cultural forms that can be associated with popular entertainment and comedy pleasure.

This discursive demarcation was asserted with reference to *TW3*'s definition as satire. Complainants tended to define satire as the exposure of error but they do not accept that

⁸⁶ Bakhtin claims that by the 16th century laughter was deemed incompatible with official culture (Stott 2005, 132).

⁸⁷ FMM writes, “these uncouth persons should listen and watch people like Richard Dimbleby and Cliff Michelmore – they are both capable of putting penetrating questions to people, but they are never rude, or discourteous” (letter to the BBC, 22 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12).

British institutions or public life are in error, and are deeply offended by the implication that British culture is in need of correction.⁸⁸

The life in BRITAIN is NOT ALL or even 1/10th HUMBUG, HYPOCRASY or INJUSTICE... most of [TW3] is amateurish bad taste, and liable to mislead the ignorant and foolish. (AAO to LG Thirkell, November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/13, emphasis in original)

As per Sherrin's desire to irritate, *TW3* deliberately departed from the conventions of broadcasting by referring to official culture and socially significant issues within the mode of comedy, instead of the serious norms of news and current affairs programming.

The way that *TW3*'s comedy is defined also shows the nature of viewers' anxieties. Many use the term 'satire' but go on to use other terms connected with aggression and humiliation, such as ridicule⁸⁹ or synonyms such as 'jibe',⁹⁰ 'made fun',⁹¹ and 'mockery',⁹² in *TW3*'s negative effects.

These responses to *TW3*'s comedy reflect Hobbes' superiority theory, where he describes laughter as a "sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves" (1889, 42). He contrasts the pleasures of superiority with the displeasure of

⁸⁸ See also GM to the BBC, 14 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12.

⁸⁹ For example, JHR to the BBC, 24 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7, from DP to Sir Arthur fforde, 2 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14, NVB to Kenneth Adam, 28 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/1, and from CH to the BBC, 21 April and 22 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7.

⁹⁰ JEO to Director of Television, 13 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/13.

⁹¹ MR to the BBC, 11 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/15.

⁹² IB to Kenneth Adam, 22 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2.

being the subject of laughter, “It is no wonder therefore that men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over” or of jokes being made about oneself or ones friends: “when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat” (*ibid.*). In this context we can see complainants’ anger as evidence that, as with a friend, they felt a deep emotional connection to these national institutions. *TW3*’s comedy was perceived as the ridicule of British institutions and, participating in the dishonour via emotional investment, of the viewers themselves.

Ridicule and the imagined community

The letters affirm Staiger’s (1992) assertion that meaning-making is politicised; complainants’ anxieties about the spread of deviant behaviour demonstrates their ideological investment in the maintenance of traditional institutions and social norms. Furthermore, the social significance attributed to the national institutions shows complainants regarded these institutions as vital to the maintenance of British society as they defined it. Many defended the institutions as a proxy for Great Britain itself, adopting the role of citizen critics (Eberly 2000) and the letters of complaint are notable for their patriotism and civic mindedness. The close relationship consistently expressed between the nation, national institutions and individuals is evidence of Anderson’s (1991) concept of the imagined community:

... it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. (Anderson 1991, 5-7, emphasis in original)⁹³

Complainants' wrote that *TW3* was attacking the nation because it suggested social values that were antithetical to those represented by British national institutions. This discourse of national attack is predicated on the assumption that the maintenance of the nation is reliant on the Church, Parliament, the army, the police, politeness and morality, and that these in turn rely upon the unified 'comradeship' of the population. This is expressed through both rational propositions and in strong emotion, and Anderson writes of the emotional ties evoked by the imagined community.

...it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism - poetry, prose fiction, music, plastic arts - show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. (Anderson 1991, 141)

The letters are a set of cultural products expressing love for the British nation, specifically love for a traditional conservative society based upon religiously-inflected morality, and respect and submission to official institutions and culture. Thus, as Staiger (1992) argues, the reception of *TW3* includes politicised meaning-making activity that exhibits conservative attitudes, British national pride and considerable anxieties about

⁹³ Anderson locates the origins of the modern national imagined community in the mass media; print (1991, 35-36) and then radio and television (135).

deviant behaviour, often based on defining *TW3*'s comedy as ridicule and interpreting this ridicule as socially powerful. Similar interpretations can be seen in the smaller collection of positive responses to *TW3*. Viewers praising the series attribute it with affective power, interpreted it as encouraging critical thought. It was described as “a safety-valve [that]...forces us to think” (DFP to the BBC, 17 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14, emphasis in original) and enthusiasts also adopt the role of citizen critics by depicting *TW3* as a useful⁹⁴ and courageous series.⁹⁵

There is a shared interpretation across complaints and plaudits that *TW3*'s comic treatment of British institutions was significant because it was socially affective. Both groups comprehend *TW3* as the ridicule of official culture but they disagree about the proposition that such jokes are entertaining or benign.⁹⁶ These two positions express an ideological conflict over the nature of the British nation in 1962-1963. Opponents predicted that such mocking propositions would undermine the institutions being joked about, leading to national disaster, expressing a social conservatism that locates value in traditional national institutions and traditional practices of respect. Fans praised comedy ridicule as a politically progressive act that encouraged individual thought, articulating a socially liberal attitude that valued the intellectual autonomy of the individual above a relationship to institutions. Both demonstrate a shared way of making meaning from *TW3*, culturally categorising its combination of comedy and current affairs as powerful,

⁹⁴ See also GC to the BBC, 14 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3.

⁹⁵ See NA to Hugh Carleton Greene, 16 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/1 and DJC to Hugh Carleton Greene, 11 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/2.

⁹⁶ Taken from Morley's critique of the encoding/decoding model for seeming “to blur the axis of comprehension/incomprehension of signs with that of agreement/disagreement with forms of propositional meanings generated from these signs” (Morley 1992, 121).

and articulating a shared belief in this power through concerns about the future of the British nation. The next section will argue that *TW3*'s references to news and current affairs were particularly shocking because of their novelty and that complaints can also be seen in the context of how viewers' generic expectations of light entertainment related to pleasure, aesthetics and ideology.

III

Bad entertainment: aesthetics and ideology

The standard of entertainment provided in general by the Corporation is first class. This programme [*TW3*] makes a mockery of all social, moral and other standards. (IB to Kenneth Adam, 22 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2)

Novelty and generic expectations

TW3 has been historicised as a television innovation: Sandbrook reports, "The look of the show was startling" (2005, 582) and Briggs' account is entitled "The Shock of the New" (1995, 350). One of *TW3*'s producers, Grace Wyndham Goldie, described "new sketches, new songs, new and barbed portraits of political figures and new lyrics which embodied sharp comments on the contemporary social scene." (Goldie 1977, 224) In an article promoting the first edition in the *Radio Times*, Sherrin wrote it would "have a new structure and will establish a new type of relationship with the audience. Above all it is an experiment with an audience." (Sherrin 1962, 7)⁹⁷ The novelty of this experiment is also seen in the BBC's uncertain categorisation. Kenneth Adam, Director of

⁹⁷ See Appendix Three.

Television, asked a colleague: “Who dreamed up the description of *TWTWTW* as an ‘Entertainment Miscellany’? A curiously inappropriate use of words – ungrammatical and unnecessary” (Kenneth Adam to HAR, memorandum, 24 January 1963, BBC WAC T16/589). The reply agreed, “Not a very happy choice I admit and by now a generic description is clearly unnecessary, so we’ll drop it” (*ibid.*⁹⁸). Similarly, the quantity and content of the letters show that many felt *TW3* was significant enough to comment upon it, with a few stating they were contacting the BBC for the first time.⁹⁹

Enthusiasts praised the show as original¹⁰⁰ and courageous¹⁰¹ but critics responded to the unexpected program with shock. This aspect of *TW3*’s reception is described by Briggs: “...one extra element in the programme that made *TW3* genuinely ‘new’. Satire, biting satire that in time came to shock some of the Governors, as well as a substantial section of the public, was of its essence.” (Briggs 1995, 350-1)

Of course, satire *per se* was not innovated by *TW3*, for it was clearly familiar to viewers and possesses a long history in theatre and literature (Hodgart 1969). However, by 1962 ‘satire’ had acquired a new usage specific to that period of British culture. It referred to the output of a loose grouping of young writers and performers, almost exclusively men, who become known as the 1960s satire boom (Carpenter 2000, Crisell

⁹⁸ The reply is handwritten on Adam’s initial memo.

⁹⁹ See HWBK to Hugh Carleton Greene, 20 October 1963, WAC R41/289/2, AF to Postmaster General, 21 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/5 and RB to Hugh Carleton Greene, 16 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2.

¹⁰⁰ For example, DRM describes *TW3* as “an Auntie original” (DRM to the BBC, 14 January 1964, BBC WAC R41/289/11).

¹⁰¹ For example, “The BBC’s decision to put on such a programme...came to me as one more instance of the Corporation’s courageous willingness to move forward” (CJK to the BBC, 4 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/9).

1991 and Wagg 2002). This comprised *Beyond the Fringe*, a stage show in the tradition of Oxford and Cambridge revues that found success at the Edinburgh Festival in 1960 and went on to London and the USA; *Private Eye*, a fortnightly magazine that began in 1961, devised by a group of young men who had attended public school together; and The Establishment, a Soho comedy club owned by one of the *Fringe* stars, Peter Cook, that opened in 1961. 1960s satire was associated with youthful irreverence, socio-political comment and an anti-establishment tone.

These antecedents suggest *TW3* was not really so novel after all but such a conclusion does not take into account television as a mass medium and its cultural norms. *Beyond The Fringe* played to theatres and *Private Eye* began with a tiny circulation; neither are comparable to the BBC. *TW3* was novel because it was television satire, or television political comedy. Briggs argues:

What they [*TW3*'s personnel] were offering was in sharp contrast both to popular programmes that sought consensus, as wartime programmes had done, or to the 'Butskellite'¹⁰² language of many leading politicians. (1995, 351)

Even if correspondents had seen *Beyond the Fringe*, read *Private Eye* or visited The Establishment, they were writing as television viewers and had expectations based upon their experience of television, as shown in the angry references to BBC. Though the BBC had faced controversies over comedic material referring to politicians on the radio

¹⁰² A portmanteau of RA Butler, Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1951 to 1955, and Hugh Gaitskell, Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1950 to 1951, referring to the apparent economic consensus that developed in Britain during the 1950s.

(Daniels 2011, 32-43)¹⁰³ the sense that *TW3* was a unique departure suggests that in terms of *television genre* there were no clear cultural categorisations and that viewers' frames of reference (see T. Wilson 2009, 46-58) were therefore derived from other television genres. It will be argued below that the negative reception to *TW3* was partly shaped by the cultural categorisations of television entertainment on the BBC during 1962-3, exhibiting expectations coherent with those defined by Dyer in 'Entertainment and Utopia' (2002a) and that a small number of people watched *TW3* expecting to see light entertainment.

Defining good entertainment: “uplifting and true”

The dominant frame of reference used to understand *TW3* was that of television entertainment. Correspondents repeatedly evaluated *TW3* as failed popular or light entertainment, with some defining what entertainment should not be, commonly citing the inclusion of party politics, religion, smut, and other nation institutions, providing a negative definition of television entertainment.¹⁰⁴

There is a type of performer who will resort to filth in order to get quick and cheap effects, but I should have thought it was your duty to...encourage the better - and more difficult – form of art. (WS to Hugh Carleton Greene, 2 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/16)

¹⁰³ Daniels (2011) interprets radio comedy described as ‘antiestablishment comedy’, *ITMA* (BBC Radio 1939-1949) and *The Goon Show* (BBC Radio 1951-1960) as a “challenge to authority bound up in (supposed) innocuousness” (Daniels 2011, 22).

¹⁰⁴ See also GH to Hugh Carleton Greene, 30 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7 and JD to the BBC, 9 November 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/4.

As well as stating successful entertainment should not include filth, bad manners or ridicule national institutions, others provide positive definitions of entertainment with references to its emotional and social effects. CH asks for something “uplifting and true” (letter to Hugh Carleton Greene, 15 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7) and MP appeals for “constructive clean programmes which are really entertaining” (letter to the BBC, 14 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14).¹⁰⁵ These and other terms-clean, constructive, uplifting and wholesome-are some of the evaluative definitions (see Mittell 2004, 108-9) viewers used to culturally categorise television entertainment in the early 1960s, showing expectations of benign, positive feelings. Complainants did not find these in *TW3* and a few argue their case by referring to specific television texts that they claim exemplify good entertainment.¹⁰⁶

[*TW3*] was just about as dirty as dirt can go... Harry Worth, *Perry Mason* (CBS 1957-1966), *The Lucy Show* (CBS 1962-1968) and *The Defenders* (CBS 1961-1965). They have standards. (RC to the BBC, 17 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3)

...could you advise me why the BBC can produce such a fine and flawless show as the *Black and White Minstrels* (BBC 1958-1978) and yet, at the same time lower itself to foist on the public such drivel as *TW3*... (JM to the BBC, 12 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12)

¹⁰⁵ See also RCSH to Sir Arthur fforder, 7 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/16.

¹⁰⁶ See also BM to Stuart Hood, 11 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12

Comparisons to other programmes were also made by those praising *TW3*. A few described it as the best thing on television¹⁰⁷ or a relief from “conformist entertainment” (letter from RMB dated 16 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/1) of Saturday evenings.

Supporters and critics both evaluate *TW3* as markedly different from the BBC’s existing provision of television entertainment. As argued above there were few television antecedents for 1960s satire and viewers were unlikely to have expectations that matched the innovative aims of the *TW3* team. *TW3*’s use of comedy, music and song also meant that despite Sherrin describing the series as satire and “an experiment with an audience” (Sherrin 1962, 7), it was described as a highlight of that week’s ‘Light Entertainment’ in the *Radio Times* (*ibid.* See Appendix Three.). Perhaps most significantly *TW3* was scheduled at the end of an evening filled with popular entertainment programmes, and the importance of this schedule in shaping expectations can be inferred from those above who mention Saturdays or refer to the specific shows and genres broadcast on Saturday evenings. A number of negative reactions to *TW3* can be explained as a generic confusion; audiences expected the pleasures of television light entertainment but instead were presented with television political comedy.

Correspondents compared *TW3* to variety, westerns, drama and sitcom, and Saturday evenings on the BBC in the early 1960s were dominated by such programming, as can

¹⁰⁷ See GH to Hugh Carleton Greene, 28 January 1963 R41/289/7 and JE to the BBC, 17 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/4.

be seen in a set pattern observable between 4 January and 17 November 1962, beginning around 6pm with *Juke Box Jury* (BBC 1959-1967).¹⁰⁸

1. *Juke Box Jury*
2. Police or drama serial
3. Variety/Musical Hall
4. American detective/Western serial
5. Feature film
6. News
7. Sport; or Variety during the summer months
8. Miscellaneous (often music programme) if Sport concludes before 11pm
9. Weather and close down

Each slot in the evening maintained a consistent generic identity throughout the year, so when individual series changed, they were replaced by another show of the same genre: *Juke Box Jury* was nearly always followed by a police or drama serial, such as *Dixon of Dock Green* (BBC 1955-1976) and this was nearly always followed by variety, song and dance, perhaps *Billy Cotton Band Show* (BBC 1949-1968), which in turn was often followed by a US import. Genres change throughout the evening and series change from month to month but there is a clear flow of utopian entertainment, as defined by Raymond Williams:

¹⁰⁸ See Appendix 2 for full television schedules from 1962.

...what is being offered is not...a programme of discrete units with particular insertions, but a planned flow...It is evident that what is now called 'an evening's viewing' is in some ways planned...as a whole... (2003, 91)

Complainants' emotional expectations and the specific texts cited in the letters and scheduled on Saturday are coherent with Dyer's theorisation of utopia and entertainment. They ask for programmes that can "feed faith and build character into the British people" (BW to Sir Arthur fforde, 31 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/21), and Dyer writes of utopian entertainment as "Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realised" (Dyer 2002a, 20).

Dyer focuses on musicals and show business, one aspect of the Saturday schedule, but locates utopian characteristics (energy, abundance, intensity, transparency and community) in other genres, including Westerns and television news, also part of Saturday evenings on BBC television. Television scheduling contributes to genres' cultural classification (Mittell 2004, 56-93; Hargrave 1995) by creating associations between schedules, target audiences and cultural value. The emotional expectations complainants use to define good entertainment and to reject *TW3* invite the hypothesis that television during this period of the week was culturally categorised as 'utopian' and that this was coherent with much of the BBC's light entertainment output. *TW3*'s breaking of social norms and references to deviant behaviour was a jarring contrast from what utopia might feel like, and complainants repeatedly reject *TW3* with a discourse of *dystopia* - the interpretation of national attack.

This hypothesis will now be argued with reference to how specific aspects of some complainants' expectations are coherent with utopian entertainment and how these relate to specific ways in which *TW3* failed to meet them. This will compare the parts of the second and first editions of the second season broadcast on 5 October and 28 September 1963, with contemporaneous entertainment programmes from 1962, evaluating the editions in relationship to some of Dyer's utopian principles and arguing that *TW3* consistently frustrated these utopian expectations and resulting in *TW3*'s evaluation as 'failed entertainment', in the sense of both incompetent, offensive and pernicious.

Incompetent entertainment

A number of letters evaluate *TW3*'s production, performances, writing and duration negatively, stating it did not meet expectations of quality television, typified by TEF's description of a "dreary, fourth rate production" (TEF to the BBC, 16 March 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/5).¹⁰⁹ These criticisms of *incompetent* entertainment can also be seen in the BBC's own audience research. Some felt it was "laboured" as entertainment" ("Audience Research Report, *That Was The Week That Was*: 15 December 1962" 17 January 1963, BBC WAC R9/7/61) and a few thought the *TW3* studio felt "chaotic and uncomfortable" ("Audience Research Report, *That Was The Week That Was*: 29 December 1962", dated 4 February 1963, BBC WAC R9/7/62). Seeing the studio cameras and equipment was also felt by a few to be distracting, untidy, chaotic, and amateurish.¹¹⁰ The lack of professionalism perceived in *TW3*'s set and production can be

¹⁰⁹ See also JAC to Sir Arthur fforde, 3 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3

¹¹⁰ See "Audience Research Report, *That Was The Week That Was*: 26 January 1963", dated 20 February 1963, BBC WAC R9/7/62; "Audience Research Report, *That Was The Week That Was*: 16 March 1963",

seen in the damning verdict of “one or two critics [who] did not care for the impression that this is being performed in a church hall, with everyone falling over equipment” (“Audience Research Report, *That Was The Week That Was*: 12 January 1963”, dated 11 February 1963, BBC WAC R9/7/62). These sources evaluate *TW3* as entertainment using discourses of failure and lack, showing that expectations of certain types of pleasure were being frustrated.

Descriptions of boredom and low quality production are the inverse qualities of Dyer’s notions of *energy*¹¹¹ and *abundance*¹¹² seen in many of the programmes on the Saturday evening before *TW3*. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* and *The Billy Cotton Band Show* featured the ‘show business’ that Dyer associates most directly with utopia, providing music, dance, and spectacular sets. Both featured large groups of performers singing and dancing, interspersed with short introductions and comic business. For example, *The Billy Cotton Band Show*’s 1961 Christmas Special (BBC 1961) opened with 25 performers dressed as the cast of a Robin Hood pantomime and the performers move and sing energetically, with abundance expressed through their extravagant costumes and the bright lighting. Perhaps most indicatively of energy, Billy Cotton would famously open every show with his catchphrase, “Wakey, wakey!” *Perry Mason*, an US import depicting the detective work of the eponymous attorney, followed the slot

dated 8 April 1963, BBC WAC R9/7/63a; and “Audience Research Report, *That Was The Week That Was*: An Enquiry About The Winter 1962-3 Series”, dated 30 May 1963, BBC WAC T66/103/1.

¹¹¹ “Energy...Capacity to act vigorously; human power; activity; potential... ‘pizazz’ qualities of performance... chases, fights, bar-room brawls [in Westerns]...sharp, short items; the ‘latest’ news; hand-held camera [in TV news].” (Dyer 2002a, 22).

¹¹² “Abundance...Conquest of scarcity; having enough to spare without sense of poverty of others; enjoyment of sensuous material reality...[found in] Spectacle ...Land – boundlessness and/or fertility [in Westerns]...Technology of news-gathering – satellites, etc.” (Dyer 2002a, 22).

that was filled by *Billy Cotton* or the *Minstrels* with dramatic plots, varied locations, and a comparatively swift editing style.¹¹³

In contrast *TW3* was filmed in an almost-bare television studio with a relatively small performance space, denying abundant visual spectacle and reducing the capacity for energetic movement. This has been seen as part of *TW3*'s appeal (Crisell 1991 and Carpenter 2000) but it is clear many did not regard this “brutal production” (Crisell 1991, 151) as pleasurable or interesting. Instead of the movement of dancers or fast editing, *TW3*'s visual style is typified by cast members delivering their lines straight to camera from behind a desk. While evocative of television news, referencing *TW3*'s use of material from newspapers and news and current affairs, this led to an emphasis on long static takes in medium close up. There were often cutaways to quick one-line gags and short sketches in full shot but this static medium shot dominated through repetition. The lack of energy was further created by the long takes; the episode of 5 October 1963 featured 11 shots that ran to over a minute, 7 shots of over 1 minute 30 seconds and one shot of Bernard Levin delivering a monologue that lasts 2 minutes 50 seconds! This helps explain letters that describe it as “too long and drawn out...We never once in this long programme had a hearty laugh, possibly a maximum of three smiles” (AGO to the BBC, 14 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/13).

¹¹³ The opening nine minutes of ‘The Case of the Frantic Flyer’ (CBS 1960) presents a significant amount of narrative information, including nine discrete scenes or sections (including the opening credit sequence) with an average shot length of 11 seconds (excluding the 40 second title shot). The number of locations used in the show, moving from an office to a moving car to an aeroplane to the great outdoors via parachute also creates an expansive diegetic world, suggesting abundance via the apparently unrestricted narrative.

The lack of visual interest in the set and the camera work is an indicator that much of *TW3*'s comedy was verbal and did not fit the material abundance of utopian entertainment. The show's comedy demanded close attention and a lapse in concentration might result in missing the joke. The punch line to Robert Lang's summary of Labour's Party Conference in Scarborough, written as if it were a theatre review, ends with this delicate pun on changes to both the Labour shadow cabinet and its policies:

...the material is watered down, if anything, while the company has lost many of its principals: Gaitskell, de Freitas, Robens, Strachey... [brief pause]...and indeed many of its principles.

This is not to say *all* the comedy was verbal; the opening sequence including Millicent Martin singing along to the jazzy theme while title cards slid across the screen, and a later section about a worker who stayed underground for 105 days concluded with five dancers high-kicking alongside Millicent Martin, Lance Percival and Al Mancini. However, the routine is restrained by the tiny stage and the audience is clearly in shot sitting only a few feet away. Unlike the physical energy and abundant space that viewers could see in *The Black and Minstrel Show*, *TW3* privileged the verbal and any singing and dancing lacked the visual appeal that could compare to the music hall spectaculars that had been broadcast only a few hours before, accounting for the sense that *TW3* had failed to provide the anticipated energetic and abundant pleasures generally associated with light entertainment on a Saturday evening.

Offensive entertainment

Despite complaints, the discourse of incompetent entertainment did not produce passionate outpourings of anger. As shown, many described *TW3* as offensive entertainment because of its comedy ridicule. The angry emphasis on ridicule can be related to Dyer's notion of transparency;¹¹⁴ a term that refers to the relationships and roles of on-screen personalities. The characteristics of utopian transparency are homologous to behaviours conducive to a utopian society - honesty, sincerity, love - and are expressed by performers and characters on Saturday evenings. In his role as band leader Billy Cotton "stood for no nonsense" (Sharp 2010) and organised the performers for viewers' enjoyment. Perry Mason represents morality and justice, and *Juke Box Jury*'s host David Jacobs acted as master of ceremonies, directing his guests' comments about each record and activating the titular juke box but rarely entering into discussion himself. These relationships only relate to the world of entertainment or the texts' diegesis; Perry Mason does not solve real cases nor fail to find the murderer. Billy Cotton's bluff sincerity only relates to his presentation of song and dance (Sharp 2010).

In contrast, Sherrin repeatedly described *TW3* as 'irreverent' (1962, 7) and this, including the more potent synonym 'disrespect', summarises the quality of relationship identified in *TW3*. If utopian transparency relies on socially positive behaviours, irreverence is an attitude that contradicts social norms of reverence and viewers

¹¹⁴ A quality of relationships – between represented characters (eg. true love), between performer and audience ('sincerity')... Sincere stars (Crosby, Gracie Fields); love and romance...Cowboy as 'man' – straight, straightforward, morally unambiguous... [in TV news] (?) 'Man of the people' manner of some newscasters, celebrities and politicians (?) simplification of events to allow easy comprehension (Dyer 2002a, 23).

repeatedly interpreted this as the disruption of conservative cultural power relationships. This can be exemplified by the group of letters that specifically relate *TW3*'s disruptive nature to the youth of the cast, with BG describing them as “a mob of callow and inexperienced youths” (letter to the BBC, 5 December 1962, R41/289/5). Other letters suggest the series undermined the social hierarchies where age and civic status should be treated with reverence from the young.¹¹⁵

A similar conflict over age, hierarchy and permission to speak can be seen during the debate between Bernard Levin and Sir Cyril Osborne about morality and the law in the edition of 28 September 1963. The segment lasts almost ten minutes and quickly becomes rather ill-tempered. Sir Cyril repeatedly tries to silence Levin's interruptions, telling him “when you grow a bit older, you won't talk so much and you'll listen a bit more!” and referring to the discourse of national attack, opining “Satire and this folly for which you stand would leave our country...[mumbles] hungry! Wealth comes from work!” The debate ends with Levin stating that instead of being told how to behave by moralists. people should be free ‘to choose what they want’ and Sir Cyril replies with shrill passion, “They've chosen me, they didn't choose *you*. They wouldn't choose you in a thousand years, dammit, you wouldn't have a chance...” Sir Cyril implies that his age, his experience as a soldier and his status as elected Member of Parliament places him above Levin in a hierarchy of discourse and is taken aback that the younger man will not submit to his authority and wisdom. Complainants articulated similar discourses by locating displeasure in *TW3*'s irreverence and those who expected relationships and

¹¹⁵ See WSH to the BBC, 20 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/6; VK to Hugh Carleton Greene, 4 May 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/9; and JLC to the Chairman of the BBC, 19 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3.

attitudes of utopian transparency were shocked that *TW3*'s approach contradicted the traditional hierarchies of British society.

Pernicious entertainment

The role of irreverence in the discourse of national attack can be seen in the final aspect of Dyer's utopia: community.¹¹⁶ Complainants interpreted *TW3* as an attack on the British nation, and this is diametrically opposed to Dyer's account where community is a key aspect of utopian entertainment, in both representations of communal activity, such as sing-along choruses, pub entertainment and small town life, and in the implied concept of a larger community, as evoked by national news bulletins and its "assumptions of consensus" (Dyer 2002a, 23), a phrase evocative of the imagined community (Anderson 1991). Representations and implications of community are evident in the Saturday schedules. *Dixon of Dock Green* (shown at 6.30pm on 3 January, 13 March and 20 October 1962) has been seen as helping to "establish a new sense of community and nationhood within the private space of the home" (Sydney-Smith 2002, 20). The song and dance routines in *Billy Cotton* and the *Minstrel Show* depict communal cohesion as the group of performers move in co-ordination and *Juke Box Jury* depicted a form of community in the studio audience, spending a significant amount of time focusing on individuals in close up as they listened to the latest record.

¹¹⁶ Togetherness, sense of belonging, network of phatic relationships (ie. those in which communication is for its own sake rather than for its message)... The singalong chorus numbers... [in Westerns] Townships; cowboy camaraderie... [in TV news] The world rendered as global village; assumptions of consensus... (Dyer 2002a, 23).

TW3 did provide representations of community through the visible studio audience and the group of performers, who as the credits rolled were often seen shaking hands and chatting, and the act of watching a widely-viewed national broadcast is connotative of a communal experience. However, the show resists the experience of communal consensus that Dyer and Anderson imply is vital to utopian entertainment and the imagined community because ridicule explicitly contradicts accepted hierarchies and implies conflict. A significant part of the series' material, for example Levin's uncomfortable debate with Sir Cyril, rejected the "assumption of consensus" (Dyer 2002a, 23) that utopian entertainment relies upon. Enjoying the series more or less demanded that viewers find the ridicule of public figures and national institutions funny and appropriate. Many viewers found it neither, and *TW3*'s irreverent ridicule produced the disturbing sense that Britain was not the coherent community that complainants believed it to be. Viewers with strong emotional ties to the imagined national community of traditional Britain realised their attitudes were not universally shared and that an alternative perspective was being spread via the mass medium of television, threatening to produce a subculture of irreverent young people that would disrupt the traditions of British society.

These anxieties suggest some of the beliefs about television in the early 1960s. The deep concern for the nation shows some viewers perceived Saturday evening television to be an experience shared with the entire national community. The emotive response to *TW3*'s failure to provide utopian light entertainment also suggests that television entertainment can be experienced ideologically; those who described their emotional

expectations with terms such as uplifting, wholesome and constructive were specifically referring to programmes like *The Black and White Minstrel Show* and *Perry Mason*. Dyer's descriptions acquire historical significance because the aesthetics of light entertainment were associated with the maintenance of a conservative British national community. This sense of the nation was disrupted by a new television series that refused the pleasures of utopian entertainment and did not conform to social hierarchies, undermining the fantasy of consensus aesthetically and behaviourally, causing some viewers to imagine a dystopian Britain and what it "would feel like rather than how it would be organised" (Dyer 2002a, 20).

Novel pleasures and comedy communities

These anxieties affirm that what we laugh at and what we refuse to laugh at is an index of ideological, social and cultural attitudes, as argued in Medhurst's (2007) study of comedy and British culture. He interprets the comedy of British comedian Roy Chubby Brown, "fast and filthy, with the overwhelming majority about sex" (Medhurst 2007, 188), as a community-forming act and claims Brown's comedy creates and reinforces a community based upon the division between those who appreciate the humour and those who do not, or those who do or do not accept the frames of reference offered by the jokes. Similarly, *TW3*'s material produced "recognition of shared and familiar reference points" (Medhurst 2007, 196) from some television viewers. Medhurst's theory of cultural demarcation was implicitly understood by complainants; they interpreted this new form of comedy as possessing the power to produce values different from and destructive of their own. The reception of *TW3* therefore does not just give access to

how people in 1962-1963 responded to one series of political comedy but how some of them culturally categorised the whole notion of entertainment. It shows that those who were offended by the series expressed a desire for entertainment with high production values and skilful performances that provided emotional experiences emphasising positive behaviour within a consensual community. These were the frames of references within which *TW3* was interpreted, and they contribute to a greater understanding of why complainants' deployed the emotive description of the series as an attack on the British national community. *TW3* contradicted viewers' expectations of how official culture should be referred to and how entertainment should be provided, resulting in dystopian discourses that implicate television political comedy in ideologies of the British nation.

IV

Nation shall not speak irreverence unto nation

No government has the right to expect its people to behave responsibly whilst the government itself takes a spineless attitude towards the most powerful propaganda organ in the land and allows it to brainwash the nation with filth, tyranny and anarchy that kills the spirit of responsibility.

(FLA to the Postmaster General, 31 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/1)

While the majority of complaints specifically locate the discourse of national attack in *TW3*'s comedy content, identifying its ridicule of national institutions and refusal to

conform to the norms of television entertainment as dystopian, some letters directly invoke the power of the television medium. In these cases, ridiculing national institutions constitutes an attack on the British nation through a theory of media effects akin to the ‘hypodermic model’. If dystopian ridicule was interpreted as *TW3*’s message, then BBC Television was the medium. The interpretation of national attack entirely relies upon a folk version of the media effects theory; viewers would not have been so deeply disturbed unless they felt television had the power to change something.

The power of television and BBC impartiality

Some located television’s power in the mass medium’s discursive inequality, and others through its direct influence. Only a small number refer to the former, complaining that people on television are making jokes “at the expense of those who cannot defend themselves” (MPH to Director of Programmes, 14 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/6).¹¹⁷ These complainants depict *TW3*’s television broadcast as possessing the power to distort or to provide only one side of a debate without the chance for balance. The majority of those who directly refer to television’s negative properties emphasise its ability to promote social deviance by directly influencing individuals’ behaviour.¹¹⁸ The notion of media effects developed in the interwar years in response to concerns about propaganda, and such anxieties increased when the horrors of National Socialism arose within a democracy (Curran and Seaton 2003, 333). Such concerns can be seen from the

¹¹⁷ See also FRH to Director of Programmes, 17 January 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/6.

¹¹⁸ See also LB to Sir Arthur fforde, 29 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2 and KDB to Dame Anne Godwin,¹¹⁸ 30 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2.

few who referred to *TW3* in relation to the Nazi and Communist propaganda.¹¹⁹ The associations of *TW3* with revolutionary propaganda and ideologically affective power were generally based in angry accusations that the BBC was broadcasting material about current affairs that was not impartial and balanced, as shown in Part II's summary of complaints.

Some expectations related to news and current affairs; such complaints are rare but a few specifically refer to BBC news and current affairs presenters, “people like Richard Dimbleby and Cliff Michelmore... they are never rude, or discourteous” (FMM to the BBC, 22 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12). They demonstrate a link between *TW3*'s reference to news and current affairs and the generic expectations of factual broadcasting. Far more dominant is the complaint that *TW3* represents a sea change at the BBC itself, with the Corporation abandoning its traditional aims and standards.¹²⁰

For the BBC to allow this sort of filth is a betrayal of its trust... The decision to allow dirt on the TV is a momentous one. Who takes such a decision? The electors do not control it, the listeners have no power. The BBC appears to be responsible to no democratic masters. (RWC to the BBC, 30 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3)

Many letters demanded that the BBC should conform to political impartiality, Christian morals and the will of the government. They depict the BBC as culturally subordinate to

¹¹⁹ See SWE to the BBC, 4 January 1963 R41/289/4.

¹²⁰ See LB to Sir Arthur fforde, 29 September 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/2 and GJC to the BBC Governors, 14 April 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/3.

these institutions, refusing it permission to broadcast irreverence and deviance, and insisting on programming that promoted a better British nation: “the BBC should give heart and encouragement to make this NATION a GREAT BRITAIN, great through the character of its people” (AAR to the BBC Governors, 30 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/15).¹²¹ The BBC is represented as an adjunct to the existing national institutions, submitting to and reproducing their standards, and influencing citizens to act in ways that offer a continuity of the national consensus.

The BBC as national institution

This reflects the long-standing and oft-repeated relationship between the BBC and nation asserted in both broadcasting policy and history. Such ideas have structured thinking about the BBC since its inception; a founding principle was that the airwaves belonged to the nation and were “a valuable form of public property” (Sykes Committee 1923, 11 quoted in Scannell 2000, 46). An early document outlining the arguments for a national broadcaster suggests its “unifying effect” (Briggs 1961, plate 18) and the national role of the BBC was famously described by John (later Lord) Reith as “making the nation as one man” (quoted in Scannell 2000, 48). The Corporation has also been historicised alongside traditional national institutions: “For most of the twentieth century, the BBC ranked alongside the Monarchy and the Church of England as a central part of British life.” (Whittaker 2001, 145) These sentiments were clearly expressed by Reith, writing to senior staff after the General Strike in 1926:

¹²¹ See BRM to Hugh Carleton Greene, 8 February 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/12

...the BBC was a national institution, and since the Government in this crisis was acting for the people...the BBC was for the Government in the crisis too; and that we had to assist in maintaining the essential services of the country, the preservation of law and order, and of the life and liberty of the individual and the community. (quoted in Briggs 1961, 365)

Reith deploys the notion of the British nation evident in so many of the letters;¹²² the British community is dependent on and synonymous with its institutions. Very similar language is used in letters where correspondents specifically deploy the term ‘national institution’ to describe the BBC.¹²³

...the British Broadcasting Corporation, a British national institution, should never have been allowed to degenerate to this level. (TOT to the BBC Governors, 19 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/18)

The BBC’s status as a national institution alongside other traditional institutions has origins in Reith’s attitudes to broadcasting but the few letters that refer to the Second World War suggest the importance of the Corporation’s role during that time, when Briggs records “the 9pm news bulletin became in most households an institution almost as sacrosanct as family prayers are said once to have been” (Briggs 1985, 188). A

¹²² JECM reports working with Reith for five years in his complaint about blasphemy and “can therefore estimate what action he would have taken” (letter to Hugh Carleton Greene, 11 March 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/11).

¹²³ See also VK to Hugh Carleton Greene, 19 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/91.

number of letters record memories of BBC radio broadcasts in the struggle against fascism and contrast this negatively to *TW3*.¹²⁴

I cannot conceive of such a programme being carried in war-time because of its sneering and cynical attitude to so many of the great institutions of British life, and it clearly must have that same detrimental effect to national morale in peace time. (GSW to Sir Arthur fforde, 14 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/22)

The BBC was not simply regarded as a supplier of television texts but an institution with significant powers over, and responsibilities to, the national community. *TW3*'s irreverent ridicule was seen to represent an abandonment of the BBC's role as a British institution of consensus and community. The emotive criticisms of *TW3* are an expression of fears that the BBC was not only undermining other national institutions via ridicule but also undermining itself: "In my opinion the item [on religion]...thoroughly discredits the BBC..." (FH to BBC Chairman, dated 13 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/6).¹²⁵ These complaints claim that the BBC and its role as a traditional national institution was changing. These complaints were correct.

Changes in broadcasting: Competition, Pilkington and Greene

In the early 1960s British society was changing (Sandbrook 2005) and broadcasting was too (Turnock 2007). The early 1950s saw the gradual end of post war austerity and

¹²⁴ See also letter from FD to Dame Patricia Hornsby-Smith MP, 30 Sept 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7; JHR to the BBC, 24 October 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/7; and EP to the Home Secretary, 31 December 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/14.

¹²⁵ TEF to the BBC, dated 30 July 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/5 and

as the decade progressed there was greater social mobility, more material wealth and a growing youth culture that was changing British society's pre-war structure. During this period broadcasting was marked by three significant events: the rise and rise of ITV, the Pilkington Committee's report on broadcasting and the appointment of Hugh Carleton Greene as Director-General. There is a consensus between television historians that the founding of the new commercial channel led to competition and significant changes at the BBC (Goldie 1977; Hilmes 2003; Sandbrook 2005; and Tracey 1998) and this meant programmes, scheduling and even the definition of public service itself (Tracey 1998) underwent an evolution; *TW3* was one result of these changes.

One way ITV specifically contributed to changes at the BBC was in relation to the current affairs magazine programme, *Tonight*, where the production team of *TW3* honed their skills.¹²⁶ According to Grace Wyndham Goldie, an influential figure at the BBC during this period, *Tonight* was an explicit response to the new competition:

It was created to fill the so-called 'Toddlers' Truce', the period between 6pm and 7pm during which there had been no television... The commercial companies, anxious for more programme hours in order to be able to increase their advertising revenue, wished to fill this space. The BBC felt compelled to do likewise. In the competitive climate of 1956-7 it seemed important not to lose the

¹²⁶ *Tonight* is referred to in the *Radio Times* promotional article: "Just as *Tonight* was based on the premise that there is a large audiences in the early part of the evening anxious to listen to intelligent comment on a wide variety of subjects, *That Was The Week That Was* is based on the suspicion that there is a similar audience late on Saturday night, prepared to listen to comments which is funny and impudent and covers an equally wide range of topics" (Sherrin 1962).

early evening audience to ‘the other side’ in case they might keep it for the rest of the evening. (Goldie 1977, 209)

It can also be argued that ITV’s news broadcasts, with their informal and visual approach (Harrison 2005, 123), influenced *Tonight*’s attitude, which was different from the “authoritative” (Goldie 1977, 216) tone of *Panorama* (BBC 1953-ongoing). It catered for distracted viewers (Goldie 1977, 211) by providing short varied segments produced by staff from across the BBC’s different departments. Goldie believed *Tonight*’s popularity, with seven million viewers by the autumn of 1958 (215), lay in its informal but serious attitude: it was “journalistic rather than reverential... [and it was] egalitarian. Gardeners and eel-catchers were treated as seriously as Members of Parliament” (215-6). *Tonight*’s new informality would be extended into irreverence when the production team began developing others ways to combine current affairs with this new mode of address, resulting in *TW3*.

Another important element in broadcasting culture in the early 1960s was the Report of the Committee on Broadcasting, 1960.¹²⁷ Also known as the Pilkington Report, after the chairman Harry Pilkington, the committee’s task was to “consider the future of the broadcasting services in the United Kingdom” (1962, 285) and the report, published in June 1962, has become well-known for demanding high quality television and its stinging criticisms of ITV, particularly in regard to quiz shows and trivial programming, described as “waste of the medium” (34, 64-5). Caughey has proposed that committees

¹²⁷ A few letters refer to the Pilkington Report, wondering if its praise for the BBC was any longer warranted. See AMAB to the Director of Television Broadcasting, 10 December 1962, BBC WAC R41/289/2.

into broadcasting are useful historical evidence in “chart[ing] the ways in which television could be thought and spoken, and the position it was asked to occupy in the national culture” (Caughe 2000, 79) and the Pilkington Report charts part of why *TW3* came into being.

The most relevant aspect of the Pilkington Report to *TW3* is that it rejected triviality, particularly quiz shows, and affirmed a discursive association between quality, innovation and challenge: “All broadcasting, and television especially, must be ready and anxious to experiment, to show the new and unusual, to give a hearing to dissent.” (19-20) Such sentiments are repeated in the rejection of programming that relied on “well-tried themes...or established patterns...[and] hackneyed devices” or served to “reinforce rather than disturbing prejudice and complacency” (34). It concludes with a rousing statement of broadcasters’ moral duty, asserting they are responsibility for presenting

the widest possible range of subject matter.... they must pick out and focus attention on that which is significant - the best...; the worst...; the new and challenging... (285)

Whilst it emphasised many things, including the need for broadcasters to respond to the tastes and attitudes of the public, the Pilkington Report demonstrates the discursive significance of innovation, challenge and even controversy in the early 1960s by describing them as duties. The Pilkington Report did not create *TW3*, for Goldie records

that planning began before its publication (1977, 222)¹²⁸ but it shows some of the beliefs about television that were dominant in parts of the BBC in the early 1960s and contributed to the devising, commissioning and broadcast of *TW3*.

The attitudes to broadcasting proposed by the Pilkington Report and the evolution of current affairs in *Tonight* may not have led to *TW3* if not for Carleton Greene, and he has been credited with the idea for the show himself (Briggs 1995, 358). He became Director-General in 1960 after a long BBC career that included working as a foreign correspondent in Germany during the 1930s. In an early speech, entitled ‘Broadcasting as Public Service’ in 1960, he was already associating the BBC with diversity and social relevance, instead of consensus and conformity.

... a public service of broadcasting, like a library, must provide so far as possible for every taste and for every sort of entertainment, for information on every worthwhile topic, and for education wherever it is needed. Broadcasting in Britain was developed with these diverse requirements in mind. (quoted in Tracey 1998, 88)

That his modern attitude represented a significant change at the BBC is ably demonstrated by Greene’s relationship with John Reith. The two men struck up a friendship but as Greene’s new vision for the BBC became clearer it became strained. In 1964 Reith wrote in his diary, “I lead, he follows the crowd in all the disgusting

¹²⁸ She records Sherrin, Alasdair Milne and Donald Baverstock put an initial plan together in February 1962.

manifestations of the age” (quoted in Briggs 1995, 317). One of their last telephone conversations is reputed to have concluded thus: ““Don’t you think, Hugh, that dignity is the most important quality?” ‘I’m afraid, John, I do not’, was the reply” (Briggs 1995, 318). In contrast to Reith’s conflation of the BBC, the nation and the government after the General Strike, Greene believed the BBC should “hold a mirror to what was going on in contemporary society” (quoted in Briggs 1995, 317). The end of Reith and Greene’s friendship demonstrates on a micro level the BBC was changing from a traditional institution and experimenting with irreverence and disruption. This is reflected in *TW3*’s production context where it was accorded special status,¹²⁹ described as “an endeavour to discover whether a group of creative people could work outside the normal framework of BBC editorial control” (Goldie 1977, 234). That final phone call also indicates that what Reith and complainants wanted from the BBC - consensus around an accepted hierarchy - was no longer the sole aim of broadcasting. However, the *TW3* letters demonstrate that although ideological change was occurring within the BBC, there were many viewers whose standards had not changed, resulting in the cultural conflict that the letters depict.

The changes at the BBC are also illustrated in how BBC staff replied to complainants, with letters, some signed by Greene himself, explicitly articulating the new standards that explained and justified *TW3*.

¹²⁹ See also Crisell (1991).

Normal standards of ‘bias’ and ‘balance’ cannot to my mind apply to this programme, as though what is said is meant to be taken literally. (Hugh Carleton Greene to CIOR, 8 February 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/13)

Greene’s ‘correct’ way of interpreting *TW3* is more akin to that of comedy, distancing it from the factual, journalistic discourse of current affairs by using another generic association to defuse criticisms. Another reply uses a journalistic comparison to make a similar point about interpreting *TW3* in a non-literal way.

If *TW3* is to exist at all as a vehicle for political comment it must have the freedom to use occasions as they arise, in the same way that a cartoonist contributing to a newspaper. One does not expect the cartoonist to balance his drawings or restrain his pen so long as he makes his point – which he does by exaggeration. One looks for the other arguments to the leader columns or the features provided by the editor. In the same way, we feel *TW3* can have freedom to make its points as long as we continue to provide the fuller picture in our other programmes on current affairs. (DB Mann to FMOB, 6 November 1963, BBC WAC R41/289/13)

Once again, the ‘correct’ interpretation is proposed by claiming that *TW3* belongs to a different genre, and arguing for balance over the BBC’s entire output, rather than within *TW3* itself. These sources demonstrate that impartiality was being reinterpreted within the BBC; they insist that because *TW3* is a new and different kind of television programme (‘satire’, hybrid of current affairs and comedy, or political comedy) it should

be interpreted differently. This dispensed with the assumption in many of the letters that the BBC should *only* provide communal, consensual and impartial material. Indeed, Greene's letter asks the viewer to accept the Corporation may broadcast material about factual issues that is knowingly exaggerated, and thus strictly inaccurate, marking a huge leap from the pronouncements during the General Strike in 1926 that the BBC would only deliver "authentic news" (BBC News bulletin, 4 May 1926, quoted in Briggs 1961, 369).

Fears about changes at the BBC were therefore not merely paranoid ramblings. The letters expressed fears about the effects of ridiculing national institutions on television, love for the British nation and anxieties about counter-communal entertainment, but they also articulate emotional investment in the BBC as a traditional national institution. The letters express anger that national institutions are being mocked, while also communicating shock that the attack was coming from the treasured BBC – an institution considered part of the traditional national culture. Such a reaction highlights the extent to which the changes occurring at the BBC in the 1960s were not merely administrative, ideological or stylistic but felt to be of deep social significance because, like the other institutions, the BBC too was seen as a partial proxy for Britain itself.

The nature of the change as it is understood in the letters can be summarised as that of a shift in cultural hierarchies within broadcasting. The discourse of national attack, the anxiety about dystopian entertainment, and the acknowledgement of changes at the BBC, all express a similar understanding that the Corporation was no longer consistently

acting as the discursive subordinate of other national institutions but instead asserting itself as an independent voice. At its founding the BBC was a subordinate institution, with even the timing of news bulletins restricted by the commercial imperatives of newspaper publishers (Briggs 1961, 172). There was a huge paradigm shift between 1922 and the Pilkington Report's assertion that television must "show the new and unusual, to give a hearing to dissent" (1962, 20) These letters are therefore more than complaints about jokes about the Queen or references to knickers; they are evidence that some people believed changes were occurring in Britain's discursive hierarchy, with television abandoning its position as cultural and discursive subordinate to the government, the church or the monarchy. This was a destabilisation of British society, elevating to equality and independence a medium that had not even been running for twenty years in the UK. This explains the fears that social power and influence was moving away from the traditional centres and towards the mass media. These fears acquired a particularly dystopian tone because they originated in experiments by the young and inexperienced whose only right to make deviant pronouncements to the entire country lay in their employment by the BBC. Greene's fears that *TW3* was undermining some people's confidence in the BBC were not misplaced.

V

Media power, television and political comedy

Above all it is an experiment with the audience.

(Sherrin 1962, 7 in *Radio Times*, 22 November)

One result of *TW3*'s experiment was to show how some viewers felt the BBC fitted within the "cultural power relations" (Mittell 2004, xiv) of British society. Jason Jacobs has argued that viewers expected television in the 1950s to be a cosy medium but that the intense drama of *1984* (BBC 1954) showed "the audience could no longer trust the intimate screen." (Jacobs 2000, 155) In a similar way, viewers in 1962 expected the BBC to act as a national institution promoting a culture of national consensus and were shocked when it did not. This is not to argue that the BBC's output significantly changed in 1962; *TW3* was a novelty, an experiment in Sherrin's words, and utopian entertainment would continue to dominate Saturday evenings. But broadcasting standards were changing in the early 1960s and the letters of complaint are evidence that some people noticed and were very unhappy about it. These fears demonstrate beliefs about television as a medium and about political comedy as a genre.

Many complainants express the desire that the BBC should always be respectful and impartial because of its influential role over the nation. Fears about national attack suggest complainants believed a significant proportion of the national community were watching BBC Television, reflecting television's establishment as a national mass medium during the 1950s (Turnock 2007, 194), and that these viewers were vulnerable to influence. Letter-writers had absorbed television into their definition of Britain's imagined community and saw the population was united by a technology providing a shared culture. Indeed, it is as if correspondents regarded the television audience as synonymous with British society itself. This is an indication of the cultural centrality accorded to television in 1960s Britain, and it is a useful example of the politicised

nature of viewers meaning-making (Staiger 1992) for the meanings attributed to the television audience reflect ideological assumptions about the nature of the national community with complainants expressing their desire that Britain and the BBC should more or less maintain the status quo by adhering to socially conservative traditions.

Turnock asserts that from the 1950s television had already

made visible, in a new way, social and cultural difference. In the histories of the 1950s the arrival of ITV is often seen as the moment when the consensus culture of post-war Britain was ruptured. (2007, 198)

Similarly *TW3* made visible a cultural difference at the BBC. The discourse of national attack is an anxious response to one instance where another cultural consensus was perceived to rupture. As this chapter has shown, the media's power to 'construct reality' through representations (Couldry 2000) has been recognised throughout broadcasting's history: by Reith, World War Two propagandists, the Pilkington Report and Hugh Carleton Greene. The letters show people feared *TW3* because it apparently used television's power to construct a new and dystopian nation with an irreverent BBC at the apex of its cultural hierarchy. Complainants did not interpret jokes about the police as 'jokes' but as a part of a social process though which the BBC was constructing a new irreverent Britain that would replace the traditional nation they loved.

This allows the first set of claims to be made about the cultural classifications of British television political comedy. The discourse of national attack shows significant influential power was attributed to *TW3*, specifically to jokes about national institutions and institutionalised modes of behaviour. Respect towards an institution or idea ensures its continuity through consensus, while political comedy's ridicule is attributed with the ability to reduce symbolic power by encouraging irreverence in viewers. This was also located in television's cultural centrality; there were only two channels in 1962 and the BBC was considered a national institution with considerable cultural influence. The power attributed to *TW3* as television political comedy is thus located in both the cultural classification of political comedy as disruptively disrespectful and the cultural classification of BBC Television as socially influential.

The reception also demonstrated television political comedy was felt to be in a different category from existing modes of television entertainment. Some expected *TW3* to provide the utopian pleasures of light entertainment, finding their generic expectations frustrated and describing it as failed entertainment. This marks a divide between the cultural classifications of utopian light entertainment and the new genre of television political comedy, associated with powerful ridicule.

TW3's reception has thus shown how people defined the series, television entertainment on Saturday evenings, the BBC as an institution, and the British national community in the early 1960s. Discussion of the complaints produced the more nuanced claim that text and reception were both concerned with British culture and society, and

the dominant interpretation of *TW3* by complainants was as an attack on the British nation. The letters have been identified as supporting a traditional conservative ideology, with a smaller number of enthusiasts expressing more liberal sentiments. The letters expressed the cultural categorisations of television entertainment as powerful and that *TW3* disrupted the feelings of utopian consensus anticipated on a Saturday evening by providing them with deviant ridicule. These were also related to the BBC itself, expressed in fears that the Corporation was being corrupted from the inside and usurping symbolic power within the national community. These anxieties must be seen in the context of changes occurring in British society and British broadcasting and they also show that in 1962-1963, treating official culture with comedy ridicule on national television was interpreted as an act with the power to disrupt the behaviours and traditions of conservative British culture and replace them with new and disruptive forms of social relationships. Similar sentiments are expressed throughout the entire reception of television political comedy and the interpretation of its power will be elaborated in later chapters. While these include further concerns about disruption, the next chapter will demonstrate that political comedy's power has also been characterised as constructive and educative.

Chapter Three

Sitcom, the Real and Cynicism

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Authentic Comedy

Definitions of comedy tend to emphasise its deliberate attempts to create pleasure and laughter: it is “professional entertainment consisting of jokes and sketches, intended to make an audience laugh” (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., s.v. “comedy”). However, defining comic form or how comic effects are created is a complex matter. As discussed in the Introduction, comedy has been theorised in different ways (see Stott 2005, 1-3; Morreall 2009, 1-26) but is dominated by incongruity theory, which suggests comedy is caused by “a thing whose parts or features violate our normal mental patterns and normal expectations” (Morreall 2009, 11). Similar ideas can be seen in *Roget’s Thesaurus*, a reference book recording words’ relationships in cultural practice rather than their precise definitions, where ‘comedy’ refers to laughter and ridiculousness (150th anniversary edition, s.v. “comedy”), dividing comedy between pleasure on one hand and incongruous form on the other. Comedy thus tends to be culturally categorised as producing the effect of comic pleasure via absurdity or incongruity. However, as the last chapter demonstrated, responses to television political comedy include a variety of emotions and this chapter will show that viewers’ reactions are more complex than, and sometimes antithetical, to comedy’s common categorisation as a genre of absurdity and pleasure.

Comic pleasure does play a major part in the reception of political situation comedy; viewers in the BBC's Audience Research Report into the first series described *Yes Minister* as "original, witty and entertaining" (VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164), *The New Statesman* was "hilariously funny" (T.R. Alexander, 4 December 2007, review in Amazon 2009d) and *The Thick of It* "desperately funny" (moto89, 3 November 2005, review in IMDb 2009d). However, there is a tendency for viewers to subordinate comic pleasure to evaluations of intellectual quality and to interpretations of representational accuracy. This chapter shows that viewers of *Yes Minister*, *The New Statesman* and *The Thick of It* do not write about the pleasures of absurdity but of authenticity, praising coherence above incongruity. It will explore how the three series are defined and evaluated, and how pleasure is intertwined with authenticity, comic taste, extra-textual knowledge and attitudes to British political culture. It examines "what it means when [viewers] say they experience pleasure or displeasure" (Ang 1985, 11) in writing about political sitcom, drawing together the negative and positive evaluations, interpretations and implicit definitions across the three case studies to show how television political comedy's sitcoms have been culturally categorised.

The case studies of political situation comedy discussed in this chapter are *Yes Minister*, *The New Statesman* and *The Thick of It*. All three series have been classified as political comedies or using related terms; they all featured in Channel 4's *30 Best Political Comedies* (2006), and were promoted with an emphasis on their political material. Similarly, each series is recognizable as a 'situation comedy', fitting into the formal definition of "a short narrative-series comedy, generally between twenty-four and

thirty minutes long, with regular characters and setting” (Neale and Krutnik 1990, 233); all three are defined as sitcoms in the reception; and the two earlier series featured in the BBC’s *Britain’s Best Sitcom* poll (2004). The contrast between *TW3*’s revue-style and these sitcoms illustrates the formal variety within the genre of political comedy, and it is hypothesised the reception may relate to both television sitcom and television political comedy.¹³⁰

The chosen series are not the only candidates for a study of political comedy, though there is not a large selection. Older sitcom series, *The Whitehall Worrier* (BBC 1966-1967) and *If It Moves, File It* (LWT 1970) meet the textual definition but have been wiped, while others have found little lasting acclaim, for example, *Whoops Apocalypse* (LWT 1982), *No Job For a Lady* (Thames 1990-1992) and *My Dad’s The Prime Minister* (BBC 2003-2004). In contrast, the three political sitcoms in this chapter were produced over a number of years, won numerous awards, have been repeated on several occasions, spread to different formats-such as books, film and theatre-and are still available on home video. A further justification of these three texts selection is that audiences understood them to be similar; some sources directly compared them to each other and there were no more than one or two passing references to any other television political comedy sitcoms. The three texts were understood to exist in close relationship to each other and culturally categorised with the same genre.

¹³⁰ In the context of the thesis, television political situation comedy is theorised as both a self-contained genre with its own cultural categorisations, and a sub-genre of television political comedy, sharing cultural categorisations with the other case studies.

In *Yes Minister* Jim Hacker (Paul Eddington) is the Minister for Administrative Affairs at the mercy of a manipulative civil servant, Sir Humphrey (Nigel Hawthorne), and assisted by Bernard (Derek Fowlds). *The New Statesman* focuses on the corrupt ambitions of an amoral Conservative backbencher, Alan B'Stard (Rik Mayall), whose career includes an assassination attempt, a death sentence and becoming an MEP. *The Thick of It* follows the work of the ministers and staff in the Department of Social Affairs and Citizenship, focusing on their relationship with the Prime Minister's 'enforcer', Malcolm Tucker (Peter Capaldi), and his aggressive attempts to protect the government from negative news coverage. The ongoing popularity of each series has resulted in a collection of reception sources and those used in this chapter are as follows; newspaper articles from the period of broadcast collected from the British Library's newspaper archive, the British Film Institute Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection, and online newspaper databases; 29 newspaper articles were gathered relating to *Yes Minister*, 16 for *The New Statesman* and 44 articles about *The Thick of It*. Two BBC audience research reports from the 1980s were used for *Yes Minister*. Internet reviews were also collected; 160 for *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*, 48 for *The New Statesman* and 42 for *The Thick of It*. One personal email responding to an invitation was received in relation to *The New Statesman*.

This chapter will argue that the pleasures, value and meanings of television political sitcom are almost exclusively written about with reference to political authenticity and comedy. The latter includes defining the texts as comedy series or sitcoms, descriptions of comic pleasure and laughter, and expressions of appreciation for comic narratives,

dialogue and performances. The former notion of political authenticity is less obvious and refers to how texts are interpreted, defined and evaluated using criteria that include but are not strictly limited to ideas of realism, verisimilitude, relevance and truth. Viewers interpret the series as existing in a close and accurate relationship to the realities of British politics and the actual behaviours of politicians. Assertions of authenticity vary in intensity with weaker claims making general references to politics without direct propositions of authenticity. At the other end of the spectrum, people explicitly describe the series as verifiably accurate, interpreting it as an unproblematic representation of politics. Political authenticity is therefore hypothesised to be an important cultural categorisation of television political sitcom. It would seem counter-intuitive for viewers' to describe a representation as authentic when they believed the truth to be different, so this chapter also hypothesises that the reception of television political sitcom gives access to viewers' political attitudes.

This following work will also contrast the ways viewers wrote about the three series as authentic. The case studies share a common interpretation but each series deploys different styles of comedy, writing, performance and filming. The continuity of authenticity across three markedly different texts suggests there may be at least three modes of interpreting political authenticity. This chapter therefore sets out to examine how viewers identify and defend authenticity in each case study, hypothesising there are multiple ways in which representations of politics are written about as authentic.

This chapter explores several things; how viewers define, evaluate and interpret three canonical series of television political situation comedy, with specific attention to authenticity and comic pleasure; how responses can be seen to express viewers' political views over the different periods of time; and how viewers express their interpretation of each case study as politically authentic. It will argue that the reception of television political sitcom shows it is culturally categorised as authentic, intelligent and of high aesthetic quality, and that texts judged to not meet this criteria are described as generic failures.

II

Yes Minister and Comic Coherence

This section will show the scope and longevity of the interpretation of *Yes Minister* as authentic, from the time of broadcast to the period of this research. It will also show that viewers evaluated authenticity as culturally valuable and defined the series' comedy as serious and clever; both will be shown to be a key part of viewers' expectations that exist in a directly proportional relationship to overall evaluations of success. It will be hypothesised that these responses to *Yes Minister* rely on two things; perceived verisimilitude to British politics, and evaluating the style of comedy as coherent with the cultural categorisations of British politics. This comic coherence will be argued to be the key interpretative mode through which *Yes Minister* is experienced as an authentic representation of British political culture, and that this coherence indicates how viewers culturally categorised British politics itself.

The dominance of authenticity in the reception of *Yes Minister*

The interpretation of authenticity defines the entire history of *Yes Minister* and can be traced back to before the series even began. The first episode, ‘Open Government’, was broadcast on Monday 25 February 1980 at 9pm on BBC2. It showed Jim Hacker’s appointment as Minister for Administrative Affairs and introduced his new colleagues, his Principal Private Secretary, Bernard Wooley, and the department’s Permanent Secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby. Most episodes portrayed Hacker devising new policies or attempting to reform Whitehall bureaucracy to benefit his party and his own career, though these plans are generally doomed to failure due to Sir Humphrey, whose self-appointed role is to curb Hacker’s enthusiasm and maintain the status quo within government and the public sector more generally. Coherent with discourses of political impartiality and balance at the BBC, Hacker’s political affiliation is never mentioned and Oakley notes both Hacker and Sir Humphrey are flawed characters (1982, 75). The first claim that these representations were authentic was printed a full week before the broadcast of ‘Open Government’, with Kenneth Gosling reporting in the *Times* on 18 February that “the public will be given a greater insight than before into the Whitehall and Westminster corridors of power.” (1980, n.p.¹³¹) A few days later on 23 February, the *Daily Mail*’s Martin Jackson described *Yes Minister* thusly: “Inspired by the Crossman Diaries this promises a new style of comedy: ‘faction’ with laughs” (1980, 17). The BBC had given no preview screenings, as several other television reviewers complained,¹³² leading to the conclusion that these initial discourses of authenticity

¹³¹ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

¹³² See Fiddick (1980a), Kenneth Gosling (1980) and Horner (1980a).

originated from the BBC itself. As the *Guardian*'s Peter Fiddick wrote: "It is after all the creators of *Yes Minister*...who are touting the authenticity as a special feature" (1980b, 9).

This suggests authenticity was the BBC's preferred interpretation of *Yes Minister*, and this matches how the series has been historicised as part of the Corporation's efforts in the late 1970s and early 1980s to produce distinctive high-quality sitcoms that differed from the "gag-style joke telling" (Sutherland 2010, 14) supposedly typical of ITV sitcoms. The success of this can be seen in the interpretations of authenticity that have been repeated ever since *Yes Minister*'s broadcast. The BBC's own research records that "many respondents [felt the characterizations] to be adroit reconstructions of politicians and civil servants... ('exactly how I imagined it would be')" ("Audience Research Report: The Official Visit", VR/80/115, 11 April 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164)¹³³ and press and internet responses repeat this.

Labour Cabinet Ministers have been heard to describe it as fantastically true to life... (M. White 1981, 6)¹³⁴

The series have been cited by political scientists for their accurate and sophisticated portrayal of the relationships between civil servants and politicians... (climatic_fanatic, 1 March 2007, review in Amazon 2009a)

¹³³ Similar responses are a large part of the report summarizing the response to entire first season ("Audience Research Report: *Yes Minister*", VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164).

¹³⁴ Also Nancy Banks-Smith (1986).

Work within television studies has also noted these interpretations of *Yes Minister*'s authenticity; Oakley (1982), Adams (1993), Sutherland (2010) and van Zoonen and Wring (2012) all refer to the series' relationship to realism as a significant part of the press reception, and Granville (2009) discusses how politicians talked and wrote about the series as realistic. The continued acceptance of the series' authenticity is also implied by journalists' ongoing use of 'Sir Humphrey' as a synonym for a senior civil servant.¹³⁵

Authenticity dominates interpretations of *Yes Minister* but it is not evidenced in every single source. Newspaper articles making more than passing comment tend to refer to *Yes Minister* as authentic but it is less frequent in internet reviews. Approximately half of internet comments do not propose authenticity but neither do they contest it or provide an antithetical alternative. Nearly all the reviews that do not refer to authenticity instead focus on describing *Yes Minister* as a funny programme of high quality: "Full of great lines and superb acting" (Mr. A. Privett, 11 March 2005, review in Amazon 2009d). Internet reviews are not dominated by the interpretative discourse of authenticity but instead emphasise evaluative and emotional responses, as has been found by Steiner (2008) and Katz and Rice (2002). However, there is still clear agreement across the sources that *Yes Minister* is a series of high-quality comedy, with only a few arguing that its representation of the dysfunctional relationship between minister and civil servant is not authentic.

¹³⁵ See Drury (2009) and R. Tyler (2009).

Defining *Yes Minister*'s authenticity

Viewers who do assert *Yes Minister*'s authenticity agree that it relates to contemporary British political culture. Nearly all newspaper articles from the 1980s and many internet reviews after 1999 interpret the series as authentic to their own political moment: "A very humorous introduction to British political life" (Joelle, 5 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009a). A few internet reviews refer to democracy in general¹³⁶ but more commonly it is understood to be a British comedy about British politics. However, despite locating the series in Britain and the majority of sources originating from British viewers, there are very few claims of authenticity that refer to individual politicians. A small number state the series was a favourite of Margaret Thatcher,¹³⁷ Conservative Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, and a small number make brief references to Tony Blair¹³⁸ and Gordon Brown,¹³⁹ Labour Prime Ministers during the period the internet sources were taken from. However, there are no mentions of specific policies, debates or political scandals. Instead, authenticity is described in general, showing "the intricacies of administration and the British Civil Service more generally" (Falcon42, 14 March 2004, review in Amazon 2009e) and "the way business is done" (Ms. Aim Wameyo, 30 June 2007, review in Amazon 2009c). The interpretation of *Yes Minister* as authentic is therefore not related to individual people or specific events but how politics 'works' in

¹³⁶ The "biting examples shown here, although clothed in wonderful humour and personality, are repeated in governments around the world" (Geoffrey Thomas, 16 February 2009, review in Amazon 2009a). See also Guzinus Vulgaris, 23 February 2009; and O. Ribert, 1 February 2009, reviews in Amazon 2009a; Catherine Mills, 31 October 2003, review in Amazon 2009e; and Oliver Stevenson, 15 June 2006; and BeingEarnest, 20 January 2004, reviews in IMDb 2009a.

¹³⁷ For example, the ex-pat, 8 February 2009, review in Amazon 2009a; and ProfessorStahlman, 12 September 2008, review in IMDb 2009a.

¹³⁸ See anglo-frenchie, 9 August 2005, review in Amazon 2009c; Louise Stanley, 7 November 2005, review in Amazon 2009e; and Sanatan Rai, 7 September 2001, review in IMDb 2009b.

¹³⁹ See A. Rolph, 3 June 2009, review in Amazon 2009a; and Gerry O'Neill, 31 March 2009, review in Amazon 2009c.

general. Viewers repeatedly refer to *Yes Minister*'s authentic representation of the relationships, interactions, modes of speech, personality types, practices and processes that can be described as 'contemporary British political culture'.

There is also wide agreement that contemporary British political culture should be characterised as dysfunctional. This is typical of fictional narratives about politics on British television (van Zoonen and Wring 2012) and is a negative view of political culture that defines it as impotent, incompetent or unprincipled. This is articulated in a variety of ways; just as authenticity has its weaker expressions, so many people write with a vague sense of antipathy, describing politics as full of "intrigue" (moneywise, 30 July 2009, review in Amazon 2009c) or "brutal pragmatism" (Baldrick⁴⁴, 19 February 2005, review in IMDb 2009a). Others locate similar ideas in the character of Sir Humphrey, describing him as "scheming" (cspaced1, 16 October 2006, review in IMDb 2009b) or "cunning and devious" ("Audience Research Report: The Official Visit", VR/80/115, 11 April 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164). Others are more specific, defining the political culture represented by *Yes Minister* as one of conflict between minister and civil servant.

Yes Minister...shows how the best Government intentions are usually thwarted by crafty civil servants...Much research has gone into the series...Hence much of it is true... (Summers 1980, n.p.¹⁴⁰)

¹⁴⁰ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

In the United Kingdom, ministers are political appointees charged with making decisions about policies, while the “Civil Service helps the Government of the day to develop and deliver its policies as effectively as possible” (Civil Service 2010). This relationship between the two men is the focus of each episode of *Yes Minister* and most rely on a similar scenario; the affable Hacker tends towards vanity, making rash decisions and ignoring Sir Humphrey’s advice, while the composed Sir Humphrey uses obfuscatory rhetoric and professional connections to engineer a situation where Hacker is compelled to follow the initial advice. Generally, Hacker and Sir Humphrey have conflicting goals and the unfortunate Bernard must attempt to please them both, though Hacker sometimes gets the better of Sir Humphrey, and occasionally they are forced to work together for their common good. This relationship is specifically described as authentic in a significant proportion of press sources from the 1980s and a number of the more recent internet comments.¹⁴¹

Nigel Hawthorne and Paul Eddington as the devious civil servant and his confused Minister rapidly learning the tricks of the trade. (Horner 1980b, 25)

Nigel Hawthorne...portrays a civil servant who really truly believes that it is he and not the Minister that runs the department, with perfection... (gibbog, 2 March 2005, review in IMDb 2009a)

The dysfunctional nature of this relationship is generally understood to be located in bureaucracy, and the role of bureaucracy in modern politics is also signalled by Hacker’s

¹⁴¹ See also *Times* (1980); Paul Johnson, 21 August 2005, review in Amazon 2009c; and ProfessorStahlman, 12 September 2008, review in IMDb 2009a.

job; Minister for Administrative Affairs is a sign of his low status in the party and an ironic reference to the preeminent status of bureaucracy in government. Adams' textual analysis of the series relates *Yes Minister*'s central conflict to the English Report of 1978, which challenged civil servants' power, with one committee member and former civil servant claiming civil servants "seek to govern according to their own narrow, well-defined interests" (Brian Sedgemore quoted in Adams 1993, 66). Concerns about bureaucracy in British politics had grown throughout the 1970s, as faltering economic growth and social disruption eroded the consensus around economic policy that had characterised British politics since 1945 (Marwick 2003). Margaret Thatcher, who became Prime Minister in 1979 with a small but safe majority, devoted much rhetoric to the stifling economic effects of bureaucracy in the welfare state, nationalised industry and Civil Service.¹⁴² Although no sources make explicit references to this historical period, concerns about bureaucracy run through many of the sources from the early 1980s and the post-1999 internet comments make similar interpretations, suggesting viewers believed political culture was being distorted by the self-interest of bureaucrats during both periods: "Politics and the civil service may still be much like this today" (anglo-frenchie, 9 August 2005, review in Amazon 2009c).

As well as the dominant discourse of the scheming bureaucrat, authentic British political culture is also typified with the subordinate discourse of the incompetent politician. These views are less widespread, appearing sporadically in the internet comments. Hacker is described as "a cowardly vain and idealistic politician [who] tries

¹⁴² By no small coincidence, she claimed *Yes Minister* was her favourite television programme at a National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVLA) awards ceremony in 1984. The NVLA was founded by Mary Whitehouse in 1964 to campaign against immorality on television and radio.

to advance his career" (Huc, 16 February 2009, review in Amazon 2009a), and other comments imply a lack of intellect or ability, referring to him as "wonderfully inept" (silvermaene, 7 November 2004, review in Amazon 2009e). Demonstrating the dominance of the civil servant trope, most still include references to Sir Humphrey's schemes and affirm that a political culture controlled by the Civil Service is also authentic. The reception of *Yes Minister* therefore expresses consistent cynicism, with viewers repeatedly interpreting its representations of a devious and incompetent British political culture as authentic. The practices of British politics are seen as a distortion of the proper constitutional process and populated by individuals who rarely cooperate and whose efforts are largely unproductive, with specific reference to the relationship between elected officials and civil servants.

Proposing empirical authenticity

But what evidence do people use to make these claims about the true nature of British political culture? Is it possible to draw conclusions about political sitcom from how people account for their interpretation of political authenticity? Attention to the reception shows two general trends; in one trend *Yes Minister*'s authenticity is said to derive from authorial research and experience; in the other, authenticity is asserted without any supporting evidence at all. In both cases, *Yes Minister* is interpreted as verifiably true, with what will be described as 'empirical authenticity', distinguishing it from the other authenticities to be discussed below. The discourse of authorial research and experience is largely evident in press sources dating from the series' earliest years. Kenneth Gosling noted in the *Times* that *Yes Minister* was written with "care and

research...making the themes and relationships as accurate as possible" (1980, n.p.¹⁴³) and James Murray claimed in the *Daily Express* that "[certain politicians] have 'revealed all' to comedy writers Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay" (1980, 25). The diaries of Richard Crossman, a Labour cabinet minister during the 1960s, were also described as a major source of inspiration,¹⁴⁴ and Jay's time as a producer in BBC Current Affairs programming was credited with providing him with him behind-the-scenes access to politicians.¹⁴⁵ As the series moved into later seasons, specific press references to Jay's career and Crossman's diaries declined in frequency but general claims about authorial research continued, describing it as "brilliantly researched wonderfully acted comedy" (*Guardian* 1986, 10).¹⁴⁶ This suggests the importance of evidence in asserting *Yes Minister*'s authenticity became less significant because the series' authentic character became an established part of its interpretation and an encrusted meaning (Staiger 1992, 139).

A lack of references to empirical evidence is also visible in the internet comments, where interpretations of authenticity are made using personal feelings or beliefs. Crossman's diaries and Jay's career are mentioned only once, and a few others cite personal experience or anecdotal reports from relatives who work in government.¹⁴⁷ Apart from these exceptions, internet sources asserting the discourse of authenticity do

¹⁴³ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

¹⁴⁴ Three volumes published during the 1970s, with an abridged version released as *The Crossman Diaries* in 1979. See Gosling (1980) and M. White (1981).

¹⁴⁵ See Fiddick (1980a) and Summers (1980). Jay worked on *Tonight* and also contributed material to *TW3*.

¹⁴⁶ See also N. Baker (1986), D. Barker (1986) and Leapman (1986).

¹⁴⁷ See Sanatan Rai, 7 September 2001, review in IMDb 2009a; pp_brussels, 26 February 2009, review in Amazon 2009a

so without any factual evidence. Some express authenticity ambivalently, writing they “*feel* that the themes and issues are as relevant today as ever (I.B., 3 October 2008, review in Amazon 2009c, my emphasis) or “it’s *easy to believe* it to be true” (Paul Johnson, 21 August 2005, review in Amazon 2009c, my emphasis), using terms denoting personal judgment. However, the majority assert that *Yes Minister* is self-evidently an authentic representation of British political culture. The lack of factual references in internet writing suggests that these interpretations of authenticity are not reached through empirical correspondence to a verifiable political culture but instead to viewers’ personal beliefs about politics. This should be clarified further; the clear indifference to empirical evidence in internet comments suggests viewers’ beliefs in the authenticity of this cynical representation of British political culture should not be seen as complete expressions of a political philosophy, views on political practices or a sign of electoral preferences, but rather one element of viewers’ political opinions and feelings and that internet writing is a context where they can express these unevidenced and non-rational discourses.

This is coherent with findings that internet reviews privilege subjective, emotion-based writing (Steiner 2008 and Katz and Rice 2002) and similar findings have also been associated with television reviews which tend to emphasise the personal reactions of the reviewer “from a subjective, everyday kind of viewpoint” (Rixon 2011, 177). Interpretations of political sitcom on the internet and journalistic television reviews are therefore hypothesised to express the authors’ political feelings, grounded in prejudice, ‘common sense’ and emotion, rather than their rational political beliefs. In a

homologous fashion, Ang argues that viewers' descriptions of *Dallas* as realistic relied on what she called the "melodramatic imagination" (1985, 83), whereby the emotionally-heightened narratives were felt to be realistic because they were compared to individuals' personal emotional experiences in a highly selective way. Ang implies that any representation could be interpreted as realistic if it matched just "one of the ways in which [the viewers] encounter life" (*ibid.*). Interpretations of *Yes Minister*'s authenticity could be said to express a 'political imagination', where the series is recognised as true related to selective parts of viewers' political knowledge. The cynicism contained within the interpretation of authenticity can therefore be seen as a genuine but incomplete part of viewers' attitudes to politics, emphasising feelings and beliefs above facts.

Interpreting and enjoying authenticity

As already mentioned, the promotion of *Yes Minister* as authentic by the BBC was related to the Corporation's desire to produce quality sitcoms coherent with its public service remit to inform, educate and entertain (Sutherland 2010). This was clearly successful; authenticity was not a mere observation but played a key part in evaluations of the series as high-quality television. BBC audience research located viewers' enthusiasm in their interpretation of authenticity and 43 percent of those interviewed said they would 'definitely' watch more of the series ("Audience Research Report: *Yes Minister*," VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164). In the press, *Yes Minister*'s success was explained by the fact that the authors "know something about the subject"

(Grundy 1980, n.p.¹⁴⁸), linking quality to political knowledge, and this is repeated in internet comments' references to relevance and topicality, often combined with praise for its intelligence and comedy.¹⁴⁹

Viewers valued authenticity, alongside clever comedy, as one of *Yes Minister*'s key aspects. This is coherent with the term's associations; truth and honesty have moral value, and television genres associated with empirical truth, such as news, current affairs and documentary, possess high cultural value. A significant proportion of responses do not elaborate on this, implying there is a clear presumption that the truth about politics is self-evidently valuable, but a substantial minority of sources, predominantly from internet reviews, specifically locate the cultural value of authenticity in its ability to educate and inform. One described *Yes Minister* as "an education in politics" (petsteph1, 22 September 2008, review in IMDb 2009a) with another claiming "This show *explains* the importance of voting and taking part in elections" (sylviastel, 17 June 2008, review in IMDb 2009a, my emphasis). Others describe the series in relation to learning about bureaucracy,¹⁵⁰ power, management, and even the English language.¹⁵¹ The value attributed to *Yes Minister*'s authentic information can also be seen in the sources that describe it as revelatory, giving access to the private practices and locations of British politics. This can be seen in press suggestion that the scripts were inspired by unnamed sources but it is more obvious in the internet comments where it is described as a

¹⁴⁸ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

¹⁴⁹ For example, see also nrabbit, 2 January 2006, review in Amazon 2009c; and Canvoodoo, 28 April 2008, review in IMDb 2009a.

¹⁵⁰ See Ms. Aim Wameyo, 30 June 2007, review in Amazon 2009c.

¹⁵¹ For example, Joelle, 5 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009a; and Jean Louis, 13 November 2006, review in Amazon 2009c.

“portrayal of life behind the scenes in government circles” (A Customer, 7 September 2001, review in Amazon 2009b).¹⁵²

The revelatory character of *Yes Minister* lies in its representations of British political culture’s ‘back regions’, a term coined by sociologist Erving Goffman (1990). In this schema, society has front and back regions, different spaces with different standards of identity and behaviour. Goffman argues activity in a front region tends towards a performance defined by social norms and that back regions are

...a space, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course...[and] where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude.

(Goffman 1990, 53-4)

The performative front regions occupied by MPs in British political culture in the early 1980s would have been created through appearances in the media or perhaps public meetings, while the Whitehall office - the principal location of *Yes Minister* - is clearly a back region to which there is no public access. The revelatory tone in some interpretations of *Yes Minister*’s authenticity is a product of this front/back divide; the series appeared to show something new and previously inaccessible; “Two in three thought the situation offered a great deal of potential, ‘a refreshing change’ many said

¹⁵² The phrase ‘how politics *really* works’ or variations is also used by The Mighty Quin, 15 February 2009; lexo1941, 16 August 2007; cwhd83, 3 March 2006; and DR Blott, 2 February 2009, reviews in Amazon 2009a; dhillier, 16 January 2001, review in Amazon 2009f; and mark.plesko, 6 December 2000, review in Amazon 2009g.

from the usual domestic comedy” (“Audience Research Report: *Yes Minister*”, VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164). This novelty can further be explained by remembering that television broadcasts of debates in Parliament did not begin until 1989. Viewers’ lack of knowledge about the restricted ministerial back region may even support the discourse of authenticity; research in the 1940s suggested that “people were particularly vulnerable to persuasion about subjects of which they had no direct experience” (Curran and Seaton 2003, 332). The value of *Yes Minister* as educative and revelatory can thus be linked to how this front/back divide invests knowledge about political culture with cultural capital; interpreting representations of political culture’s back regions as authentic allows viewers to feel they are gaining privileged access into the cynical nature of British political culture. The section now turns to discuss how this relates to how many sources subordinate comic pleasure to the series’ political content.

***Yes Minister’s* quality comedy**

As this chapter began by outlining, the interpretation of political authenticity in *Yes Minister’s* reception contrasts sharply with popular definitions of comedy as incongruous and absurd. It is more coherent with definitions of satire, a term used sporadically through the reception and also seen in relation to *TW3*,¹⁵³ which does have associations with real life: “true satire demands a high degree of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world” (Hodgart 1969, 11). As has been shown, *Yes Minister’s* authentic involvement with the problems of the real world is accorded high cultural value through interpretations of education and revelation. The

¹⁵³ Definitions of satire will also be discussed in the next chapter on *Spitting Image*.

following passages will now show how its comedy is evaluated as of high aesthetic quality and intelligence, and it will be argued that high-quality comedy is interpreted as a style appropriate to representing political culture authentically, while evaluations of lowbrow comedy are described using the discourses of disruption and absurdity.

Viewers regularly single out *Yes Minister*'s plots, dialogue and acting for considerable praise, with emphasis upon creative skill and craft; "They considered the script had been cleverly and astutely written with its 'delightful subtleties' and 'witty dialogue'" ("Audience Research Report: *Yes Minister*", VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164); and Andrew Davies described it as "a classic example of the script-plus-actors genre" (1980, n.p.¹⁵⁴). Similar expressions are used throughout the internet sources: "Staggeringly wonderful even years after its conception. A perfect cast and a fantastic script across every series. One of the best British comedies ever" (M.A. Cossins, 22 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009a).

Expressions of aesthetic quality are more or less equal to praise for its clever comedy: "cleverly and astutely written" ("Audience Research Report: *Yes Minister*", VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164) and "the wit and cleverness of this series could make even corruption something to laugh at" (Rosabel, 23 July 1999, review in IMDb 2009a) Viewers particularly locate cleverness in the style of writing and acting; *Yes Minister*'s comedy privileged precise dialogue and intricate plots, rather than physical comedy or one-liners and, as was the BBC's intention, the text is written about in terms

¹⁵⁴ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

that confer cultural value. Interestingly, a few did not enjoy *Yes Minister*'s style of comedy, with BBC audience research reports reporting some found it "too slow" or "boring and unfunny" (VR/80/179, 11 June 1980, BBC WAC R9/7/164), perhaps because those individuals expected a more energetic and broad style. This aspect of *Yes Minister* can also be seen in some internet reviews which focus on expressing high value, describing it as clever, without even describing it as 'funny', their writing subordinating comic pleasure to intellectual or aesthetic satisfaction: "The writing was a triumph; extremely intelligent and delightfully witty" (grendelkhan, 31 May 2003, review in IMDb 2009a, my emphasis).

Terms such as 'witty', 'clever' and 'subtle' associate the pleasures of *Yes Minister*'s comedy with the aesthetic attitudes of disinterest and refinement related to highbrow culture (see Bourdieu 1984 and Kuipers 2006 on comedy). This tendency is particularly evident in the dominance of low potency terms (see Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum 1957 for discussion of this). Terms such as 'funny' 'comic', 'humorous,' 'witty' and 'amusing' are much more frequent than those with strong potency, such as 'hilarious', 'very funny' or direct mentions of laughter.¹⁵⁵ One even wrote "The comedy is quite subtle in a way that one would never feel at any point to laugh out loud." (DrMathComp, 29 January 2007, review in IMDb 2009a) A similar subordination of comedy can also be seen in a small collection of responses that make no specific reference to comic pleasure

¹⁵⁵ For higher potency comments see J Wellington Peevis, 16 October 2002; and canvooodoo, 28 April 2008, reviews in IMDb 2009a; summa, 25 June 2009; and Jan Van Dijk, 25 February 2009, reviews in Amazon 2009a; R Cunningham, 13 March 2007; and TR Alexander, 4 December 2007, reviews in Amazon 2009d; and Kalah, 12 July 2006, review in Amazon 2009h.

and only refer to the series' political content. This can be demonstrated by reproducing an internet reviews in its entirety.¹⁵⁶

A change but still brilliant...

At the end of the last series of *Yes Minister*, Jim Hacker was made Prime Minister and this first series of the sequel series details the trials and tribulations of his term. All the main characters from the series return and are as good as ever and if anything the brilliant writing that was on show in *Yes Minister* is even better here.

The series still revolves around the conflicts between Jim Hacker and Sir Humphrey but there are also some things that tie some of the episodes together such as Hacker's attempt to get his defence policy through and Sir Humphrey worried about reductions in the power he has over the Civil Service.

Yes Minister and *Yes Prime Minister* are both terrifically well written series that only improve as the series progress. It is also amazing how much of the series is relevant today as you can find an episode relevant to most political situations. These two series are easily my favourite sitcom. (T. R. Alexander, 14 November 2008, review in Amazon 2009e)

Yes Minister is described as a superlative example of television comedy or sitcom, so T.R. Alexander does not ignore its comic nature. However, the effects and pleasures of

¹⁵⁶ See also, for example, mjc121, 30 November 2003, review in Amazon 2009d.

comedy are only implied, and if the generic terms ‘sitcom’ or ‘comedy’ were removed there would be no evidence *Yes Minister* was a comedy, rather than a drama or, if references to the quality of writing were removed, perhaps even a current affairs documentary. Reviews like these focus on lengthy descriptions of setting or plot, and praise characterization, performance and writing, privileging aspects of the text most readily associated with notions of cultural quality and subordinating comedy: “the initial episodes had more of a serious strain than the later ones. They are better because they concentrate on the politics, rather than on the comedy” (Sanatan Rai, 7 September 2001, review in IMDb 2009a). Some viewers only evaluate *Yes Minister* in relation to politics and current affairs, and interpret it as educational and revelatory, including no explicit references to comedy and pleasure. This leads to the tentative hypothesis that *Yes Minister* produced a discursive context where the more potent pleasures of comedy and its incongruous characteristics were subordinated to more refined, highbrow pleasures such as intellectual and aesthetic appreciation. The comic hierarchy that this implies can be clearly seen in the few negative responses to *Yes Minister*.

Interpreting inauthenticity and comedy style

There are not many negative responses to *Yes Minister* but they are useful in elucidating viewers’ expectations of political sitcom because they show why the text was judged to fail. Cross-referencing positive and negative responses shows that both express expectations of political authenticity and high-quality, clever comedy. Of

particular note is how negative responses evaluate *Yes Minister*'s comedy style as low value and closely relate this to discourses of inauthenticity, absurdity and disruption.

Yes Minister is only explicitly interpreted as inauthentic in a few newspaper reviews and it is evaluated negatively. Herbert Kretzmer wrote in the *Daily Mail* that Jim Hacker is “an improbable politician...little more than a vain ninny... *Yes Minister* never quite recovers from this central flaw” (1980, n.p.¹⁵⁷), connecting textual failure to Hacker’s improbable characterisation. Similarly *Guardian* television reviewer Peter Fiddick complained that Sir Humphrey makes an error in referencing *Hansard*, the record of parliamentary debate.

[The error] ...didn’t spoil the joke...but a comedy aiming admirably higher than knockabout gags will be sharp in its detail – the more we can believe it, the funnier it will be... I would not say *Yes Minister* is the sharpest thing...[but] it deserves nursing. (1980b, 9)

Fiddick’s writing on *Yes Minister* will be the focus of this section but the association between inauthenticity and low comedy quality is evident in other sources across the years. One review wondered about the change of situation in *Yes Prime Minister*; Hacker’s promotion “had many of us supporters apprehensive...Hacker in No. 10? Surely not, that would be tilting the comic scales too heavily. Quite wrong, it’s as good as ever” (*Daily Telegraph* 1986, 35). Authenticity is related to comic pleasure, quality

¹⁵⁷ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

and textual success but elements interpreted as unrealistic or incorrect are attached to evaluations of low quality.

This link between political inauthenticity and textual failure appears to lie in the cultural significance of politics. Fiddick's preview shows that he expected political comedy to be authentic, intelligent and of high quality.

Hope of the week must be *Yes Minister*...not because there is nothing else about, but because this television season sorely lacks an intelligent new comedy series, and the pedigree of this one is certainly impressive. ...The promise is that it's all true... It's even got Gerald Scarfe titles – there's classy. (1980a, 16)

The lukewarm review, above, on the 26 February shows these high expectations were not entirely met and that his disappointment was related to his personal desire for politically-engaged comedy.

I would not say *Yes Minister* is the sharpest thing since Mort Sahl¹⁵⁸ but in an age when the nearest to political comment is Janet Brown in a Maggy Thatcher wig,¹⁵⁹ it deserves nursing. (1980b)

¹⁵⁸ American stand-up comedian (1927-) well-known for referring to politics and current affairs in his material.

¹⁵⁹ A reference to Brown appearing as a female Prime Minister in the James Bond film, *For Your Eyes Only* (John Glen 1981).

It is likely that Fiddick, writing for the left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper, was sympathetic to left-wing politics and that his clear dissatisfaction with contemporary political comedy, specifically referencing Thatcher, is an expression of negative attitudes towards a right-wing government. His desire that *Yes Minister* be ‘nursed’ is probably partly motivated by this, suggesting that the significance he placed on political authenticity was not related to education or revelation but to a critique of contemporary politics, probably related to his attitudes towards the Conservative party.

The hypothesis that *Yes Minister*’s political authenticity is valuable to Fiddick because British politics is personally significant to him is supported in principle by other audience research into situation comedy. A number of studies have shown that interpretations of authenticity are particularly significant when a representation is personally important to an individual.¹⁶⁰ Cripps (2003) and Bodroghkozy (2003) showed how some African-American viewers responded negatively to *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (CBS 1951-1953) and *Julia* (NBC 1968-71), respectively, because the characters did not match their own experiences of contemporary African-American life. In Jhally and Lewis (1992) some viewers praised *The Cosby Show* (NBC 1984-1992) for its authenticity, while Hallam (2005) explored how female viewers’ responded to *Butterflies*’ (BBC 1978-1983) representation of a married woman’s life according to its accuracy.¹⁶¹ Viewers prized representations they considered accurate and criticised those felt to be inauthentic, particularly when self-identifying with characters and settings or

¹⁶⁰ Authenticity and realism have also played a part in the writing and production of television since its inception, from *Hancock’s Half Hour* (BBC 1956-1960) to *The Office* (BBC 2001-2003). See Godard (1991) and Mills (2004b) respectively.

¹⁶¹ See also Medhurst (2007) on student interpretations of *The Royle Family* (BBC 1998-2000, 2006-ongoing) and its authenticity.

considering the representations to be socially significant.¹⁶² As already shown, some viewers interpreted *Yes Minister* as educational but more widely there is the sense that accurate representations of political culture have intrinsic value, coherent with the cultural capital traditionally invested in factual broadcasting and politics itself. The popularity of *Yes Minister* and the longevity of the discourse of authenticity suggest that those who wrote about the series' authenticity considered British politics to be important.

Fiddick's criticisms of *Yes Minister* can therefore be seen as an expression of his anxiety that popular culture was not engaging critically with contemporary politics. This concern was not solely based on the series' factual inaccuracy though, and just as praise identified value in authenticity and intelligent comedy, so negative comments link inauthenticity and low quality comedy. As the language of his preview suggests, Fiddick's expectations for *Yes Minister* were high, using the terms, "intelligent...impressive...classy" (1980a) but his lukewarm review shows they were not entirely met. His line on 26 February that *Yes Minister* is "aiming admirably higher than knockabout gags" (1980b, 9) is a somewhat backhanded compliment and his conclusion that "I would not say *Yes Minister* is the sharpest thing" (*ibid.*) again suggests thwarted high expectations. This tone of disappointment continues a week later with his preview of the second episode hinting at blunted enthusiasm; the "new comedy of Whitehall warfare gets (we must hope) into its stride" (1980c, 14). His last reference to the first season is on 8 March and it takes a negative view of the series' comedic style;

¹⁶² Comic representation is used in the widest possible way and not limited to characters or situations.

the phrase “for anyone caught by its jokey view of Whitehall life” (1980d, 20) implies that he was not caught because of its ‘jokey’ nature, demonstrating that the BBC’s intention to produce high-quality comedy was not universally successful to someone with clear political attitudes.

In these reviews, evaluations of comedy style and interpretations of authenticity are intertwined. The final review suggests it was the jokey view of politics that Fiddick disliked, linking low value jokiness to an unsuccessful representation of politics and thus inauthenticity. Similarly in the first review he wrote, “the more we can believe it, the funnier it will be” (1980b, 9), linking authenticity to successful comedy. Combinations of low value comedy and inauthenticity are evident in a few other negative comments. Peter Davalle wrote in the *Times* about *Yes Prime Minister*, “I regret that what was the funniest comedy series on the television has recently shown silly and fantastic streaks” (1986, 31). Fiddick and Davalle both link inauthenticity and lowbrow comedy; low value jokey comedy does not provide worthwhile political representations, and very funny political comedy is undermined by fantasy and silliness. This is coherent with the hypothesis from the positive reception that viewers culturally categorise successful political sitcom as providing authenticity and high-quality comedy. Furthermore it suggests they are interdependent and that lowbrow comedy can undermine political authenticity. This observation will now be used to argue that the reception of *Yes Minister* exhibits an interpretative strategy of ‘comic coherence’, whereby textual success and authenticity rely upon culturally classifying a political sitcom’s style of comedy as coherent with the cultural classification of the political culture represented.

Comic Coherence

The theory of comic coherence hypothesises that viewers tend to write about *Yes Minister* as authentic if their evaluation of its comedy style is coherent with their assumptions about the nature of British political culture. *Yes Minister*'s pleasures are consistently associated with interpreting it as politically authentic *and* evaluating it as possessing high aesthetic and comedic quality: "They are so funny, so well acted, absolutely believable. A classic" (Geraldine Atkinson, 22 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009a). Conversely Fiddick's writing shows inauthenticity is attributed to low value comedy, implying that this style of comedy disrupts accurate representation.

Comic coherence can be seen most clearly where Sir Humphrey and Hacker are written about using discourses of verisimilitude and of comic quality. After the political upheaval of the 1970s, viewers see Hacker as an authentic representation of an ineffectual politician and Sir Humphrey as the authentic representation of the overweening civil servant. The same textual element - for example Hacker's ineffectual nature - is therefore part of his authenticity and his comic value.

Hacker is green to the job and somewhat inept with the civil servants continually getting one over him... It's an excellent demonstration of just who holds the power in government... (Paul Johnson, 21 August 2005, review in Amazon 2009c)

With Fowld's Bernard trying to keep the peace and Eddington's Hacker wondering how he can get anything it's just a masterpiece of British comedy.
(oldstuff, 26 December 2008, review in Amazon 2009a)

The reading of the character of Hacker as both funny *and* authentic shows the comedy conforms to individuals' assumptions about actual political culture while also amusing them. Sir Humphrey's monologues, delivered to an often bewildered Hacker, are similarly read both as authentic representations of how civil servants actually speak and intelligent comedy: "A genuinely fine example of subtle British humour *and* the fine use of bureaucratese language" (A Customer, 28 October 2001, review in Amazon 2009d, my emphasis). Lowbrow comedy, for example slapstick, could not be interpreted as politically authentic because it would represent behaviours not associated with political culture; in frustrating the expectations of authenticity it would also be evaluated as bad comedy.

Mills (2005) discusses the idea of sitcom realism in relation to Godard (1991); he proposes that comedy is produced through establishing a naturalistic diegesis and then disrupting it via comic incongruity. In relation to this hypothesis he suggests, "It is necessary to 'believe' the diegesis of any particular sitcom only to the point at which that the comedy which contradicts it begins to make sense" (2005, 141). He therefore argues that "In sitcom, realism instead points to a suitability between the diegesis created by the programme and its humour" (*ibid.*) and that sitcom realism is the result of an internal, textual coherence between the sitcom diegesis and its comedy. *Yes Minister's* comic coherence suggests that political sitcom operates in a different way; the

text's setting and its comic material must be coherent with each other but they must also be coherent with viewers' extra-textual beliefs about political culture in real life. Comic coherence demonstrates *Yes Minister*'s authenticity relies upon both comic taste and political beliefs, and the series must be interpreted as internally coherent and externally coherent with British politics. A viewer must find Sir Humphrey's lengthy digressions amusing *and* associate this verbal dexterity with actual civil servants in order to interpret it as a funny joke about British political culture.

The text displays other examples of this duality, conforming both to generic sitcom tropes and evoking quality and political culture. The opening titles of sitcoms often introduce setting, characters and lead actors, and this is fulfilled by *Yes Minister* in a way coherent with its political content. They are drawn by Gerald Scarfe, a noted political cartoonist, and depict the Houses of Parliament and the three leads in Scarfe's recognisably angular style of caricature, while the theme tune opens with ringing chimes, evoking Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, and continues with accents of brass instruments, reminiscent of traditional pageantry. Scarfe's persona refers to discourses of politics, journalism and satirical political caricature, while the theme tune evokes the ceremony associated with the traditions of official cultural events. At the same time both are evidence of the series' sitcom nature, providing the expected opening sequence with a theme by Ronnie Hazlehurst, a composer and arranger of many BBC sitcoms and light entertainment shows.

Comic coherence can also be used to explain the subordination of comic pleasure and the dominance of highbrow discourses of intelligence and subtlety by arguing that viewers identify coherence not just through representational verisimilitude but in cultural categorisations. This hypothesis claims viewers interpret *Yes Minister* as politically authentic because its highbrow style of comedy is coherent with their cultural expectations of British political culture as upper class and/or because it is culturally coherent with the high standards that govern broadcasting's representation of British politics. British political culture itself has a long association with traditional official culture and in the 1980s and the 2000s it still exhibited practices inherited from a period before universal suffrage, such as the monarch's role in opening parliament and granting royal assent to legislation, and until 1999 peers who inherited family titles were able to debate and vote on British legislation in the House of Lords. In 1980 the loci of power in British society – for example, financial institutions and politics – were still dominated by families who had held comparable positions in industry and aristocracy for generations (Marwick 2003, 170) and though upper class¹⁶³ dominance of politics has declined since the nineteenth century, the upper classes were still pervasive in the Conservative government of the 1980s (Marwick 2003, 276; Kavanagh, Richards, Geddes and Smith 2006, 88-9), with the notable exception of Thatcher, whose father was a bourgeois shop owner. Similarly, the Civil Service shares this culture; it is traditionally dominated by another section of elite British society - Oxbridge graduates - and senior civil servants are routinely awarded honours: every Head of the Civil Service since the role was created in 1919 has held the title of 'Sir' and some were given peerages. British political

¹⁶³ Marwick's usage labels the top two per cent of the population 'upper class'. He classifies himself as upper middle class (2003, 168-9).

culture thus has strong associations with the upper classes and their cultural markers, such as etiquette, Received Pronunciation, verbal dexterity and wide social connections. Similar claims can be made for the latter period of *Yes Minister*'s reception, for former barrister and Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair attended a prestigious boarding school, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron is a descendant of King William IV and his mother is the daughter of a baronet, while his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, is the heir to a baronetcy.

These expectations are reflected in *Yes Minister*'s characters and in its comedy style. In terms of character, Sir Humphrey is clearly a member of traditional official culture with his knighthood, Oxford education and crisp diction, and he socialises with other senior civil servants in leather armchairs while discussing how to thwart Hacker. Sir Humphrey's attempts to control the middle class, LSE-educated Hacker also dramatises the dominance of upper-class power; the civil servant's manipulative solutions to the problems created by the minister often makes use of his many connections with people in high place in government, industry or other national institutions. However, most significantly in terms of the reception's emphasis upon comedy quality, the series' comedy style is also coherent with popular assumptions and representations of the upper classes. The well-constructed plots and precise dialogue are comparable to the comedy of manners,¹⁶⁴ a comedy form commonly used to represent the etiquette, foibles and faults of the English upper middle classes. Similarly the description of the comedy as intelligent and sophisticated confers highbrow status, depicting a discursive coherence

¹⁶⁴ "The subject of comedy of manners is the way people behave, the manners they employ in a social context; the chief concerns of the characters are sex and money...; the style is distinguished by the refinement of raw emotional expression and action into the subtlety of wit and intrigue" (Hirst 1979, 1).

between the highbrow comedy and the high status of political office, and descriptions of intelligence work in a similar way in relation to expectations of politics on television and current affairs. From the other end of telescope, Fiddick's reviews suggest low comedy produces interpretations of low textual value and inauthenticity because low culture is incoherent with expectations of politics and because Fiddick is personally invested in an intellectual treatment of politics on television. The interpretation of empirical authenticity is thus located not in verisimilitude *per se* but because the comedic aesthetics of the series are coherent with beliefs about the cultural categorisation of British political culture and how it should be represented on television.

Comic coherence and British political culture

Yes Minister's reception has exhibited several aspects that will be highlighted in the rest of this chapter. It is dominated by interpretations of political authenticity and evaluations of high-quality comedy and it was argued that the discourse of authenticity showed viewers repeatedly wrote that *Yes Minister*'s cynical view of British political culture as incompetent and impotent was accurate, demonstrating negative feelings and attitudes towards politics in Britain. Evaluations of its comedy were dominated by terms such as 'intelligent', 'subtle' and 'classic', with a tendency towards low potency comic evaluations, showing *Yes Minister* was consistently associated with the norms of highbrow aesthetics. This was contrasted with the way evaluations of lowbrow humour produced interpretations of inauthenticity and textual failure, suggested the importance of the highbrow discourses in enjoying *Yes Minister* as funny and authentic. This was compared to the cultural dominance of upper class culture in 1980s British politics. It

concluded by arguing that interpretations of *Yes Minister* as authentic relied on evaluating the series using terms coherent with how British political culture itself was culturally categorised as near the pinnacle of British cultural hierarchies: upper class and highbrow. This led to the working hypothesis of comic coherence and that viewers' pleasure relied upon a style of comedy that matched its referent; a highbrow comedy for an upper-class world.

This suggests that while viewers were generally cynical about political culture's practices, there were also other more benign associations. There are the negative notions of class dominance and privilege associated with traditional official culture but through their interpretations of authenticity some viewers imply that politics can be culturally classified as 'clever' and 'serious' too. These may be aspirations that are considered to have not been met, accounting for the widely-shared cynical attitudes, but they also suggest the varied and multiple ways in which politics is perceived both as a culture of failure and incompetence and one that demands intelligence and skill. In a similar way, the reception of *Yes Minister* has shown a sitcom can be interpreted as both funny and empirically accurate. The chapter now turns to the second case study to explore how authenticity, comedy style and pleasure appear in the reception of a very different political sitcom series.

III

The New Statesman and Ideological Coherence

Similar to *Yes Minister*, authenticity features in the reception of *The New Statesman*. However, strong discourses of authenticity appear in only a minority of sources, most of them journalistic, and many internet reviewers subordinate the series' political content to praise for Rik Mayall, the leading actor. This section thus looks at how authenticity and comic coherence play a part in this second example of political sitcom, demonstrating the prevalence of a *personalised authenticity*, whilst examining other frames of reference that shaped how people wrote about the series.

The New Statesman was produced by Yorkshire Television and written by Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran, sitcom writing partners, who first had success with *Shine On Harvey Moon* (Central Television 1982-5, 1995) and later at the BBC with *Birds of Feather* (1989-1998). In the first episode, broadcast on 13 September 1987, Conservative candidate Alan B'Stard (Rik Mayall) is elected as a Member of Parliament after cutting the brake cables on his opponents' cars. The local Chief Constable, a mentally unstable Christian who talks to Jesus in the pub, finds evidence of B'Stard's crime and blackmails him into proposing legislation to arm the police; Alan agrees and successfully gets the bill passed. He then manages to dispose of his blackmailer and make a substantial profit by selling cheap, faulty guns to the police at full price. Later episodes follow Alan's quest for wealth and sex; attempting to rob fellow MPs in a financial scam and publishing a pornographic pamphlet at the Conservative party conference. Over the four series, B'Stard relentlessly pursues a variety of extreme

policies, including trying to restore the death penalty and exempting the poor from the Poll Tax in exchange for their right to vote, and getting involved in outlandish schemes, such as attempting to assassinate Mikhail Gorbachev and buying Hitler's cryogenically preserved penis. In contrast to the dominant television representation of MPs as clumsy, somewhat impotent, middle-aged males (van Zoonen and Wring 2012, 274), B'Stard is a proactive and scheming young egoist who behaves with aggressive disdain, delivering withering putdowns to his fellow MPs or sniping at his wife. An on-going narrative charts Alan's career, rising through the ranks of the Conservative party in the UK, and then becoming an MEP. The final series in 1994 concluded with Alan's new party winning a landslide election victory, and a later theatre production depicted him as a malign puppet master behind the New Labour group led by Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. The series never reached the heights of popularity seen by *Yes Minister* and this is perhaps reflected in the smaller number of reception sources found, though it was awarded Best Television Comedy Series at the 1991 BAFTA Awards, and was 61st in *Britain's Best Sitcom* (BBC 2004) and eighth in the *30 Greatest Political Comedies* poll (Channel 4 2006).

Inauthenticity, exaggeration and failure

Sixteen press articles were found relating to *The New Statesman* and a third of them feature criticisms of the series' representation of politics and its style of comedy. As in

the few negative reviews of *Yes Minister*, inauthenticity, low quality comedy and comic failure are related.¹⁶⁵

[*Spitting Image*] has acquired a veneer of sophistication [but] Laurence Mark's and Maurice Gran's script is so far over the top that's its not even funny. (Last 1987, 12)

Just silly... Politicians were said to be concerned that the programme would make people laugh at them. They needn't have worried. No one who has watched this tosh would be in any mood for laughter. (*Sunday Express* 1987, 17)

These sources lambast *The New Statesman* for its comic excess; exaggerated comedy is related to comic failure and silly tosh fails to produce laughter at MPs, implying inauthenticity. These sources locate textual failure in the series' lowbrow style of comedy. Kuipers (2006) has explored definitions of lowbrow comedy in her audience research, arguing it is

...mostly based on stereotypes and exaggeration...explicitly framed as humorous, for instance by using costumes, funny voices, an emphatic humorous presentation and canned laughter. (365)

This matches the hypothesis from the last section that journalists value television political sitcom that can be interpreted as politically authentic and evaluated as high

¹⁶⁵ See also Catchpole (1987).

quality, and that these expectations shape their writing about *Yes Minister* and *The New Statesman*. The unsuitable nature of *The New Statesman*'s lowbrow comedy is made explicit in a review from the *Evening Standard*, which after praising *Yes Minister* as "verbally dextrous", moves on:

The problem is that, with the wealth of material at their disposal, the writers have opted for easy targets and fleshed them out with gratuitous detail – clichés – obscured absurdity – a device which worked in the film *Airplane!* but which simply fails to get off the ground in this context... The suspicion that this is a series designed to lift Mayall out of the Looney Tunes ghetto into the realm of intelligent verbal comedy is heightened by the lengths everyone has gone to in order to make him look different....in his Bentley and expensive suits... Mayall now and then lapses into 'Rick-speak' which blows holes in the credibility of the character. (Norman 1987, 31)

Norman's description of *The New Statesman* as exaggerated is easily located in the text, for while Hacker and Sir Humphrey politely wrangled over policies about hospital staffing or urban farms, Alan B'Stard verbally and physically attacks characters he dislikes or behaves sycophantically towards those who provide him with money, power or sex, whilst trying to bring back hanging or hiding nuclear waste under a school. The textual comparisons made are telling; spoof disaster film *Airplane!* (Abrahams, Zucker and Zucker 1980), the ultra-violent and surreal *Looney Tunes* cartoons (Warner Brothers 1930-1969), and the sitcom *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982-1984) in which Mayall had one of his earliest television roles as Rik. Each of these fits Kuipers' definition of lowbrow

comedy and they are deployed to criticise *The New Statesman*. The description of Mayall's career and *Looney Tunes* as a comedy 'ghetto' is a metaphor of poverty and entrapment; comic parallels with *Airplane!*'s famous spoofs are evaluated as entirely unsuccessful; and *The Young Ones* is used to reject B'Stard's political authenticity. These comparisons confirm the hypothesis that comedy style influences interpretations of political authenticity. Norman asserts that lowbrow comedy is incoherent with political comedy when he writes *The New Statesman*'s "clichés – obscured absurdity...fails to get off the ground *in this context*" (Norman 1987, 31, my emphasis). His opening reference to *Yes Minister* has established that 'the context' is television political comedy and he argues that cartoony, obscure comedy cannot succeed in this genre, and that good political sitcoms, such as *Yes Minister*, deploy a highbrow style, such as sophisticated verbal comedy, which reflects the high cultural values associated with British political culture and its television representation. Norman's review does not just refer to lowbrow humour in general but to specific texts. Of particular import for this British historical study is the low value attributed to *The Young Ones* and Mayall's persona, both of which originated in the youth-oriented Alternative Comedy of the 1980s.

Low value comedy and Alternative Comedy

As historical sources, these contemporaneous evaluations give brief insights into how *The New Statesman* was related to contemporaneous television comedy, such as *Yes Minister*, *Spitting Image* and Mayall's career in what has become known as Alternative Comedy. Mayall receives scant praise from some reviewers; Dunkley wrote in the

Financial Times that it “serves mainly to make you wonder whether Mayall should have stuck to the adolescent obsessions of pimples, willies and bottoms with which he endeavoured to win laughs previously” (1987, 19), another in the *Spectator* that “I wasn’t expecting subtle and accurate realism from a series whose central character is called B’Stard and played by Rik Mayall” (Cope 1987, 54). One ambivalent review in the *New Statesman* magazine described it as “a knockabout political farce seemingly written especially for the Rik Mayall character in *The Young Ones*... a clown for today whose humour is derived...from his whole heartedly two-dimensional character” (H. Williams 1987), associating Mayall’s persona with shallow characterization. These consistent parallels between Mayall and lowbrow comedy can be accounted for by a brief description of Alternative Comedy and Mayall’s part in it.

Mayall began his comedy career as part of the duo Twentieth Century Coyote with Adrian Edmondson, appearing at Peter Rosengard’s Comedy Store. This where Alternative Comedy, the wave of comedy reacting to the dominant forms of working class, stand-up comedy, is said to have started (Wilmut and Rosengard 1989, xiii). It was a combination of left-wing, confrontational, anarchic comedy and “common to many was an aggressive mode of delivery ... and a performance style that drew attention to its own lack of polish” (Duguid 2008). It typically involved young people fresh from university, though in contrast to those who were part of the sixties satire boom, most did not attend Oxford or Cambridge. Mayall appeared in many of alternative comedy’s most well-known television iterations, Ben Elton’s *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982-1984), an anarchic sitcom set in a student house, and *The Comic Strip Presents...* (Channel 4

1982-1988, 1998-2005, BBC 1990-1993), a series of short films, the first of which was broadcast on Channel 4's opening night, affirming the 'alternative' label by being given prominence by the channel with remit to be different (see Goodwin 1998, 25-37). Channel 4 also screened another alternative comedy success, *Saturday Live* and *Friday Night Live* (Channel 4 1985-1988), a studio broadcast that attempted to capture a club atmosphere, which included Mayall and Edmondson as The Dangerous Brothers performing cartoonishly violent slapstick sketches. The continuity between Mayall's roles is marked and he fostered a comic persona of aggressive and deluded vanity in other sitcoms; *Filthy, Rich and Catflap* (BBC 1987), cameos in two seasons of *Blackadder* (BBC 1983-1989) as a sex-obsessed egoist, Lord Flashheart; and performing more violent slapstick in *Bottom* (BBC 1991-1995). Describing his own performance style, Mayall has said: "I was best at being angry and petulant and selfish and a nuisance and ugly and unpopular" (Wilmut and Rosengard 1989, 54).

Mayall's comedy persona and Alternative Comedy match Kuipers' (2006) definition of lowbrow comedy, explaining the negative attitude to Mayall and the low value that some journalists attributed to Alternative Comedy. However, such writing is all but absent from the internet comments, with only TC Raymond negatively associating *The New Statesman* with

... the wretched eighties tradition of 'alternative comedy', so you know you're in for lame jokes about private parts, flatulence, vomiting and plenty of infantile

profanities... The final nail in the coffin is the casting of Rik bloody Mayall ...

(15 July 2002, review in IMDb 2009c)

Rik Mayall and Alternative Comedy are evaluated as low value comedy and interpreted as inauthentic by some journalists because its style – evaluated as aggressive, shallow and immature – did not meet the highbrow expectations of political sitcom, such as intellect, subtlety and skill, that were seen across the reception of *Yes Minister* and linked to authenticity. However, these highbrow discourses do not dominate the internet reception of *The New Statesman* where viewers are overwhelmingly positive and exhibit different generic expectations that produce different responses to the text.

Effacing authenticity – Mayall's star persona

The majority of internet comments positively evaluate *The New Statesman* without clear interpretations of political authenticity, though, as will be discussed, there are references to British politics. Instead of accurate representations, these sources focus on praising the series' comedy and acting, with consistent praise for Rik Mayall as a comedy actor. This demonstrates an alternative frame of reference to that of political authenticity: Mayall fandom.¹⁶⁶

Been a fan of Riks for years. But this tops the lot...Alan Beresford B'stard and Rik Mayall go hand in hand. (varsania, 8 June 2001, review in IMDb 2009c)

¹⁶⁶ As can be seen some use of the term 'fan' (see Mr. Damian J McGrath, 21 October 2003, review in Amazon 2009o; and A Customer, 30 June 2005, review in Amazon 2009m) and some even comment on how attractive they find him (mdr42, 10 July 2002, review in Amazon 2009l; and ozzys babe, 14 October 2005, review in Amazon2009k).

Acknowledgement of Mayall's persona can also be seen in a preview article by Jonathan Margolis in the *Mail on Sunday* which recorded that writers Marks and Gran were given a tour of Parliament by Michael Portillo. While this evokes authenticity and echoes claims about the research done by the writers of *Yes Minister*, Mayall's disruptive style of comedy is emphasised. Portillo is quoted saying, "He's one of those anarchic sense of humour actors, isn't he? I can't think it will be very respectful" (1987, 9) and the article concludes:

In Yorkshire Television's files in Leeds rests a note about *The New Statesman* from an official of the Independent Broadcasting Authority. It reads: 'Rik Mayall. Politics. Rude words. I'm already getting nervous.' The rest of us can't wait. (*ibid.*)

Apart from a single article in *Today*, quoting an MP complaining about the series (Middlehurst 1987), this political controversy did not emerge, perhaps due to the series' perceived inauthenticity. But internet reviewers do generally write about the 1980s, *The Young Ones* and Mayall's performance style with significant approval, demonstrating that the distaste with which some journalists regarded Alternative Comedy in the 1980s is not shared by many who wrote about the series after 1999.¹⁶⁷

I have been a huge fan of Rik Mayalls... finally, I checked out *The New Statesman*... Definitely recommended for a Mayall fan... (Mr. Damian J. McGrath, 21 October 2003, review in Amazon 2009o)

¹⁶⁷ See also, for example, D. Balbirnie, 27 January 2008, review in Amazon 2009i.

Internet sources use different cultural references to that of the journalists; critics compared *The New Statesman* to other political comedy texts, *Yes Minister* and *Spitting Image*, and rejected Alternative Comedy as unsuitable for political sitcom, but internet comments tend to refer to his career and texts such as *The Young Ones*, *Bottom*, and *Blackadder* (BBC 1983-1989, 1999). This contrast suggests that journalists and internet reviews disagree over the generic categorisation of *The New Statesman*. Negative responses are not written in a vacuum but with the generic assumption that *The New Statesman* is a ‘political comedy’, and positive evaluations generically classify the series as a successful ‘Rik Mayall comedy’. As Mittell has theorised, this generic difference also leads to the application of different cultural standards. Those who categorise *The New Statesman* as political comedy expect highbrow quality and criticise exaggeration, while Mayall fans praise its absurd, aggressive and physical comedy. Similarly, while critics expressed negative attitudes to the writers Marks and Gran, some Mayall fans write about them in glowing terms; the scripts are “truly brilliant” (A Customer, 27 November 2001, review in Amazon 2009n) and the “scheming and wordplay are brilliant” (Corky1984, 20 March 2006, review in IMDb 2009c). This shows internet reviewers are expressing a different set of cultural standards to the newspaper reviewers and many of those who praised *Yes Minister*. The difference between viewers is also suggested by other contextual factors; in the mid 1980s ITV was the UK’s principal commercial television channel and had been associated with populist culture and working class audiences since its inception in the 1950s, while Alternative Comedy was associated with youth culture and students. These contribute to the hypothesis that *The New Statesman* and its viewers are markedly different from the BBC audience of *Yes*

Minister and that these groups understood the series and political comedy in different ways.

However, despite these apparently different cultural standards, it is notable that a substantial number of internet reviewers write about *The New Statesman* using terms of quality reminiscent of the reception to *Yes Minister*. While many do praise its exaggerated nature, around half also agree with the description of it as intelligent:

Rik mayall [sic] at his best, *TNS* has more of an intellectual side than his usual fast witted comedies boyish humour and innuendo's aplenty, which is quite political correct in this respect! (Drunken Monkey2, 24 December 2004, review in IMDb 2009c)¹⁶⁸

These viewers describe a series where the protagonist hides nuclear waste beneath a school in terms very similar to how *Yes Minister*'s dialogue-based, comedy of manners style of sitcom was defined. As is clear, these judgements are significantly influenced by the context of his past roles, "Mayall's trademark lunacy has been watered down somewhat" (A Customer, 15 September 2000, review in Amazon 2009j), and praising his acting skills, "the show proved there was more to Rik Mayall than nose picking and farting" (AdamFontaine, 12 January 2007, review in IMDb 2009c). The use of terms such as 'subtle', 'clever' and 'intellectual' demonstrate how viewers' evaluations are relative to their expectations. Understanding responses thus demands an engagement

¹⁶⁸ See also Howlin Wolf, 11 May 2002, review in IMDb 2009c; and A Customer, 21 April 2001, review in Amazon 2009m.

with the generic frames of reference that contextualise how viewers' evaluate and interpret a text. Evaluations reveal something of viewers' wider cultural standards; fans of Rik Mayall tend to prefer comedy with an emphasis on physical humour, aggression, rudeness and anti-social behaviour, and use terms of high cultural value in relation to comedy that is simply less aggressive, rude, etc. than Mayall's other work. However, politics itself is referred to by a substantial number of viewers with significant pleasure, suggesting that Rik Mayall fans still regard the discourse of politics as culturally valuable, and that they confer this value onto Mayall's performance, prompting the terms such as 'subtle' and 'clever'. The reception of political sitcom thus demonstrate an ongoing association between 'politics' and high cultural value, and affirming the earlier claim that viewers' associate politics with some positive qualities alongside their political cynicism which in reception of *The New Statesman* is expressed in relation to the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher and criticisms of greed and selfishness.

Anti-Conservative comedy

As already stated, strong interpretations of political authenticity are rare in writing about *The New Statesman* and the topic of politics itself does not dominate the internet comments. However the reviewer who wrote it would "never be considered a classic due to it being about British politics" (fibreoptic, 24 July 2004, review in IMDb 2009c) is atypical¹⁶⁹ and internet comments tend to praise *The New Statesman*'s for its negative attitude to politics, particularly its anti-Conservative content. *Yes Minister* was discussed as an authentic representation of a non-specific political culture typified by an

¹⁶⁹ Only one other wrote similarly that, "It's only downfall is its tendency to lapse occasionally into political complexity" (A Customer, 15 September 2000, review in Amazon 2009j).

institutionalised stalemate but *The New Statesman* explicitly depicts B'Stard as a Conservative MP and comments associate the series with the political culture of the Conservative party or more generally refer to Mayall as a greedy and unscrupulous politician, showing “the absolute worst side of Thatcherite government” (Richard Chalk, 23 October 2003, review in Amazon 2009k).¹⁷⁰

These post-1999 internet comments express negative views about Thatcher's Conservative government during the 1980s and this reflects popular narratives of the period. As already discussed, Thatcher broke with the economic consensus of the post-war period and emphasised the importance of competition, business and the profit motive; “[her] fundamental philosophy was that the most efficient economic decisions, the ones that would benefit the country most as a whole, were the ones that took place in a free market-place undistorted by Government intervention” (Marwick 2003, 262). She oversaw government spending cuts, tax cuts, de-regulation of financial services and the privatisation of government-owned businesses and housing stock. A new social archetype, the yuppie,¹⁷¹ arrived, defined by youth and conspicuous consumption, while the early 1980s also saw a deep economic recession and high unemployment. Despite this Thatcher won the 1983 election after defeating the 1982 Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands in a brief but violent conflict. The decade was punctuated with further violence; the Irish Republican Army's bombs killed many, including several MPs, and Thatcher survived an assassination attempt during the Conservative Party conference in 1984. The same year saw the first closures of unprofitable coal mines, described as

¹⁷⁰ See also A Customer, 8 January 2005, review in Amazon 2009k.

¹⁷¹ Young Upwardly Mobile Professional.

“narrowly conceived and inhumane in their implications” (Marwick 2003, 283), resulting in a year-long miners’ strike and sporadic but intense clashes between miners and the police. Other civil unrest was attributed by some on the left to “high unemployment; despair and aimlessness...; the fostering of aggressive economic selfishness; and the policies of polarisation and confrontation pursued by the Thatcher Government” (Marwick 2003, 297). Eventually Thatcher came to be seen as an electoral liability by her own colleagues and in November 1990 a challenge to her leadership led to her resignation, famously leaving 10 Downing Street in tears.

The perpetuation of this narrative of market-driven callousness is evident in the few comments that directly refer to Thatcher, and is coherent with the much larger number that refer to Alan’s corrupt personality, describing him as a “sex/money/power/violence-obsessed though devastatingly smooth and cunning Tory MP” (baaaah, 24 January 2008, review in Amazon 2009i). As was observed in relation to *Yes Minister*’s interpretations of empirical authenticity, no political evidence is cited in internet comments referring to Thatcher or Alan B’Stard’s corrupt character. This is especially notable given that there is little shortage of ways to criticise Thatcher, as the overview above suggests. This can also be said of descriptions of corruption given that the 1990s saw a number of Conservative MPs promoted under Thatcher caught in controversies that included extra-marital affairs,¹⁷² lying to Parliament,¹⁷³ using prostitutes,¹⁷⁴ and perjury.¹⁷⁵ These individuals did not occupy the more important positions in government but such “an

¹⁷² Alan Clark and David Mellor.

¹⁷³ Alan Clark.

¹⁷⁴ Jeffrey Archer

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Aitken and Jeffrey Archer.

unending series of scandals” (Reid and Pelling 2005, 178) led to a media narrative of ‘Tory sleaze’, and is seen as one of the contributing factors in the Labour election victory of 1997. It is certainly a possible frame of reference within which internet reviewers could have made meaning from *The New Statesman*.

However, none of the internet or press sources makes specific comparisons between *The New Statesman*’s characters and actual Conservative politicians, or make reference to specific Thatcherite policies or ‘sleaze’. It is possible that internet reviewers were unaware of such specifics or that internet writing was not felt to be an appropriate context for such specific comparisons. The internet context can certainly be seen to affect their writing in other ways; Amazon reviews included many complaints about the audio-visual quality of the series’ DVD,¹⁷⁶ relevant to the retail context, while reviews on IMDb, a site with a discourse of film and television connoisseurship, tended to feature generalised political references. The internet reception of *The New Statesman*, like *Yes Minister*, is dominated by emotion and opinion, rather than fact and knowledge. In contrast to *Yes Minister*, this emotive writing about politics does not produce discourses of empirical authenticity but interpretations that the series is a *criticism* of Thatcherism or politics in general as anti-social and selfish. Rather than authenticity, many viewers express pleasure at *The New Statesman*’s self-consciously negative attitude and cynicism, praising the series as “vicious” (A Customer, 23 February 2004, review in Amazon 2009k) and lauding B’Stard’s “unspeakable acts of corruption” (mdr42, 10 July 2002, review in Amazon 2009l).

¹⁷⁶ See reviews by R. McCarron, 6 May 2009; Mr David Peyton, 8 April 2009; J.Jameson, 11 March 2009; and Chooky McCool, 1 February 2009; reviews in Amazon 2009i.

Yes Minister's reception exhibited a desire for comic coherence, where the style of political comedy can be culturally classified in the same way as the political culture represented in the text, and that this gave access to how people culturally classify political culture. While some journalists criticised *The New Statesman* as lowbrow and inauthentic, deploying expectations of comic coherence based on highbrow politics, most internet comments expressed pleasure in the series' nasty comedy in the context of an anti-Conservative attitude. This is another example of comic coherence, albeit with different categorisations from *Yes Minister*. These aggressive, nasty terms are coherent with how internet reviewers culturally classified the Conservative party and/or political culture in general. Describing exaggerated nasty comedy as a key pleasure of *The New Statesman* is therefore partly an expression of emotional beliefs that the Conservative party is anti-social, arrogant and exaggeratedly inhumane. As clarified before, these are not so much political opinions but emotional responses and attitudes.

The pleasures of this negative attitude are most lucidly expressed in a personal email to the author. This followed a request posted on The British Comedy Guide, a British comedy internet forum, and was the only response. It is atypical from the other sources used in this research but despite this, it is coherent with the positive responses, if far more cogent.

I was in secondary school in the 80's, and politicised by unemployment and the miners' strike. *The New Statesman* was a joy – a bunch of grotesque B'Stards, it was the kind of satire I was yearning for. It poured bile on them and gave

expression to years of anger, resentment, and powerlessness. *Yes Minister* was also very good – not so much for the political satire, which was rather bland, but the superb dialogue.... (Rhubarb to the author, email message, 11 September 2009)

The New Statesman's value lies in its critical attitude to the Conservatives of the 1980s, contextualised by biographical narrative, personal emotions and political opinions about Thatcher's treatment of the organised labour movement in the UK. In contrast, *Yes Minister* is praised only on aesthetic terms and described as politically passive, with 'satire' defined as social activism. This provides a very clear ideological evaluation of *The New Statesman* that locates "joy" (ibid.) in the exaggerated representation of "a bunch of grotesque B'Stards" (ibid.) which is a product of "anger, resentment, and powerlessness" (ibid.) at Thatcher's policies. Such a clearly articulated ideological evaluation with specific political views is unique and perhaps a result of being a considered response to the author's invitation. As stated, none of the internet comments refer to specific Conservative policies or politicians from the 1980s or 1990s, though the pleasures of the series' nasty, vicious and cruel comedy are consistently located in B'Stard's identity as an MP with around half referring to him as a Conservative. In contrast to *Yes Minister*'s cynical view of the British government as an institution and a culture, *The New Statesman* focuses on Alan's individual character and the characters around him who are equally corrupt or are just stupid or mad, suggesting viewers enjoy comedy about an MP who is a corrupt and selfish individual. Instead of an authentic representation, viewers locate the pleasures of B'Stard's character in its negative representation of political culture: "the most cruel, obnoxious and all round disturbingly

corrupt um, "B'stard" on TV, yet still came away with the audience loving him" (Chew-7, 6 March 2000, review in IMDb 2009c).

The pleasures of *The New Statesman*'s representation of political culture have little to do with verisimilitude but appear to be derived from their coherence with viewers' personal feelings about politics, as clearly shown in Rhubarb's email and suggested by the lack of factual references. *The New Statesman*'s comedy is therefore not evaluated according to empirical authenticity but according to how negatively it represents the Conservative party or politicians in general, demonstrating anti-Conservative views alongside a deep cynicism towards MPs. The criterion is a *personal authenticity*: people enjoy the series because they agree with it, as has been suggested about political comedy more widely (see Keighron 1998, 140). Empirical authenticity appears irrelevant for viewers who do not ask 'Do I think this is true?' but 'Do I agree with this?', again suggesting these responses articulate a different set of cultural values to those seen in *Yes Minister*.

Personalised authenticity and populism

The dominance of negative feelings towards political culture in evaluations of the series can also be seen in the few interpretations of authenticity, seen in positive press reviews. Here journalists describe the series as exaggerated but reinterpret this as only an *apparent* exaggeration that is in fact empirically authentic.

Mind you, fiction often gets closer to truth than fact... I do not suppose that many would-be Tory MPs have actually arranged the death of their opponents...but Mayall...made it all seem entirely and uncomfortably natural.
(Stoddart 1987, n.p.¹⁷⁷)

I do hope there aren't too many viewers who think that this is far-fetched satire.
Most of it seemed uncomfortably close to reality... (Street-Porter 1987a, 21)

'Preposterous' many of you will have shrieked... I speak as one whose career has frequently required his attendance in the corridors of power when I tell you that this was subtle stuff which might have been taken down verbatim. (*Mail on Sunday* 1991, 49)

These interpret authenticity in a way not seen so far; in the *Sunday Times*, Stoddart asserts the series' exaggerated fiction makes a special kind of truth claim through Mayall's performance; Janet Street-Porter, writing in *Today*, encourages viewers to revise their own definitions of exaggeration in politics; while the *Mail on Sunday* review makes a claim for authenticity based on personal experience. All three acknowledge *The New Statesman* does not fit the expectations of verisimilitude but deploy rhetorical ways of asserting authenticity despite this.

This dogged emphasis upon authenticity despite exaggeration can be seen as an artefact of the journalistic context, for many press sources consistently provide evaluations of

¹⁷⁷ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

empirical authenticity, while it is less dominant in internet reviews. This is coherent with the standards of journalistic practice in regards to news, current affairs and politics that uphold accuracy and fact-checking. It may be this produces the dominance of the discourse of authenticity in the press reception of political sitcom. The interpretation of ‘exaggerated-but-authentic’ would be an attempt by journalists who enjoyed *The New Statesman* to express a positive response using the standards of value and quality that dominate their professional context, while avoiding the negative associations of exaggeration and inaccuracy. ‘Exaggerated-but-authentic’ is also a reading coherent with political caricature, a form commonly associated with newspapers for centuries, where its distortions are felt to reveal a truth *not* visible in realist representations, where “the distortions of caricature [are interpreted] as a means of presenting an otherwise hidden reality” (Streicher 1967, 438). Interpretations of ‘authenticity-in-exaggeration’ adopt such an attitude. They are admissions that *The New Statesman* is unrealistic but enjoyable because it is coherent with the writers’ feelings, matching the responses seen in many of the internet comments.

The dominance of personalised opinions and the ambivalence towards empirical authenticity in the positive reception to *The New Statesman* shows people make meaning in different ways than from *Yes Minister*. In the latter series, interpretation of authenticity used discourses of objectivity, empirical truth, and education: viewers expressed their pleasure in its direct relationship with reality. In contrast, viewers relate *The New Statesman’s* representations to the Conservative politicians or politicians in general claims of truth. They interpret Alan B’Sard as pleasurable, rather than

authentically, cruel and thus express a discourse of ‘personalised authenticity’; that is, *The New Statesman* is politically authentic with reference to their personal political feelings. Both this and empirical authenticity are hypothesised to be based upon viewers’ personal views but the empirical authenticity self-consciously makes claims about the facts of British political culture. Responses to *The New Statesman* make no attempt to defend the factual nature of their propositions about politicians, demonstrating a confidence in expressing their personal political opinions in this context.

The distinction between the two authenticities is that empirical authenticity relies upon culturally approved, highbrow ways of defining and categorizing comedy style and representations of politics. It uses terms of aesthetic quality and factual accuracy. In contrast, personalised authenticity embraces a range of aesthetic evaluative terms from subtle to outrageous, because it relies only upon textual pleasure and personal attitudes. This is a position that takes for granted the propositions of populism (see Ang 1985, 113-116) that personal responses are sufficient in themselves and “rejects any paternalistic distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (Ang 1985, 113) based on highbrow cultural standards. Viewers who enjoy *The New Statesman* have no cultural need to refer to empirical authenticity because they are confident in locating textual value in the pleasures of a negative view of politicians, rather than feeling the need for highbrow evaluative terms. This supports the earlier claim that the positive reception of *The New Statesman* expresses different cultural standards to that of *Yes Minister*, for the populist pleasures of the series are regularly located in its lowbrow style of comedy that contrasts

with highbrow discourse of quality, verifiability and education that typified the reception of *Yes Minister*.

IV

The Thick of It and Personas of Authenticity

The Thick of It is the most recent series addressed in this chapter and its reception exhibits discourses of authenticity, comic coherence and evaluations of clever comedy. This section will outline these similarities, demonstrating how *The Thick of It*'s reception includes interpretations of authenticity that repeatedly refer to the personas of public figures that relate to its contemporaneous historical period.

The first season of *The Thick of It* was broadcast in 2005 and this research focuses on these early episodes.¹⁷⁸ They depict the work of Hugh Abbot (Chris Langham), the newly appointed minister for Social Affairs and Citizenship, and his staff. Abbot is promoted after his predecessor is summarily dismissed, and the threat of a similar fate hangs over him as he develops policies and seeks positive media coverage with the often half-hearted support of his team; two special advisors, Ollie (Chris Addison) and Glen (James Smith), and the department's press officer, Terri (Joanna Scanlan). One of their principal aims is to avoid the attention of the party's Director of Communications, Malcolm Tucker (Peter Capaldi), who reports directly to the Prime Minister and whose most significant task is to minimise negative press coverage of the government. When Abbot and his team make mistakes, Malcolm arrives to rectify their errors and

¹⁷⁸ Primary research was completed in 2009, just before the later series were broadcast.

aggressively berate them with inventively splenetic invective. Two specials without Langham were broadcast in 2007,¹⁷⁹ and the later series add new characters, replacing Abbot with Nicola Murray (Rebecca Front) in 2009 and introducing characters from opposition parties. In 2012's fourth season Nicola is Leader of the Opposition with a coalition government in power, mirroring the result of the 2010 UK general election.

A culture of spin

The political culture that viewers interpret as authentically represented by *The Thick of It* is one defined by an unhealthy relationship between the government and the media, particularly describing this with references to ‘spin’, a term with pejorative connotations that refers to the practice of presenting “information in a particular way; a slant, especially a favourable one” (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., s.v. “spin”).

It presents a bitter picture of politics, driven by spin and ambition rather than anything more honourable. (*Guardian* 2007, 32)

The Thick Of It deals primarily with hapless ministers being manipulated by spin doctors (the current power brokers). (motor89, 3 November 2005, review in IMDb 2009d)

¹⁷⁹ Chris Langham, who played Abbot, was convicted for possessing obscene images of children and after appeal was sentenced to 6 months in prison.

The reception displays similarities to the previous two case studies: interpretations of authenticity dominate the press reception and a substantial number of internet reviews refer to the series as authentic, but with some only providing positive evaluations of the series. As also observed in relation to *Yes Minister*, not all interpretations of authenticity identify the political culture specifically, though they still propose the series' general authenticity with conviction: "It probably gives you a better insight into British Politics than any thing else on television" (Dangermouse Zilla, 5 October 2007, review in Amazon 2009q). Political authenticity is once again highly valued and pleasurable, demonstrating that viewers value authenticity across decades and contexts, and that it should be seen as one of the cultural categorisations of British television political comedy. This third occurrence of authenticity specifically relates *The Thick of It* to the political culture from the mid 1990s to the 2000s, interpreting these early episodes of *The Thick of It* as an empirically authentic representation of the Labour party under the leadership of Tony Blair, 1994 to 2007.¹⁸⁰

...*The Thick of It*, Armando Iannucci's brilliant and unsparing satire on the inner works of the no longer new Labour government. (Gilbert 2009)

...superb slick humour and a horribly plausible satire on Blair's style of government. (rwbingham, 16 January 2006, review in IMDb 2009d)

The culture of spin is described as a departure from appropriate or perhaps idealised definitions of politics; it is dishonourable, promotes political ideas on the basis of media

¹⁸⁰ Leader of the Opposition from 1994-7 and Prime Minister from 1997-2007. For references to Blair and New Labour see also, for example, Cid Highwind is dead, 17 April 2007, review in Amazon 2009q.

popularity and locates the centre of political gravity away from elected representatives and towards unelected spin doctors. This is coherent with ideas of an obstructive civil service in *Yes Minister* and shares a cynicism with that of *The New Statesman*; once again we see incompetent ministers and self interest producing a corrupted political culture.

The relationship between spin and the Labour party must be historicised within a narrative of internal reform that began with Neil Kinnock's attempts to win the political centre after the electoral failure of its leftist policies in the 1970s and 1980s (see Reid and Pelling 2005, 167). This narrative of change and modernization continued under the short leadership of John Smith, who died in 1994, and then Tony Blair. This was illustrated in 1994 when the party's constitution was amended, replacing the overtly Marxian Clause 4 that spoke of placing the means of production into state ownership with "a new clause stressing social justice as the fundamental value" (Marwick 2003, 355). This was an attempt to recast the party's political position, based on the understanding that the right-leaning British press was highly influential in shaping the electorate's attitudes and partly responsible for Labour's previous lack of popularity. In 2007, Blair reflected on this:

We paid inordinate attention in the early days of New Labour to courting, assuaging, and persuading the media. In our own defence, after 18 years of Opposition and the, at times, ferocious hostility of parts of the media, it was hard to see any alternative. But such an attitude ran the risk of fuelling the trends in

communications that I am about to question. (Tony Blair, speech on 12 June 2007, quoted in BBC 2007)

The benefits of such tactics seemed evident after the 1997 general election, when Tony Blair became Prime Minister with a majority of 179 MPs. The resounding nature of this victory has been questioned (Marwick 2003, 416) but it supported the thesis that electoral success was tied to effectively handling the media and preventing the stories of scandal and party in-fighting which had damaged the Conservatives throughout the 1990s. Somewhat ironically it also led to negative media narratives about government spin, and the term grew in significance within public discourse, resulting in criticisms that the Labour government produced empty policies that only sounded attractive in an attempt to placate the electorate. Some have even excused Labour ministers of lying (Oborne 2005). Viewers' responses deliver a similar critique.

It is fabulous but definitely not that funny. We must not imagine but realise we are governed by this kind of social climbers [sic].... (Jacques Couardeau, 3 June 2009, review in IMDb 2009d)

As in the other case studies, apart from a small number of press sources, interpretations of authenticity and cynical political attitudes include no references to specific events or policies. Once again, viewers express unevidenced beliefs in the political narrative of spin, some locating authenticity in its comedy style and many more doing so with reference to personas of authenticity. The former will be discussed below in relation to comic coherence but the latter term should be defined. A 'persona of authenticity' is the

naming of an individual who by dint of their identity or experience is used to propose textual authenticity. A few *Yes Minister* sources referred to the career of Antony Jay but it is more widespread in the reception of *The Thick of It* with most referring to Alasdair Campbell and Armando Iannucci. A few mention former BBC reporter and Labour communications advisor, Martin Sixsmith, and these are illustrative: “The influence of Martin Sixsmith brings undoubted realism to Ianucci's writing” (310396, 6 February 2009, review in Amazon 2009q).¹⁸¹ Specific authentic aspects are rarely identified and Sixsmith’s name alone is used here to defend the interpretation of *The Thick of It*’s narratives of spin as realistic.

...the script for the new episode has been checked for feasibility by former journalist and government press officer Martin Sixsmith. "Martin rang round a few people in touch with what's going on and said, yeah, it's all true," says Iannucci. (Holden 2007, 4)

As has been hypothesised, the lack of detail in interpretations of authenticity suggests they rely on viewers’ feelings and opinions about the political culture of the Labour party under Tony Blair and until at least 2009.

Comic coherence and comedy vérité

As argued above, comedic style plays an important part in evaluations and interpretations of television political sitcom and, while it does not dominate, discussion

¹⁸¹ See also stipesdoppelganger, 9 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009q, Burrell (2007) and James Rampton (2007).

of *The Thick of It*'s visual and performance styles exhibit this. A number of viewers comment on the series' use of handheld cameras and the resultant jerky footage and though a few are negative, claiming it made them feel sick,¹⁸² most interpret it as authentic. A number of comments include comparisons to *The Office* (2001-2003),¹⁸³ an award-winning and popular BBC sitcom made in a documentary style, demonstrating *The Thick of It* was recognised as an example of 'comedy verité' (Mills 2004b), a term used to describe stylistic changes in television sitcom that began during the 1990s. Mills describes comedy verité as a departure from the sitcom traditions of the proscenium arch-style three-camera setup used in both *Yes Minister* and *The New Statesman*, with the use of hand-held cameras exploring the space of sets more fully and allowing improvisation to be filmed more easily. The deliberate use of this style to evoke authenticity can be seen in an interview with the series' producer and deviser, Armando Iannucci.

'I wanted to do something set in the world of politics that was rough and messy, slightly improvised and realistic', said Iannucci at the show's launch in 2005. '... I wanted the viewer to feel like they were actually in a room watching politicians and civil servants do what they do.' (Gilbert 2009)

The Thick of It's use of comedy verité can be seen as another example of comic coherence; it is part of contemporary trends in situation comedy and is used as evidence

¹⁸² See Rwbington, 16 January 2006, review in IMDb 2009d; and M Thomson, 3 January 2009, review in Amazon 2009q.

¹⁸³ See liam thomas, 17 January 2006, review in in IMDb 2009d; Political Junkie, 23 May 2007, review in Amazon 2009q; and anglo-french, 21 June 2009; and Alex DaLarge, 15 May 2009, reviews in Amazon 2009r.

of the series' political authenticity by drawing on the close cultural association between politics, current affairs and documentary. This can also be seen in relation to performance style, using the hypothesis from the earlier sections that political situation comedy's authenticity relies on viewers categorising the comedy as coherent with the political culture represented. Chris Langham's performance as Hugh Abbot is naturalistic and awkward, sometimes stumbling through his sentences, at other times shouting ineffectively at his staff, and in one episode constantly murmuring about how tired he feels. It is evaluated as both a quality performance, described as "understated throughout" (christhesmoothbacon, 2 April 2007, review in Amazon 2009q), and an authentic representation of ministerial incompetence, describing him "the fumbling minister... the series is probably closer to the truth of the internal workings of Government than we would really like" (stipesdoppelganger, 9 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009q). The awkward naturalistic performance style is both typical of comedy vérité and perceived as an accurate representation of the incompetent politician, a recurring trope.

Langham's style of introverted awkwardness contrasts with the performance of Peter Capaldi, who plays Malcolm Tucker with vitriolic fury. Tucker is also evaluated as pleasurable and interpreted as an authentic representation of the Labour government's culture of spin. Abbot's lack of authority is partly produced through his relationship with Malcolm, who acknowledges the minister is technically his superior but rarely acts in such a way, ordering him around and shouting at him. Such aggressive comedy is enjoyed by viewers, reminiscent of Alan B'Stard, directly relating pleasure with terms

that would commonly be associated with moral reproach: “Tucker is a foul-mouthed maniacal bully, appalling but somehow compelling: the Hannibal Lecter of politics”, wrote Shrimpley in the *Financial Times* (2005, 15). Particular relish is taken in admiring and recounting his expletive-laden dialogue.¹⁸⁴

As Tucker says "This is a bucket of ****. If someone throws **** at us, we throw **** back at them. We start a **** fight. We throw so much **** back at them so they can't pick up ****, they can't throw ****, they can't do ****."

(stipesdoppelganger, 9 May 2009, review in Amazon 2009q)

A small number of sources do not agree that such comedy is pleasurable; Michael White of the *Guardian* explained, “I don't much like the comedy of humiliation. When it comes down to it, that's may be why I don't laugh at good lines. It's cruel” (2009).¹⁸⁵ One other journalist in the *Scotsman* describes Tucker's dialogue as artificial, linking this to inauthenticity and comic failure:

...all those convoluted, expletive-strewn tirades just sound overwritten and unconvincing to me...This contrived dialogue often jars uncomfortably with the generally naturalistic tone...I appreciate it, but I don't find it all that funny.

(Whitelaw 2007, 48)

¹⁸⁴ See also N. Ross, 4 April 2009; and Ian Shine, 1 February 2009; reviews in Amazon 2009q; and M. Turner, 16 May 2009; and Alex DaLarge, 15 May 2009, reviews in Amazon 2009r.

¹⁸⁵ Similar displeasures will be discussed in relation to *Brass Eye* in Chapter 5.

A small number of internet comments also objected to the swearing and the representation of political culture on the basis of taste and decency¹⁸⁶ and inauthenticity.

FREQUENT USE OF THE "F" WORD CANNOT BE TYPICAL OF THE
INHABITANTS OF THE PALACE OF WESTMINISTER AND IF IT IS, NO
WONDER PEOPLE ARE "TURNED OFF" POLITICS AND POLITICANS
(Ulsterman, 18 November 2007, review in Amazon 2009q, emphasis in original)

Each of these negative comments reiterates the importance of comic taste in interpretations of authenticity; as seen in both previous case studies, viewers must first enjoy the comedy before they can find the series coherent and authentic. These views are in a minority though and for many viewers Tucker is both funny and interpreted as an accurate representation of Labour's 'spin doctor', Alastair Campbell, Downing Street Press Secretary from 1997 and Director of Communications and Strategy from 2000 to 2003. One reported in *Scotland on Sunday*:

[Iannucci] said: "We've exaggerated for comic effect only to have Estelle Morris [former Labour Cabinet Minister] congratulate...for getting Alastair Campbell's 8:30am briefings spot-on." (Lyons 2006, 4)

Campbell is acknowledged as a key player in the culture of spin, and comparison between Tucker and Campbell is a dominant way that viewers write about authenticity,

¹⁸⁶ See Peter Foreman, letter to the editor, *Sunday Times*, 11 February 2007; and M. Thomson, 3 January 2009, review in Amazon 2009q.

deploying Campbell as a persona of authenticity and describing Capaldi/Tucker as the principal character.¹⁸⁷

...the star of this show is Peter Capaldi, who basically plays Alastair Campbell. His rants and highly inventive curses...constantly tickle... (Ian Shine, 1 February 2009, review in Amazon 2009q)

Tucker illustrates comic coherence most clearly; aggressive behaviour, particularly swearing, is evaluated as very funny and also interpreted as typical of Alastair Campbell's behaviour whilst working for the Labour government. The descriptions of Capaldi's style of comedic performance – terrifying, foul-mouthed and aggressive – are coherent with how Campbell is represented and he is linked to the political culture of spin, which itself is described with references to aggression, chaos and bodily waste: Iannucci himself claimed “everything runs on bullshit” (quoted in Wild 2005, 15).

Cabinet ministers are as uniform and discardable as disposable nappies: used for as long as they can contain the mess and discarded the moment they are soiled. (Shrimpsley 2005, 15)

Other images include those of exploitative consumption: Martin Sixsmith was “sucked in and spat out by its news management machine” (Burrell 2007, 10). A sitcom where a main character tells another to “Come the fuck in or fuck the fuck off” is seen by

¹⁸⁷ See also, for example, Mansfield (2005).

viewers as culturally coherent with the aggressive standards of the political culture of spin during the 1990s and 2000s.

Once again, *The Thick of It*'s discourse of authenticity lacks any references to specific examples of spin in British politics. The lack of factual references is all the more noteworthy because the early 2000s were marked by one particularly infamous accusation of spin; the Labour government was accused of distorting evidence about the military capabilities of Saddam Hussein to justify the invasion of Iraq. During 2003 the government published two documents arguing Saddam Hussein possessed or sought chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). On 29 May 2003, a BBC journalist, Andrew Gilligan, claimed that an unnamed source had told him some of the conclusions had been 'sexed up' or 'spun' by Alastair Campbell to make Iraq seem more threatening. Gilligan's claims became headlines, eventually taking a tragic turn when his source, revealed as weapons expert Dr David Kelly, committed suicide. Events were eventually addressed by three government inquiries, the Hutton Inquiry, the Butler Review, and the Chilcott Inquiry, and while the quality of the intelligence was questioned, Campbell himself was not found responsible. Campbell resigned as Director of Communications and Strategy in August 2003, with a statement from Tony Blair including the claim that, "The picture of Alastair Campbell painted by parts of the media has always been a caricature" (Tony Blair, statement, 29 August 2003, quoted in BBC 2003). The 'dodgy dossiers', as they were known, are mentioned in only one newspaper article (Appleyard 2007) and other references to Iraq

are predominantly seen in quotes from Iannucci¹⁸⁸ or Capaldi.¹⁸⁹ Neither Iraq nor the dossiers are referred to in internet reviews. As observed before, claims of authenticity emphasise general narratives of political culture, and are buttressed by viewers' feelings about politics, rather than specific events, supporting the hypothesis that comic coherence between comic style and political culture produced interpretations of authenticity, not empirical accuracy.

Auteur comedy: Quality, authenticity and Iannucci

As well as funny and authentic, *The Thick of It* is also described as a high quality comedy. Viewers compare it other popular, award-winning sitcoms or praise scripts and performances. A few describe it as much better than most other comedy, which is criticised as lowbrow, associating the series with the terms of high cultural value used repeatedly in reference to *Yes Minister* and sporadically in relation to *The New Statesman*.

As comedy looks to be increasingly dumbed down with sketch show trash...its [sic] good to know Armando Iannucci is still waving the flag for decent, well written, well acted, interesting comedy. (christhesmoothbacon, 2 April 2007, review in Amazon 2009q)

Whether implied through praise for its writing or directly stated, sources often deployed a discourse of authorship in relation to Iannucci, credited as *The Thick of It's*

¹⁸⁸ See Rampton (2007) and Wild (2005).

¹⁸⁹ See Mansfield (2005).

director, producer and creator, and repeatedly referred to him in relation to both authenticity and comedic quality. Some report Iannucci asserting authenticity himself; "Iannucci admitted plot lines he thought were highly improbable later turned out to be alarmingly close to the truth" (Lyons 2006, 4), and another quotes him saying:

...we decided a couple of years ago to feature a Minister who walks to the House of Commons because he thinks it will look good, while his civil servants follow in a car carrying all his red boxes. But I ditched the idea because I thought it was too silly. Then, lo and behold, soon after we discovered that David Cameron was cycling to work while a car came after him with his red boxes and a clean shirt.
(Armando Iannucci quoted in Rampton 2007, 1)

The pedigree of Iannucci's persona of political authenticity is also produced through interviews where journalists approvingly quote his political opinions.¹⁹⁰

"There's something deeply wrong about the abandonment of long-term principles for the sake of the next day's banner headline," he argues. "Blair wasn't the first to do this, but he's made it the norm...." (Armando Iannucci quoted in Smith 2006, 1)

Others emphasise comic quality or use more general terms, praising aspects and attributing them to Iannucci's authorship.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ See also Iannucci quoted in Holden (2007).

Iannucci is one of the best comedy minds we've ever been lucky enough to experience. And this is yet another shining example of his...The fly-on-the-wall style of this just adds to the sneaking suspicion we all have that this is probably closer to real life than any other political comedy.... (DangermouseZilla, 5 October 2007, review in Amazon 2009q)

Iannucci's persona as a political comedy auteur is thus associated with his political intelligence and comic skill, both of which are asserted with reference to his career since the early 1990s, which has included a number of political comedies; his first television work, *The Day Today* (BBC 1994), a news parody featuring performers he has worked with on numerous occasions, including Chris Morris and Rebecca Front; *The Saturday Night Armistice*¹⁹¹ (BBC 1995-1999), an often surreal review of the past week that included an election night special in 1997; and *Veep* (2012-ongoing) an HBO series with many similarities to *The Thick of It*.

These imply that *The Thick of It* is a perceptive political comedy because Iannucci has previously worked in perceptive political comedy. The total identification of Iannucci as author also allows the series to be firmly categorised as 'political comedy', emphasizing his career and effacing his less than total authorship. Iannucci is credited as director and 'Devised by...' but much of the writing is credited to a group of writers, including Sam Bain and Jesse Armstrong, writers of *Peep Show* (Channel 4 2003-ongoing), a sitcom with no generic relationship with political comedy. Iannucci's name therefore serves a

¹⁹¹ See also Cid Highwind is dead, 17 April 2007, review in Amazon 2009q.

¹⁹² Renamed *The Friday Night Armistice* from 1996 when the second season was rescheduled.

rhetorical author function, defining the way in which *The Thick of It* is categorised and imbuing the series with the authenticity that his authorship has accrued throughout a television career spanning some twenty years. Iannucci's persona, in the context of his career in television political comedy and comic skill, adds authorship and connotations of originality, unique insight and genius to the dominant reception discourses, buttressing interpretations of authenticity and insight, and adding to evaluations of quality.

Furthermore, in contrast to the personas of Sixsmith and Campbell, Iannucci's persona has no direct relationship to political culture itself but only to political comedy culture. People interpret and evaluate political sitcom based on, in part, other television political comedy texts and the wider genre, rather than political culture itself, suggesting the value of Iannucci's authorship is related to his status as part of the media and its power (Couldry 2000), with his media career acting as evidence of his political insight. Instead of relying on political sitcom's referent (real life political culture) some viewers refer to other examples of political comedy or use Iannucci's persona, accessible only through his creative output and appearances or interviews in the media, to propose *The Thick of It*'s authenticity. This demonstrates that *some* viewers are sufficiently knowledgeable and emotionally invested in the genre of political comedy so that their interpretations of authenticity are dominated by intra-generic references and discourses whereby television political comedy texts are used as evidence to assert the genre's authentic relationship to actual political culture.

It can therefore be seen that the reception of *The Thick of It* exhibits many of the discourses already identified in the other case studies, including praise for authenticity and comic quality. It demonstrates the cynical views towards the political culture of spin held by internet reviewers and journalists, and the continued dominance of unevidenced non-rational discourses in expressing political feelings and attitudes. It also revealed a third interpretative strategy of authenticity, with many viewers referring to personas of authenticity; the insider persona of Martin Sixsmith; the persona of inspiration, Alastair Campbell; and the authorial persona of Armando Iannucci, demonstrating the dominance of media figures and the recruitment of media power to the discourse of authenticity.

V

Conclusions

The cultural categorisation of television political situation comedy

The cultural categorisations of a genre can be identified by their recurring appearance; the continuities in the reception of generic texts *are* the categorisations that comprise the genre. This chapter has argued that television political sitcom is culturally categorised as offering politically authentic representations and high quality comedy. Sources from three different periods, the early 1980s, the late 1980s, and from 1999 to 2009, and from different contexts, newspaper articles, internet reviews, and audience research reports, repeatedly define, evaluate and interpret the three texts in expectation that they provide *authentic representations of contemporaneous British political culture*. The importance of authenticity to the genre of political sitcom is demonstrated by the repeated association of authenticity with pleasure and value, and inauthenticity with textual

failure. The only marked exception to this was in internet responses to *The New Statesman*, where exaggeration was praised without reference to authenticity, though this was shown to be a product of viewers categorizing the series as a Rik Mayall vehicle, rather than as political comedy, resulting in a different set of expectations and evaluative criteria. In general, the interpretation of authenticity, that political sitcom represents and reveals truths about British political culture, is a huge part of political sitcom's pleasures and value for viewers, and acts as what should be described as an interpretative definition; a textual interpretation that is an important part of people's expectations of the genre and which generic success relies upon.

Another more obvious part of the genre of political sitcom is that of comic pleasure; viewers expect that texts will provide material that provokes everything from mild amusement to hilarity, and lack of comedy resulted in displeasure. While the discourse of authenticity is prevalent but not totally pervasive, evaluations of comedy are evident in nearly every source, with comic success linked to textual value, especially in those that do not invoke authenticity. Within this overall discourse of comic pleasure, comedy is defined and evaluated in different ways, producing a hierarchy of comic style especially evident in the newspaper sources. Political sitcom's comedy is often praised using aesthetic terms associated with high culture and high value, such as intelligence, sophistication, subtlety and authorship. Similarly, some evaluations of high value, generally in relation to *Yes Minister*, were associated with low potency descriptions of comic pleasure, again remaining within high cultural discourses of aesthetic pleasure that emphasise restraint and intellectual engagement over emotion. Political comedy is

regularly written about using discourses of value associated with ‘legitimate’ highbrow culture, a practice partly related to the similarly elevated position of British politics in the hierarchy of British national society and partly to the dominant definitions of factual television, such as seriousness and the provision of information, and public service broadcasting, to educate, inform and entertain. Terms associated with highbrow culture are therefore part of the cultural categorisation of political sitcom, specifically operating as evaluative definitions (Mittell 2004, 106): evaluations that form a key part of people’s expectations of the genre. Further, critics use lowbrow terms to describe political sitcom’s textual failure, delegitimizing these styles of comedy in the context of representing politics. Newspaper reviews expressed negative views about political sitcom by referring to its comedy using terms associated with low cultural value, such as exaggeration, silliness, immaturity and physical humour. This distaste for low value humour is not prevalent in internet sources, and while internet reviewers do value the high cultural notions, they also unproblematically write about pleasure with high potency, referring to hilarity and loud laughter.

This demonstrated differences between the two main reception contexts; press and internet. Journalistic reviews balance negative and positive aspects of the text, and they consistently evaluate aesthetic quality and authenticity, valuing the standards of factual television, public service and highbrow values. In contrast, internet reviewers write about their emotional responses, and in all three case studies, the overwhelming majority of internet reviews were positive, whilst newspaper reviews as a whole were more equivocal. Newspaper reviewers are positioned as cultural arbiters, self-consciously

producing and reproducing hierarchies of taste, and internet reviews appear to be prompted to write based on a strong emotional response and give more attention to expressing personal pleasure. Despite these differences, the overall approach to political sitcom's comedy is still dominated by evaluations and expectations of high quality, serving to mark the genre off from 'mere' entertainment and categorise it as culturally proximate to quality public service television and highbrow culture. This can especially be seen in the journalistic rejection of low value, jokey, exaggerated comedy which too easily evokes discourses of entertainment and is considered unsuitable for political comedy.

The role of cultural categorisations that refer beyond the pleasure of entertainment can be seen in how some viewers describe political comedy as both 'funny' and 'serious', describing the pleasure of comedy, which produces laughter, and the pleasure of authenticity, which produces an awareness of contemporaneous political culture. It is no coincidence that nearly all those who complain about an exaggerated style of comedy do so in relation to authenticity, most obviously seen in the press reception to *The New Statesman*. If comedy comes too close to the cultural categorisations of low entertainment it is interpreted as losing the ability to represent politics; the wrong kind of comedy disrupts seriousness and cultural value. This relationship is one part of the theory of comic coherence. There is therefore a tension in the reception of political sitcom between the pleasures of authenticity and the pleasures of comedy; both are necessary but if the style of comedy is considered inappropriate due to its low cultural status, then the text is interpreted as inauthentic, resulting in generic failure. Thus it is

clear that the two key cultural categorisations of political sitcom are an *authentic representation of contemporaneous political culture in a style of comedy associated with high cultural value*. Thus while it is described as both funny and serious, the notion of seriousness tends to play a far more important role in claims about political sitcom's value.

Interpreting television political sitcom: practices and hypotheses

The prevalence of the discourse of authenticity was hypothesised to mean that reception is a useful source of information about viewers' attitudes to politics. However, the research demonstrated that while some viewers referred to political parties and key political figures, there was an almost total lack of references to specific political events or political policies, suggesting viewers were writing about the political *feelings* initiated by the series. The many sources that invoke the discourse of authenticity are thus expressions of emotive attitudes and opinions about political culture from different historical moments. This suggests that audience research into political beliefs should not limit itself to factual programming, such as in Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980), but can use the reception of comedy and light entertainment too, as was been demonstrated by the re-evaluation of the BBC's research into racism and *Till Death Do Us Part* (BBC 1966-1975) (Husband 1988). It is likely that in whatever context viewers use a discourse of political authenticity they are expressing their attitudes to political culture, though this demands one caveat. Using the discourse of authenticity as bellwether for political beliefs is problematic because interpretations of authenticity were intertwined with comic taste. Thus, interpretations of inauthenticity do not

necessarily mean viewers are unsympathetic to a text's attitude to political culture but rather that their comic tastes rendered the comedy unfunny or inappropriate, and the representation comically incoherent and thus inauthentic.

The chapter has also demonstrated the variety of ways in which viewers made sense of political sitcoms as authentic, and the similarities between them. Claims of empirical authenticity, personalised authenticity and personas of authenticity are all based upon definitions and categorisations from popular discourse, often newspapers and television, and not verifiable evidence about actuality. Empirical authenticity uses comic coherence between the cultural categorisations of television comedy style and of British political culture; personalised authenticity looks for coherence between comedy and viewers' political feelings; while personas of authenticity relies upon media figures acquiring sufficient media power to confer authenticity. This reiterates the reliance on limited and often fictional texts, and viewers' own feelings and attitudes. The interpretation of texts is therefore often a function of an individual's existing attitudes and beliefs. If the discourse of authenticity is one way for viewers to express already-held opinions, they do so by invoking texts, individuals and discourses related to the mass media and their own beliefs.

Political sitcom and British cultural history: conclusions and hypotheses

Across each of the distinct moments there is a generalised cynicism towards political culture, typified as impotent, corrupt, populated by incompetents or egoists, and serving the needs of everyone but the electorate themselves. Many sources from the early 1980s

and from 1999 to 2009 expressed the belief that the British civil service and bureaucracy led to the impotence of elected officials; a smaller collection of sources from the late 1980s and from 1999 to 2009 believed that the Conservative party of the 1980s was motivated by greed and corruption; and many sources between 2004 and 2009 expressed the belief that the Labour party under Tony Blair and Gordon Brown slavishly conformed to the practices of the mass media. This cynicism fits with other evidence from the post-Second World War period about the British public's attitude towards politicians. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1958), includes a passage on the generalised cynicism of working class culture towards politicians:

They may appear to have opinions on general matters – on religions, on politics, and so on – but these views prove to be a bundle of largely unexamined and orally-transmitted tags, enshrining generalisations, prejudices and half-truths...

'They're all talk – they've never done a day's work in their lives.'

'Of course, all politics are crooked.' [...]

'There's now't to choose between 'em' (of political parties).

(R. Hoggart 1958, 103)

Marwick (2003, 353) discusses a 1993 opinion poll that records 59 per cent of people describe politicians as the least trustworthy profession and that 59 per cent of people did not trust parliament to "tackle the country's problems" (ICM *Observer* 1993 cited in

ibid.).¹⁹³ The cynicism in the case studies has been consistently described as emotional, non-rational responses within the context of comic text, and Richard Hoggart describes the attitudes he cites as “not intellectually considered. They have a hypnotic and final effect, the sound of revealed truth” (1958, 103). However, the sources discussed here have demonstrated that viewers often go beyond expressions of cynicism to politics in general and express a specific set of assumptions and anxieties.

The close relationship between these sitcom representations and the available political narratives from the period of production supports the claim that sitcom narratives tend to reflect the culture of its production (see Marc 1989 and Hamamoto 1989). However, the findings above demonstrate it is reception research that provides evidence about cultural beliefs, not textual analysis, and that these beliefs are certainly not limited to the production period of the series; *Yes Minister*’s reception shows that beliefs about bureaucracy and the civil service were still in circulation twenty nine years after broadcast. Similarly, the relationship between comedy style and political culture suggested by comic coherence means viewers’ responses to the specific form of comedy can show implicit agreement about the authenticity of the political culture represented. This leads to the conclusion that some viewers felt that the nasty, aggressive, innuendo-filled style of *The New Statesman* really was indicative of the Conservative party of the 1980s, and that many people associated terms such as ‘chaotic’ and ‘aggressive’ with Labour’s culture of spin during the 1990s and 2000s. Despite these competing ways of classifying political culture, *Yes Minister*’s tone of reserve, etiquette and verbal precision

¹⁹³ Although 79 percent *disagreed* with the statement that voting was a waste of time, demonstrating that people still had some faith in the concept of democracy, even if this did not include politicians themselves.

is persistently interpreted as coherent with political culture. This shows popular attitudes to politics at one moment are always multiple, with different individuals holding different attitudes that date from different periods. Beyond this, the longevity of *Yes Minister*'s authenticity shows that, despite categorisations of political culture in the 2000s as nasty, domineering and aggressive, some still believe it is dominated by standards inherited from Britain's traditional hierarchies, suggesting political cynicism can also be combined with a vague kind of political nostalgia.

The pleasures of political situation comedy

Brett Mills' makes the point that while situation comedy is predicated on the creation of laughter and comic pleasure, the pleasures of sitcom cannot be limited to these (2005, 136). This chapter has demonstrated the variability of comic taste but that there are consistent pleasures throughout the entire reception over the three historical moments; the pleasures of cynicism and the pleasures of authenticity. Viewers who write about authenticity in detail express their pleasure in seeing the hidden back regions of politics, and the significance of this access is also related to the cultural categorisation of the representations; politics is considered socially important and therefore authentic insight is similarly significant. While comedy is often categorised in terms of absurdity and silliness, political comedy is valued for its engagement with the real and the notion of realism can be an important part of how some people enjoy some situation comedy.

Cynicism has also been identified as a common part of fictional television narratives about politics (van Zoonen and Wring 2012, 275) and this chapter demonstrates that

such attitudes are ideological positions that are written about with pleasure by viewers. The negative representation of politicians is written about with enthusiasm and energy and reviews enumerate the incompetence of Hacker and Abbott or expound upon the moral failings of Sir Humphrey, B'stard and Tucker with relish. Viewers enjoy the cynicism of the series *and enjoy expressing this cynicism*, most clearly in online comments. This extends the hypothesis above; the reception of political sitcom gives access to viewers' cynical feelings about politics and shows they *enjoy* these political feelings. Political sitcom is a cultural context where viewers actually gain pleasure from experiencing cynical feelings about politics.

In her research into the reception of *Dallas*, Ang describes pleasure as “a spontaneous feeling of well-being” but points out that people “rarely wonder why something is pleasurable to them” (1985, 86). She goes on to quote Terry Eagleton arguing that “the cognitive structure of an ideological discourse is subordinated to its emotive structure” (1979, 64) and this invites a discussion of the emotive structure of viewers’ political cynicism. The chapter began by discussing the dominance of incongruity theory within the study of comedy and it will conclude by raising another theory – that of superiority, most commonly associated with Thomas Hobbes (1889 and see Morreall 2009). Superiority theory proposes that comic pleasure is the result of perceiving some diminution of status in another and the relative status gain for one’s self. Applying superiority theory to the ideological pleasures of political cynicism suggests that viewers enjoy cynical political comedy because diminishing politicians brings an increase in viewers’ self-perceived status. This can be extended to hypothesise that viewers also

believe there is an unequal relationship between politicians and citizen that needs rebalancing. Similar psychological claims have been applied to jokes about Communist officials in the Soviet bloc (C. Davies 1988) and minority groups (Billig 2009) but these have emphasised the joke text. In this chapter it has been conclusively demonstrated that the viewers of political sitcom enjoy expressing cynicism in relation to representations of political culture. The use of superiority theory and its evocation of power and status demands further research but the pleasures of cynicism expressed in the reception of political sitcom as authentic suggest that there is a perceived power gap between politicians and television viewers and that laughing at their elected representatives is one way in which some people respond to this inequality.

Television political situation comedy may not always meet with approval from viewers but this chapter has demonstrated that they consistently expect it to provide authentic representations of British political culture via an appropriate style of comedy that reflects their definition of that specific culture and their general cynicism towards British politics. While the generation of laughter is vital, it clear that many viewers also insist that what they are laughing at must reflect what they believe – or rather feel – to be true.

Chapter Four

Spitting Image and definitions of political comedy: satire or carnivalesque

I

Puppets, public figures and the press

Spitting Image (ITV 1984-1996) combined puppetry, caricature, the comic sketch format, outrageous humour and topical references to produce the longest-running series addressed in this thesis. Each edition featured extravagantly caricatured puppets representing politicians, world figures and celebrities with voices by a team of vocal impressionists and scripts from a team of comedy writers which placed the puppets in a variety of spoofs, songs and parodies. The puppets themselves were produced by a group of artists and technicians working under Roger Fluck and Peter Law, two artists who had been involved in the ‘satire boom’ of the early 1960s; Roger Law drew cartoons on the walls of The Establishment comedy club and Fluck cartooned for *Private Eye*. They began collaborating in the early 1970s (Chester 1986a, 8), combining sculpture and modelling with the traditions of political cartooning (Brillenburg 2011), and their work was used in a variety of contexts; JK Galbraith’s *Money* (1975) has a Fluck and Law model on the cover, they provided full page illustrations for an edition of *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens 1979), and contributed images to newspapers including the *Economist*, *Marxism Today* and *Der Spiegel* (for more see University of Kent 2011).

The first episode of *Spitting Image* was broadcast on the evening of Sunday 26 February 1984 on ITV and opened with a close-up on the front page of the *News of the World* newspaper. The headline announced the publication of topless photographs of Prince Andrew's¹⁹⁴ then-girlfriend, Katie Rabbet and was clutched by large, sausage-like fingers (see fig. 11 on p.260). The sound of ribald chuckling is interrupted by a bugle blast and the paper drops to reveal that the enthusiastic readership are contemporaneous members of the Cabinet in puppet form: a grey-faced Norman Tebbit in a leather jacket, a floppy-haired, preening Michael Heseltine and Norman Fowler with a grin like the Cheshire Cat. A voice announces the entrance of 'Her Majesty The Queen' and the image cuts to... a puppet of Margaret Thatcher wearing a crown. The others bow as Thatcher intones, 'Good evening, boys!' There is canned laughter and a cut to the opening titles, featuring lively music and news footage of international figures with strings and a control bar superimposed onto the picture as if they were puppets. The titles end and the next sketch begins; puppets of John McEnroe and Jackie Collins are in bed together and the punchline is a sexual innuendo about whether 'it' was 'in'. This is followed by a three minute sketch with Ronald Reagan, entitled 'The President's Brain is Missing', where Reagan's walnut-sized brain is misplaced by his assistant. These opening minutes give a quick introduction into the main concerns of the series; public figures and current affairs; jokes about political leaders, most famously Thatcher and Reagan, and their subordinates, the British Royal Family, celebrities and popular culture; and the use of parody, sexual innuendo and outlandish conceits.

¹⁹⁴ From 1986, the Duke of York.



Figure 1. Images from the first episode of *Spitting Image*, Sunday 26 February 1984. Clockwise from top left: Thatcher and the Cabinet; Tony Benn in the opening titles; President Reagan; Joan Collins and John McEnroe in bed..

Spitting Image was a considerable success as its long duration suggests, though it had a faltering start. The 7.9 million people who watched the first episode on 26 February 1984 (BARB 1984a) dropped to 6.3 million on 18 March (BARB 1984b) and the series finished on 15 April with 6.7 million viewers (BARB 1984c). The second season saw similar figures but the beginning of the fourth season in January 1986 attracted 12.6 million viewers (BARB 1986a) and the last edition of the fifth season in May 1986 garnered 11.2 million viewers (BARB 1986b). This first series was reportedly troubled; two of the producers, Tony Hendra and Jon Blair, left before the second series began and the show had apparently also been at risk of cancellation but was saved by its young audience: “They were half of a mind to kill it when Central’s Director of Television

came in flourishing audience figures... Central's market research had shown that the 12 to 34 age group [a key target group for advertisers] is consistently the most appreciative of *Spitting Image*" (Chester 1986c, 11). Public enthusiasm for the series is also testified by the merchandising and licensed products, including music records, magazines, books, limited edition mugs, a computer game and dog toys of Thatcher and Reagan. Gradually, as is perhaps inevitable, *Spitting Image*'s popularity waned and it "was not essential viewing [by] the 1990s" (Lewishohn 2003, 722) leading to its cancellation in 1996.

This chapter will argue that newspapers' definitions, interpretations and evaluations of *Spitting Image* can be divided into two general trends, satire and carnivalesque, and that these are exhibited in different types of newspaper and different forms of newspaper article. The first trend dominates opinion columns from the quality press and defines 'satire' with highbrow cultural standards, political commitment and socio-political effects, displaying clear continuities with the previous case studies. The second trend, discussed in relation to Mikhail Bakhtin (1984), is evident in some television reviews and most tabloid coverage, and significantly differs from the standards of satire. These sources express the carnivalesque in two ways: they praise or emphasise textual elements of *Spitting Image* coherent with Bakhtin's definition of the 'grotesque', a visual aspect of the carnivalesque; and/or they express *ambivalence*, a defining aspect of the carnivalesque's ideological attitude. Both satire and the carnivalesque are identifiable in the few scholarly references to *Spitting Image*; Brillenburg (2011), Crisell (1991; 1997) and Wagg (1992; 2002) all use the former term in writing about the series. Relating to the carnivalesque, Ellis' reference to "the grotesqueries of on-screen

celebrity in the political satire *Spitting Image*" (2005, 46) is more connotative but Donoghue (1988) and Hoy (1992) discuss whether the series expresses Bakhtin's theories. Other scholars have also referred to Bakhtin's analysis in reference to film and television more generally (see Fiske 1987; Stam 1989), demonstrating wider use of the theories within the field. The carnivalesque, the grotesque and their ambivalence will thus be highlighted and contrasted to the sources that refer to satire, with particular emphasis on the cultural identity of newspapers, particularly the qualities and the tabloids, demonstrating that defining political comedy is a discursive act that attempts to patrol the boundaries of 'suitable' comedy style.

The reception sources of *Spitting Image*

Despite the long-lasting success of the show, few reception sources such as letters or internet reviews originate from individual viewers. The forty reviews on Amazon.co.uk and imdb.com are very short, and the brief references in conversations on comedy discussion forums were generally enthusiastic but referred to the series, often defined as 'satire', without significant discussion: Tallulah du Pres' entire review reads, "Fantastic. The invective satire and demonic caricatures are second to none. This is a must see DVD" (Amazon 2010). Others contain little more than descriptions of favourite sketches of puppets, as Alex-372 relates:

Thatcher sits in a restaurant with the rest of her cabinet (Howe, Tebbit, etc.). The waiter comes over and asks: "Would you like to order meat, ma'am?" Thatcher:

"Yes. Rare." Waiter: "Vegetables?" Thatcher, making a broad arm movement to the boys: "Oh, they'll have the same". (IMDB 2010)

The search for contemporaneous viewer responses was unsuccessful, with exploratory work at the IBA/ITC paper archive at Bournemouth University yielding only one letter. The UK's communications regulatory body, Ofcom, hold records of adjudications made about *Spitting Image* but complaints letters are not preserved (Adam Burton, Content & Standards Officer, Ofcom, personal communication). The British Film Institute Reuben Library's collection of 303 newspaper cuttings was therefore the only source used, with two thirds of these dating from 1984 to 1988. This collection cannot be described as exhaustive but it provides excellent access to the press reception of the earlier part of the series, which this chapter will focus on.

The emphasis on the press demands closer attention to how different newspapers have been conceptualised and Franklin (2008) usefully categorises British newspapers and the different kinds of journalism that appear within them. Individual articles were classified according to the character of the publication (popular,¹⁹⁵ mid-market¹⁹⁶ or quality¹⁹⁷), its political orientation, left or right (Franklin 2008, 6), and then identified from among the different genres of newspaper writing: news article, comment piece, television review or feature (see Franklin 2008). Dominant trends, topics and concerns were then brought

¹⁹⁵ *Daily Mirror, Daily Star, News of the World, Sun, Sunday Mirror*.

¹⁹⁶ *Daily Express, Daily Mail, Evening Standard, Mail on Sunday, People, Sunday Express, Sunday People*.

¹⁹⁷ *Daily Telegraph, Guardian, Observer, Scotsman, Sunday Telegraph, Sunday Times, Times*.

together and added to a database.¹⁹⁸ Press sources differ from personal letters or reviews because they are produced in the habitus of journalism (Bourdieu 1998) and will therefore be coherent with the editorial aims of the newspaper and intended audience. As established, newspapers contain different genres and styles of writing “which combine to ensure that today’s newspapers are anything but papers solely about news” (Harrison 2008, 39), including coverage of television (Ellis 2008). Newspapers are useful in a reception study because they have “a significant role in influencing which of television’s meanings may be activated in one reading” (Fiske 1987, 119) and can become involved in a “struggle over accepted views of the cultural role, nature and importance of television” (136). As Staiger (1992) also argues in relation to cinema, the scope of the mass media makes the press “particularly important in the structuring of public discourse about television” (Rixon 2006, 139) and the press reception of *Spitting Image* will explore how journalism is involved in the structuring and definition of the term ‘satire’ as part of the genre of political comedy.

¹⁹⁸ These topics were: Positive, Negative, Mixed Review, Puppets as ugly, Bad taste, Funny, Topical, Puppets too ugly, Puppets better than scripts, Puppet making, Law/Fluck, Accuracy of puppets, Representation of royals, Representation of politicians, Representation of celebrities, Vocal impersonations, Is it satire?, It's cruel, Cites a controversy, What controversy?, Limitations of puppets, Political effect?, What effect?, Authors political opinions.

II

Press definitions of *Spitting Image* – satire or not satire?

What the British Government is up to is not funny, which is exactly why we should be in a golden age of political satire. And we're not. (Herbert 1986, 11)

The most detailed journalistic engagements with *Spitting Image* appear in the twenty seven articles identified as comment pieces or opinion editorial columns in the quality or midmarket press. They provide analysis and offer explanation based upon the “discursive authority” (McNair 2008, 113) of the author who is often a respected journalist, academic, expert or former politician. Most newspaper content is written in the third person but comment pieces use the first person and have the generic permission to articulate “individually subjective opinions” (115). If news is the “production of facts” (113), then comment or opinion columns engage in the “construction of meanings” (113). The meanings constructed in comment articles about *Spitting Image* are dominated by negative evaluations that conclude the series should *not* be defined as satire. The usefulness of the comment pieces is that they propose these arguments in more detail than the shorter reviews, assuming a position of cultural authority from which they adjudicate on *Spitting Image*’s generic identity: Stanley Eveling wrote in the *Scotsman* that “It still remains questionable whether it is right and proper to regard *Spitting Image* as satire” (1990, 20). This section will look at the cultural criteria used to define *Spitting Image* as a satirical failure and infer the definitions of satire itself with attention to how the series is evaluated as a lowbrow text.

Satire and politics

The case against *Spitting Image* as satire is made with two general propositions: journalists write that satire must possess political engagement and political influence, explicitly describing contemporary politics and current affairs as the only subjects appropriate for satire; and they define *Spitting Image* as a lowbrow text unsuitable for satire's highbrow standards. In the former, the *Guardian's* Edward Pearce asserts satire demands conviction and passion, locating *Spitting Image*'s failing in its lack of political commitment: "Wit and satire are things that to matter have to be meant...you have to feel and mind something to write satirically" (1995, 20). He identifies *Spitting Image*'s key failure: "satire done as entertainment...is a necessarily plastic thing" (*ibid.*). Others focus on authorial intention; Eveling writes that satire needs "a strong political bias of your own, which the spitting imagers don't seem to have" (1990, 20).

These journalists propose a divide between satire-as-politically-engaged-comedy and other types of non-satirical comedy. Alan Coren argued in the *Mail on Sunday* that *Spitting Image* was only "political farce" (1987, 37) and Eveling continues that it was in fact just "parody" (1990, 20). These terms, unlike satire, are not defined or explored but used to refer to a less valuable form of political comedy, producing a hierarchy that places satire at the top. *Spitting Image* is simultaneously defined as 'mere entertainment' and evaluated as 'low quality'.

Satire is also defined as enacting some kind of influence over its audience and political culture. Hugh Herbert in the *Guardian* (1986) and Boyd Tonkin in *New Society* (1985),

both writing for left-wing publications, negatively evaluate the series alongside Alternative Comedy, the wave of left-leaning comedy that emerged in the late 1970s. They are scathing; Alternative Comedy is “rudeness dressed up as relevance” (Herbert 1986, 11) and *Spitting Image* “turns parody into a substitute for politics” (Tonkin 1985, 381). Again, ‘parody’ is used uncritically to refer to a form of political comedy below satire that does not produce change. Herbert’s criticism, writing in an earlier review of the first series, that “Maggie sails on regardless” (Herbert 1984, 9) highlights this association between social affectivity, value and personal political attitudes, as discussed in relation to *The New Statesman*. The Conservative Party’s electoral success in 1979 and 1983 had taken place amidst significant social conflict and the Labour Party’s 1983 election result was particularly poor. Herbert and Tonkin locate affective power in satire, and their frustration at *Spitting Image*’s satirical failure is tied to their negative feelings about Thatcher’s political success. *Spitting Image* is not “effective political comedy” (*ibid.*) because it does not provide a clear criticism of the right-wing government that those on the left were opposed to; influential satire is defined as more important than entertainment during a period of prolonged political conflict.

Stanley Eveling suggests *Spitting Image* may have some social effects but that this effect is incompatible with satire; it “undermines our beliefs in people, rather than their views” (1990, 20), preferring an engagement with politics that avoids personality and focuses on policy. He also invokes a discourse of authenticity when he criticises a sketch where Prime Minister John Major is depicted as having no knowledge of economics: “The idea that Major doesn’t know his hard...ecu...is palpably false... All they are after

is to make it seem that Major is a bit of an ass” (*ibid.*). As seen in relation to political sitcom, he expresses an expectation that political comedy should represent politics accurately, displaying generic characteristics related to factual programming. Similar associations can be made with the clear expectations of pertinence, where *Spitting Image*’s jokes are criticised for being obvious or out-of-date. Hugh Herbert complained, “I counted all but three lines that could not have been penned and puppeted any time in the past couple of weeks” (1984, 9). Another definition of ‘satire’ is therefore that it shares similarities with news and current affairs, expressing accuracy and pertinence. Concerns about pertinence are also articulated in relation to subject matter with columnists criticising some of the figures caricatured as puppets. Although praising the puppets of the Royal Family, Jane Gordon opined in *Today* that “The funniest thing about this new series of *Spitting Image* is that its makers still call it ‘satire’” (1989, 25), referring to the focus on celebrities. A former *Spitting Image* scriptwriter bemoaned in the *Independent* that the show became “preoccupied with idiot TV presenters” (D. Tyler 1995, 14). Both Gordon and Tyler evaluate figures from entertainment as alien to satire and identify the Royal Family and politicians as the subject of real satire. Satire is therefore defined through its representation of individuals perceived to have institutional power through their role in political decision-making or the traditions of monarchy. This is coherent with the expectations seen in respect of political sitcom, where viewers repeatedly attributed value to accurate representations of political culture, and the way that *TW3*’s complaints focused on national institutions. Criticising the representation of public figures associated with entertainment subordinates entertainment to politics,

defining satire by its focus on political activity (the work and decisions of professional politicians) and interpreting entertainment as without satirical value.

Scholarly definitions of satire

Political commitment and political or social effects run through scholarly definitions of satire. It demands “a high degree of commitment to and involvement with the painful problems of the world” (Hodgart 1969, 11) and is “designed to attack vice and folly” (Griffin 1994, 1) because the satirist “has a view of how people and society should behave morally” (Ogborn and Buckroyd 2004, 11). It should be noted these do not specifically refer to politics or include caveats about which subjects are inappropriate for satire. They focus on the effect of satire or its intention, rather than excluding content related to entertainment. Indeed, Hodgart emphasises, “Satire at all levels must entertain as well as try to influence conduct” (1969, 20).

Such definitions also propose satire cannot be identified by formal aspects but by the attitude of the text and the reader. “It is in fact very difficult to distinguish [satire] clearly from other literary forms...because it may assume a bewildering variety of sub-forms.” (1969, 12) If satire is “an attitude to life” (Hodgart 1969, 13) rather than a formal definition, it follows that identifying satire necessarily relies upon the culturally contingent definitions of folly, the problems of the world and morality that the genre engages with. Newspaper columnists defined satire as an engagement with current affairs and political culture, and interpreted *Spitting Image*’s lack of detailed textual references to political events and its close associations with entertainment as preventing

it from tackling problems such as Thatcher's government. They thus refused it the definition of satire. This also produces a definition of 'entertainment' as a depoliticised discourse, subordinated and disassociated from the cultural significance accorded to satire. This denigration of entertainment can also be seen in the second set of propositions used to define *Spitting Image* as 'not satire' that evaluates the series as of low cultural value.

***Spitting Image* and hierarchies of cultural value**

...it is moral authority which the creators of *Spitting Image*, with their witless one-liners, their giggling inanity and their indiscriminate, unthinking choice of target, so conspicuously lack. (C. Spencer 1988, 6)

Mittell's reception research into US daytime talk shows revealed the notion of an evaluative definition (Mittell 2004, 94-120); viewers defined the genre through negative evaluations, identifying it as trash culture (108) and a bad genre (101). In a similar way, some reviewers use 'satire' in a way that demonstrates the term is not merely a neutral description but a description imbued with cultural categorisations of high quality and value. The previous section showed journalists associated satire with authentic and pertinent political engagement and influence, and *Spitting Image* with entertainment and irrelevance. This section shows journalists drew distinctions between *Spitting Image* and satire by explicitly associating them with low culture and high culture respectively.

Some propositions about *Spitting Image*'s low cultural value are made by comparing it negatively with canonical texts used to exemplify satire. Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph* contrasts *Spitting Image* with Jonathan Swift as he emphasises the series' reliance on the "cheap joke" (1988, 6); writing in the *Sunday Times*, Neil Mackwood (1992) quotes from literary critic Gilbert Highet's *The Anatomy of Satire*; Jeffrey Richards (1987) in the *Daily Telegraph* refers to the eighteenth century cartoonists Gilray and Rowlandson; and, in the same paper, Russell Davies (1995, 19) cites satirists of the Weimar Republic. In each case, the negative evaluation of *Spitting Image* is accompanied by a comparison with texts that carry credentials of cultural authority and value. References to those texts from the British cultural canon imply that good satire must be equal to these exalted standards of value. *Spitting Image* is repeatedly declared an inferior text compared in comparison, with specific emphasis on its style of comedy; Russell Davies criticises its reliance on the "cheap laugh" (1995, 19) and Ned Sherrin, director of *That Was The Week That Was*, described the show as "low comedy" (quoted in Mackwood 1992, 25).

The associations between satire and high culture can be contextualised by satire's long association with historical periods revered for their intellectual or political culture. Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* refers to the satirical plays of Ancient Greece and their role in the development of Athenian democracy and culture (2004, 65; 85), and Ancient Rome is referenced in Victor Lewis-Smith's pun in the *Evening Standard* that the show was "Not so much Juvenal as juvenile" (1994, 49). Satire is also considered influential in the evolution of British public life and democracy during the

Enlightenment, with the writing of Jonathan Swift and the cartoons of Gilray both referred to. There is also a clear association between satire and literature, whether in the plays of Aristophanes, the pamphlets of Swift or in its description as “a literary work of a special kind” (Hodgart 1969, 7). This literary quality of satire appears especially pertinent in the columnists’ negative attitudes to *Spitting Image*’s scripts: Alan Coren claimed in the *Mail on Sunday* that “it is the *words* that make political satire” (1987, 37, my emphasis). Others state the series’ scripts are its weakest element: “the scripts are worse than tacky” (C. Spencer 1988, 6) and this is also evident in many television review articles.

In contrast to this, *Spitting Image*’s visual qualities are recognised and often praised, though sometimes grudgingly: “in their horrible way, brilliant” (C. Spencer 1988, 6). However, they are not – despite the history of political cartooning and caricature – referred to as satire in much of the press. Tonkin praises the “Hogarthian puppetry” (1985, 381) in his *New Society* article but does not accept that they produce satire and Alan Coren writes “there is a limit to the amount of time one can spend watching lengths of sorbo rubber socking one another” (1987, 37). The puppets, while noted as important textual aspects, do not meet the standards of political engagement and high culture, and so are not described by these journalists as satire.

In a similar move, a smaller number of the columnists explicitly describe *Spitting Image* as low culture, repeating the cultural hierarchies described above from the opposite perspective. Writing in the right-leaning *Daily Telegraph*, Russell Davies

deploys satire's association with high culture to associate *Spitting Image* with offensiveness and "bad taste" popular culture (1995, 19): teen sex comedies *Animal House* (John Landis 1978) and *Porky's* (Bob Clarke 1982), outrageous burlesque nightclub acts, and bands The Beastie Boys and The Sex Pistols. Jeffrey Richards, *Daily Telegraph*, described the audience of such acts as "surfeited on tabloid journalism" (Richards 1987, 11) and displays conservative tendencies by criticising the depiction of the Royal Family. He concludes that *Spitting Image* is "puerilism...a blend of adolescence and barbarity...[that] prevails when a culture of work is replaced by a culture of entertainment." (ibid.) This is at the extreme end of the discourse of low culture, with other columnists and some television reviews using a discourse of bad taste; Bob Monkhouse (1986) was disgusted by jokes about the Royal Family and clubbing a baby seal to death and Ann Robinson complained in the *Daily Mirror* about the "grotesquely ugly" (1984, 9) puppet of the Queen. Others include criticisms of juvenile comedy, echoing some complaints about *TW3*: television reviewer Herbert Kretzmer called the scripts "the catcalling of malevolent schoolchildren" (1984a, 23) in the *Daily Mail*. Jane Gordon, *Today*, links this criticism of childishness to political impotence, claiming politicians "will find little to worry them in the latest series... [of] schoolboy comedy" (1989, 25). Former *Spitting Image* writer David Tyler also expresses political frustration in the *Independent*, writing of his regret that "No matter how complex the sketch on Douglas Hurd's hypocrisy to Vietnamese boat people...you still had to end with them nutting each other" (1995, 14). Lowbrow comedic style is thus also negatively compared with satire, and critics declare *Spitting Image* a failure because its

style and content does not meet their expectations of satire as identified above; politically engaged and highbrow.

Satire is therefore not a ‘blank’ description but a term pregnant with evaluative definitions of cultural quality, creative skill and political intelligence. Columnists repeatedly argue texts must meet high cultural standards in order to be defined as satire. These standards are related to desires for comedy that is engaged and influential in politics, especially pertinent for individuals on the left during a period of electoral failure for Labour, and a comedy that is sophisticated and intellectual, especially obvious in the writing of conservative columnists who promote traditional standards of taste and decency. Both negative discourses criticise *Spitting Image* and reinforce highbrow cultural hierarchies that privilege intellectual engagement and literary culture. The next section will address the pleasures of *Spitting Image* and how a different group of journalists expressed their enthusiasm for the series in the articles categorised as television reviews.

III

Defining *Spitting Image* as grotesque

It is in the 120 television reviews of *Spitting Image* that most of the positive responses are found. The reception in these reviews is not a unified one; some enjoyed the series, others criticised it and others found certain aspects praiseworthy and other parts offensive or of poor quality. Dominant criticisms in the reviews show continuity with the comment articles; it was judged to be insufficiently funny, poorly scripted, rude or

defined as ‘not satire’. The majority of reviews using the term ‘satire’ conclude *Spitting Image* was not satire, though this is less dominant and expressed less passionately than in the comment articles. The *Evening Standard*'s Lucy Hughes-Hallett criticised it as “superficial satire” (1984, 27), while Julie Davidson commented in the *Glasgow Herald* that producers described *Spitting Image* as “a ‘topical comedy sketch show’ (they daren’t call it satire)” (1984, 6). Only a few reviewers explicitly affirmed the series’ satirical character; Christopher Dunkley wrote in the *Financial Times* that the “the scripts have steadily improved so that today...the programme becomes a powerful piece of satire” (1988, n.p.¹⁹⁹). In other cases, ‘satire’ appears to be used as a synonym for ‘political comedy’ without elaboration or discussion,²⁰⁰ for example, Nina Myskow in the *Sunday People* simply described it as a “Sunday night satirical puppet show” (1984, 24).

Positive evaluations of the series or elements of the series (for many offered only partial praise) do not engage significantly with such definitions. Instead they are dominated by expressions of pleasure at the series’ puppets, its bad taste and cruel caricatures. The absence of the discourse of satire suggests there are different cultural standards operating in this genre of writing from those of the opinion columns, as seen in Chapter 3 in relation to Rik Mayall fans whose responses to *The New Statesman* departed from the norms of authenticity and highbrow quality associated with political sitcom. The following section will explore how television reviews expressed the pleasures of *Spitting Image*, arguing that the textual elements discussed and the feelings

¹⁹⁹ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²⁰⁰ See also Barnes (1987), Forwood (1984) and J. Russell (1987).

expressed are coherent with the cultural standards of the carnivalesque and the grotesque as described by Bakhtin. This will then be used to propose that while critics of the show explicitly define *Spitting Image* as failed satire, journalists who enjoy the series implicitly defined it as carnivalesque and grotesque.

Bakhtin and the Carnivalesque

Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque and the carnivalesque is based on his study of the French novelist François Rabelais. He explores how the novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* depicts the exaggerated physical characteristics of the two eponymous giants and their similarly exaggerated bodily functions as 'grotesque', focusing on excretion and consumption (Bakhtin 1984, 335-339). Bakhtin defines the grotesque as "Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness" (305) with particular attention to "the body and food" (*ibid.*). The latter often appears in banquets but more generally in incidents of eating and swallowing, while in regards to the body "the artistic logic of the carnival and the grotesque ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable body and retains only its excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices" (317-8). Bakhtin interprets Rabelais' grotesque imagery as part of the culture of the lower social hierarchies and was exhibited by the medieval carnival:

...these images [of the body] predominate in the extra-official life of the people... The body that figures in all the expressions of unofficial speech of the people is the body that fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured... In all languages there is a great number of

expressions related to the genital organs, the anus and buttocks, the belly and the mouth and nose. But there are few expressions for the other parts of the body: arms and legs, face, and eyes... Whenever men laugh and curse, particularly in a familiar environment, their speech is flooded with bodily images. (319)

The grotesque body referred to in ‘unofficial’ language, such as swearing and general bad language, falls outside the bounds of etiquette and polite discourse, and such speech is associated with the lower classes and particularly located in the medieval marketplace:

...[a place of] freedom, frankness and familiarity. Such elements of familiar speech as profanities, oaths and curses were fully legalised...the marketplace was the centre of all that was unofficial...this popular aspect was especially apparent on feast days...there is probably no other work reflecting so fully and deeply all aspects of the life of the marketplace as does Rabelais’ novel. (153-4)

He argues the grotesque body, laughter and the speech of the common people is an alternative to the official medieval culture of church and state: “laughter in the Middle Ages remained outside of official spheres of ideology and outside all official strict forms of social relations. Laughter was eliminated from religious cult, from feudal and state ceremonials, [and] etiquette.” (73)

Bakhtin goes on to argue that medieval folk culture found its clearest expression in the carnivals that punctuated the calendar and – he claims - punctured small holes in monolithic official culture. He records that the Church gave “exceptional privileges of

license and lawlessness...in the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature. And medieval laughter knew how to use these privileges widely" (71-72). The marketplace and the carnival were locations where different cultural standards applied and different rituals were permitted; "Nearly all the rituals of the feast of fools are a grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols and their transfer to the material bodily level" (74). Bakhtin gives a number of examples of carnival rituals from across medieval Europe; for example, a priest braying like a donkey to conclude a service (78) or a mock Pope being chosen to oversee ceremonies (80); they destabilise norms and produce an outrageous revision of the original.

Tabloids and the grotesque

A textual analysis of *Spitting Image* could argue for a similar operation where the puppets replace the mimesis of photography – the official mode of circulating images of public figures - with grotesque versions. It will be argued below that the positive reception of *Spitting Image* expresses pleasures and discourses coherent with Bakhtin's definitions of the grotesque and the carnivalesque. Those who found it offensive were responding to the flaunting of convention, taste, decency and hierarchy, while those who enjoyed it were responding to the extravagant excess of *Spitting Image*'s carnivalesque grotesque comedy. Just as carnival disrupted religious ceremony, so *Spitting Image* visually disrupted the faces and personas of public figures in the 1980s and 1990s.

While many reviews of *Spitting Image* are ambivalent, often criticising the scripts, they express considerable enthusiasm for other elements of the text. The most striking aspect

of these positive comments celebrates the bad taste of *Spitting Image*'s comedy. Just as Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque as an inversion of the social relations of official politeness, and as Alan B'stard's immoral behaviour was a source of pleasure to many, reviewers describe the series as pleasurable disgusting. Two *Sun* journalists wrote that "we all know that *Spitting Image* was in bad taste... But wasn't it great?" (Kinnersley 1985, 15) and "Really offensive!...Disgusting! But wasn't *Spitting Image* absolutely hilarious?" (Martingale 1988, 29)²⁰¹ While many articles do not make explicit reference to the notion of 'bad taste' per se, most positive evaluations include cognate descriptions of the series' cruelty,²⁰² its ability to shock²⁰³ or providing poison or vitriol.²⁰⁴ These somewhat hyperbolic pleasures are expressed by journalists working for a range of papers from tabloids such as the *Daily Star* to the right-leaning *Spectator* and the listings magazine *Time Out*.

The source of *Spitting Image*'s pleasurable bad taste is consistently located in the puppets and they are the most significant textual aspect in praise for the series. A photograph of a puppet (often Thatcher or Reagan) featured in many articles and, as discussed, the overall evaluation was that the puppets were superior creative works to the scripts. Sean French's comment in the *Sunday Times* that "the models by Fluck and Law were brilliant, and the style was admirably hard-edged. The only problem was that it wasn't funny" (1985, 13), while perhaps ironic to some extent, suggests that despite

²⁰¹ See also Bushell (1989).

²⁰² See Ritchie (1985), French (1985) and Thomas (1992).

²⁰³ See Kretzmer (1984b) and G. Baker (1985a).

²⁰⁴ See *Daily Mirror* (1989).

being unfunny *Spitting Image* was still able to provide pleasure though “Fluck and Law’s amazing foam rubber puppets” (Hughes-Hallett 1984, 27).²⁰⁵

There is an aesthetic appreciation of the puppets as creative works that relates to their caricatured nature, and the repeated use of hyperbolic language relates to another aspect of the grotesque: “Exaggeration, hyperbolism, excessiveness” (Bakhtin 1984, 305). Other articles praised the puppets as a product of creative labour and skill. Daniel Farson in the *Mail on Sunday* calls them a “technical marvel” (1984, 37) despite disliking their ugliness, and Christopher Dunkley describes them as “Fluck and Law’s extraordinary puppet caricatures” (1988, n.p.²⁰⁶) in the *Financial Times*. The manufacture of the puppets is also a recurring subject for newspaper feature articles and another aspect of the grotesque can be seen here in descriptions and photographs of the faces and bodies of the puppets (see figs. 2-4).

²⁰⁵ See also *Scotsman* (1990).

²⁰⁶ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

EXCLUSIVE MAIL PREVIEW OF SOME VERY STARTLING FACES...



Anne—stale kipper. Bishop of Duran — one-eyed. Scargill—illustration. Roseland—shark's teeth. Daley—cheeky. Pym—Piss-Ella.

It's spit—with polish!

by BRIAN VINE

A GIRL was scrupling Arthur Scargill's matted fine-wire hair over his porous bald dome. It's a new care-worn Scargill, less hair than ever and with a gargoyle nose.

Another helper was shaping a new tongue for Sir Ian Taylor—the Boss, her plates obscured—entertainment Budget— and a third had been sent off to buy a leather dummy—“We're looking for a body for Miss Fawcett,” added Law.

The firm of Peter and Roger—sometimes called the puppets of the Month—were at work on the latest satirical crusade, like the late-night Central TV show through their grotesquely accurate puppets to dominate everyone's word-of-mouth features.

Does Prince Harry have his father's fur ears? He does in *Scargill*. In Limehouse Studios in London's Docklands I had a preview of some of the 20 new characters who will be appearing in the show's 13-week run starting on Sunday.

★★★

P

Off and white Whitaway, Maggie's Mr. Z. looks more like a middle-class assistant than a high-end Terry-Howard Maxwell, the gentilier has a black version of Devil May Care, while another darkened fat around his neck to cook a goose.

Scargill shows signs of frustration—triple chin, from 300 jowls, booted skin-cya closing firmly.

The maverick Bishop of Duran, David Jenkins, makes his debut, with a face that's been flattened like a lemon and with a grey kiss-curl. He has a revolting eye for piercing Mrs Thatcher's arched, committee-creator brows.

The bishop earned his place as a Thatcher-attack in the cleric who wanted Ian McGregor out and there's obviously something in the air, because he's got a considering view of the Virgin Birth, the Resurrection and other miracles.

The irreverence knows no bounds. And it's all done in a factory of modelling clay, glass fibre and latex which looks more like a funeral home in Wimpey's The Land of One True Love, or even something for Forces' lawn battles than a Minoan-like fortress. A part-finished Michael



Augmented Charles with Harry, and (right) E.T.-like Michael Roseland gets full nose job

The factory where the wickedest show on TV takes shape

Readers could be mistaken for it, but no one would want him.

Take-over tycoon Tim Rowland has the pointed teeth of a Great White shark and a huge pair of lips, the size of a car.

Gold medallist Daley Thompson needs to have apples in both cheeks and a neck the width of a seven-pipe.

Firm, former Foreign Secretary, has the shock appearance of a gormless pug, while Princess Anne would win the beauty contest in a competition of sharks.

Lester Piggot's nose appears to have taken a pound of modelling clay to get into shape while rock star Prinew's

hair is being held up by a hairdryer.

Nigel Dempster . . . Is he wearing a skunk-skin toupee?

Do people being held up as figures of fun? Yes, says producer John Lloyd, who made his TV name with *Not The Nine O'Clock News*.

David Owen apparently said he would be very upset not to be included, says Mr Lloyd. “He’s a very good man,” he says, adding that there is only one thing worse than being taken away and that is not being talked about.

“The humour is merciless.

Fluck and Law deliver their satire with snit-and-potter

hair cascades in black singlets. The show's favorite puppets, our own Nigel Dempster will probably set his lawyer to call — his last nights are showing greater and greater skill and readers reckon they have been grossly unfair to his hirsuteness — he looks as if he's wearing a shaggy coat.

No one is sacred. Fluck and Law have made four Royal Johnsons of Frankie Goes to Hollywood. “We're going to put all four on in the same time,” complete with lips that are reminiscent of a Royal Mail red pillar box.

The former bassans were born on the day of the week the takes place looks like a factory for surgical parts. Heads of Chermeskin, an unctuous Russell Harty, a whingeing Mark Thatcher, a balding skin and less of that, hung up as if in a butcher's window.

★★★

EVEN the bosses, the famous have to share a rare alphabetical badminton air of mystery. Now, with Nigel Lawson with Patrick Lichfield, Tony Benn with P. W. Botham, Harold and Maude, longer and longer, Collingham's checks get more rumpled and Thatcher's eyes are drawing closer together.

Do people being held up as figures of fun? Yes, says producer John Lloyd, who made his TV name with *Not The Nine O'Clock News*.

“The humour is merciless. Fluck and Law deliver their satire with snit-and-potter

Figure 2. Feature article with the puppets as grotesque works of craft (Vine 1985). *Daily Mail*, 2 January 1985.



Figure 3. Photograph from feature with the puppets as grotesque works of craft (Franks 1993). *Times Magazine*, 6 November 1993.



Figure 4. Photograph from feature article with the puppets as grotesque works of craft. Photo subtitled, 'Fluck and Law in the dummy abattoir.' Peter Law is pictured (A. Gill 1985). *New Musical Express*, 26 January 1985.

Newspaper feature articles “take the reader behind the headlines” (Niblock 2008, 48) and often appear with glossy colour photographs published in newspapers’ weekend editions (Brett and Holmes 2008, 199). In the case of *Spitting Image*, these tend to emphasise the craftsmanship behind the puppets, some taking the form of a visit to *Spitting Image* Productions’ workshop, interviewing Fluck and Law and other staff, and describing the experience of being surrounded by disembodied puppets: the *Sunday Times* explained that “The first thing that greets you when you enter the *Spitting Image* workshop is a brace of Thatchers dangling from a rack suspended from the ceiling” (A. Gill 1985, 23). Most features include images from the workshop which almost exclusively focus on the puppets; in storage, in the process of fabrication or in ironic poses with Fluck and Law, production staff or voice actors. These photographs hold the puppets up for attention as objects of grotesque fascination, emphasising the grotesque’s focus on “excrescences (sprouts, buds) and orifices” (Bakhtin 1984, 317-8). This can also be seen where journalists describe the puppets with relish; “Blubbering jelly with three chins and bulbous lips...squint eyes, huge noses and wingnut ears”, wrote Geoff Baker (1985b, n.p.²⁰⁷) in the tabloid *Daily Star*, while others emphasised the puppets outside the performance context in an extra-textual grotesque: “Norman Tebbit’s...gruesome head lies decapitated, eyes staring hideously into space, next to President Botha’s on the shelf...” (Ungood-Thomas n.d., n.p.²⁰⁸). Similarly reviewers refer to orifices, excrescences and imperfect textures with glee: the “spongey gargoyles

²⁰⁷ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²⁰⁸ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers or clear dates.

of household faces, are marvellously malicious" (Davidson 1984, 6).²⁰⁹ The influence of Rabelais is even referred by producer John Lloyd himself in a *Sunday Times* article where he light-heartedly complains that the puppet makers "have an insufficient grasp of Rabelaisian humour" (Chester 1986b, 58).

Television reviewers were not unanimous in their praise for *Spitting Image*'s grotesque puppets and some located displeasure in ugliness and cruelty. The aesthetics of Fluck and Law's caricatures was singled out as a particularly unpleasant textual element: described as "hideous sub-muppet caricatures...sick humour" (Last 1984, 13) in the *Daily Telegraph*.²¹⁰ Criticisms of ugliness deploy many of the same terms featured in positive reviews; ugliness, disgust and sickness are associated with pleasure *and* displeasure. The series and the puppets are uniformly described as rude, cruel and offensive but some find the bad taste pleasurable and others criticise it. This again suggests that different cultural standards are operative. Negative responses to *Spitting Image* tended to express the highbrow standards of satire, and this is consistent with the displeasure at the puppets' ugliness and bad taste. The positive evaluations of *Spitting Image* ugliness are thus counter to these highbrow aesthetic standards and, accepting Bakhtin's opposition between official culture and the carnivalesque, these different cultural standards express the pleasure of the grotesque body. The disgusting pleasures of the puppets are an implicit acknowledgment of *Spitting Image*'s carnivalesque nature and its contrast to the highbrow definitions of satire.

²⁰⁹ See also A. Wilson (1992).

²¹⁰ See also Purser (1984).

Distinguishing between carnivalesque and satire: ambivalence

Rabelais' grotesque and carnivalesque are therefore not just a style but an attitude expressing the culture of the lower classes in the medieval period, and its continued significance is suggested by Bakhtin's point that "Whenever men laugh and curse...speech is flooded with bodily images" (1984, 319). As part of the language of the marketplace and the disruptive carnival, the grotesque is defined against the norms of official culture, as seen in journalists' negative evaluation of *Spitting Image* as lowbrow, low value entertainment and not highbrow satire. Its pertinence to television is suggested by Fiske's description of carnivalesque as

the collision of two languages, the high, validated language of classical learning, and the low vernacular of the folk. A similar semiotic tension exists in television... The carnivalesque is the result of this collision and is a testament to the power of the 'low' to insist upon its rights to a place in culture... (Fiske 1987, 241)

Spitting Image brings together politics and lowbrow comedy in a collision that produces criticisms of failed satire from some, demonstrating a conservative reluctance to allow such a combination, but also significant pleasure from others, demonstrating an acceptance of lowbrow culture but that it is still not defined as satire.

This is entirely coherent with Bakhtin, who also separates satire and the carnivalesque. He even criticises another Rabelais scholar, Schneegans, who sought to define all Rabelais' grotesque representations as satirical (1984, 306). Bakhtin rejects this as a "narrow modern interpretation of satire as a *negation* of separate individual phenomena" (307, my emphasis) and that this was a "neglect of its *ambivalence*" (ibid. my emphasis). Bakhtin analyses Schneegans' interpretation of a passage from *Gargantua and Pantagruel* where the belfry of a monastery is metaphorically compared to a giant phallus and women walking under its shadow fall pregnant. Schneegans interprets this as a satirical condemnation of medieval monasticism's corruption. Bakhtin's interpretation of the grotesque image is of a different order; he argues that the image of the belfry/phallus does not address a single issue (such as medieval monks and their social role) but is "a negation of the entire order of life (including the prevailing truth), a negation closely linked to the affirmation of that which is born anew." (306) He continues: "It would be a mistake to rationalise this image [and relate it to a single critique of monasticism]...This idea is not extraneous to the image but such a narrowing of the grotesque metaphor is inadmissible" (313). In contrast to the traditions of satire defined above, Bakhtin repeatedly describes the carnivalesque, the grotesque and its accompanying folk culture as ambivalent (for example, 135; 136; 142) and identifies a key ambivalence in the emphasis on eating, mouths, intestines and defecation "which destroys and generates, swallows and is swallowed" (163). He rejects Schneegans' single satirical interpretation of Rabelais' imagery (311) and reiterates the importance of ambivalence in relation to the monastery's belfry-as-phallus metaphor.

...the nonofficial popular-festive language of the marketplace speaks here of very different things. The mighty material bodily element of these images uncrowns and renews... It uncrowns the entire monastery...its false ascetic ideal, its abstract and sterile eternity. The belfry's shadow is the shadow of the phallus that generates new life... (312)

According to Bakhtin's definition the carnivalesque does not set out to criticise and reject but features a "joyful lavishness...the quality, wealth and variety of the image" (306) that "uncrowns and renews" (*ibid.*). The carnivalesque and the grotesque represents the existing world in an exaggerated, ridiculous and probably offensive way using the non-official language of the marketplace.

Bakhtin uses the ambivalent dyads of birth/death and uncrowning/renewing to conclude that the carnivalesque expresses the medieval definition of humanity as existing through the entire community rather than the individual. The grotesque body that is born and dies and is renewed and consumes and produces is an expression of "the immortality of the ancestral body of mankind" (367), a growing realisation that "each man belongs to the immortal people who create history" (*ibid.*). Such an analysis should be seen in the context of Bakhtin's writing *Rabelais and His World* in the Soviet Union under Stalin, reflecting both Communism's proposition about the revolutionary historical role of the proletarian lower classes and the limited opportunities for freedom in life under totalitarian dictatorship. Such bold claims are not borne by *Spitting Image*. The carnivalesque rituals that re-interpreted religious ceremonies in medieval France are not the same as representing the Queen as a rubber caricature and the press reception of the

series as carnivalesque cannot be used to argue for the series' liberating cultural influence. However, Bakhtin's theories are fruitful because they produce a clear distinction between 'satire' and the 'carnivalesque grotesque' as separate modes of political comedy with different styles and attitudes. As already identified, the puppets and *Spitting Image* were criticised according to the standards of satire for a lack of engagement with political issues. Identifying the pleasure of *Spitting Image*'s ugliness and cruelty as relating to the carnivalesque grotesque provides a different way of defining the series.

As already seen, the pleasures of *Spitting Image* were expressed with "mixed feelings or contradictory ideas" (*Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed., s.v. "ambivalent") with reviewers praising the puppets in a language of disgust and offense, contradictorily locating pleasure in terms commonly associated with displeasure. In a few sources criticism and praise are almost indistinguishable; Lucy Hughes-Hallett in the *Evening Standard* loved that the puppets were "horrid to look at" (1984) but Philip Purser in the *Sunday Telegraph* criticised them as "repellent" (1984, 15). Writing about *Spitting Image*'s puppets does not fit into commonplace understandings of pleasure because they combine ugliness and pleasure together; the grotesque image of Margaret Thatcher does not conform to norms of beauty but still provides aesthetic pleasure. Other aspects of Bakhtin's theories can be applied to the puppets, notably his idea that the grotesque uncrowns and renews. The grotesque Thatcher puppet could be said to 'uncrown' Margaret Thatcher herself through the operations of disgust and ridicule, but it also renews her as a compellingly ugly and pleasurable puppet. The same can be said for

each figure represented in puppet form; their identities and personalities are not critiqued or negated, as in Bakhtin's reference to Schneegans, but rather transformed and recreated according to the logic of Fluck and Law's caricatures.

IV

Spitting Image and the tabloid carnivalesque

The ambivalence of Bakhtin's carnivalesque grotesque can also be seen in the tabloid and popular press' news reports about *Spitting Image*. They produce reception sources that, similar to the television reviews, represented the puppets as compellingly repulsive and suggest a coherence between British tabloid newspapers and the carnivalesque. All papers provided news reports on how *Spitting Image* related to official life, to politicians,²¹¹ business,²¹² or the legal system.²¹³ However, news articles from the popular and tabloid press also reported "tendentious" controversies (Harrison 2008, 40-44), using splash headlines and large photographs, sometimes on the front page. These varied from reporting viewers' complaints about specific puppets, a court case against the IBA and, predominantly, representations of the Royal Family. The latter are essentially human interest stories emphasising individuals' emotions by tendentiously reporting how *Spitting Image*'s Royal puppets *would* or *could* cause distress to the Windsor family or their loyal subjects. Such coverage can also be read as offering the photographs for viewers' pleasure, often accompanying predictions of offense with

²¹¹ Such as Roy Hattersley, a prominent Labour MP, appearing with his own puppet (see Worthington 1986).

²¹² For example, a new CEO of *Spitting Image* Productions (*Times* 1990).

²¹³ This included a court case where the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) was taken to court by an individual, Norris McWhirter, when *Spitting Image* included single images as 'flash frames'. These were jokes but subliminal messages are banned from UK television. See Hickey (1985).

photographs of the offensive puppet itself. The tabloid news articles will be shown to both criticise and celebrate the puppets' grotesque nature, homologous with Bakhtin's notion of ambivalence and uncrowning and renewing.

The front page of the *Daily Star* on 18 December 1985 reported on the *Spitting Image* Christmas special in capitals: "DIANA'S CHRISTMAS SHOCK" with the subheading "TV show will cause Royal storm" (see fig. 5). More photos were included inside (see fig. 7) under the headline, "SPITTING MAD" (G. Baker 1985c, 16). The first article exhibits its tendentious content with the opening sentence predicting, rather than reporting: "Members of the Royal Family *are going to get* the shock of their lives this Christmas" (*ibid.*, my emphasis) and also explains that "Many people who do not agree with the Royal Family being the subject of *Spitting Image*'s humour *are certain* to be offended" (*ibid.*, my emphasis).



Figure 5. Front page of the *Star*, 18 December 1985.

IDEAS

Upper pranksters spring a surprise

on Diana



Figure 6. Feature on *Spitting Image* (G. Baker 1985c). *Daily Star* 18 December 1985.

This offense was reported in a *Sun* story from 1987 (see fig. 7): “STORM OVER HRH RAMBO” with the subheading “Ban *Spitting Image* spoof says an MP” (Dampier 1987, 1) and an MP denounced a sketch where Prince William attacked Prince Harry as “sick and irresponsible” (*ibid.*). None of these controversies make reference to any tangible consequence, with the exception of a court case that claimed *Spitting Image* was affecting viewers by including a joke in a flash frame. Framing offense against the Royal Family as inherently objectionable, these reports are removed from any social context beyond that of evoking readers’ emotional investment in traditional conservative values associated with the Monarchy and taste and decency, and demonstrate no engagement with or analysis of contemporary political events.

STORM OVER HRH RAMBO



FUNNY OR SICK? Spitting Image's "Rambo" Prince William sticks a knife in toddler brother Harry's head

Ban Spitting Image

spoof says an MP

By PHIL DAMPIER

A SPITTING Image sketch showing a "Rambo" Prince William stabbing and shooting brother Harry sparked an outcry last night.

A Tory MP branded it "sick and irresponsible" after the Hungerford massacre, and called for the Central TV show to be banned.

Clean-up campaigner Mary

EXCLUSIVE

Whitehouse stormed: "To portray violence as a joke is deplorable and sick."

In the sketch, to be screened on Sunday, Wills, dressed in combat gear, stabs a knife in Harry's head while the three-year-old is tied to a chair.

Wills shouts "Dagga dagga dagga." Then he holds an automatic gun to the toddler's throat and fires it as Harry screams "I want to

Picture: ARTHUR STEEL

be Prince Edward" and sings "There's no business like showbusiness."

Tory MP Terry Dicks stormed: "The makers of Spitting Image have gone too far for this time. They should receive psychiatric treatment, as they are obviously very sick people."

"The IBA should step in and put a stop to this filth."

Central TV spokesman Peter Rushden said: "All kids play with war toys. We are showing the Royals as a normal family."

Figure 7. Tendentious tabloid headlines (Dampier 1987). "Storm over HRH Rambo," Sun, 5 November 1987.

The language in all these tabloid reports is critical of the series but the entire articles exhibit ambivalence towards the puppets. The front pages of the *Daily Star* and *Sun* feature condemnation of the puppets from figures of authority but are accompanied by large images of said puppets. The *Daily Star* front page that reported on the possible offense that could be caused by the puppets, also shouted “INSIDE AMAZING PICTURES”, leading to a double-page spread of more photos (see fig. 6). The *Sun*’s caption on the photograph of the Prince William puppet attacking the Prince Harry puppet asks “Funny or sick?” (Dampier 1987 and see fig. 7), suggesting it could be either or maybe even both. The practice of printing stories about controversial puppets alongside the images of the puppets themselves is repeated in different contexts, for example, stories on the puppet of the Queen Mother in the *Sunday People* (1985; see fig. 8) and *Mail on Sunday* (1985). They express criticism of the puppets, giving readers sympathetic to the Royal Family the opportunity to respond with suitable ire, and print photos, evidencing the criticisms, while also allowing readers to enjoy the grotesque spectacle of the puppets. These ambivalent texts are similar to the reviewers who expressed delight at the show’s ugliness; it expresses disgust, while holding the puppet up for closer inspection. The reception of *Spitting Image* in tabloid news articles therefore criticises, exploits and revels in the puppets’ grotesque nature, expressing the ambivalence Bakhtin identified with the grotesque carnivalesque.

T'S ENOUGH TO MAKE YOU SPIT, MA'AM!



FIST LOVE "It's not grotesque," says Spitting Image producer John Lloyd.

SUNDAY PEOPLE REPORTER

THIS is the Spitting Image caricature of the Queen Mother due to appear on ITV tonight.

It was unveiled by network chiefs yesterday... after the man behind the satire puppet show promised that the take-off would NOT be offensive or grotesque.

According to Spitting Image producer John Lloyd, the caricature would try to capture some of the Queen Mum's famous charm.

Up to now, Britain's best-loved lady has been the only member of the immediate royal family to escape the attentions of the Mickey-taking show.

Mr Lloyd admitted that the decision to include the Queen Mother was controversial. But he insisted: "The puppet we have made is not grotesque."

"Cartoons are cartoons, and this will obviously be a caricature of the Queen Mother."

"But far from being offensive, we think this one will catch a midgeon of the Queen Mother's charm."

Mr Lloyd admitted that there had been differences of opinion within the Central TV team over the inclusion of the Queen Mother.

Own spot

And showbiz stars and politicians yesterday condemned the new puppet as offensive.

Mr Lloyd would not reveal what role the Queen Mother would play in the script, or confirm reports that she would be cast as the royal family's "agony auntie."

He said: "I don't want to give the joke away."

"But she's got her own spot in the show."

ANOTHER CRUEL CLANGER

● THE Spitting Image team hesitated a long time before making a puppet of Princess Diana because of her huge popularity — and then made her so beautiful that no one could object, writes MARGARET FORWOOD.

● They hesitated even longer over the Queen Mum—and the caricature is much crueler.

● The Queen Mother may be an old lady but accentuating the signs of age the way they have is well below the belt.

● Still, it can't be as offensive as their portrayal of Princess Margaret the day after she went into hospital, which was... ahem...

Figure 8. Tabloid ambivalence towards *Spitting Image* (Sunday People 1985). 24 February 1985.

This style of reporting does not predominate in news articles from middle-market newspapers and does not feature at all in the quality newspapers. They do not print large photos, use hyperbole or give as much column space in general to *Spitting Image* compared to the tabloids (see figs. 9 and 10). The tabloid newspapers' enthusiastic engagement with the series, coupled with the often negative reviews in the quality press, suggests *Spitting Image* was more coherent with the editorial demands of the tabloid newspapers than of the qualities and middle-markets. Tabloid news coverage of *Spitting Image* is consistent with regular content trends, such as campaigns against a controversial issue (Harrison 2008, 44), "emotive language in easy-to-consume formats" (Rooney 2000, 91), stories about the Royal Family (Coward 2008), and gossiping information on popular culture, specifically television culture (Conboy 2004, 181). Emphasis on popular television culture in tabloid newspapers accounts for the prominence given to *Spitting Image*, and is evidenced by their pre-broadcast access to new puppets. For example, the *Sunday People* reported that the puppet of the Queen Mother that would be televised that evening (fig. 8), with one journalist complaining that "accentuating the signs of age the way they have is way below the belt" (Forwood 1985, 5) but with a photograph of the puppet printed alongside the complaint. This illustrates tabloid ambivalence *and* shows that photographs of the puppet were in circulation before broadcast, perhaps released to raise publicity via a controversy. Another article mentions a puppet had been "unveiled by network chiefs yesterday" (*Sunday People* 1985, 5) and the *Sun's* front page article about Harry and William fighting (fig. 7) contained a still of the puppets before the episode has been screened. The relationship is also suggested by the Conservative ministers reading the *News of the World* in the first episode (fig. 11)

and an article in the tabloid *Daily Star* features the Princess Diana puppet reading the paper itself (fig. 12).



Imagine . . .

Michael Heseltine is either extremely vain or he has a well concealed sense of humour. According to Peter Fluck and Roger Law, the brains behind the *Spitting Image* TV series, Heseltine has tried the hardest of all victims to buy his puppet caricature. After receiving repeated calls from the staff at the MoD, Law one day snapped: "Tell him if he sends cruise back he can have it for nothing." The line has since gone dead. Sir Kenneth Newman, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, is much amused by his puppet — "but could you tell them I never wear my helmet when lecturing." Too horrified to watch, on the other hand, is Leon Brittan. "But he always knows when he's on," says a friend. "He can hear his children rolling around the sitting room carpet in uncontrolled giggles."

Figure 9. (left) Example of quality press coverage of *Spitting Image* (D. Barker 1984). *Guardian*, 23 June 1984.

Figure 10. (right) Example of quality press coverage of *Spitting Image* (PHS 1985). *Times*, 24 September 1985.

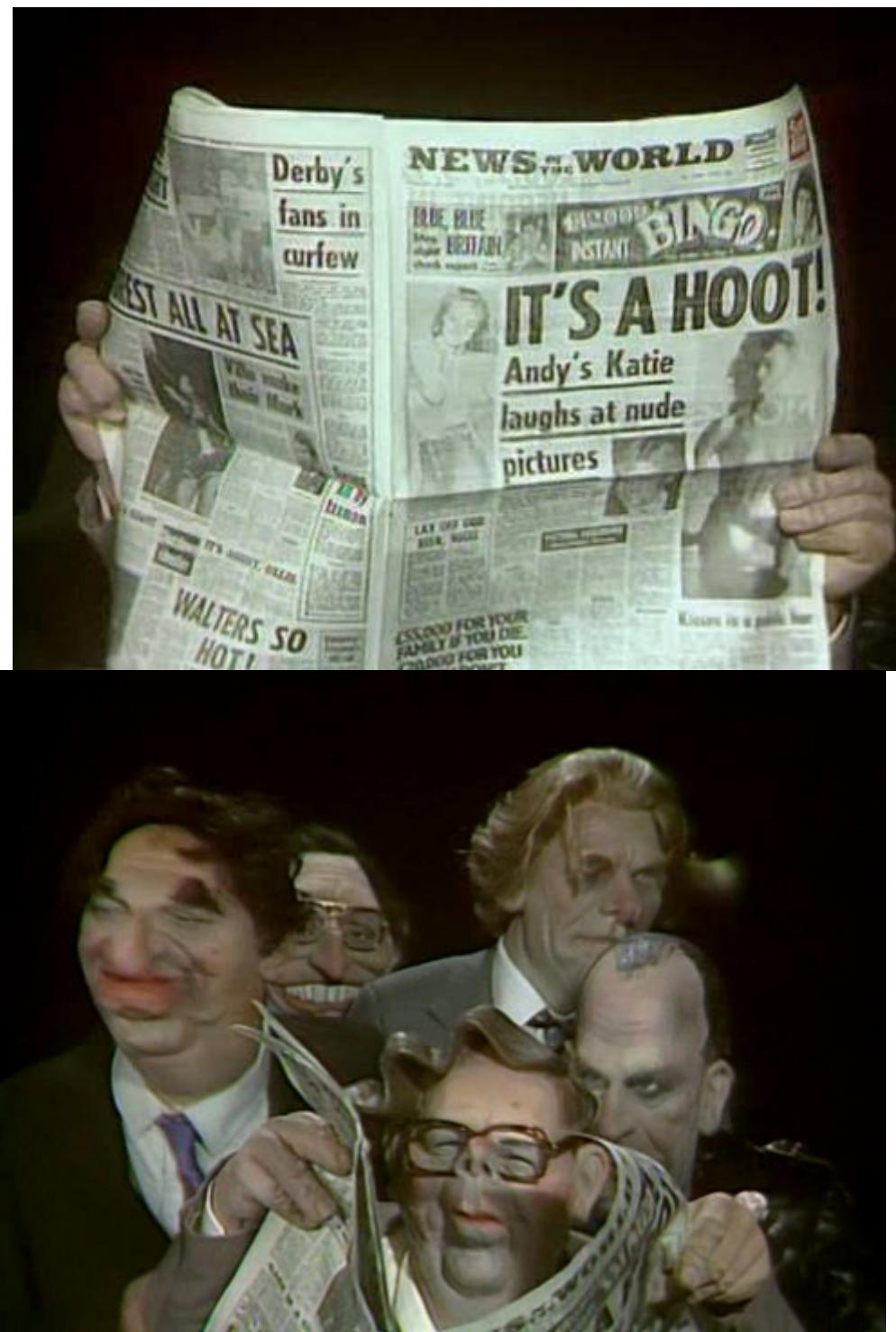


Figure 11. Opening sketch of the Cabinet reading the *News of the World*. Episode one, series one.



Figure 12. Princess Diana puppet reading a tabloid (G. Baker 1986). *Daily Star*, 22 February 1986.

The shared cultural values between *Spitting Image* and tabloid newspapers also played some part in highbrow criticisms of the series. This was clearly articulated in Jeffrey Richards claim in the *Daily Telegraph* that the show was for viewers “surfeited on tabloid journalism” (1987, 11), and the other criticisms about celebrities and the lack of political material can be seen within this context. Indeed, the repeated association of *Spitting Image*, failed satire and low value is coherent with the claim that “The debate about tabloids is a debate about quality” (Rooney 2000, 91). Furthermore, tabloid newspapers’ tendency to appeal to the working classes (Conboy 2006) suggests such debates are also about class and culture.

Parallels between *Spitting Image* and the British tabloids become all the more fruitful in the context of comparisons between the carnivalesque and tabloid culture:

According to Bakhtin, popular culture is distinguished by its carnivalistic embrace of bad taste, offensiveness to officialdom, comic verbal compositions, vulgar language, ritualistic degradation and parody, emphasis on laughter, and excessiveness of all forms, but especially of the body. Such characteristics are typical of the tabloid media... Tabloid media derive much of their energy from the juxtaposition of journalism...and disreputable popular tastes for melodrama, scandal, sexual intrigue, parody... (Glynn 2000, 115)

While Glynn write about US tabloidism, his definitions are homologous with critiques of low value journalism from Europe, suggesting Western tabloid culture shares

common characteristics. Pierre Bourdieu criticised French journalism for becoming “devoted to human interest and sports” (1998, 42) and “anecdote or scandal” (51), and British tabloids have been said to focus on “prurience, voyeurism, salaciousness and celebrity” (Harrison 2008, 44) with “an increase in news about celebrities, entertainment...personal issues...sensationalisation...pictures and sloganised headlines” (Rooney 2000, 181). Western tabloid press culture is criticised in similar ways, demonstrating that Glynn’s theorisations about the USA are also pertinent to the UK, and that *Spitting Image* can be linked to the cultural standards discussed by Bakhtin from the perspective of its tabloid coverage, further triangulating its reception as carnivalesque.

Glynn also identifies a general tendency to disparage tabloid culture, writing that criticisms define it as “excessive, emotive, antiscientific, unsubtle, crude and ‘tasteless’” (2000, 106). Similar terms were used by critics to reject *Spitting Image* as satire and evaluate it as low value, lowbrow culture, and this relates to Bakhtin’s repeated connection between the carnivalesque and the lower forms of culture, the marketplace, the peasantry and folk culture. The broadcaster of the series was ITV, the channel characterised as the most populist of the four television channels then broadcasting in the UK, with a reputation since its launch for low cultural forms of light entertainment, such as game shows (Holmes 2008) and soaps, both favoured by working class audiences. Therefore in its visual aesthetics, its cultural referents, its comedic style, its broadcaster and its presumed audience, and its cultural equivalents in the press, *Spitting*

Image is repeatedly associated with cultural standards described as tabloid and the carnivalesque.

Social effect, hegemony, ambivalence and media culture in the 1980s

Despite the evaluative separation between the carnivalesque and the highbrow definitions of satire, there is one shared characteristic: positive social change. This was evident in the reception of political sitcom and the discourses of education and revelation, and in the sources that criticised *Spitting Image* for its lack of political engagement, with the implicit assumption that it should be politically affective. Similarly, Bakhtin, and others such as Glynn (2000), Fiske (1987) and Stam (1989), value the carnivalesque as an expression of the unofficial culture of the people against the constraints of official culture. Bakhtin argues the medieval carnival offered “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the existing order” (Bakhtin 1984, 10) and disrupted the “intolerant, one-sided tone of seriousness” (73) of church and state. Similarly, Glynn defends tabloid culture as a space where “voices usually marginalised or excluded from the discourse of elite journalism...[can] interfere with the extension of imperialising power-bloc knowledge” (2000, 10). Fiske writes that the carnival is a collision of “the high, validated language of classical learning, and the low vernacular of the folk” (1987, 241) and this maps on to *Spitting Image*’s representation and ridicule of the powerful and famous figures of official culture via its ugly, rude puppets. The provision of a cultural alternative to hegemonic culture is a key aspect of the carnivalesque’s social value; Glynn interprets the political career of the wrestling star-turned-Governor of Minnesota, Jesse Ventura (2000, 235-242) as the progressive

intrusion of the populist carnival into official political culture, and sees television programmes about UFO mysteries as counter-narratives to those produced by the Government or the military (2000, 160-183).

Spitting Image was described in similar counter-hegemonic ways by the puppets' creators, Fluck and Law, and one of the series' producers, John Lloyd. In contrast to criticisms that the show lacked political engagement, Fluck, Law and Lloyd discuss the show's grotesque puppets producing an effect by providing a different way of seeing people in the public eye. John Lloyd defined the show as "poking fun at important people" (K. Spencer 1990, 3) in *Today* and "all we want to say is "Yah, boo, sucks" (S. Hoggart 1984, 21) in *the Observer*. Peter Fluck argued, "It's good to take the piss out of politicians, because they live on a public image... The whole thing's a complete performance and it needs the piss taking out of it to bring it down to a realistic level" (quoted in A. Gill 1985, 30). Law added to this:

If you don't like what public figures are doing, and you've got absolutely no way of changing anything, it helps to slag them off. Saatchi and Saatchi are doing the opposite to us. People say we're too savage but you never hear anyone going to Saatchi and Saatchi to complain that they're grossly benevolent. (Chester 1986a, 117)

These brief comments show one intention behind *Spitting Image* was an attempt to challenge the symbolic power exercised by individuals in public life. This can be

historicised within the growing anxiety about the role of publicity and the media in politics, as was discussed in Chapter 3 in relation to *The Thick of It* and the culture of political spin. Tony Blair and New Labour are recent examples but politics has relied upon public image for decades; Harold Macmillan trimmed his moustache and started wearing newer suits around the time of the 1959 election (Sandbrook 2005, 98), and during the 1960s Harold Wilson represented himself as a down-to-earth “pipe-smoking Yorkshireman” (Sandbrook 2005, 213). More pertinent to *Spitting Image*, Margaret Thatcher received training to lower her voice, believing higher shrill tones would not work in parliamentary debate (Charmley 1996, 205), the Conservative election campaign in 1979 was run by advertising firm Saatchi and Saatchi (Oborne 2005, 130), and Neil Kinnock, Labour leader from 1983 to 1992, embarked on a campaign to change public perception of the Labour party after their electoral collapse in 1983, with Peter Mandelson appointed “director of campaigns and communications – a new post” (Reid and Pelling 2005, 166). The growing relationship between politics and public relations can also be linked back to tabloid journalism, in particular the *Sun*. Since the late 1970s, the paper has dominated the tabloid market (Rooney 2000) and been perceived to play a role in influencing its massive readership’s electoral choices. It has been linked to the success of the Conservative party during the 1980s, when its owner, global media mogul Rupert Murdoch, supported Margaret Thatcher, and then the success of Labour in 1997, when Murdoch switched support to Tony Blair. Fluck, Law and Lloyd suggest the perceived growth of public relations in British politics could be countered by *Spitting Image*’s grotesque representations. In a similar way to Glynn (2000), they suggest *Spitting Image* could provide a counter-hegemonic voice.

However, these interpretations of social effect do not take account of the carnivalesque grotesque's ambivalence, with its ability to both uncrown *and* renew. According to Bakhtin, the carnival does not create an entirely egalitarian social space but instead re-invents existing hierarchies in a distorted fashion. It does not abandon hierarchy but temporarily inverts official culture (Bakhtin 1984, 10); the church ceremony is still conducted, even if it is with the sound of a donkey, and a Pope, even if he is a mock Pope, is still declared. Folklorist Carl Lindahl affirms this with his research into Cajun Mardi Gras, where he describes how masked men ride from farm to farm, intimidating their neighbours with impunity but all the while submitting to the authority of their *capitaine* and other rules of Mardi Gras (1996, 62).

Ambivalent social effects can be seen in some press sources where journalists worried the puppets might *benefit* the figures being ridiculed. Peter McKay, *Today*, considered the series a satirical failure because public figures were “entitled to think their stock has risen rather than otherwise, because we remember only the artistic genius of the latex moulds” (McKay 1986, 10). He expresses a desire for satire that matches Bakhtin’s reference to Schneegans - the “negation of separate individual phenomena” (Bakhtin 1984, 307) - and expresses anxiety about an effect that is coherent with ‘uncrowning and renewing’. This can be seen in other sources that discuss *Spitting Image*’s ability to humiliate *and* raise the profile of public figures. *Time Out* comments “cabinet ministers now consider it a mark of political clout to be included on the programme” (Jivani 1991, 154) and Hilary Bonner mused in the *Daily Mirror*:

some of the most important people in the country want to be on television so badly that they really don't care in what form or how much they are derided. any puppet however offensive, is better than not being part of it. (1987, 8)²¹⁴

Janet Street-Porter, *Today*, appears to confirm this when she ironically reflected on “a great moment in my TV career. I am, of course, referring to the distinction of having a Janet Street-Porter puppet doing disgusting things... I believe it was flatteringly entitled ‘toilet-cleaner’” (1987b, 31). These accounts are a clear articulation of the ambivalence of the puppets; Street-Porter’s grotesque puppet is a disgusting distinction through which she is both uncrowned and renewed.

It should also be noted that Bakhtin’s work is not entirely coherent with *Spitting Image* and tabloidism. Interpretations of *Spitting Image*’s counter-hegemonic influence and suspicions of its ambivalence both implicitly rely upon a factor that plays no part in Bakhtin’s theoretical foundation: the mass media. Bakhtin’s work focuses on the relationship between medieval folk culture and the specific imagery used in Rabelais’ literary text. His conclusions of ambivalence are based upon textual analysis, for example, the fecund phallus-belfry. In contrast, the journalistic interpretations of influence and ambivalence are related to *Spitting Image*’s large television audience and the notion of media power (Couldry 2000). It is the mass of television viewers who are clearly implicated in the production of the series’ ambivalent power to humiliate and raise the profile of the individuals represented. The puppet-text may have been

²¹⁴ Reminiscent of Harold MacMillan’s response to being lampooned in *TW3*: “It is a good thing to be laughed over – it is better than being ignored.” (Carpenter 2000, 238)

humiliating to the individual who inspired it but the appearance of the puppet-text on television confirmed and reinforced their public significance because of the medium's cultural centrality. The ambivalence over the 'effects' of *Spitting Image* as partly humiliating, partly aggrandising, therefore demonstrate an uneasy awareness of the significance of media exposure in British politics and the growing idea that becoming one of the "media people" (Couldry 2000, 46) confers symbolic power even if it is ambivalently achieved via a grotesque puppet.

Carnivalesque ambivalence is a useful counter to the sometimes utopian tones of cultural criticism. It is not acknowledged in Glynn's textual analyses of US tabloids; he interprets an article about a psychic who can split into two people, and the tendency for American tabloids to regularly feature stories about gender transformation, "for instance, 'Sex Change Dad Is Now Son's 2nd Mom'" (2000, 147), as highlighting "the instability and alterability of socially constituted identities" (147). This is a textual interpretation without supporting evidence and does not take account of tabloid ambivalence, avoiding discussion of how a paper with headlines that include 'Satan escapes from hell' and 'Alien backs Clinton' (Glynn 2000, 149) can intersect with readers' social identities in a profound way. As part of the recuperative movement in cultural studies seeking to claim popular texts as politically progressive, Glynn's work can be critiqued as utopian textual analysis that ascribes effects to texts without reception research *and* without considering the complex nature of the carnivalesque. Similarly *Spitting Image* cannot be said to present an alternative world or create political action because there is no evidence for it *and* because it would be incoherent with its apparently carnivalesque reception. The

figures of official culture, the government, the opposition, the Royal Family, and of popular culture, celebrities and others, are not negated or critiqued but uncrowned and renewed as rubber puppets whose grotesque visage both undermines and affirms their social significance through their mass reproduction on television. Indeed, as a continuing example of the uncrowning and renewing effect of the carnivalesque grotesque, in 2010 the Tate Britain gallery held a ‘Rude Britannia’ exhibition, providing a history of British cartooning and caricature. The room on political cartooning was filled with cartoons of Prime Ministers from Pitt to David Cameron but was dominated by the *Spitting Image* puppet of Margaret Thatcher placed on a low pedestal in the centre of the space. Even while Margaret was long into retirement and in her eighty-fifth year, her puppet was uncrowning and renewing the image of Thatcher into the twenty first century (fig. 13).



Figure 13. A Maggie Thatcher puppet at 'Rude Britannia', Tate Britain, June to September 2010. Courtesy of Andrew Stys.

V

Another definition in political comedy

This chapter has not argued that *Spitting Image* is a carnivalesque text or that it possesses political power. Indeed, the liberating potential of the carnivalesque has been challenged by critics who question its social power (see Sales 1983 and Eagleton 1981) and qualitative historical reception research addresses the cultural significance of viewers' meaning-making, rather than textual influence. Instead this research has shown the reception of *Spitting Image* repeatedly exhibits anxieties, pleasures and

interpretations coherent with ‘carnivalesque’ and that this provides a way of defining a mode of political comedy that is separate and different from ‘satire’.

The negative reception of *Spitting Image* rejected the series because viewers were not able to define it as satire. This was most clear in comment columns from the quality press and such articles demonstrated what was at stake in evaluations of *Spitting Image* was not pleasure or a disinterested notion of quality but whether it fitted the cultural categorisations of satire. In these sources satire is defined as the apogee of political comedy, associated with the ability to influence viewers through politically committed authors, representational accuracy, and to withstand comparisons to canonical texts from literary history. These sources suggest ‘satire’ is the only valuable and important way of making comedy from references to politics, news and current affairs. Similar expectations have been seen in the previous chapters, where some viewers have expected that political comedy will conform to highbrow, high quality standards. This produces a hierarchy where textual elements associated with entertainment, celebrity, popular culture, lowbrow humour and lack of references to current affairs are evaluated as low value. This was particularly seen in discourses of failure, inappropriateness or low value that referred to the puppets of celebrities and television presenters, or the complaint that jokes about current affairs were not sufficiently current. In these sources *Spitting Image* was evaluated as lowbrow and defined as a failed *text* because it was seen as failed *satire*.

In contrast to the dominance of ‘satire’ in criticisms of *Spitting Image*, positive writing about the series in television reviews uses the term less frequently and without in-depth discussion, focusing on the pleasures of the puppets, their ugly, disgusting visual style and the creative skill behind them. Highbrow standards are not expressed in these positive comments and, while the scripts were criticised, the puppets are described by many as pleasurable due to their grotesque nature, a visual aspect of the carnivalesque that emphasises orifices and excrescences. Carnivalesque traits were also identified in the tabloid news coverage of *Spitting Image*, where the puppets were represented as disgusting, controversial and compelling, and both rejected and celebrated. Similar discourses of ambivalence were also expressed by some who worried that the puppets benefitted the public figures grotesquely represented, coherent with the carnivalesque’s ability to uncrown and renew through its own excess. Such writing demonstrates cultural standards that differ substantially from those associated with the term ‘satire’ in the negative responses.

However, there are no explicit attempts to clearly differentiate these standards from the dominant definitions of satire or provide an alternative classification. This suggests that ‘satire’ dominated the generic terms available within political comedy, and that even when writing about *Spitting Image*’s pleasures there was either ‘satire’ or an absence of terminology. The ‘carnivalesque’ fills this gap and offers another way of naming and writing about *Spitting Image*. This is not merely a matter of administrative detail, for defining aspects of the reception of *Spitting Image* as carnivalesque does two things. First of all, it acknowledges viewers of *Spitting Image* do not solely make meaning from

within the discourse of ‘satire’, and that they exhibit cultural standards different from its highbrow cultural categorisations. Second, it opens up how *Spitting Image*, and perhaps political comedy more widely, is culturally categorised, moving away from the general association between lowbrow culture and generic failure evident in other chapters. This conclusion has similarities with Glynn’s hypothesis about tabloid culture – that it offers alternative cultural positions for its viewers. The claim here is significantly less utopian, and the primary argument is that the ‘carnivalesque’ allows for greater clarity in discussing and evaluation. Simply rejecting *Spitting Image* as ‘not satire’ closes down debate by imposing an inappropriate set of criteria. The term ‘carnivalesque’ may have been silent but its characteristics are loud and clear in both the *Spitting Image* text and reception sources; wider use of the term acknowledges the mode exists and that some viewers appreciate its characteristics and cultural categorisations.

The identification of the two definitions and their different cultural categorisation also allows observations about the sources they originate from. The highbrow definitions of satire are dominant in comment articles from the quality press, affirming their generic role in producing and reproducing authoritative discourses about the world by defending and defining cultural highbrow cultural hierarchies and socially conservative values. In contrast, television reviews and feature articles from across the spectrum of journalism and news reports from tabloids papers repeatedly take pleasure in or exhibit aspects of the carnivalesque through subjective discourses that privilege personal pleasure and/or displeasure, emphasising emotive and/or sensational rhetoric. Tabloid news articles and headlines in particular suggest a cultural coherence between tabloidism and the

carnivalesque. These observations demonstrate the different standards that operate between different newspapers and between different genres of writing within newspapers.

Other claims can be made in relation to historical attitudes about British culture in the 1980s. Criticisms of the series within the discourse of ‘satire’ clearly express antipathies to Thatcher’s Conservative party (specifically from the left-leaning papers) and towards popular entertainment. The former is coherent with the political narrative established in the discussion of *The New Statesman* concerning anxieties about the dominance of the Conservative party, but the latter suggests a set of anxieties about the relationship between politics and current affairs, and entertainment and low culture. These can also be seen in relation to the few general criticisms of tabloid journalism and the complaints about the negative influence of references from outside the politics and current affairs. The positive reception to *Spitting Image* also exhibits pleasure in the humiliation of individuals via caricature, and viewers make no complaint that instead of focusing on official culture, it represents a wider public culture, particularly through puppets representing people with careers in the mass media.

While ‘satire’ and the association between highbrow culture and quality dominates explicit definitions of *Spitting Image*, this chapter has argued that part of the reception of *Spitting Image* acts as a ‘minority report’ for a cultural categorisation that celebrates ugliness, excess, ambivalence and lowbrow popular culture. This chapter has also observed that the cultural classifications of satire and the carnivalesque featured

opposing emphases; respectively, between the verbal and the visual, the high and the low, the socially affective and the pleasurable, and intellectual and the emotional. What is at stake in the reception of *Spitting Image* is its value as a political comedy text and the value of political comedy as a genre; some propose it could only possess value if it were made according to the cultural standards associated with satire but others appreciated it according to other criteria, such as those provided by Bakhtin's carnivalesque, tabloid culture or simply entertainment. While some journalists were able to express their pleasure at *Spitting Image*, the rhetorical and cultural power of the term 'satire' resulted in others judging it a failure. This chapter proposes an extension of the critical vocabulary and cultural categorisations used to define political comedy that extends beyond satire to include the carnivalesque and its ambivalent popular pleasures.

Chapter Five

Brass Eye: Comedy, ethics and power

I

The Sickest TV Show Ever

The *Brass Eye Special* (Channel 4 2001) introduces its topic immediately. A burst of white noise and a frantic montage of images are followed by a shot of a group of children ambling along an urban street. An authoritative male voice intones, “These are our children. They skip down our streets.” He pauses. “But the paedophile is waiting...” Discordant music plays over cutaways to street signs, ‘Fancia Drive’ and ‘Youngbottom Ride’, and an unnerving cackle breaks into the soundtrack as a man with ‘PAEDO’ scrawled on his forehead lurches forward into an extreme close-up. A cut and whip zoom out reveals that the man is standing with his arms around two children’s necks, before another burst of static and jerky cuts transitions to a different scene. Former England football captain Gary Lineker sits in a chair, explaining in earnest tones how paedophiles can become so sensitised to images of children that they will attack photographs where the child is no more than a tiny blur. The male voiceover returns, as the image cuts to footage of space rockets and mission control, reporting that convicted child murderer Sidney Cooke was placed into a space prison and launched into orbit but that an 8 year-old boy had been mistakenly left inside the vessel. Another cut to a television studio; Chris Morris, whose voiceover has run over the sequence, stands dressed in a suit against a black backdrop and next to a computer generated map of

Britain. He asks curtly, “Why can we no longer think of the British Isles without the word 'paedoph' in front of them?” The title of the map changes to reflect his lines and three leering faces emerge from the map, groaning and growling (see fig. 14). Morris turns to the map, yelling in fear as he shrinks to the size of a child. His cries rise in pitch as he runs yelling towards the camera and out of shot. The image cuts to the *Brass Eye* logo and the titles sequence begins. The rest of the thirty-minute programme parodies television news’ coverage of live events and current affairs crime reporting, presenting itself as a live studio broadcast of Operation Daisy Bird, a campaign to protect Britain’s children from paedophiles by securing them inside sports stadiums. Co-presented by Swanchita Haze (Doon Mackicham) and Valise Belcher (Julia Davis), it includes other parodic content such as a history of paedophilia in the UK, a case study of paedophile Jez North, a live video linkup to a protest about North’s imminent release, focus groups with actual members of the public, and supposed public service announcements about paedophiles from public figures. Most content is scripted and fictional, apart from the latter two which involved hoaxing individuals.



Figure 14. Still from the opening of the *Brass Eye Special*.

The response to this special episode, aired on 26 July 2001, was passionate and dominated by a debate about whether it was right for *Brass Eye* - “a satirical programme for an adult audience” according to Channel 4 (2002, 14) - to refer to paedophilia. On 28 July the front page of the *Daily Mail* described it as “The sickest TV show ever” (Conlan and Boshoff 2001, 1; see fig. 15) and negative responses also came from the left-leaning press with the *Guardian* publishing an article entitled, ‘It had no place on TV’ (Coward 2001, 15). Critics argued that *Brass Eye* had unacceptably crossed boundaries by combining comedy with references to paedophilia, though others interpreted the programme as parodying the British media’s sensationalist representations. Similar debates over the limits of comedy had also taken place during the broadcast of *Brass Eye*’s six-edition series in 1997, when public figures were tricked into supporting fictional campaigns and charities; some argued the hoaxes were wrong

and deceitful, while others defended them as highlighting how some celebrities and politicians support issues they know nothing about.

Fury as Channel 4 repeats spoof child-sex

THE SICKEST TV SHOW EVER

By Tara Conlan
and Alison Boshoff

CHANNEL 4 stood defiant last night after screening a vile spoof documentary about paedophilia.

The *Brass Eye* programme on Thursday night provoked a record 2,000-plus complaints from disgusted members of the public.

The NSPCC said it was deeply offensive and trivialised offences against children.

Yet the much-criticised broadcaster still scheduled a repeat of the programme last night.

And the chairman of the board which sanctioned the screening - who astonishingly ran a recent appeal for the NSPCC - stood by its decision.

Father-of-three Vanni Trevis, 60, said: 'I was involved in the decision that this should be shown and I think it was right.'

Two million viewers saw the beginning of the programme, hosted and written by satirist Chris Morris, at 10.35pm on Thursday. By the time it finished half an hour later, a million had turned off.

In one scene, Morris played a Crime-watch-style presenter introducing a boy pretending to be his son to a paedophile and asking him if he would like to have sex with him. More than 1,000 viewers called

Turn to Page 6, Col. 1

Figure 15. *Daily Mail* coverage of the *Special* (Conlan and Boshoff 2001) on 28 July 2001.

Defining *Brass Eye* as political comedy is perhaps less obvious than the other case studies because it does not give the same sustained attention to either political culture or to political figures. However, it is consistently described as 'satire' and its references to

television current affairs and the topical issue of paedophilia are coherent with this thesis' textual definition of political comedy. *Brass Eye* is considered a canonical text in British television history, featuring in recent books, such as *Fifty Key Television Programmes* (Creeber 2004) and *Experimental British Television* (Mulvey and Sexton 2007), and is available on home video. The initial controversy and the continued significance of *Brass Eye*, coupled with the considerable number of reception sources from newspapers and the internet, make it an ideal candidate for this final case study of the genre of political comedy. As in previous chapters, reception sources are taken from the British press and individuals posting comments or reviews on the internet. 109 newspaper sources were gathered from the BFI National Library's Press Cuttings Collection and a further 63 from online newspaper archive ProQuest, giving 172 articles. Newspaper sources originate from 1997 and 2001, the years in which the series and the *Special* were broadcast, respectively. 69 comments were gathered from websites reviewing the DVD release of *Brass Eye*:²¹⁵ Amazon.co.uk and IMDb.com. Chris Morris is the subject of significant fan attention and 32 discussions threads referred to *Brass Eye* in the longest-serving fan website, cookdandbombd.co.uk, but only a small number of these refer to the texts in any detail.

As has been shown in previous chapters, responses to political comedy texts have often referred to their effect upon individuals or society. Critics of *TW3* claimed it was attacking Britain, political sitcom was positively evaluated according to the extent it revealed truths about political culture to viewers, and *Spitting Image* was criticised for

²¹⁵ Internet reviews were written between 1998 and 2011 in relation to the DVD release of *Brass Eye*, which include all seven editions.

failing to produce an effective critique of British politics. The reception of *Brass Eye* is most akin to that of *TW3*; critics repeatedly discuss the *Special's* references to paedophilia and the series' hoaxing of celebrities within a discourse of harm and the creation of suffering. Positive comments take a different perspective but also see the series as possessing affective power in its ability to critique the media, linking this to notions of education and media literacy. Similar powers are located in the positive and negative responses to the hoaxing of public figures. This chapter will also argue that ethics played a significant part in the reception of *Brass Eye* and these sources give access to two moral panics from the period of the late 1990s and early 2000s; anxieties about the threat posed by predatory paedophiles living anonymously in British society, and anxieties about the spread of tabloid media practices and their influence on British culture. This chapter will therefore discuss how *Brass Eye* is understood as a disgusting way of producing unethical comedy by one group of viewers, and described by others as an intervention against the corruption of journalistic practices and television standards in the British media. This chapter will also show how the meanings and interpretations specifically attributed to comedy pleasure inform an understanding of how people felt about paedophilia and the mass media during this period. What is at stake in the reception of *Brass Eye* are the cultural and social effects ascribed to the combination of comedy and social deviance, and how these relate to viewers' historical contexts, beliefs about the appropriate use of comedy and comedy style, and the point where comedy becomes associated with pain instead of pleasure.

II

Against *Brass Eye*: Comedy harm

Negative responses to *Brass Eye* describe it as disgusting, unethical and harmful. People consistently label its references to paedophilia as inappropriate and wrong, and the hoaxing of public figures as a harmful deception. These discourses are most prevalent in the press reception, and negative internet comments focus on creative criticisms of the *Special*, rather than issues of ethics. Internet fan responses will be discussed but this section focuses on the ways *Brass Eye* is written about as a socially unacceptable text that creates suffering, paying attention to how comedy and paedophilia are defined and interpreted.

The *Brass Eye Special*'s controversial potential was evident before it was broadcast. The programme had been scheduled for some weeks before but it was reported in early July there were anxieties at Channel 4 about the coincident news of a missing teenager, Danielle Jones.²¹⁶ Such anxieties proved well-founded and the eventual transmission produced responses that, unlike the tabloid controversies of *Spitting Image*, expressed unambiguous and passionate opposition. The *Daily Mail* printed a viewer's reaction: "It was the worst programme I have seen on British TV, beyond words." (Mrs Delia Neale quoted in Sears and Woolfe 2001, 22) The language of the negative response was forceful and emotive in news reports, comment pieces and through quotes from the general public and charities. The most potent terms were used by the popular press; the

²¹⁶ See Walton (2001).

News of the World reported Channel 4 had received bomb threats²¹⁷ and later claimed the programme might lead to criminal charges,²¹⁸ though none were ever pressed.

The mid-market (Franklin 2008, 6) *Daily Mail* similarly referred to the edition as “vile...deeply offensive...inappropriate and irresponsible”, reporting on the “record 2,000-plus complaints from disgusted members of the public” (Conlan and Boshoff 2001, 1). Quality newspapers proposed more reasoned arguments about the programme’s inappropriate nature, with the *Telegraph* arguing “it fell into the worse trap of trivialising the gravest offences against children” (McCartney 2001, n.p.²¹⁹) but there was still an emotive discourse of low-level disgust; a *Guardian* editorial described it as “a deeply unpleasant piece of television” (2001, 17).

These responses are dominated by the idea that making and broadcasting the *Brass Eye Special* was wrong and should not have happened. This is an ethical claim; ethics, or ‘moral philosophy’, “deal with values, with good and bad, with right and wrong” (Singer 1991, v). A number of articles explicitly refer to morality;²²⁰ a caustic *Mail on Sunday* article profiled Morris’ co-star, Doon Mackichan, writing she “failed to realise...the greater moral dimension...demanded by national TV” (Pryer and Gill 2001, 34). The *Daily Mirror* asserted moral authority by claiming “Newspaper editors...understand the views and moral beliefs of the people whose loyalty pays our wages” (S. Carroll 2001,

²¹⁷ See Arnold (2001).

²¹⁸ See *News of the World* (2001).

²¹⁹ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²²⁰ Singer suggests morality and ethics are homologous but ethics is the debate and study of how to live, whilst ‘morality’ refers to the specific claims and rules.

11). Other articles implied an ethical stance through their choice of language, such as the metaphor of a line or boundary. Tessa Jowell, then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, said it was “tearing down all the boundaries of decency on television” (quoted in *Independent* 2001). Descriptions of the show as disgusting or sick also relate to ethics for “disgust has indeed come to play an important and systemic role in human moral psychology” (Kelly 2011, 102), for example, “hearing stories about others who have committed incest can induce disgust” (120). The rejection of *Brass Eye* as disgusting is thus related to interpretations of its social deviance, and this is consistently related to claims the programme was able to create suffering through the utterly inappropriate combination of comedy and references to paedophilia.

Defining the *Special*: a paedo-comedy and its pleasures

Such was the strength of the offense that a number of journalists supported regulatory action against Channel 4,²²¹ while two government ministers, Tessa Jowell²²² and David Blunkett,²²³ made comment, and supposedly met with officials from the Independent Television Commission (ITC). One week after the initial broadcast an ITC spokesperson summarised the dominant content of complaints about the *Special*: “They’re saying they don’t think it was a suitable subject for humour” (quoted in Wells 2001, 4). Channel 4 described the *Special* as “a powerful satire on the way the media exploits and sensationalises the subject of paedophilia” (*ibid.*), defining it as a ‘media satire’ but

²²¹ See Heffer (2001) and Conlan and Boshoff (2001).

²²² See Laing (2001).

²²³ See Murphy (2001).

negative responses repeatedly referred to comedy, humour and other cognate terms to define *Brass Eye* and its intended effects.²²⁴

Dr Fox, the Capital FM DJ, also admitted being taken in, but said the subject has been inappropriate for comedy... (*ibid.*)

Had the bold Mr Morris made a straightforward documentary...the whole affair would probably have passed unnoticed...Instead he lampooned it, he mocked it, and – worst of all – did it for laughs. (Laing 2001, 10)

In these sources comedy and paedophilia are described as discourses that are entirely incompatible. This is based on how the two are culturally categorised; paedophilia was defined as a clear and present risk of incalculable harm, while comedy was written about as a genre devoted to pleasure, laughter and joking. The *Sun* asked rhetorically, “What had provoked such fury? A show that wanted us all to have a laugh at paedophilia and child porn” (2001, n.p.²²⁵).

For those who didn’t have the ‘pleasure’ the sketch involved sending Cooke up in a spacecraft...but accidentally sealing an eight-year old boy in with him...Call me a prude but I just couldn’t laugh... (Coward 2001, 15)

²²⁴ See Heffer (2001).

²²⁵ The fan website CookdandBombd reproduces a collection of articles that were not found elsewhere. This is one.

The topic of paedophilia was thus not considered inappropriate for television or journalism *per se* but rather for the hedonistic mode of comedy: Allan Laing in the *Glasgow Herald*, quoted above, argued that a mode associated with seriousness, such as documentary, would not have caused a controversy. While this thesis defines *Brass Eye* as ‘political comedy’, the negative reception defines its references to paedophilia as a “vehicle for comedy” (Heffer 2001, 15) and then defines comedy itself as a mode solely related to pleasure. As a result, *Brass Eye*’s pleasures are located in paedophilia, and ‘paedo-comedy’ replaces Channel 4’s definition of ‘media satire’. A *Daily Mail* article quotes a charity, National Children’s Homes, describing it as “a comedy based on the sexual abuse of children” (quoted in Conlan and Boshoff 2001, 6).

The journalistic definition of the *Special* as a paedo-comedy is also supported by articles that suggest it featured graphic representations of child abuse. As described above, the pre-credits sequence referred to convicted child murderer Sidney Cooke, and Ros Coward described it in the *Guardian* thus: “the sketch involved sending Cooke up in a spacecraft...but accidentally sealing an eight-year old boy in with him” (2001, 15). This permits the reader to imagine that the narrative described was dramatised and represented visually. However, the television text is very different: the segment is 24 seconds long and apart from a still image of Cooke’s face in the corner of the screen it includes only library footage of space craft, a rocket blasting off, staff at mission control and some text. The reference to the child occurs only in Morris’ voiceover:

Last month the notorious paedophile Sydney Cook was blasted into space to spend the rest of his life aboard a one-man prison vessel, posing no further threat to children on Earth. But it was revealed that an 8-year-old boy was also placed on board by mistake and is now trapped alone in space with the monster. A spokesman said “This is the one thing we didn’t want to happen.”

By describing the text incompletely, this article defines the segment as a comedy sketch about a young boy trapped with a sadistic killer and is vague enough to allow significant imaginative freedom as to how disgusting it could be. A *Sun* article similarly writes a “‘sketch’ showed a little American girl with breast implants” (Darvill 2001, 9). Again this ignores context and detail. It is one part of a segment parodying American television and the image of the child with breast implants is pixelated (see fig. 16). This is not to reject Darvill’s criticism but demonstrates that some responses represented the text as unambiguously disgusting and unethical through incomplete descriptions that emphasise references to the abuse or sexualisation of children. These support the negative interpretation that *Brass Eye* was a paedo-comedy rather than a media satire.



Figure 16. Still from the *Brass Eye Special*.

Lockyer and Attwood (2009) account for the prevalence of the ‘paedo-comedy’ by arguing journalists “misinterpreted the ‘target’ of the satire” (2009, 55). This implies there is a single correct interpretation of the *Special* and that journalists such as Coward have made a mistake in their meaning-making. However, this underestimates complainants’ powers of comprehension and media literacy, for many refer to Channel 4’s definition of the show as ‘satire’ but reject its legitimacy. Some imply *Brass Eye*’s combination of paedophilia and comedy might have been acceptable as satire but that shocking content undermined this; Hugo Young wrote in the *Guardian*, “The satire was too deeply embedded in the shock effect to make much sense.” (2001, n.p.)²²⁶²²⁷ Satire is defined as incompatible with shock because it prevents intellectual coherence, and other

²²⁶ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²²⁷ See also Hegarty (2001).

conclusions of ‘not satire’ combine criticisms of the text’s shock and pleasures as inappropriate emotional responses:

Did [Brass Eye] really need to...perform gags about men such as [Sidney] Cooke? The satire could have survived without it... (McCartney 2001, n.p.²²⁸)

Others do not make such clear arguments but still refer to Channel 4’s ‘satire’ definition. The *Daily Mail*’s Simon Heffer described it as “the most grievous breach of taste I have ever seen on television” while pointing out Morris intended to “[satirise] the media and society’s response to paedophilia” (2001, 15). Some articles deliberately subordinate the media satire definition by placing a quote from Channel 4 in the final paragraph²²⁹ but few ignore it. The negative sources do not validate Lockyer and Attwood’s (2009) conclusion that the emphasis on paedophilia was an error by unsubtle viewers but suggest it was an interpretation based on different criteria. These were ethical criteria that regarded the use of comedy in relation to paedophilia as a disgusting social deviance based upon the conflation of comedy with pleasure, and upon defining paedophilia as uniquely harmful. As seen, successful political comedy has been argued to possess serious and educative power but the contrast between comedy and paedophilia are so great that comedy is simplified into a single characteristic: pleasure. The emotional potency associated with paedophilia in 2001 can be contextualised with reference to the contemporaneous moral panic about paedophile crime in the UK.

²²⁸ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²²⁹ See Conlan and Boshoff (2001).

Moral panic: paedophilia in the late 1990s

One historical context for the *Brass Eye Special's* production and reception was the growing anxiety during the late 1990s and early 2000s about the presence of predatory child sex offenders in British communities, and the role of television and newspapers in propagating narratives about the threat posed by these individuals. Silverman and

Silverman and Wilson reported that “we are undeniably more concerned about paedophile crime than we were twenty or thirty years ago” (2002, 21-22) and demonstrated that newspapers’ reporting of paedophilia increased significantly during the 1990s (22). They argue “the media has played a crucial role in providing information about paedophiles and has contributed to creating a ‘moral panic’ at a time when the numbers of sex offenders were actually stable within the prison population” (*ibid.*). This featured fears that convicted paedophiles were being released into the community to live anonymously, enabling them to reoffend easily, and these were reproduced in the popular, mid-market and quality press (Cross and Lockyer 2004, 3). One key moment was the murder of seven year-old Sarah Payne who disappeared on 1 July 2000; her body was found two weeks later and her killer Roy Whiting was convicted in December 2001. After the trial, Whiting’s previous convictions for child sex offenses were publicised and this was used to support a campaign initiated by the *News of the World* in

July 2000 for what was dubbed ‘Sarah’s Law’; legislation that would allow communities to know if convicted sex offenders moved into their areas. This, and the *News of the World*’s ‘naming and shaming’ of 79 convicted paedophiles, led to the excesses of this panic being associated with the tabloid press. The apparent danger of such coverage was highlighted when residents of Paulsgrove, an estate in Portsmouth, began street protests in response to fears about a local man, Victor Burnett, who had been ‘named and shamed’ in the *News of the World* (Silverman and Wilson 2002). These led to threats of vigilante justice and incidents of vandalism, and Cross and Lockyer (2004) give examples of other attacks following newspapers reports. Lockyer and Attwood (2009) argue that by 2001 “the British press and broadcasting were thus sensitised to paedophile crimes, trials and releases, and the risks posed paedophiles to individual children and communities as a whole” (51).

These discourses are easily identified in the more emotive responses to the *Special*; Heffer described paedophilia as singularly evil and implicitly refers to the high level of risk posed by paedophiles: “when the nation was revolted by the...murder of Sarah Payne, I, like millions of other parents, knew that there but for the grace of God went I... Paedophilia is a uniquely horrific crime.” (2001, 15)²³⁰ In these responses paedophilia is not a vague threat but a crime threatening all British children. The power of this threat is suggested by the emotive detail of victims’ suffering used to accuse the *Special* of ignoring the truth of paedophile crime, referencing a victim of Sidney Cooke, the paedophile referred to in the pre-credits sequence.

²³⁰ See also *Sun* (2001).

Perhaps Morris didn't acquaint himself with the details of how Cooke tortured and abused Jason, who died with tears on his cheeks. (Coward 2001, 15)²³¹

This detail is used to assert the discursive significance and seriousness of paedophilia and supports the ethical stance that combining such a topic with a genre of pleasure is wrong. References to paedophilia evoked a threat to children, the suffering of victims, fear of unknown criminals and the belief that these were all proximate and real. These anxieties reflect a dominant press discourse from the period and classify paedophilia as a serious topic that should only be combined within other discourses of seriousness, such as a documentary or journalism.

The negative reception of *Brass Eye* thus performs a discursive policing of pleasure and of generic boundaries, evaluating which subjects, genres and modes are appropriate for combination. Rejecting *Brass Eye* as a combination of comedy and paedophilia is an assertion about the boundaries of both, based on defining comedy as unserious and paedophilia as very serious. In relation to the British press, this discursive schema also affirms the right of newspapers to refer to paedophilia within the serious discourse of news, reaffirming their central role in defining the issue, despite widespread criticisms of their coverage, not least from *Brass Eye* itself. The discursive significance of paedophilia and the emotive power of disgust displaced the *Special's* critique of media practices to produce an ethical critique of the show's use of comedy. These journalists reject Morris' work and promote the journalistic field's own practices of reporting as appropriate and ethical, and also demonstrate a deep unease about emotional responses

²³¹ Jason's tears are also referred to by McCartney (2001).

to *Brass Eye*, specifically the consequences of combining pleasure with socially serious issues.

Similar concerns about Morris' use of comedy and seriousness are hinted at in scholarship; Mills (2007) evaluates Morris' *Jam* (Channel 4 2000) as an experiment with television comedy aesthetics and displays no discomfort with the idea of serious comedy. However, Mills does appear wary of *unserious* comedy and displays something approaching disapproval that Morris' "experimentalism may also *serve to justify* content that is less concerned with exploring serious issues" (2007, 191, my emphasis). This suggests that the intention to "generate laughter for less socially 'serious' purposes" (2007, 192) needs justification, allowing the inference that true comedic experimentalism avoids *unserious* pleasure due to the latter's lowbrow, popular nature.²³² This inference is supported by the definition of these less serious comedic elements as "enjoyment in the repeated use of nonsense language, offensive words, and jokes about death, the body, sex and genitalia" (Mills 2007, 192), a description that evokes the carnivalesque, and the criticisms of *Spitting Image* as lowbrow. This reiterates concerns that the 'serious' can be devalued by 'unserious' pleasure and that seriousness must be monitored and patrolled for disruptive, *unserious* intrusions.

Interpreting the *Special's* paedo pleasures

In the case of the *Brass Eye Special*, the disruptive combination of comedy and paedophilia was interpreted as possessing the power to create or exacerbate harm in

²³² Though Mills elsewhere criticises work on sitcom that places "progressiveness over pleasure" (2005, 142).

several ways; the evocation of previous abuse; the trivialising of paedophilia; the distortion of truth; and the production of pathologised pleasure.

Narrowing the definition of *Brass Eye*'s comedy to the production of simple pleasure or shock produced the interpretation it was an unserious but powerful text that broke discursive boundaries in an unethical way. This was consistently based in a connection between the *Special* and harm. A few sources claimed this originated in the text's ability to reproduce or evoke memories of suffering in the victims of paedophiles.

...there were certain places, like paedophilia, where we would not go [in comedy]. Places where you could potentially damage someone. (Mike Bolland, television comedy producer, quoted in Laing 2001, 10)

As a comedy producer, Bolland makes it clear it is *comedic* references to paedophiles that could cause hurt, and he makes no comments about news, current affairs or documentaries. The endangerment of other individuals by *Brass Eye* was also cited in relation to the child actors employed in the production of the programme, with some journalists implying the young actors had been at risk.²³³

Anxieties about the text causing suffering did not dominate the reception and many criticisms instead focused on the trivialisation of paedophilia. These sources still refer to victims, some implicitly, through an argument about the discursive relationship between

²³³ See Pryer and Gill (2001) and Sears and Woolfe (2001). The ITC also received complaints on this issue, though ruled there had been no breach of production standards.

paedophilia and satire or comedy: “Paedophilia should not be satirised because it trivialises the issue.” (Syd Rapson MP quoted Arnold 2001, 16) This was repeated by several articles²³⁴ and though the specific process of trivialisation is not expanded upon it is clearly regarded as inappropriate and wrong. Trivialisation is the process by which something is rendered commonplace or of little importance, and the act of trivialisation is located in comedy, conflated with satire by Syd Rapson, the genre of pleasure that renders its representations as unserious and frivolous.

The processes of trivialisation can be seen in criticisms that *Brass Eye* did not make adequate reference to the suffering caused by paedophilia and thus produced inappropriate attitudes to paedophilia. A ‘paedo-comedy’ is by definition unethical because it renders the serious risk of paedophiles as unserious – potentially decreasing vigilance and allowing paedophiles greater freedom to offend – and suggests that the suffering of victims is also ‘unserious’, creating a text whose principal effect is to produce pleasure from human pain. Such pleasures contradict the empathy that is socially appropriate upon encountering suffering; from religious parables to utilitarianism, the ethical response to suffering is prevention rather than laughter. By defining comedy as comic pleasure, the negative sources accuse *Brass Eye* of undermining the appropriate emotional response to paedophilia; disgust at the criminals, empathy with the victims. This is again reliant upon defining the text as ‘about paedophilia’, rather than about the ‘media representation of paedophilia’. The expectation that *Brass Eye* should represent the suffering of victims authentically also

²³⁴ For example, Conlan and Boshoff (2001); and Beverly Hughes, Home Office minister, quoted in Murphy (2001).

shows the use of ethical standards of respecting human suffering coherent with standards of journalism or documentary, as described by John Birt, Director-General of the BBC from 1992 to 2000, in a volume on television ethics: “we must always remember the responsibility the broadcaster has to the humanity of the people affected” (quoted in Shaw 1999, 118). The programme was found to be unethical and hurtful because its representations ignored the humanity of those affected by such abuse.

Such was the disgust at the *Special*’s apparent diminution of human suffering that a number of sources suggested that appreciating the show was complicit with paedophilia. Viewers who enjoyed *Brass Eye* are thus said to have enjoyed content about paedophilia and should be ashamed, with the additional implication that the *Special* might be suitable for the mentally ill or paedophiles themselves, with the hoaxed Richard Blackwood quoted as saying, “If you think that kiddie porn is funny you should have a good laugh.” (Richard Blackwood quoted in Wells 2001, 4)²³⁵ A similar anxiety can be seen in research into violent racist jokes, where Billig writes: “It is not expected that any readers will laugh at the jokes. Rather it is expected they will be horrified that anyone might find such material humorous” (2009, 29). What is and is not found to be funny is therefore closely related to an individual’s ethical values. It is right to be disgusted by racism and paedophilia and to support human equality but to laugh at jokes about them raises suspicions. *Brass Eye*’s comedy pleasure is thus also framed as unethical because it might foster moral corruption, inviting viewers to not only ignore the suffering of victims but to indulge in deviant tendencies. This discourse is highly rhetorical, though

²³⁵ See also *Daily Mail* (2001).

other articles quote official comments by police officers,²³⁶ implying *Brass Eye*'s proximity to criminal activity. Comedy pleasure is pathologised and simplified into ideological correspondence; it is proposed that when we take pleasure in representations we also support, agree with and like them.

The final pathologisation of *Brass Eye* lies in the way that Chris Morris is defined as the programme's socially and psychologically deviant author. This includes a criticism of moral hypocrisy because he did not assist police enquiries into child abuse at his former school (Boshoff 2001) and descriptions that describe him as possessing "a deep-seated hatred of humanity." (Lewis-Smith 2001, n.p.²³⁷) A few articles even link Morris' psychological state to his appearance, continuing the link between aesthetics, value and ethics in an interpretation of his face:

Morris still hates being photographed because of the strawberry-coloured birthmark on the left-hand side of his face... Others who have worked with Morris say he is an arrogant, egotistical character, driven by an almost psychopathic need to shock but too cowardly to account for his actions.
(Donnelly 2001, 28)

The comedy, the pleasure and the author of the *Special* are bound up in related discourse of deviance and harm where the comedic referencing of paedophilia threatens

²³⁶ See *News of the World* (2001).

²³⁷ The fan website CookdandBombd reproduces a collection of articles that were not found elsewhere. This is one.

individuals, children and the community, and produces unethical pleasure that is an affront to human dignity.

Aesthetic criticisms from internet fans

In contrast to the ethical concerns about the *Special's* references to paedophilia, the few criticisms on internet review sites and fan site CookdandBombd.co.uk discuss textual quality and value in the context of Morris as an auteur.²³⁸ Only a third of the internet reviews refer to the *Special* and some do not mention the paedophile material, suggesting the avoidance of a taboo subject.

Brass Eye may not always be in the best of taste, (I won't mention the ill received 'paedophile' episode that caused several papers to brand Morris as Satan) (bazza83, 23 November 2002, review in Amazon 2011)

Evaluations of the paedophile content from fans are also rare and never detailed, although this may be due to forum material not dating beyond 2004, divorcing the responses from the moment of broadcast. Internet criticism of the *Special* therefore displays a completely different frame of reference to the negative press reception, exhibiting coherence with Hills' findings about horror fans where responses to texts were dominated by discourses of generic and textual connoisseurship and knowledge

²³⁸ See also Comments at 03:36a.m. and 12:33a.m. September 16 2009 in Coookd and Bombd 2001a; Cooperman, 4 December 2005, review in IMDb 2011; Comment at 08:10p.m. 15 October 2010 in Cookd and Bombd 2011b.

(Hills 2005, 75).²³⁹ Many fans consider that the *Special* is an inferior text compared to the rest of the 1997 series, writing “The *Special* is perhaps not quite as funny as the others” (E. Parry, 30 April 2002, review in Amazon 2011) and that it “didn’t really live up to the series.” (movieman_kev, 8 September 2005, review in IMDb 2011)²⁴⁰

Internet reviews and fan sources adopt an evaluative position based upon quality and comedic pleasure, though some reach conclusions homologous to the press criticisms of the show’s ‘shock’ comedy: “the satire is pretty clumsy at times” (Comment at 12:33a.m. 16 September 2009 in Cookd and Bombd 2011a). Thus, rather than ethics, aesthetic quality and connoisseurship are the principal discourses for fans of Chris Morris and for internet reviews of *Brass Eye Special*, even to the point of associating low aesthetic value with discomfort.

I’d always recalled it being terribly disappointing but containing some good stuff in there, recycled ideas aside. Well, [watching it again] I have to say that *it was not a pleasant half hour*. Only Blackwood’s ‘hammers’ line made me laugh out loud, and Fox with the crab did elicit a few chuckles, but in the main I felt like I was just wasting my time. (Comment at 6.30a.m. 10 April 2004 in Cookd and Bombd 2011c, my emphasis)

²³⁹ Fandom is also suggested by the absurd user names which have been removed but are reminiscent of Morris’ style of comedy.

²⁴⁰ See also Comment at 08:57a.m. 3 April 2004 and Comment at 12:12a.m. 4 April 2004, in Cookd and Bombd 2011c.

This commenter's 'not pleasant' experience was not, as many journalists expressed, based upon the offensive combination of comedy with references to paedophilia but the absence of comic pleasure, defining the enjoyment of comedy as the principle evaluative criterion and making no mention of the ethical concerns expressed in many newspaper articles.

The negative reception of the *Brass Eye Special* is thus dominated by the programme's references to paedophilia, with particularly emotive discourses appearing in the popular and mid-market press, coherent with their involvement in the moral panic about paedophilia dating from the late 1990s. The significant and harmful power ascribed to the *Special* cannot be understood without this historical context and it would be methodologically suspect to extend such ethical criteria beyond this case study to political comedy in general. However, the letters of complaint about *TW3* suggest that discourses of anxiety and harm can be prompted by references to socially significant topics, and that the *Special's* engagement with paedophilia is the primary cue for viewers' ethical evaluations. Furthermore, the reception of earlier editions of *Brass Eye* shows that similar interpretations of individual harm had prompted ethical evaluations in relation to *Brass Eye's* hoaxing of public figures over four years before.

Brass Eye, power and public figures

The first episode of *Brass Eye* was broadcast on 29 January 1997, though as with the *Special* transmission had been intended for an earlier date, in November 1996. Newspapers reported it was postponed at short notice due to Channel 4's anxieties over

whether the use of hoax interviews broke broadcasting regulations.²⁴¹ Each episode of the 1997 series was based on a single topic, discussing Animals, Drugs, Science, Sex, Crime, and Decline in a parody of television current affairs programming. Much like the *Special*, each episode parodied archive material, investigative reports, computer graphics, dramatic reconstructions and interviews. Most featured Chris Morris in a variety of roles, playing the presenter Christopher Morris in each edition and numerous other characters discussing absurd topics, such as weasel fighting in the London's East End. Other segments featured public figures who were fooled into participating in hoax reports, public service announcements, charity campaigns and studio interviews.

In the episode ‘Sex’, broadcast on 19 February 1997, Morris encouraged advice columnist Claire Rayner to explain how she would ‘beat him off’,²⁴² and in the episode ‘Drugs’, broadcast on 5 February 1997, Bernard Ingham, Noel Edmonds, Bruno Brooks, Rolf Harris, Bernard Manning and David Amess MP described the dangers of a new drug called ‘cake’. It was these segments of the 1997 series that produced the most negative responses.²⁴³ As would happen in 2001, Channel 4 provided their own interpretation, with the Channel 4 Chief Executive Michael Grade writing to the *Times* that “[*Brass Eye*] highlights how easily some people who command media attention can be persuaded to endorse a cause...without even attempting to make the most rudimentary check.” (letter to the editor, dated 14 February 1997) Despite this, complainants wrote that the hoaxes went beyond the boundaries of appropriateness to

²⁴¹ See Landesman (1997) and Culf (1996).

²⁴² Slang for masturbation.

²⁴³ Despite the ‘Sex’ episode making some references to child abuse.

produce unethical comedy, describing the series as fraudulent,²⁴⁴ vicious²⁴⁵ and breaking broadcasting regulations.²⁴⁶

Though it is significantly less intense, the negative reception to the hoaxes exhibits very similar discourses to that of the *Special*, expressing interpretations that *Brass Eye* was able to hurt individuals, decrease empathy and increase suffering through the trivial pursuit of pleasure. The *Sunday Times* drew comparisons between shock and low intellectual value, describing Morris' career aim as finding “the nerve that will get him banned...The effect of his inventions is the dumbing down of satire” (1997, 3). In the same paper, Cosmo Landesman, also in the *Sunday Times*, described Morris' best hoax as convincing fans that the hoaxes “are somehow radical or subversive” (1997, 12). Just as the issue of paedophilia dominated definitions of the 2001 episode, hoaxes were often described as the principal aspect of the 1997 series, simplifying the series to a comedy prank show just as the *Special* was described as a ‘paedo-comedy’: “The central conceit is that this is a spoof news and current affairs show that makes fun of gullible celebrities” (A.A. Gill 1997, 12).²⁴⁷ As with the *Special*, the hoaxes become the focus for complainants who describe it as a ‘hoax comedy’ and reject the entire text through an interpretation of harm.

This was divided between criticisms that the hoaxes deceived and humiliated the well-meaning and produced undeserved emotional pain; and the claim that such hoaxes

²⁴⁴ See Lawson (1997).

²⁴⁵ See Purves (1997).

²⁴⁶ See McElvoy (2001).

²⁴⁷ See Hagan (1997) and Aaronovitch (1997).

would reduce celebrity endorsements for good causes in the future, reducing the efficacy of their beneficial work. In the former, the public figures are represented as good-hearted victims with benign motives upon whom Chris Morris has inappropriately chosen to inflict the pain of humiliation.²⁴⁸ This is then linked by a few to concerns that it will reduce public figures involvement with genuine charitable organizations and good causes, accepting without question that such participation is important and useful. Claire Rayner wrote of her own hoaxing in the *Observer*:

Because of this series, it seems likely that fewer and fewer honest people who speak on TV out of conviction will agree to do so in future. (Rayner 1997, 1)

As with the paedophile material, a substantial number of commentators did note the hoaxes were intended as a critique of the media and publicity hungry public figures. However, the legitimacy of this critique was contested by claims that the wrong individuals had been hoaxed, Libby Purves in the *Times* described it as “less crusading than cowardly” (Purves 1997, n.p.²⁴⁹) and Cosmo Landesman in the *Sunday Times* challenged Morris’ critique, asking:

But are these celebs really publicity-starved prats who will do or say anything to get onto television – as we are meant to assume – or are they people who, when asked to support a worthy cause, are prepared to do so? (Landesman 1997, 13)

²⁴⁸ See also Lewis-Smith (2001), *Sunday Times* (1997); and Syd Rapson MP quoted in Arnold (2001).

²⁴⁹ The fan website CookdandBombd reproduces a collection of articles that were not found elsewhere. This is one.

Just as paedophilia was judged to be unethical because the topic produced pleasure from suffering, so the hoaxes and the deceit they relied upon was judged to create unethical harm because its targets were innocents who did not deserve the humiliation of being hoaxed. This resulted in discomfort for viewers who empathised with the hoaxed individual, with AA Gill stating in the *Sunday Times*, “I find humiliation television virtually unwatchable...It’s just too embarrassing” (1997, 12).²⁵⁰ Empathy with the hoaxed is directly described as preventing or interrupting comedy pleasure, and discussions on the fan site CookdandBombd.co.uk articulate the discomfort of empathy, although the dominance of aesthetic disinterest and connoisseurship is suggested by their ambivalence, one describing the hoaxes as “still funny, in a rather guilty way.” (Comment at 08:38p.m. 26 February 2004 in Cookd and Bombd 2011d) and another recording that “some of the people involved in it seem genuinely upset... (yes okay they are stupid to believe it but I still dont approve)” (Comment at 08:57a.m. 3 April 2004 in Cookd and Bombd 2011c).

The emotional discomfort of watching the hoaxes is located in witnessing deceit, humiliation and the creation of suffering in another individual, or the assertion of power over another. This Hobbesian view of comedy-as-superiority results in pity, rather than pleasure, because the hoaxed are identified as individuals worthy of being treated with honesty, even if they are also stupid or unlovable. This anxiety about Morris’ power subordinates other emotional responses, and the deception and humiliation of an individual is presented as a problematic subject for television. Some interpret it as a

²⁵⁰ See Aaronovitch (1997).

negative cultural trend or part of Morris' pathological character who "take[s] a sadistic delight in having power over people" (Landesman 1997, 13).²⁵¹ Complainants were concerned about *Brass Eye*'s ability to produce or exacerbate suffering through personal humiliation, the reduction of trust and the increase of sadism in public life. Once again, the response to the series is evaluated in terms of right and wrong, interpreting the hoaxes as the unethical treatment of individuals by *Brass Eye*.

Power over pain

Much of *Brass Eye*'s content is often absurd and entirely fictional - for example, weasel fighting - but the empathetic reaction in the negative reception must be seen as having its foundation in the aspects of the text that directly relate to real individuals: its references to paedophilia and the hoaxing of public figures. In the case of the *Special* no specific individuals were cited but rather the rhetorical projection of victims, while in the hoaxes journalists both discussed and quoted public figures who expressed their hurt. In both cases the anxiety is over the suffering of human beings and it is this that prompts interpretations of unethical comedy, exhibiting an interpretative framework based on a discourse of individual human dignity and communal empathy. *Brass Eye* is thus interpreted as a television text antagonistic to the generally accepted standards of community life in Britain which must be defended through media criticisms or political intervention. This can be seen in the strength of the outcry in 2001 and the calls for stronger regulation of television, as well as anxieties about modern media culture, specifically Channel 4. This fits into long-standing criticisms of the channel since its

²⁵¹ See also Blacker (2001) and *Sunday Times* (1997).

founding from the more conservative press that interpreted its innovative content as a sign of cultural decay in Britain. This came particularly from the *Daily Mail* (see Brown 2008, 67; Hobson 2008, 37; 41) and in relation to Michael Grade, Chief Executive from 1987 to 1997, named ‘pornographer in chief’ by the same paper (Brown 2008, 165). It can also be seen as part of an on-going narrative of the conservative press against perceived lapses of standards in British broadcasting and their potential social effects.²⁵² *Brass Eye*’s confrontational combination of comedy with references to child sex abuse in a climate of anxiety about paedophiles produced this response but the existence of similar interpretations in 1997 indicates comedy and television may be seen as dangerous and damaging to individuals’ emotional well-being and dignity to the extent that its pleasures appear to invoke discourses of power, trivialisation and humiliation.

III

***Brass Eye* as satire: truth, justice and retribution**

In contrast to complaints about *Brass Eye*, the positive reception was dominated by claims the text was funny, of high quality and socially beneficial, expressing discourses of benign power seen in the reception of political sitcom and the press definitions of satire in the reception of *Spitting Image*. This section will show those viewers who enjoyed *Brass Eye* interpreted its comedy as a parodic satire of British media culture and that its pleasures were intertwined with anxieties about the tabloid media. It will demonstrate that positive responses were different from, and more diverse than, the

²⁵² For example, the controversy over prank calls made by Russell Brand and Jonathan Ross on BBC radio in October 2008, contestants having sex on Channel 4’s *Big Brother* reality show, and the British National Party leader Nick Griffin’s appearance on the BBC’s *Question Time* in September 2009.

anxieties of corrupt pleasures in the negative reception, and included expressions of comic pleasure, discomfort, intellectual engagement, and tabloid antipathy, and leading to the conclusion that many who enjoyed the series also interpreted *Brass Eye*'s use of comedy and humiliation as ethical acts.

Positive comments were found in both press and internet reviews, and discussion and analysis of the *Special*'s references to paedophilia do not dominate. Only one third of the internet sources even mention the *Special* and most of these do not use the term 'paedophilia', while the majority of the 34 positive newspaper sources address the programme's controversy, rather than actively defending the text's references to paedophilia in detail. This could reflect a reluctance to engage with the subject of paedophilia or, in the case of internet sources, because individuals were reviewing all seven episodes on the *Brass Eye* DVD release. It is a slightly surprising absence given the *Special*'s noteworthy status; one reviewer even commented "I imagine there will be much focussing on the special episode" (E. Parry, 30 April 2002, review in Amazon 2011), and this part of the chapter will be structured slightly differently from the first, looking at the interpretations, definitions and pleasures of the series as a whole rather than focusing on the *Special*.

Interpreting *Brass Eye*: media critique

The positive reception of *Brass Eye* is dominated by the interpretation that the series is a critique of the aesthetics and practices of British media culture, particularly television news and current affairs, and in the case of the *Special* this is specifically linked to the

representation of paedophilia. Sources typically discuss *Brass Eye* in relation to a discourse of declining media standards, citing the *Special's* references to paedophilia,²⁵³ the entire series' parody of current affairs programming,²⁵⁴ and the hoaxes of public figures.²⁵⁵ They discuss how news, current affairs and factual programming in general have become more sensationalist, less serious and increasingly associated with entertainment.

...[Morris'] aim was to lampoon public figures willing to repeat, with feeling, any nonsense they are told, the bogus gravity of much current-affairs television, the hypocritical voyeurism of media coverage of sex and crime, and a lot else besides." (*Economist* 2001, 50)

In relation to the *Special*, the critique was specifically associated with "the tabloid attitude on paedophilia" (Gove 2001, 12)²⁵⁶ and the "lynch-mob mentality of publicity-seeking tabloid rags" (ShadeGrenade, 15 August 2006, review in IMDb 2011). The link between declining media standards and tabloidism invokes a critique about the low quality of the mass media but also relates to specific changes in British television during the 1990s, particularly in factual programming and journalism.

The duopoly between the BBC and ITV had remained relatively stable up until the late 1980s, when competition with the increasingly popular Channel 4 and the emergence of

²⁵³ For example Jackson (2001).

²⁵⁴ For example *Guardian* (1996).

²⁵⁵ For example, Red, 27 March 2006, review in Amazon 2011

²⁵⁶ See also Dean Anderson, letter to the editor, *Guardian*, 30 July 2001; and from Birmingham UK, 10 May 2005, review in IMDb 2011.

satellite and cable television in the early 1990s put “pressure on programme-makers to provide more and cheaper programming, in a context where a substantial proportion of the national audience is opting out of terrestrial” (Brunsdon et al. 2001, 31). One outcome of this was the rise of ‘factual entertainment’ during the late 1990s: lifestyle programming and docusoaps, a generic antecedent for ‘reality television’ that combined the documentary with a dramatic soap form (see *ibid.*). This was accompanied by the sidelining of political or investigative current affairs programmes associated with the traditions of public service broadcasting; in 1998 ITV’s *World in Action* was cancelled after 35 years, and the BBC rescheduled its flagship current affairs programme *Panorama* from weekday primetime to late Sunday evenings. In contrast, new factual formats emphasised crime, sensation, violence, injury, drama and death, with *Crimewatch* (BBC 1984-ongoing), *999* (BBC 1992-2003) and *Police Camera Action* (ITV 1994-2010) finding ratings success. They focused on “unusually violent, out-of-the-ordinary crime, but with a direct, ordinary, ‘it-could-be-you’ address to the viewer” (Brunsdon et al. 2001, 47). Docusoaps have been seen to prioritise “entertainment over social commentary...more interested in characters’ personalities than in their social roles or profession” (Bruzzi 2008, 139). Each of these genres’ engagement with factual material has been criticised as a shift towards spectacle and emotion and away from education and information.

These criticisms are coherent with the criticisms of tabloidism discussed in the previous chapter, most notably Bourdieu’s polemic against tabloid journalism. He argues most journalism has departed from its goal to provide “the information that all citizens ought

to have in order to exercise their democratic rights” (1998, 18) He specifically identifies a decline in coverage of politics, where “real information...lose[s] out to pure entertainment”, and journalists “opt for confrontation over debates, prefer polemics over rigorous arguments” (3). Bourdieu traces this to television’s increasing focus on entertaining audiences: “Whenever politics raises an important but unmistakably boring question, the search for entertainment focuses attention on spectacle (or scandal) every time” (6). Criticisms of the British media include the charge of “prurience, voyeurism, salaciousness and celebrity” (Harrison 2008, 44), where the “high standards of yesterday are being undermined by sensationalism, prurience, triviality, malice, and plain simple credulity” (Sparks 2000, 1), resulting in “a babyfood diet of superficial information which the narcoleptic couch potato can absorb without difficulty” (Stevens 1998, 32). Such criticisms are referred to in responses from internet and newspaper sources; Terence Blacker complains about the “modern trend of connecting serious issues with celebrity culture” (2001, 4), Bruce Dessau refers to “media hysteria” (1996, 179) and Ricky Roma intones that, “The news loves fear” (4 July 2006, review in IMDb 2011).²⁵⁷

Criticisms of tabloidism and media standards, already seen in the reception of *Spitting Image*, dominate the positive interpretations of *Brass Eye* and connect the series to an ongoing critique of British media culture instead of the moral panic over paedophiles living in British communities. This interpretation is also explicitly referenced in how positive sources define *Brass Eye*. Instead of defining it as a paedo-comedy or the purveyor of pointless and deceitful hoaxes, *Brass Eye* is defined as a satirical parody and

²⁵⁷ See also paul2001sw-1, 4 July 2004, review in IMDb 2011.

evaluated as a pleasurable text of high quality. Such responses contradict anxieties that the series provided frivolous sick pleasures for deviants and suggest that a very different process of meaning-making was occurring.

Defining *Brass Eye*: satirical media parody

Negative responses rejected Channel 4's claim that *Brass Eye* was "a satirical programme for an adult audience" (2002, 14) but every one of the positive newspaper articles from 2001 agree with it. The *Financial Times* said it was "true satire" (Dunkley 1997b, 23), and internet reviews describe it as "a satire on *Panorama* type shows" (fleaaaaaaa, 26 April 2006, review in IMDb 2011). Fewer of the 1997 newspaper sources use the term but most agree with the dominant interpretation that *Brass Eye* was criticising declining media standards. The use of the term 'satire' as used in the positive reception is repeatedly coherent with scholarly definitions.²⁵⁸

Viewers also describe it as clever and of high quality,²⁵⁹ repeating the cultural categorisation of 'satire as quality' observed in the negative reception of *Spitting Image*. They also disagree that *Brass Eye*'s shocking and trivial comedy prevented it from being satire. Instead, positive reviewers record that "Morris' dark wit...has created one of the deepest and cleverest satire TV shows in recent history" (Nink Dwrite, 27 December 2007, review in Amazon 2011) or that "Morris's excellent satire...works on so many levels... The man is a genius" (Martin Greaves, letter to the

²⁵⁸ As discussed in Chapter 4. See Leonard and Born (2001) and fleaaaaaaa, 26 April, review in IMDB 2011,

²⁵⁹ See also A Customer, 5 September 2004; R. Johnson, 3 September 2004; and simon_conning, 5 September 2004; reviews in Amazon 2011; and alice liddell, 3 August 2001; and Master Cultist, 28 December 2009; reviews in IMDb 2011.

editor, *Daily Mirror* 15 March 1997). As scholarly definitions also suggest, interpreting *Brass Eye* as an intelligent satire does not prevent people from describing it as funny and linking the comedy and critique. Reviewers repeatedly connect comedy pleasure with serious criticism: Dea Birkett in the *Guardian* argued “the funny man is the only person we can take seriously” (2001, 18) and paul2001sw-1 wrote it is “the most subversive television comedy ever made, and one the funniest” (4 July 2004, review in IMDb 2011).²⁶⁰ This seriousness is specifically related to *Brass Eye*’s thesis that “our perception of the world is controlled and manipulated by the commercial demands of television” (the_duke_of_hazzard, 7 May 2002, review in Amazon 2011). These viewers therefore define *Brass Eye* as a good, useful and ethical satirical text that has the ability to engage with the unethical nature of some contemporary media practices.

The way *Brass Eye* critically engages with these practices is specifically referenced by viewers and writing about *Brass Eye* also shows viewers’ defined the text as a parody. As with satire, these were coherent with its scholarly definition: parody is described as “the process of recontextualising a target or source text through the transformation of its textual (and contextual) elements, thus creating a *new text*” (Harries 2000, 6, emphasis his own). A number of responses fit with Harries’ definition by explicitly referencing a target or source text, agreeing with the *Times* article that argued Morris had “parodied those television programmes, from *Crimewatch* through 999 to *Tonight with Trevor McDonald*, which claim to serve the public interest” (Gove 2001, 12).²⁶¹ Individuals also articulate aspects of Harries’ detailed definition of parody, such as his

²⁶⁰ See also Jody Raggio, 1 August 2002, review in IMDb 2011; Anon 1997b, *Sun*; TouringMars, 15 September 2004, review in Amazon 2011; and Ahmed and Arlidge (2001).

²⁶¹ See also Mulholland (1997) and A Customer, 4 September 2003; Mr. Tristan Martin, 20 September 2006; and R. Johnson, 3 September 2004; reviews in Amazon (2011).

argument that it distorts the source text's lexicon and style (Harries 2000, 8; and see Altman 1999, 89). Lexicon is "iconography, like guns or horses [in a Western]" (Harries 2000, 8) or "sound effects, camera movements and dialogue subtitles...[and] additional sets of expectations" (*ibid.*). Viewers discuss how specific aspects of current affairs lexicon and style are copied and distorted in *Brass Eye*, by "simulating the fatuously self-important tone of the TV reporter sent to mouth platitudes outside a closed government department at night" (Dunkley 2001, 14) or the "daft camera angles and reporter vanity shots" (*riteofspring*, 5 March 2004, review in Amazon 2011).²⁶² *riteofspring* identifies *Brass Eye*'s parody of news and current affairs style, while Dunkley cites the lexical elements of the reporter and a government-building.

Harries also argues such parody can be "an excellent vehicle for critiquing aesthetic (and social) norms" (Harries 2000, 6)²⁶³ and viewers link *Brass Eye*'s parodic distortion to its critique, bringing the definition of *Brass Eye* full circle back to 'media critique'. Parodic textual subversion is clearly understood as part of this discourse.

...[blurring boundaries is] at the very core of his attack on television itself...his fantastical nomenclature...his subversion of the apparent logic of television graphics... (*Self* 1997, 8)

...with statistical graphics you can't understand &...meaningless phrases such as 'he was as gay as a window' and the professionalism of the final-cut of every

²⁶² See also Sandsman, 16 April 2007, review in Amazon 2011; and Bradshaw (1997).

²⁶³ Harries questions whether parody is subversive, suggesting its ability to "move from norm-breaker to norm-creator" (2000, 130) in commercial film production.

episode...you'll get more than just a few giggles; but only once you understand that *Brass Eye* is NOT about the subjects it discusses - but rather the way they are portrayed to us in everyday life, will you fully appreciate the content.
(Gordon, 5 February 2004, review in Amazon 2011)

The positive reception of *Brass Eye* consistently defined the series as a parodic media satire, a serious, intelligent and ethical engagement with the aesthetics and mode of contemporary news and current affairs. They do not relate to the series in trivial or hedonistic ways, although comedy pleasure plays an important part, and will be further discussed below. Responses display thoughtful and clearly articulated responses to the text's satirical critique, rather than revelling in its supposed paedo-comedy. The pleasures and emotions expressed in positive responses to *Brass Eye* were far more complex than its detractors feared, with dominant discourses being comic pleasure, the discussion and value of discomfort, the pleasure and value of critique, the pleasure of humiliating hoaxes, and the value of ethical comedy.

Emotional responses to *Brass Eye*

As has been suggested throughout this section, viewers responding positively to *Brass Eye* tend to describe it as funny, though here there is some difference between the *Special* and the series in the press response. Responses from 1997 tend to be clear in the expressions of comedic pleasure; a *Guardian* reviewer said her "eyelids seemed to be

glued together with tears [of laughter]" (Banks-Smith 1997, n.p.²⁶⁴) and others described it as "laugh out loud funny". (*Sun* 1997, 9)²⁶⁵ Comic pleasure appears to have been rather more problematic in relation to the *Special* and sources, including TV reviews, tend to only provide brief or somewhat disengaged descriptions of the show's comedy. The *Economist* related in cool terms that "*Brass Eye*, inspired by the hysteria that surrounds paedophilia in Britain, was broadcast twice by Channel 4...The programme was very funny" (*Economist* 2001, 50). Other journalists defended *Brass Eye* by almost exclusively referring to its serious aims, avoiding individual expressions of pleasure. Christopher Dunkley of the *Financial Times* praises Morris for using "television itself to attack and mock...today's mass media" (2001, 14) but gives no personal engagement with the *Special*'s comedy pleasure. Others merely supported Channel 4's right to broadcasting by citing the primacy of free speech.²⁶⁶

This drop in comic potency could be related to the strength of the discourse of pathologised pleasure in the vocal and passionate negative reception. Journalists may have felt that supporting the show's broadcast *and* its comedy in a mass publication would produce unwanted attention from the tabloid and popular press. However, it should be noted that positive references to the *Special* in the press tended to be in comment articles, which privilege an analytical and rational focus on political and economic issues, and in the quality press, which is similarly dominated by a factual, informative tone. References to the *Special* in these comment pieces testify to the

²⁶⁴ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²⁶⁵ Also Mulholland (1997) and Bradshaw (1997).

²⁶⁶ See *Independent* (2001) and Freedland (2001).

cultural significance it achieved in 2001 but are not particularly instructive as to its pleasures. In contrast, internet sources are dominated by potent language and directly reference textual material they consider pleasurable, recalling that "Morris attempting to score some "clarky cat" off a "bozz-bozz" in the hope of getting a bit "bluety" just make me smile at thinking about them" (christoff, 18 August 2006, review in Amazon 2011). This even included the *Special*'s paedophile material, with Jared Jennings writing, "the special was one of the best things i've ever seen, the rap was awesome with the doll attached to his crotch (amazing)" (11 July 2007, review in Amazon 2011).

The last quote appear to confirm the fears seen in some negative responses that viewers were in some way laughing at or enjoying paedophilia. However, nearly all of the small number of sources that praise the *Special*'s references to paedophilia directly refer to its media critique. fleaaaaaaa writes that "maybe the funniest episode is the episode on Paedophilia" but expands on this evaluation with the interpretation that *Brass Eye* is "making fun of the way the Media uses these issues and will exploit them" (fleaaaaaaa, 26 April 2006, review in IMDb 2011). Similarly, Ricky Roma's praise for segments representing paedophiles is bookended by criticisms of the media.

...it also depicts the media's relentless fear mongering. At one point we're told that a paedophile has been getting away with attacking children by dressing as a school. And there's a hilarious segment about a pervert called Jez North. The skit features a reconstruction *Crime Watch* would be proud of and then even though the paedophile gets a nonce bashing, and is therefore "quadra-spazzed on a life-glug", we're asked whether we can be sure that "pervert mechanics" can't build

him a "rooboplaegic wrong-cock." The news loves fear. (Ricky Roma, 4 July 2006, review in IMDb 2011)

This is fully coherent with the definition of satire, which locates the use of comedy and its pleasures in relation to a critique, rather than the textual representations themselves. Far from laughing at paedophilia, Ricky Roma's pleasure is interlinked with what he finds to be ridiculous and reprehensible: sensationalist media practices.

Pleasure is not the only response to *Brass Eye* and, coherent with their muted response to the *Special*'s comedy, newspaper articles often display discomfort, though this is evident in internet sources too. This can be seen in the *Guardian*'s description of the *Special*'s ability to "make us squirm" (Birkett 2001, 18).²⁶⁷ Austin Lafferty in the *Glasgow Herald* specifically relates this discomfort to its satirical nature:

Not a comfortable watch. But humour it had. Not lightheartedness, which is only a subset of the universal set of humour. There are many others, and satire, and mocking of hypocrisy, are a couple of others. (2001, 15)

Discomfort at the *Special* was also written about as pleasurable, reminiscent of *Spitting Image*'s enjoyable disgust, and described as evidence of the series' high quality. For Terence Blacker in the *Independent*, "The further Chris Morris pushes the joke into the realms of bad taste, the happier I am" (2001, 4) and Master Cultist enumerates its pleasurable and uncomfortable characteristics, "Sharp, searing, witty, vile, nasty, satirical, idiotic, thought-provoking, juvenile, sublime, absurd." (28 December 2009,

²⁶⁷ See also *Independent* (2001); and Touring Mars, 15 January 2004, review in Amazon (2011).

review in IMDb 2011) The link between discomfort and intellectual, highbrow quality is made by Mills (2007) in his evaluation of Morris' oeuvre as 'experimental comedy' and is also seen in audience research by Kuipers (2006). She suggests a link between cultural capital, highbrow comedy and ambiguous, difficult comedy. Unlike the negative responses which evaluated the programme's uncomfortable material as unethical, and defined shock as antithetical to its satire, discomfort is here described as an integral part of understanding *Brass Eye* as a challenging and socially affective text, most commonly in relation to the *Special*'s reference to paedophilia.

As previously noted, only one third of internet sources written after the 2001 broadcast mention the *Special* and a number of these make no specific reference to paedophilia, so internet expressions of discomfort are understood as referring to the series as a whole unless specifically mentioning the *Special*. The paucity of references to paedophilia in the internet comments could be historicised as the result of the gap between broadcast and the writing of the reviews – they all date from after 2002 – and a decline in the *Special*'s ability to shock due to its familiarity. However, the normalisation of the paedophilia references would have probably made it less problematic to discuss and led to more references, so its low frequency implies the topic was still problematic or taboo, suggesting a kind of discomfort that could not be discussed or enjoyed.

This caveat in mind, internet reviews generally described *Brass Eye* as controversial, shocking or offensive and emphasise how they themselves were unaffected, once again display a characteristic associated with fans: a textual mastery that emphasises aesthetic appreciation over emotional effect (Hills 2005, 75).

... if making fun of serious issues really doesn't amuse you, avoid this like the plague. If, like me, you're laid back enough to be able to laugh at anything & everything then give it a go, it's as funny as hell! (Russell Tit Davies, 16 March 2004, review in Amazon 2011)

There is an acknowledgement that *Brass Eye* will not be enjoyed by everyone and the context of the review is important. Sources from the commercial site Amazon.co.uk include warnings to potential viewers: "As for the easily offended; don't watch?" (MIKEHILL38, 13 April 2002, review in Amazon 2011). Instead of being described as unethical and wrong, the potential offense is treated as an aesthetic aspect that some may simply not appreciate and the review warns them of the potentially unsuitable nature of the product.

The act of being offended was interpreted by some as a sign of cultural incompetence. Hills argues that horror fans avoid discourses of fear because they are associated with feminisation and a lack of expert textual engagement. Similarly fans of *Brass Eye* stigmatise offense, some seeing it as the result of stupidity, claiming "Those who did not understand the depth of the satire...were often offended" (John Walker, 13 September 1998, review in IMDb 2011),²⁶⁸ or linking it to the consumption of despised texts: "one of the funniest things you could ever watch providing: a) you do not read the *Daily Mail* b) [do not] like your jokes with an obvious punchline and canned laughter (from

²⁶⁸ See BStalker, 30 July 2001 and Cooperman, 4 December 2005; reviews in IMDb 2011.

Birmingham UK, 10 March 2005, review in IMDb 2011).²⁶⁹ Two internet reviewers even describe the media controversy over the *Special* as funny, finding pleasure in their superiority over what is interpreted as the stupidity of lowbrow newspapers: “It was quite funny to see the papers the day after it was shown, as they reacted in exactly the way that Morris had ridiculed” (E. Parry, 30 April 2002, review in Amazon 2011) and “What was amusing was the way Rebekah Wade [then-editor of the *News of the World*] missed the point” (ShadeGrenade, 15 August 2006, review in IMDb 2011). A few newspaper articles also articulated these discourses, claiming, “You would need to be very dim to miss the fact that Morris was making fun of the media” (Dunkley 2001, 14).

It must be noted that these stigmatising sources give no credence to the notion that being offended by *Brass Eye* might be an *ethical* judgement and it is interpreted as a failure of comprehension, similar to Lockyer and Attwood (2009). The stigmatization of offense allows *Brass Eye*'s enthusiasts to represent themselves as viewers with the cultural capital to understand the serious highbrow aims of a media critique, gaining the pleasure of superiority by representing the offended as lowbrow incompetents, rather than simply viewers with different standards. The media critique is therefore not just a textual interpretation but part of how the reception sources express the value of *Brass Eye*.

²⁶⁹ See S J Buck, 3 April 2005; and Touring Mars, 15 January 2004; reviews in Amazon 2011; Ricky Roma, 4 July 2006, review in IMDb 2011; Steven Fowler, 6 January 2004, review in Amazon 2011; and Master Cultist, 28 December 2009, review in IMDb 2011.

Pleasure was also located in defining *Brass Eye* as a parodic media satire, with explicit claims that the series was educating²⁷⁰ and engaging with the world by encouraging viewers to notice the cultural decline in the media.²⁷¹ Internet sources produced more subjective and personal discourses, incorporating education into hyperbolic declarations of need, such as StevenFowler's claim that "We live in a world crying out for talents like this man" (6 January 2004, review in Amazon 2011). A few reviews provided self-reports of education, discussing their lack of faith in the news in relation to their encounter with *Brass Eye*.

No longer can I watch *Tonight with Trevor MacDonald* without retching and thinking of the immortal 2001 special line "WELCOME, to Paedogeddon!"
(iwishiwasinbusted, 16 March 2004, review in Amazon 2011)

This is a rhetorical dramatization of *Brass Eye*'s educative potential; it shows, it reveals, it changes people's views of how the media operates to the extent that they no longer consider what they watch on television to be trustworthy and are more able to perceive truth from fiction. Such narratives are homologous to Couldry's (2000) observations about people involved in protests against live animal exports in Brightlingsea which became the subject of significant media attention in 1995. Couldry argues that protestors realised there was gap between what they witnessed and what was broadcast, making them aware of media practices, such as editing, selecting and re-using of footage, resulting in a loss of faith in media representation: "the news...is not actually

²⁷⁰ See also Ahmed and Arlidge (2001); BStalker, 30 July 2001, review in IMDb 2011; and Andrew Banks, 14 July 2010, Amazon 2011; and Touring Mars, 15 January 2004, Amazon 2011.

²⁷¹ Mulholland (1997) and Ahmed and Arlidge (2001).

what happens" (Ed quoted in Couldry 2000, 138). Couldry describes this as the "denaturalization of the media frame" (127) – a realisation that media power; "the power of constructing reality" (Bourdieu 1991, 166), is a construction.

The denaturalization of the media frame suggested in the reception to *Brass Eye* is not related to an encounter with a site of media production, as in Couldry's work, but through the parody that produces a critical relationship between *Brass Eye* and the target texts of current affairs television. This is coherent with Harries' description of the power attributed to parody to "[highlight] the text's social constructedness...an excellent vehicle for critiquing aesthetic (and social) norms" (Harries 2000, 6). These narratives of frame denaturalisation, within the dominant discourse of *Brass Eye* as educative and revelatory, attribute the series with the power to reveal the constructedness of news and current affairs. The descriptions of contemporaneous media culture in very negative terms, referring to manipulation, distortion and exploitation, suggest *Brass Eye*'s critique and its ability to diminish media power should be regarded as an ethical act. Thus the uncomfortable topic of paedophiles in British communities is subordinated to another issue of social importance, the malign media, and *Brass Eye* is interpreted as ethically educating viewers by encouraging them to critique the media's distortions.

Hoaxing and the ethics of entertainment

Similar negative views towards contemporary British media culture can be found in the positive responses to *Brass Eye*'s hoaxes, particularly in the widely expressed pleasures of humiliating public figures. Many take relish in lengthy descriptions of the surreal

assertions made by the hoaxed individuals and some represent the hoaxes as the primary element: “*Brass Eye* was showing celebrities vast, virulently yellow pills, claiming they were a new killer drug from Czechoslovakia called cake” (Banks-Smith 1997, n.p.²⁷²) and “*Brass Eye*’s speciality is dangling celebrities by their own credulity” (*Guardian* 1997, 7). This can also be seen in coverage of the *Special*. The controversy over the paedophilia references were the focus of most articles but the hoaxing also received attention across the sources, with repeated reports of complaints from celebrities and references to the ridiculous things that they were filmed saying:

The most extraordinary element of...[the *Special*] was the willingness of celebrities and politicians to queue up to condemn bizarre, non-existent threats from paedophiles...Richard Blackwood, a comedian, said paedophiles could make children’s computer keyboards release ‘toxic vapours that make you more suggestible’... (O’Neil 2001, 9)

Praise for the hoaxes dominates internet reviews, with similar descriptions of the surreal dialogue, and some asserting the canonical status of the hoaxes, claiming that it is a “work of genius. Any show that can convince ostensibly seasoned celebrities into making the most ridiculous of soundbites deserves a gong.” (bianc93, 12 May 2009, review in Amazon 2011) Like the references to paedophilia, journalistic and internet sources interpret the hoaxes as showing the shallow nature of contemporary media culture, again describing them using terms such as ‘serious’ and another part of the

²⁷² Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library’s Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

ethical media critique, described as “a tremendous public service” (S. Hoggart 1997, 2).²⁷³

In the negative reception, humiliation and deception were interpreted as unethical, with critics of the series expressing empathy for the deceived and appealing to the primacy of honesty. In the positive reception, the humiliation of celebrities is described as part of *Brass Eye*'s media critique and written about with considerable pleasure, specifically the pleasure of humiliation: “if you have a particular celebrity you hate you will love seeing him or her being made a complete fool of” (S J Buck, 3 April 2007, review in Amazon 2011). Celebrities are accused of having “wasted enough of our time – let Morris waste some of theirs. It is a wonderful thing to see...” (Romney 1997, 2).

Just as *Brass Eye*'s parody critiqued news and current affairs through parodic ridiculing of style, so the hoaxes operate through ridiculing public figures, critiquing their willingness to support media campaigns without any awareness of their value. However, the pleasure of humiliation shows the hoaxes do not solely operate on the level of intellectual critique. The positive reception of *Brass Eye* is filled with expressions of antipathy towards the public figures hoaxed in the show, ‘celebrities’ and tabloid culture. In contrast to the negative reception, which represented the hoaxed individuals as innocent victims, internet reviewers and journalists consistently identify the hoaxed individuals as ‘celebrities’, using the term in association with their despised characteristics; “the mind-numbing complicit stupidity of modern day celebrities” (C. Mcsloy, 11 January 2007, review in Amazon 2011). Even the influential broadsheet

²⁷³ Channel 4's Chief Executive used the same broadcasting term in the *Times* (Michael Grade, letter to the editor, dated 14 February 1997).

columnist Hugo Young wrote of the “stupid personalities [who] were conned into appearing on it” (2001, n.p.²⁷⁴). This antipathy towards celebrities is not just a feeling towards the notion of celebrity culture but also an indictment of specific individuals with specific failures.²⁷⁵

If I thought that any of you were as stupid as, for example, Gary Lineker, Phil Collins, Sebastian Coe...[lists other hoaxed individuals] then life really wouldn't be worth living... (Flett 2001, 20)

The pleasure of humiliating despised celebrities is justified by a discourse of guilt relating to their role in media culture and their gullibility, suggesting that it is the hoaxed rather than *Brass Eye* who bear responsibility for the deceit. As with the stigmatisation of those offended by the series, the pleasure of humiliation is a pleasure of Hobbesian superiority.

You can't help but laugh at Phil Collins wearing a Nonce Sence T-shirt or Nick Owen talking about fake electricity. How these people don't realise they are talking rubbish is anyone's guess. (Jody Rago, 1 August 2002, review in IMDb 2011)²⁷⁶

A few sources express an awareness that the hoaxes and the resulting humiliation probably caused suffering, as proposed in the negative reception, but ethical

²⁷⁴ Many of these sources were found in the BFI Reuben Library's Cuttings Collection. A small number did not have page numbers.

²⁷⁵ See also Lawson (1997).

²⁷⁶ See also from Birmingham UK, 10 March 2005, review in IMDb 2011.

considerations are avoided with the claim that celebrities can be treated differently or are subject to different ethical standards than private individuals because they are defined as ‘celebrities’, with an article in the *Observer* explaining that the “humour lay mainly in celebrity-baiting, which is fine by me, and should be fine by you too” (Ellen 1997, 8).²⁷⁷

Hoaxing and hurting public figures is therefore excused because the individuals are ‘only’ celebrities who deserve their treatment because of this definition. The term celebrity is thus used within the terms of the media critique, referring to them as part of a low value media culture, occupying the lower-rungs of the media’s hierarchy: “Anyone who can get...a bunch of C-list celebrities to help in a campaign where a west Indian elephant has her head stuck up her backside...must be made of finer stuff than you or I” (bazza83, 23 November 2002, review in Amazon 2011).²⁷⁸ Will Self in the *Observer* crystallises the discourses above by denying celebrities their reality as individuals.

...the reason why its legitimate to gull people like Rayner into making silly asses of themselves is that, in a very important sense, they aren’t real at all...they’re hyper-real...Their reach for notoriety – predicated on that fulsome mediocrity of talent... - has become frozen on their faces. (1997, 8)

Celebrities can be humiliated and hoaxed *because* they are celebrities and are categorised as different from ordinary people. Couldry argues the media power produces

²⁷⁷ See also Banks-Smith (1997).

²⁷⁸ See also their description as B- and D-list celebrities (Jody Rago, 1 August 2002, review in IMDb 2011; and ShadeGrenade, 15 August 2006, review in IMDb 2011 respectively).

a hierarchy where ‘media’ people are considered more important than ‘ordinary’ people because “appearing in the media normally comprises a form of prestige or cultural capital” (2000, 48). The pleasure of *Brass Eye*’s celebrity hoaxes demonstrates there is a hierarchy of media people and that some of them are placed at the bottom or judged to be unworthy of their status. This desire to humiliate D-list celebrities could be seen as an attempt by viewers to strip undeserving media people of the prestige and symbolic power conferred upon them²⁷⁹ and a rejection of the cultural classification of media people as more important than non-media people.

Brass Eye’s pleasures of humiliation also rely on evaluating the hoaxing of celebrities as ethically different to the hoaxing of non-celebrities. A small number of sources cite the power disparity between ‘media’ and ‘non-media’ people in their discussion of television that does hoax ordinary people: “At least Morris takes on people who are more famous and more influential than himself...” (Dunkley 1997a, 7)

Most prank broadcasting – from *Candid Camera* to *Beadle’s About...* - has involved powerful presenters picking on ordinary civilians... [Morris] is honest about the element of cruelty in such stunts, which Edmonds and Beadle hide behind smiles... (Lawson 1997, 18)

Lawson refers to *Beadle’s About* (LWT 1986-1996) in his *Guardian* article, a series that secretly filmed members of the public being hoaxed, often involving something of value owned by the individual, for example a car, being apparently destroyed. Partway

²⁷⁹ Similar to Fluck and Law’s intentions for *Spitting Image*.

through, host Jeremy Beadle would approach the victim in disguise and eventually reveal the practical joke. The comparison of *Brass Eye* to *Beadle's About* demonstrates that *Brass Eye*'s serious social critique produces a different ethical context from that of the 'mere' comedy pleasures associated with entertainment. This difference is also clearly related to the discourse of power, referenced by both Lawson and Dunkley, and that exerting such power for mere entertainment is unethical. References to other television hoaxes are not expressed by reviewers on Amazon or IMDb but can be seen on CookdandBomb, with fans creating an ever clearer distinction between innocent ordinary people and the guilty media people.²⁸⁰

I do find it funny, but it depends on the targets really...Some of these people walk right into it and no-one else to blame but themselves...John McCririck, now there's a cunt...However, being exploititave [sic] of a member of the public's good nature is not funny. (Comment at 06:49a.m. 26 February 2004 in Cookd and Bombd 2011d)

These viewers reject hoaxing ordinary people as an abuse of power but justify *Brass Eye*'s hoaxes because they are said to reveal the truth about media personalities in a way that is socially positive. They are enjoyed within a discourse of celebrity antipathy that identifies the hoaxed individuals as 'cunts' who are implicated in the decline of media culture in the UK. This celebrity antipathy runs through the positive reception and is coherent with the language used in relation to low value British journalism in a feature

²⁸⁰ See also comment at 10:03p.m. 3 March 2011 in Cookd and Bombd (2011f) on the stupidity of newsreader Nick Owen.

on *Brass Eye*'s media critique; an anonymous reporter describes his job working for a tabloid in the *Guardian*: "The people who work for this paper are cunts and the people who read this paper are cunts" (quoted in Mulholland 1997, 4). There is a consistent rejection of British tabloid media culture and its relationship with popular culture that borders on the aggressive and angry. Jacqueline Rose advises, "Whenever we find a particular rich mix of affective or emotional language, in relation to the cult of celebrity, it might be worth paying close attention" (Rose 2003, 201) and that the "passions they arouse – are rarely a distraction" (207). The potency of language used in relation to the celebrity hoaxes, and the claim that behaviour towards celebrities invites a different set of ethics to those of 'ordinary' people, suggests celebrities evoke significant emotional charge.

Such antipathy contrasts to other celebrity reception research which identified a jealousy of material wealth, interpreting negative attitudes as a response to financial inequality which acts as "a way [for celebrity haters] to cope with their own situation" (Johansson 2006, 354). The way in which the hoaxed celebrities are despised suggests the antipathy is not related to material envy but instead to a frustration that such low value individuals can obtain and use media power. There are homologies in the sense that the pleasure of humiliation is proportional to the inequality of cultural capital between celebrity and celebrity hater and, in *Brass Eye*, to celebrity haters' perception of their own superiority over the celebrity. Objections to celebrities in the *Brass Eye* reception are based upon an entirely negative cultural classification of 'celebrity' and relate to the personal characteristics of the individuals: they are stupid, vacuous, time-

wasting, gullible and of little or no significance even in the media world, and they are in some way culpable for the reproduction of a manipulative and exploitative tabloid culture that is produced by and consumed by low value individuals. Praising the hoaxes as a satirical critique is therefore partly an ethical judgment that celebrities deserve their punishment at the hands of *Brass Eye*.

Celebrities are therefore framed as individuals who represent low value debased culture, and the pleasure of the hoaxes is partly a process of scapegoating. The antipathy towards celebrities shows *Brass Eye*'s media critique is not merely an intellectual identification of a social problem but an issue evoking deeply held feelings which are then directed to individuals whose faces, voices and personas are seen to support and maintain this debased cultural trend. The result of this is an ethical schema that delights in the humiliation of individuals, and which stands in sharp contrast to the ethical standards expressed in the negative responses which rejected pleasure from suffering as unethical.

IV

Conclusions

The reception of *Brass Eye* again demonstrates political comedy's ability to divide the audience, prompting different interpretations, evaluations and emotional responses. The negative reception interpreted the series as an unacceptable and unethical text that broke the boundaries of television comedy by creating suffering and sick pleasures. In contrast, the positive reception interpreted *Brass Eye* as a parodic media satire, describing it as a

funny, intelligent, and sometimes uncomfortable text with ethical intentions located in its educative and revelatory ability to raise awareness about tabloidised media culture. This final section now brings together the work of this chapter, addressing how *Brass Eye* has been written about and how this gives insight into British culture during the late 1990s and early 2000s. It also reflects on the sources used and the variety of responses produced, and relates all these to the cultural classifications of political comedy.

Problematic pleasures and comedy ethics

The negative and positive responses define *Brass Eye*'s comedy in ways that are partially coherent. They both attribute the text's comedy with power to affect the cultural status of its representations, respectively interpreting the show as trivialising and ridiculing paedophilia and tabloidised media culture. Comedy is thus culturally classified as possessing the power to reduce cultural status, coherent with anxieties about racist, sexist and homophobic jokes²⁸¹ and with parts of the reception of *TW3* and *Spitting Image*.

However, they disagree about how comedy interacts with other discourses; the negative reception solely defines comedy as a mode of pleasure and repeatedly implies that this cannot co-exist with other discourses such as seriousness or intelligence. This was most clearly seen in the rejection of *Brass Eye* as satire, which also included criticisms of the text's shocking nature, which defined pleasure itself as trivial and incompatible with such a highbrow term. In contrast, the positive reception unproblematically discussed

²⁸¹ See Husband (1988), Billig (2009), Morreall (2009) and the notion of political correctness (Littlewood and Pickering 1998 and Gray 2009).

comedy alongside seriousness, intelligence, discomfort and the interpretation of the media critique. The negative reception thus presents *Brass Eye*'s comedy as a dominating discourse of pleasure that suppresses other possible responses, resulting in the general conclusion that it is a hedonistic text that trivialises its real life referent: child abuse. Positive responses accord comedy a discursive equality within the text and frame the text's references to paedophilia within a dominant discourse of seriousness that relates to its definition as media satire.

The discursive dominance of comedy in the negative reception and the harm that it is said to cause cannot be seen as a judgement on comedy *per se* because sources clearly and consistently identify the *Special*'s sick and unacceptable nature in its relationship to paedophilia and the hoaxes. In contrast, the positive reception links *Brass Eye*'s comedy and its hoaxes to a critique of British media culture. There is such a difference between these interpretations that the positive and negative receptions are not really responding to the same thing but writing about the text according to different schemas. The discourse of comedy pleasure dominates interpretations when a respondent interprets comedy as trivialising a real life referent they believe should retain its present cultural status, that is, paedophilia and, as seen in respect to *TW3*, national institutions. In contrast, comedy's discursive co-existence with seriousness occurs when its trivialising power is directed at a referent the respondent believes *should not* retain its present cultural status, that is, tabloid media culture. Significant anger and disgust is attached to interpretations of inappropriate trivialisation, while there is significant pleasure attached to appropriate trivialisation. This emotional contrast may help to explain the discourse of

comedy dominance; the former group are so disgusted and upset that they focus on the object of their ire: the offensive comedy. The simplification of comedy into a mode of hedonism should therefore be seen as a cultural categorisation that structures viewers' interpretations of a text *and* displays their cultural and emotional investments. The journalists responding negatively felt paedophilia was an evil and ever-present threat and their discourse of serious news journalism was the only appropriate way it could be discussed. This was also expressed in relation to ethics and the interpretation that comedy pleasure can be harmful and unethical when referring to real life.

The reception of *Brass Eye* describes comedy material referring to, or made from, actuality that is solely for pleasure to be unethical and wrong. Negative evaluations claimed *Brass Eye*'s hedonistic and trivialising references to paedophilia caused suffering for former victims and replaced sympathy with laughter, increasing the risk of child abuse by making people less vigilant and potentially corrupting viewers by the association of pleasure and paedophilia. *Brass Eye*'s celebrity hoaxes were seen to humiliate individuals for mere comedy and reduce the involvement of public figures in important awareness campaigns. Positive responses argued *Brass Eye*'s parody and hoaxes ethically revealed the truth about the decline of the British media and its influence on British society, while focussing ethical anxieties on other hoax texts, regarding the humiliation of unwitting ordinary people on television light entertainment programmes to be unethical.

Both responses find unethical comedy in the link between suffering and mere pleasure. This is implied in the negative reception by the repeated definition of comedy as hedonistic but was most clear in the contrast between the positive reception's rejection of hoaxing ordinary people and their celebration of hoaxing celebrities. Once again, these ethical judgements demonstrate viewers' affiliations. Complainants represented the hoaxed celebrities as vulnerable innocents undeserving of suffering. This is likely influenced by the fact that the journalists complaining about the hoaxes are 'media people' who are likely to have sympathy for their deceived peers, some of whom were journalists too. Positive respondents have sympathy for the ordinary people, in the case of the internet sources these are people like them, and enjoy the humiliation of the media people who are treated as personally responsible for, and representative of, a declining media culture in the UK, casting them as guilty parties who have acquired undeserved media power through their work in the media. Ethical conclusions about the use of comedy are thus related to the target of the comedy and the intention; comedy is unethical when it generates only pleasure from the vulnerable, exploited or powerless individuals. By defining *Brass Eye* as a text of trivialising comedy pleasure, negative responses judged it to be unethical and disgusting because it created and exacerbated the suffering of vulnerable or exploited individuals for mere passing pleasure. In contrast, the positive reception shows that very tangible, if not long-lasting, suffering was considered entirely ethical when its targets were guilty and its intention was to reveal the trivial nature of tabloidised media culture.

These attitudes to comedy pleasure and ethics do not refer in general to comedy or every part of the seven editions of *Brass Eye*. Instead they are based upon the elements of the text that refer to real life – the hoaxes, paedophilia and the media parody - and the two interpretations show two very different ways in which viewers understood cultural power relationships in the UK. The combination of comedy with real life references is this thesis' formal definition of television political comedy, and its significance in how viewers understand *Brass Eye* affirms its importance. Defining political comedy as a programme dominated by comedy that references politics, news and current affairs is a key starting point to understanding the power attributed to *Brass Eye* but the reception also demonstrates viewers' interpretations, definitions and evaluations depend upon which specific aspects of politics, news and current affairs they believe the comedy has been created from. The significance of this specific aspect of actuality to viewers and how it fits into their perceptions of cultural hierarchies and power relations significantly defines their responses and gives access to wider views about British society.

British Anxieties of Media Power in the late 1990s

When viewers privilege the interpretation of ethical media satire or unethical paedocomedy they are signalling which issue they regard as the most serious: the threat from paedophiles or from the tabloidization of journalism and culture. Both have their own historical contexts and both are depicted as posing different threats to British society. Paedophiles threaten the lives and well-being of children in a way that damages them, their families and their communities; tabloid journalism manipulates, exploits and debases its consumers with low quality, degraded culture. The former privileges the

personal well-being of individuals, while the latter takes a macro view of British culture. Both express an anxiety that the media possesses the power to shape and distort the interiorities of British citizens.

This is most obvious in the positive reception which repeatedly demonises tabloidised media. The strength of this anxiety and the cultural distaste for tabloidised journalism is demonstrated by the degree to which the ethics of suffering proposed in the negative responses are all but ignored. Indeed, the almost total absence of concern at the trivialisation of paedophilia suggests viewers do not believe comedy *per se* has the power to trivialise and/or it was so clear the *Special* did not make comedy ‘from paedophilia’ that such concerns were all but irrelevant. They are much more concerned about the baleful effects of tabloidism than the humiliation of Gary Lineker or the potential trivialisation of Sidney Cooke’s crimes. In contrast, tabloid and mid-market newspaper critics locate the abuse of media power in one text only, interpreting the *Special* and the hoaxes as damaging, describing the former as a ‘paedo comedy’, and sidestepping its critique of media culture. This is coherent with conservative attitudes towards Channel 4 since its founding in 1982 that saw its boundary-breaking content become the subject of negative attention from the mid-market press from its launch. Both responses agree the media possess far-reaching power, implicitly referring to newspapers and television as central to the creation of meaning and discourse in modern culture that affirms Couldry’s description of the ideology of media power.

Media power – by which I mean the construction in media institutions of the *symbolic power* of ‘constructing reality’ (both factual representations and credible fictions) – *is a social process...[the]* complex outcome of what social actors (including audience members) do and say... we believe in the authority of media discourse in countless local contexts because we believe that most others believe the same, and because we act on the basis of these beliefs on countless specific occasions. (Couldry 2000, 4, my emphasis)

As seen in the reception of *The Thick of It* and *TW3* there were anxieties about the role of the media in political culture too, suggesting that the 1960s and the latter half of the 1990s and the entire 2000s have featured an ongoing concern that the media possess too much symbolic power in Britain and that they abuse it. This reached a climax after a series of revelations about consistent malpractice and illegal behaviour by journalists, mostly from tabloid newspapers, led to a government investigation into the culture, practices and ethics of the press: the Leveson Inquiry.²⁸²

Most responses to *Brass Eye* refer to the media’s power to shape reality as a negative act, locating it in despised texts. Positive sources criticise the *Daily Mail* or tabloids for abusing their symbolic power to construct reality, implying there are ‘good’ unproblematic media outlets that do not distort reality. Similarly, the tabloids and mid-markets depict *Brass Eye* as an unacceptable way of referring to paedophilia and represent their own discourses about paedophilia as unproblematic. This demonstrates a

²⁸² This lasted through 2011 and 2012 and reported in November 2012. Among other things, it recommended an independent press regulatory body established by statute.

somewhat naïve attitude towards the media and its power during this historical period, whereby a division is created between benign and malign aspects of the British media. These divisions are themselves indicative of cultural and social allegiances, with the negative responses to *Brass Eye* privileging the individual and the preservation of the divide between seriousness and triviality, and positive responses insisting on the maintenance of high standards in national media culture and a moralistic distinction between quality and trash culture.

Appreciating *Brass Eye*: Beyond comedy pleasure

The conclusions so far emphasise viewers' cognitive responses, although as has been argued throughout and demonstrated here again in regards to celebrity antipathy, ideological positions are rarely without emotional charge. Negative responses defined *Brass Eye* as unethically trivialising due to their understanding of comedy as hedonistic but its controversial use of comedy is not only analysed as socially powerful but appreciated in ways that go beyond comedy and pleasure.

The very notion of a parodic media satire is emotionally pleasurable to many. It is an appreciation of *critique-as-quality* and expressed by those who write about the experience of watching *Brass Eye* with a sense of satisfaction at its media critique. This appreciation can be seen in the light of the anxieties of tabloidization; popular culture is under threat but the production of intelligent and engaged texts is in some way comforting. Writing about the media critique of tabloid culture is not delivered in

academic tones but with emotion and pleasure, reflecting the definition of satire itself as a witty rejection of the reprehensible or foolish (Griffin 1994).

A similar engagement is seen in the appreciation of *discomfort-as-quality* where the controversial and shocking comedy is admired, echoing the pleasure of *Spitting Image*'s grotesque puppets. Morris' use of uncomfortable comedy is associated with aesthetic quality (see Mills 2007) and the discomfort produces satisfactions that are not comedic pleasures, as feared in the negative reception, but related to cultural competence, textual mastery and the ability to not be offended. The appreciation of the discomfort is thus related to evaluating *Brass Eye* as a high value text and the pleasure of having one's aesthetic horizons expanded.

The emotive value of the text's media critique is also seen in the *vindictive pleasure* of the celebrity hoaxes. This demonstrates *Brass Eye*'s intersection with the real world drew upon feelings about cultural distinctions and hierarchies, in this case an antipathy towards celebrity culture and individual celebrities. It not only expresses the pleasures of critique-as-quality described above but suggests the critique of tabloidism also contains personalised animosities, with the comedy of the critique augmented with the pleasure of public humiliation. This relates closely to Hobbes conception of laughter as a glorying in the loss of status that such humiliation produces in the target of a joke (1889).

The appreciation of *Brass Eye*'s critique shows viewers' attachments to quality culture and antipathies towards tabloid culture are of emotional significance to them. Their

evident appreciation of, and at times delight in, the critique also suggests a fourth and final pleasure that calls upon all three discussed above: a pleasure of *cultural resistance*. Enthusiasts attach value to and enjoy *Brass Eye* not simply because they have learned from or concur with its intellectual critique but because they interpret it as a socio-political intervention. Some newspaper sources and a larger number of internet reviews display an almost evangelical zeal to celebrate *Brass Eye*'s attack on the despised rise of tabloidism that can be seen as a pleasure of resistance. This pleasure could also be identified in the negative press sources, where journalists expressed their opposition to the text in strident, emotive discourses in an effort to produce an experience of anti-*Brass Eye* resistance for their readers. This is also coherent with the tendency for mid-market and tabloid papers to create and promote public campaigns about controversial issues (Harrison 2008, 44), pertinent examples being the campaign for 'Sarah's Law' in the *News of the World*. Further research into the reception of such tabloid campaigns is necessary but it is hypothesised that emotive headlines, and the monitoring and policing of conservative boundaries of taste, may provide readers with emotional pleasures of resisting the rise of the cultural standards they fear and despise, here in the example of *Brass Eye* and its harmful use of comedy.

This final hypothesis returns us to the intertwined notions of comedy, critique, and social power as expressed through the multiple pleasures and displeasures evoked by *Brass Eye*. The series' controversial engagement with the real world reached beyond television's norms, and its reception gives us a glimpse of how political comedy's

combination of the comedic with the real may also stretch expectations of how people respond to and interpret comedy, producing discussions of pleasure, suffering and ethics.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

This thesis set out to explore how people over the past fifty years have understood television political comedy by looking at the reception of six series categorized by audiences as part of the genre. The past chapters have explored archived letters to the BBC, newspaper articles, BBC audience research, internet reviews and fan comments, and this disparate collection of sources has exhibited recurring themes that can be inferred as the cultural categorisation of television political comedy, the “shorthand that link[s] together a range of cultural assumptions” (Mittell 2004, 19).

These findings allow clear arguments to be made about how the genre of television political comedy is defined, interpreted, evaluated and experienced, about how the varied responses to political comedy texts inform our understanding of media history, and about the wider applicability of these research methods to the study of television. They have also led to conclusions beyond television political comedy, demonstrating popular attitudes to media institutions and media culture; giving partial access to people’s cynical attitudes to British political culture; and showing the varied social effects attributed to political comedy and its pleasures. This conclusion draws together the relationships between the case studies, highlights the contributions to the field in the context of wider work, and suggests the possibilities for further research.

The Cultural Categorisation of Television Political Comedy

Television political comedy is understood in four dominant ways: sources assert there is a close relationship between political comedy and the socially significant real; they claim political comedy possesses tangible power; they evaluate political comedy in ways that are significantly influenced by discourses of highbrow aesthetic quality; and they express different and varied pleasures in relation to political comedy. They all echo existing trends in television comedy scholarship but, unlike the dominant method of textual analysis, are based on how viewers have understood texts. The role of political comedy's references to politics, news and current affairs will also be explored, hypothesising that these textual elements activate multiple possibilities for generic classification, some sources responding to it as entertainment, referring to pleasure, and in other contexts responding with discourses of accuracy, referring to journalistic standards, suggestive of news and current affairs.

Defining political comedy: Relationship to the Real

Writing about political comedy was consistently dominated by comparisons between textual representations and their real life referents, demonstrating that the genre is culturally defined as existing in a close relationship to the real. This was expressed with different nuances but can be fitted into discourses of accuracy, social significance, appropriateness and affect. This aspect of television political comedy's reception shows that comedy elicits responses beyond pleasure, incongruity, relief or superiority, and that

the genre is useful for historical research because people express views, however incomplete, about culture and society. This affirms this thesis' approach that television genre's cultural categorisations draws upon "cultural power relations" (Mittell 2004, xiv) and gives access to viewers' "available ideologies" (Ang 1985, 1).

Accuracy and social significance

Viewers consistently evaluated political comedy according to its perceived accuracy or authenticity, defining this as empirical truth or ideological agreement with parodic or exaggerated representations. While genre theory has identified generic verisimilitude (Neale 2000) to explain how we make sense of genre in general, viewers repeatedly describe political comedy as 'true' rather than 'realistic'. It is clear that many people expect television political comedy to be an accurate representation of how things are. This close relationship between text and actuality is similar to the comedy scholarship that wrote historical narratives from sitcom settings and characters, for example Hamamoto's claim that US sitcom could be used as a history text book (1989, 10). However, this thesis has shown that a critic's analysis of the text should be subordinated to how viewers' understand texts as accurate. The historical/sociological aims of comedy research therefore can still be pursued because political comedy's reception contains statements about what viewers believe to be true.

Yes Minister and *The Thick of It* were praised as accurate representations of British political culture, suggesting that British viewers have a generally cynical view of politics and believe ministers to be incompetent and manipulated by their colleagues. However,

the absence of specific references to British politics suggests these were partial beliefs rather than fully considered positions. Conversely, inaccurate or distorted representations were associated with generic failure. *The New Statesman* was criticised for lacking realism and some who complained about *TW3* described the irreverent view of British national institutions as a misrepresentation.

The textual elements subjected to evaluations of accuracy were not selected indiscriminately but according to whether they were regarded as socially significant. Sources focused on elements that referenced news and current affairs, a genre culturally defined as important, and many explicitly stated the significance of the real life referent. For example, *TW3* included many jokes about figures in popular culture but complaints referred to material about official British culture and the British nation because they were seen as far more socially significant. The reception of political comedy is therefore an index of cultural significance²⁸³ that can be used to explore the discursive hierarchies categorising different issues as more or less significant.²⁸⁴ In the other case studies viewers identify representations of Westminster's political culture, British politics in the 1980s, paedophilia, and the British tabloid media as significant issues. *Brass Eye* also shows conflict over the relative significance of different issues, with people disagreeing over the relative significance of paedophilia and the tabloid media within an ethical hierarchy. The 'accurate representation of the socially significant real' is thus part of the cultural categorisation of television political comedy.

²⁸³ Significance a general sense rather than implying value; 'paedophilia' is a socially significant issue, though criminal.

²⁸⁴ See also Cripps (2003) and Bodroghkozy's (2003) reception research into the sitcom representation of African-Americans.

Appropriateness and affect

Accurate representations were not always valued but sometimes subordinated to *appropriateness* when viewers expressed deep offence at a particular representation. Complaints about *TW3* and *Brass Eye* argued that British national institutions and paedophilia were of such social significance that referring to them in a comedic discourse was inappropriate, describing it as unethical rather than inaccurate. These sources regarded political comedy texts as disruptive of cultural hierarchies, arguing that it was inappropriate to represent some issues using comedy. The expectation of appropriateness gives access to viewers' ethics and, where the issue is less significant, etiquette. Responses also illustrate hierarchical relationships between genres, with some sources proposing that socially significant issues should only be represented by texts associated with serious genres, such as journalism, and that political comedy was antithetical to such representations. The reception of political comedy thus invokes viewers' beliefs about what is socially significant, how it should be represented, and which genres can appropriately represent which issues.

These strong feelings were accompanied by claims that political comedy has an affect on people. This can be seen in the angry letters describing *TW3* as not only inappropriate but dangerous, and the claims of harm aimed at *Brass Eye*. Both demonstrate a belief that television political comedy texts can intervene in culture, the founding assumption of much academic research. This reception discourse is thus another act of categorisation: it shows the aspects of culture categorised as socially significant but potentially vulnerable; and shows the significance attached to any perceived change. For

example, fans of *TW3* praised the series' irreverent representations of traditional British society because they saw these cultural standards as powerful, restrictive and in need of modernizing, offering a description of contemporaneous cultural power relations and an evaluation of these relations.

Political comedy is thus categorised as possessing power based on the accuracy and appropriateness of its representation of the socially significant real. As will be expanded upon below, this power is seen as proportional to its relationship to the real but the existence of this power is rarely, if ever, challenged. We now turn to the variety of ways in which this power is discussed and understood.

Interpreting political comedy: the power and sudden glory

The notion that laughter and comedy can exert influence can be seen across reception sources, and some of the claims are very similar to those of superiority theory, specifically the negative impact described by Plato and Hobbes, and seen in other critics' anxieties about television comedy's textual representation of subordinated social groups. However, reception sources provide a stronger basis for any socio-cultural hypotheses and reframe the direction of debate from text to culture. Textual analysis proposes that texts can have negative ideological effects, for example reproducing sexist representations, and that texts should be critiqued. Reception research draws conclusions about viewers' attitudes, for example expressions of sexist attitudes, which can then be critiqued. This reframes the site of activity from the text to the individual, though this is not to deny that texts provide a site for people to express themselves and influence

individuals emotionally. Some were very upset or offended by the notion of being “triumphed over” (Hobbes 1889, 43) by the laughter generated by *TW3*, while others have expressed the “sudden glory” (*ibid.*) of their own laughter triumphing over celebrities in *Brass Eye*. Much existing comedy research and many of the reception responses here show that laughter about the real is often interpreted as possessing cultural and social power. Though the precise nature of this is rarely explored in detail, it is generally expressed as changing social relationships by affecting individuals’ behaviour or thoughts, expressing a ‘folk’ theory of the hypodermic model of audiences. Political comedy is interpreted as a genre that possesses the affective power to educate, cause harm, trivialise and punish.

Educate

Work on comedy audiences has found that individuals tend to seek out and enjoy material that affirms their existing beliefs (Husband 1988). This is suggested by sources that interpret political comedy texts as accurate without providing any supporting evidence. Viewers consistently stated that political comedy texts accurately represented political culture as ruled by self-interest or egotism, in the case of *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It*, or that the public figures ridiculed in *Brass Eye* truly were stupid. In almost every case, this was expressed as self-evidently true, suggesting that viewers were agreeing with texts, rather than making empirically verified statements. However, ‘accuracy’ was used to propose that political comedy’s representations could educate and reveal new truths to people. As in political comedy’s relationship to the real, this also connects to news and current affairs, historically perceived to play an important role

in educating and informing the audience. Similar to mass communication research's approach to political comedy, all six series included praise for their ability to raise political awareness and engagement, though in *Brass Eye* it was the context of tabloid media literacy. Issues regarded as educative can be used as an index of cultural significance for those viewers and demonstrates how cultural classifications can include claims about a genre's social effects.²⁸⁵

However, this educative power was proposed as an interpretation rather than an experience. Only a few viewers gave narratives of their own learning and most wrote about other imagined individuals. People assumed educative potential existed without citing evidence but it is still regarded as a key aspect of each text's value. *Spitting Image* and *The New Statesman* were judged generic failures by those who considered them unable to educate or inform because they were insufficiently political. Television political comedy's potential to educate was thus a very important part of viewers' expectations, allowing us to see it as an interpretative definition of the genre, extending Mittell's idea of 'evaluative definitions' (2004, 108-9). Viewers who do not interpret a text as politically affective refuse to define it as successful political comedy.

Trivialise and critique

Political comedy's power was also located in an ability to either trivialise or critique, with the term used depending on the viewer's ideological position. The power of

²⁸⁵ See many different examples, particularly how specific types of literature were understood in the 'effects' tradition of audience studies, eg. R. Hoggart on magazines (1958) and Wertham on comic books (2003).

trivialisation was located in other people seeing inappropriate comic representations of the socially significant real; national institutions, public figures in pain, paedophilia. As in relation to educative power, a projected group of viewers were imagined to be influenced and hurt in a way that is socially damaging. These responses expressed anxieties about the maintenance of cultural hierarchies and fears that destructive diminution could occur through laughter, once again referencing superiority theory. *TW3* was judged to reduce the respect for national institutions, *Spitting Image* was criticised by some for its representations of the Royal Family, and *Brass Eye* accused of trivialising children's suffering. The discursive threat posed by comedy, either through superiority theory's emphasis on humiliation and aggression, or the links with lowbrow comedy culture, produced outrage in those who found their cultural affiliations apparently reduced in status, as seen most clearly in the *TW3* letters. This further contributes to the historical utility of reception sources, with the anxieties and moral panics expressed by viewers giving insight into their cultural and ideological affiliations.

Representations seen as trivialising by some viewers were seen as critiques by others. This reiterates the multiple nature of how viewers understand television, as argued by Hall (1980) and many others, and how different interpretations are based of different ideological positions. Individuals complain about political comedy trivialising a socially significant issue when they feel affiliated to that issue, but if they hold negative attitudes towards an issue they celebrate political comedy's power, reframing 'trivialisation' as 'critique'. The creators of *Spitting Image* claimed that one of their aims was to make viewers think less of politicians, representing trivialisation as a political tool, particularly

against the Conservative government, and some viewers of *The News Statesman* echoed this. Viewers similarly appraised *Brass Eye* as positive because it was interpreted as ridiculing the debased practices of tabloidised current affairs. In all these examples, texts were praised for their ability to reduce the status of socially damaging issues.

Harm and punish

Trivialisation and critique were directly associated with political comedy text's power to harm or punish. This was harm to the British nation in the *TW3* letters, harm to victims of child abuse in *Brass Eye*, harm to the public figures represented in *Spitting Image*, and expressions of hurt by public figures fooled by *Brass Eye*'s hoaxes. This was judged to cause harm to individuals and seen by some as a breach of television standards and ethics. Such harm was largely expressed in complaints but some viewers framed it in a positive way: punishment. Praise for *Brass Eye* and *Spitting Image* featured a current of satisfaction at the series' ability to hurt and humiliate public figures. This is coherent with traditional definitions of satire (Hodgart 1969) and extends the discourse of critique, indicating individuals' ethical judgements in relation to the socially significant real and its treatment. For example, many *Brass Eye* responses described the hoaxing of celebrities as ethical because they deserved such treatment due to their negative cultural role. This 'comedic disciplining' returns us to the idea of political comedy as educative through its power to inculcate some kind of positive change, while also repeating the interpretations of social effect claimed by superiority theory and television critics' textual analysis. To summarise, then; political comedy's cultural

relationship to the socially significant real is partly defined through its ability to influence and change individuals and culture through education, trivialisation and harm.

Evaluating political comedy: generic success and cultural value

When evaluating case study texts, viewers consistently ascribe high quality using terms such as ‘sophistication’, ‘subtlety’ and ‘intelligence’ and reference authorship, literature and satire. These are discourses identified as the qualities of high culture and these terms position texts and viewers themselves in the upper sections of a cultural hierarchy (see Bourdieu 1984), claiming for themselves a limited form of connoisseurship. Positive responses associated generic success with subtle writing, the authors’ informed experience, and excellent performances. The gravitas of authorship was attributed to Armando Iannucci, Fluck and Law, and Chris Morris, marking them out as high-status creatives, and a similar tactic can be seen in the usage of ‘satire’ to describe the highest quality of political comedy. As described by Mittell in relation to the low-quality of the talk show (2004, 94-120), these discursive practices, coupled with definitions of political comedy as accurate and possessing educative power, assert a hierarchy that elevates the genre of political comedy above other comedy forms.

This can also be seen in the way that evaluations also associate low value with textual forms emphasising disorder, exaggeration or visual comedy; the sometimes chaotic and messy studio of *TW3*, the exaggerated narratives of *The New Statesman*, the grotesque puppets of *Spitting Image* and the shocking content of *Brass Eye*. These negative responses often link textual form to cultural and generic value, demonstrating television

political comedy is generally categorised as a high-value genre that must conform to higher cultural standards than most entertainment. This can also be seen in the way that low quality was linked to interpretations of inappropriate or inaccurate representations of the socially significant real, and this was reinforced by discourses of debased authorship, with such texts said to be the work of children, undergraduates, incompetents or degenerates. For many viewers, television political comedy had to be defined as high-quality television.

Lowbrow quality

However some political comedy texts rejected on the basis of their low value were praised by others. These positive responses avoided explicit evaluations of aesthetic quality, instead focusing on comedy pleasure, as seen in the positive responses to *The New Statesman* and *Spitting Image*. The latter is an exception to this avoidance of aesthetic praise, with the grotesque puppets routinely discussed as very pleasurable and of high quality. As was observed, while the highbrow tastes expressed in quality newspapers dominated, there were ways for viewers to enjoy political comedy that extended into a different set of evaluative criteria. *Spitting Image* in particular provided the alternative perspective of the carnivalesque (Bakhtin 1984), and sources also exhibited fan enthusiasm for Rik Mayall and *The New Statesman*. These did not feature the serious discourses related to news and current affairs programming but emphasised those of the comedic and the popular. While responses to television political comedy are dominated by the literary, high-culture discourses associated with satire, there were other low-brow, populist discourses associated with the carnivalesque and tabloidism,

demonstrating that viewers respond from at least two very different cultural perspectives.

Comic style

Interpretations about political comedy's effects therefore often depended on attitude to comedy style. As established, highbrow comedy was interpreted as producing the effects described above, and this was particularly seen in relation to comic coherence. *Yes Minister*'s mannered style was seen to possess high aesthetic value *and* fitted viewers' assumptions about the aesthetics of official culture; *The Thick of It*'s handheld cameras and expletive-filled scripts were attributed to a television auteur and interpreted as authentically representing an aggressive and anxious political culture. Conversely, some viewers felt the use of grotesque puppets, slapstick and sexual innuendo produced a stupid text that did not reflect educative political discourse and could not produce the benign social effects of political comedy. There was the repeated interpretation that a highbrow comedy style produced positive effects but lowbrow comedy does not.

This should again be seen in the context of political comedy's references to news and current affairs. Viewers write as if the combination of comedy with news and current affairs demands a discursive balancing act between the entertaining pleasures of comedy style and the educative value of representations from news and current affairs. The comedy discourse must, it seems, be insulated from lowbrow associations by adopting a highbrow comic style that is coherent with the seriousness of news and current affairs. A text with a comedy style evaluated as lowbrow is interpreted as being incapable of

achieving the highbrow effects of political comedy, as if the lowbrow comedy performed an act of cultural contamination, and in doing so failed to evoke political comedy's pleasures.

Experiencing political comedy: Dis/pleasure

Political comedy's pleasures and displeasures show that there are a range of emotions connected to television political comedy, and that the same text evokes very different emotional responses from different people. Political comedy's emotional impact is therefore not produced by textual form but by the viewers' relationship to the textual referents, reinforcing the critique of textual analysis in the study of television comedy proposed in the Introduction and highlighting the need for more work on how viewers write about comedy as argued by Mills (2005, 139). Most of the pleasures expressed in relation to political comedy are the enjoyment of humour, laughter and comedy, and viewers frequently describe laughter without attributing any specific meaning to these experiences themselves. However as noted in some existing work on television sitcom (Cripps 2003 and Bodroghkozy 2003) and the history of mentalities (Burke 1973 and 1997), these emotional responses acquire meaning as historical sources because they are intertwined with the evaluations, interpretations and definitions identified so far in this conclusion. Viewers' pleasure and displeasure therefore becomes an index of viewers' position within and attitude towards British culture. The discourses of comic pleasure regarding *TW3* are evidence that viewers' regarded some elements of British culture as worthy of ridicule; those who enjoyed *Spitting Image* from a carnivalesque perspective can be associated with the lower-brow populism of tabloid newspapers.

The other dominant pleasures expressed by viewers are written about in relation the evaluations, interpretations and definitions identified above. Viewers repeatedly express their enthusiasm for the accuracy and authenticity of *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It*; for *Brass Eye*'s ability to provide ideological critique; and in relation to education, with individuals referring to the genre as personally and socially beneficial with considerable satisfaction. The cultural categorisations of political comedy as a genre are thus consistently referred to as sources of textual pleasure across the case studies.

The reverse is true in relation to lack of pleasure; inauthenticity or a lack of political critique was a disappointment and the texts associated with low aesthetic value were judged to provide the ‘wrong’ inappropriate lowbrow pleasures that undermined serious critique. Both confirm Altman’s observation that generic frustration is an emotion caused by a text’s “failure to respect generic norms” (Altman 1996, 280). Another source of displeasure was located in the *other viewers’ pleasure* at inappropriate material and anxieties about the effects of trivialisation. This is a step beyond offense and demonstrates viewers are aware that ‘the audience’ is in fact a complex group of individuals who interpret and enjoy things in different ways, reflecting critical theories of textual polysemy and multiple audiences.

Unusual pleasures

Pleasure was also expressed in relation to experiences commonly regarded as negative; some complained about being disgusted by *Spitting Image*'s puppets and *Brass Eye*'s references to paedophilia but others used exactly the same terms to describe those same

texts' pleasures. Two reception sources can express very different emotions but *locate* them in the same textual elements and *describe* them using the same terms. Analyses of reception sources must not simply engage with apparently straightforward terms, such as 'disgust', but treat individuals' writing with an empathetic engagement that explores their specific usage. These counter-intuitive pleasures were generally associated with the textual elements interpreted as critiques of the socially significant real. Viewers expressed appreciation of humiliation and punishment, enjoying *Spitting Image*, *Brass Eye* and parts of *TW3* for providing vindictive pleasure in relation to despised individuals who were considered socially damaging, such as celebrities. This allows us to see these unusual pleasures as discourses of ideological agreement as much as of comedy pleasure.

Viewers' responses to political comedy therefore cannot be accounted for by totalising formal accounts of 'how comedy works'. Instead, political comedy is a genre that repeatedly involves the unpredictable combination of the cultural value of the comic style deployed, the social significance of the real life referent used within the comedy, the internalised hierarchies and affiliations of the viewer, and the wider cultural categorisations of the genre. The reception of political comedy not only combines the expectations and associations of comedy with news and current affairs but does so within a third context: the viewer's feelings and beliefs. Political comedy is therefore a very useful site to research social and cultural attitudes because its reception is consistently contingent upon how a text combines comedy with politics, news and current affairs, and how viewers interpret this in relation to their own view of the world.

II

Television political comedy, television studies and British history

This thesis has therefore identified the collection of definitions, interpretations, evaluations and experiences through which disparate individuals have culturally classified television political comedy. They are repeatedly expressed in written responses from different times and different sources, affirming Mittell's claim that "the cultural categorisation of genre is not an unconscious or 'mythic' process but rather an explicit and conscious one" (2004, 159). However, identifying these classifications as above abstracts them from their specific usage, and the following section will now draw together how the case studies also inform an understanding of British culture, particularly political culture and media culture, and television genre, and how the thesis has contributed to the field.

Television comedy

As argued in the Introduction, television comedy reception is under-researched²⁸⁶ and this work contributes by exploring a range of reception sources from different periods of time. This section turns to what people write about how comedy 'works' and how this relates to television political comedy's cultural importance. What is clear is that while comedy is best known as a form that evokes pleasurable emotions and laughter, political comedy is systematically theorized as a genre of seriousness.

²⁸⁶ See Mills (2005, 135).

The three main theories of comedy – superiority, relief and incongruity – are each present in the reception of television political comedy. Incongruity theory, the most critically accepted theory, has almost no currency and the concept of political comedy as using incongruous representations is considered a generic failure. Accuracy and realism are praised, particularly in the sitcom case studies, and this has been noted in the reception of other sitcom representations of family life,²⁸⁷ African-Americans²⁸⁸ and housewives²⁸⁹ but not discussed at length elsewhere.²⁹⁰ The emphasis on accuracy and authenticity suggests that generically there is a lot at stake in proposing political comedy's 'seriousness' and subordinating the generation of comic pleasure

Some sources also include what could be seen as vague references to the Freudian relief theory, providing a folk version where the comic representations of politicians are described as alleviating the pain caused by a despised political culture. Laughter and comic pleasure are seen as in some way freeing the viewer from current conditions, a notion most clearly seen in Bakhtin's historicisation of the medieval carnival (1984). Again, this discusses pleasure but emphasizes political discourse as more culturally significant than the pleasures of entertainment.

The most prevalent belief about television political comedy was that texts could exert power over others, particularly able to hurt the object of laughter or to create social harm by reducing the laughing subjects' regard for the object of the joke. This is a clear folk

²⁸⁷ See Mittell (2004) on *The Simpsons*.

²⁸⁸ See Cripps (2003) and Bodroghkozy (2003).

²⁸⁹ See Hallam (2005).

²⁹⁰ Though Corner (1995, 175) notes the relationship between quality and realism in both entertainment and 'serious' television.

rendering of superiority theory where laughter itself is framed as an aggressive act of social domination. Hobbes argued that the pleasure of laughter in social situations was caused by perceiving another as lower in status or capability to yourself, and viewers repeatedly write about their pleasure at seeing politicians and public figures represented as stupid, incompetent or corrupt. Further links to Hobbes can also be seen in the anxieties about laughing at the socially significant real; he highlights the emotional pain of being “triumphed over” through laughter and argues that superior laughter is unethical and a sign of poor character.

The dominance of superiority theory in viewers’ experience of political comedy and interpretations of its affective power are therefore deeply rooted in the interpersonal experience of being laughed at or laughing at someone else. Television political comedy appears to be written about as a social experience and the effects of this dynamic are magnified in relation to television political comedy due to the mass reach of television broadcasting, with the most anxious sources expressing a folk version of the effects or hypodermic approach to media audiences. Viewers’ understanding of television political comedy combines a centuries-old understanding of laughter as an aggressive social interaction with an anxious view of broadcasting to interpret television political comedy as a powerful genre that can influence individuals and communities.

These social anxieties expand Hobbes’ interpersonal view of laughter, reflecting the communal view of comedy provided by Medhurst (2007) where he argues that jokes and laughter defines and delimits groups. Comedy proposes an ideological position through

language, character and punch line; the response is a sign of agreement and membership or disagreement and separateness. Television's mass reach allows this communal function to reach millions of people, and this is the foundation of viewers' worries about *TW3* and *Brass Eye*, and the belief that superior laughter can create volatile and disruptive power relations. This general view is coherent with textual approaches to sitcom that offer a political critique of stereotyped comic representations of subordinated social groups (see Mills 2005, 103; Dyer 2002b). However, rather than providing evidence of comedy's 'effects', reception discourses show the groups or issues considered vulnerable, most obviously British national institutions in *TW3* and young children in *Brass Eye*, or malign, such as the tabloid media or Conservative MPs, and how people wrote about these issues.

The dominance of superiority theory in the reception of television political comedy therefore makes it a useful site to explore people's perceptions of culture and society. The moral panics over *TW3* or *Brass Eye* both express attitudes about the hierarchies of British society and beliefs about how television should treat and represent people in public life, and the close connection between television political comedy and the socially significant real make it a useful site to explore the status of groups, institutions and aesthetics.

British cultural history and audiences

Audience studies has generally had a contemporary focus but this thesis has researched television audiences historically using written archives. The case studies pursued here

show that viewers' responses to television political comedy can provide evidence of beliefs about British culture and society. Unlike the Screen Theory-influenced textual analysis that provided sociological and historical readings from the television text, reception sources are a direct, if partial, expressions of individuals' own experience and attitudes. Sources have expressed feelings about television in the 1960s, the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s, and the tabloid media of the late 1990s. As well as an individual expression, writing is a practice that, as Mittell (2004) and Couldry (2000) argue using Foucault and Bourdieu respectively, discursively constitutes the attitudes expressed. Mittell cites Foucault's notion of discursive formations (1989), ideas that acquire a seemingly objective and natural reality through repetition and longevity, and Couldry refers to Bourdieu's idea of symbolic power (1991), where practices acquire dominance through shared belief and social expectation. The beliefs expressed by individuals are therefore theorized as indicative of wider cultural practices and beliefs.

The sources demonstrate that individuals write about television in different ways, sometimes focusing on their own pleasure, sometimes expressing anxieties about its effects on others, and sometimes referring to a host of other issues that allow us to identify their ideological and cultural position through the different affiliations they express. In line with the third generation of audience studies, viewers are consistently aware of themselves as a tiny part of a multi-faceted television audience and national community. The reception of television political comedy can therefore be seen to give

access to their attitudes about British society, political culture, media culture and media audiences.

Attitudes to British culture in general

The brief snapshot provided by the reception of television political comedy does show changes in British society, particularly in relation to how people respond to the consistent representation of social elites as ridiculous, generally politicians and public figures, and in relation to where social anxieties are located, particularly evident in *TW3* and *Brass Eye*. *TW3* produced angry responses because many people believed that politicians and other representatives of national institutions should be treated with high levels of respect, expressing a strong defence of conservative culture. These were viewers with strong affiliations to national institutions and their many references to propaganda, war and social unrest exhibit a belief that Britain and the world was changing during the early 1960s. While histories of the period tend to privilege the optimism of the change that was occurring – Marwick’s (2003) section on the 1960s is called ‘Roads to Freedom’ – these letter writers referenced the existential threats of the Second World War or conflict with the Soviet Union. For these people, maintenance of traditional social relations was vital and television political comedy was experienced as a direct and deliberate social disruption.

This defence of traditional British culture is not seen again with such potency, though as has been reflected on there is a lack of available case studies during the following 17 years. Instead, it is the more liberal egalitarian attitude that grows more dominant and by

the 1980s viewers were praising political comedy for its educative critique of official culture. Anxieties about the treatment of public figures persisted in response to *Spitting Images* puppets or *Brass Eye*'s hoaxes but these are framed as hurtful to the individual involved rather than possessing consequences for the entire nation. The only national threat that is identified in the later case studies is that of paedophiles or the tabloid media. Paedophiles are represented as able to destroy individuals, families and communities, while the tabloid media is diagnosed as a cause and symptom of national cultural decline. Neither reaches the scope or intensity of the *TW3* complaints and neither are as accurate, for the series did represent a cultural shift in British society and a change in the relationship between the media and official culture.

The different case studies also show change in what can be represented on British television; *TW3* received complaints for including the words 'bum and po' and naming MPs who barely spoke in the House of Commons, while *Brass Eye* was castigated for deliberately deceiving an MP into supporting a hoax charity and depicting a man masturbating with a potato. Complaints remained passionate but they refer to an entirely different set of cultural standards, and also exhibit of diminution of anxieties from the British nation to smaller groups of people, suggesting that the way people wrote about television's audience changed, shrinking from the national community expressed in 1962 into a more segmented community by 2001. What remains unchanged is the concern with the supposed power of television political comedy and how it affects aspects of society culturally categorized as 'vulnerable'.

Attitudes to political culture

Viewers also express attitudes to British politics via discourses of accuracy and authenticity. While Oakley (1982) argued that *Yes Minister*'s representations shaped audience views of politics, it seems truer to say that writing about television political comedy is a site to express opinions about textual representations. Viewers write about the pleasures of political comedy texts they describe as 'true', thus giving partial access to their beliefs about political culture and other aspects of the socially significant real.

The dominant attitude expressed in relation to the accuracy of political comedy is cynicism towards politicians and the political process. Viewers describe the dominant culture in British politics as incompetent, lazy, ridiculous, arrogant, aggressive and disgusting. *TW3*'s sketches and impressions, the unequal power relationships in *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It*, the character of Alan B'Stard, the puppets of *Spitting Image* and the hoaxing of *Brass Eye* were all written about as drawing out the truth about politics and public life. The strong current of respect seen in the complaints to *TW3* slows to a trickle in the later case studies. Cynicism thus appears to have become a norm in the way that people write about politics and individual case studies give more specific access to particular articulations. The positive *TW3* letters show that some during the early 1960s saw politicians as unworthy of the respect that traditional culture accorded them; responses to *Yes Minister* shows that 20 years later the traditional habits and networks of official culture were still believed to exert political control; the reception of *Spitting Image* and *The New Statesman* suggests that political culture was associated with excess and disgust from the mid-1980s to mid-1990s; and *Brass Eye* and

The Thick of It shows beliefs about politicians slavish devotion to the mass media from the late 1990s onwards.

The historical specificity of these feelings is somewhat blurred by the longevity of the texts in a home video culture; internet reviewers described *Yes Minister* as ‘true’ decades after broadcast, suggesting that a direct connection between text and viewers’ historical moment may be problematic, and hinting at the discursive strength of political comedy’s cultural categorisation as ‘accurate’. Viewers may use texts to express a generalized political cynicism, bringing their own attitudes rather than fully engaging with the text, as Husband (1988) argues. The vague nature of these political attitudes can also be seen in viewers’ lack of specific references to policies or political events and their consistent use of generalizations. They refer to the Labour party, Tony Blair and a culture of spin or criticize Thatcherism and Tory greed without reference to examples that would support their case. This leads to the conclusion that the political attitudes expressed in relation to television political comedy should be seen as part of a ‘political imagination’ that repeats and rehearses popular discourses that are emotive and generalized. The lack of supporting evidence suggests that people write about political comedy within a frame of confirmation bias and are looking for information that fits preconceived ideas. If this is the case, political comedy is unlikely to influence or affect people with educative power but only through reinforcement, and audiences look for texts that will confirm already held beliefs.²⁹¹ The reception of television political comedy is therefore

²⁹¹ This approximates some of the claims made by the Uses and Gratifications model in relation to ‘value reinforcement’ (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1973)

theorized as a space where people express pre-existing emotive discourses about politics and political culture.

Attitudes to media culture and institutions

A similar conclusion to attitudes about social elites can be reached from how viewers write about and culturally categorise media institutions, particularly the BBC, Channel 4, and tabloid media. While some media institutions have been culturally classified by policy makers via their founding charters, the BBC and Channel 4 included, viewers' responses show that popular discourses perform a similar *ad hoc* role. As Couldry (2000) argues, the media is defined as a 'special' cultural site and reception discourses can give access to some of the ways that this specialness, which Couldry defines as 'the power to construct reality', is expressed at other moments.

The BBC was categorized by many of *TW3*'s letter writers as a national institution but there was conflict over whether the nation that it represented was the traditional conservative nation dominated by elites and official culture or a popular nation with a more egalitarian culture. Complainants explicitly identified the BBC as a key agent in defining the nation, categorizing the broadcaster and its broadcasts as part of the nation itself. The dramatic narrative provided by *TW3*'s reception gives access to the attachments felt about the BBC: people's emotional investments in the Corporation harked back to the comfort its broadcasts provided during the Second World War or looked forward to aspirations of a new modern society.

Similar meanings are also attributed to Channel 4 in relation to *Brass Eye*, with right-leaning journalists claiming it was part of the broadcaster's deliberately attempts to shock viewers and debase cultural standards. This categorisation fits how the channel was conceived, charged with a license to be different (Goodwin 1998), and the same idea of disruption and difference was praised by some of *Brass Eye*'s fans. Similar accusations of social disruption were also used to describe the tabloidisation of the British, with criticisms of *Spitting Image* and interpretations of *Brass Eye*'s satire categorizing tabloid press and some news and current affairs as culturally degraded and degrading. There is a general consensus that media forms culturally categorised with forms that emphasise shock, melodrama and hyperbole produce negative social consequences.

These categorisations express hierarchies of taste and cultural anxieties that have long-standing precedents but which are specifically located in the mass media. These are consistent and abiding concerns about the impact of endlessly multiplying texts upon culture but in each of their particular cases they do give access to contemporary concerns about social disruption, such as *TW3*'s youthful cast mocking politicians or the tabloid media adopting cultural standards associated with American culture. It also demonstrates that while the history and theorization of media institutions is often about government committees and policies, production practices, technology and texts, as vital as these are, there is an alternative folk history of how they are culturally categorized and given meaning by viewers.

Attitudes to other media audiences

As well as classifying genres and media institutions, reception sources consistently refer to other parts of ‘the audience’, framing themselves and others as active viewers, and expressing concerns about other people’s illicit pleasures at inappropriate representations. *TW3* complainants worried about those who would lose respect for politicians, the police or the Queen; *Spitting Image* reviewers castigated those who enjoyed the series as mindless tabloid readers; and *Brass Eye* critics worried that some viewers would be harmed and others corrupted. These concerns reproduce many of the assumptions that motivated early examples of audience studies research, where the audience of the mass media is assumed to be vulnerable to texts’ powerful effects, and viewers’ awareness of ‘other’ audience members who might hold different opinions can be seen in research into contemporary audiences (for example Jhally and Lewis 1992) and historical sitcom audiences (Cripps 2003 and Bodroghkozy 2003).

One of the key sites of intra-audience discourse is the ongoing concern about other people’s pleasure. Political comedy’s use of the socially significant real is a prompt for most of these anxieties, with the genre’s dual status as a provider of pleasure and of seriousness producing texts where potentially conflicting ideas are brought together. Stigmatising other viewers and their pleasure is one way that this is expressed, allowing viewers to define their own cultural status in relation to others. Quality newspaper journalists positioned themselves as arbiters of cultural value by rejecting *The New Statesman* and *Spitting Image* as low brow comedy and dismissing viewers who enjoyed it, citing classic works of literature as exemplars of ‘real’ satire. *TW3* complainants

similarly described the cast as unskilled amateurs, and readers of tabloids and the *Daily Mail* were demonized by *Brass Eye* fans. Just as Bourdieu (1984) researched the aesthetic tastes of different social groups through their textual preferences, so such conflicts can explore how people categorise themselves and others via their antipathies and anxieties.

Reflecting on reception sources

This research has also suggested that different sources tend towards different discursive emphases; internet comments tend to evaluate textual pleasure clearly, expressing enthusiasm through emotive descriptions. Newspapers tend to express pleasure with less potency, emphasising interpretations of effect, from the rational arguments of the quality papers to the tendentious headlines of the tabloids. The *TW3* letters demonstrate discourses of dis/pleasure and effect, while also showing that letters to the BBC were a personal engagement with the Corporation reflecting beliefs about its important role in the national life. Television reception is not just about the decoding of television texts but involves other issues including the classification of media institutions, the texts' audiences and the site of writing itself. Writing about television will result in sources that stray far from elaborations of textual meaning and towards hypotheses about the place of the text in society.

This thesis has therefore shown that individuals relate to political comedy in ways that are varied and complex, writing about texts, broadcasters, other viewers and the socially significant real. They write about issues that have concerned television studies for

decades – the power of representation, cultural power relations, the effects of texts, and the social significance of the media – and they do so because television political comedy is a genre that evokes these discourses through its combination of comedy, pleasure and representations of the socially significant real.

III

Genre: Cultural classifications as systems

This research has already outlined how people have culturally classified television political comedy and this section will now address how it operates from a more theoretical perspective. It will argue that cultural categorisations and textual elements interact in a structured way that suggests genres include an internal discursive hierarchy and that a text's generic success relies on successfully replication this structure.

Sources clearly demonstrate that genre cannot be seen as an intrinsic textual property but rather an act of categorisation performed by individuals and through cultural consensus, affirming Derrida's claim that texts participate in genre (1980, 230) via viewers' interpretive practices. The same text is not merely described or interpreted in different ways but can be categorized as belonging to different genres by different people. Many people defined *TW3* as satire but some watched it as Light Entertainment and complained because it did not meet their expectations of utopian pleasure. Some responses to *The New Statesman* labelled and enjoyed it as a 'Rik Mayall sitcom' because they were fans of the actor. Polarised responses defined texts as satire or not-

satire depending on the cultural value they attributed. The act of classifying texts generically is therefore not an objective identification but a discursive practice.

The examples of *TW3* and *The New Statesman* above also demonstrate that while genre classification is cultural, it depends on the textual aspects that are privileged by viewers in the process of meaning-making. In *The New Statesman*, Rik Mayall acted as a textual cue that dominated fan responses and subordinated ‘political comedy’. Similarly *TW3*’s scheduling and use of songs and music acted as a Light Entertainment cue for some. Viewers’ classification of a text as a specific genre can therefore relate to the textual elements they identify as dominant. For television political comedy, this was comic references to the socially significant real but other elements in individual texts enable different classifications and enable the text to participate in multiple genres. As Frow (2006) argues, the practice of generically categorizing texts is a combination of viewers’ generic awareness, their attitudes to different textual elements and the relative significance of specific textual elements associated with specific genres.

The role of textual elements in cueing specific genres is also seen to have an inter-generic quality and that is not just texts that participate in different genres but cultural categorisations too. Television political comedy’s references to the socially significant real are consistently associated with discourses of accuracy and seriousness, closely reflecting the cultural categorisation of news and current affairs. Television political comedy and news and current affairs share cultural categorisations, such as accuracy, because both texts refer to the socially significant real, demonstrating the discursive

strength of journalistic representations to be classified as ‘real’.²⁹² The mixing of genres is historically a normal practice (Altman 1999) but this demonstrates Mittell’s assertion that “textual hybrids are also cultural hybrids” (2004, 158), and that understanding any form of generic hybridity or mixing must be rooted in how the new relationships between textual elements are understood. Mittell also argues that generic blurring leads to controversy and “when different frameworks are juxtaposed,²⁹³ violating traditional norms and well-rooted assumptions, a cultural crisis is quite common.” (178)

Mittell also writes that “By looking at the genre mixing practice, media scholars can better understand the complex ways genres operate as cultural categories” (195). The observations made so far suggest that one way in which television political comedy operates is through a balancing act between expectations of comedy pleasure and expectations of serious pleasure derived from references to news and current affairs. Too much or the wrong kind of comedy pleasure disrupts the necessary seriousness, and they must exist in an appropriate relationship within the text. Television political comedy is therefore not a random cluster of categorisations but possesses a structure. Jauss (1982) observed how collections of genres are organised in hierarchies and systems, and this evidence suggests that categorisations within television political comedy operate in a similar way: comedy is subordinate to seriousness, and accuracy is subordinated to appropriateness and ethics. These hierarchies support Frow’s claim that genres contain “universes” (2006). Political comedy not only gives access to attitudes concerning

²⁹² As argued by Couldry (2000).

²⁹³ Echoing Douglas’ definition of comedy: “It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another.” (1978, 95-96)

specific examples of the socially significant real but also a system of values that structure the internal relationships of different cultural categorisations.

Television political comedy is therefore a genre that exists in a perpetual balancing act between issues that people hold very strong opinions about. As has been seen, television's mass audience contains wide cultural diversity and achieving balance in the eyes of every viewer a virtual impossibility. Every failure that results in a complaint and every laugh that leads to a positive review is therefore evidence of the cultural conflicts and affiliations that viewers are participating in and which political comedy cannot help but invoke.

Engaging with individuals' writing is unpredictable and reception research must follow viewers' own concerns, potentially frustrating one's own research aims if they are set to tightly. However, the case studies here have suggested dominant trends that could be used as hypotheses for further work to address, including: how individuals evaluate, define and interpret television broadcasters and broadcasting institutions; what political opinions are expressed in the reception of other political comedy texts and formats; how viewers respond to other comic styles; how do other moral panics about the media mirror those seen here; and what internal structures and hierarchies can be seen in the cultural categorisations of other genres.

IV

The use value of qualitative historical reception genre research

The final part of this conclusion proposes some ways in which this thesis has contributed to the field of television studies via the method of researching history, comedy, genre and audiences.

Television history

This work has demonstrated that television history can be written from the ‘bottom up’ by addressing viewers’ emotive affiliations and phobic reactions as historical facts about issues that range from genres and texts to media institutions and broadcasting standards.

As Staiger (1992) argues, it *is* possible to find and research historical audiences. The thesis has also successfully transferred her method of qualitative historical reception research from film to television, and effectively combined it with Ang’s (1985) method of symptomatic reading. This has also been done with reference to different types of evidence - letters, internal correspondence, audience research, newspaper reviews, internet reviews and fan comments – showing that a variety of sources enriches research by giving access to the different discourses that each source tends to privilege.

Genre

The shared cultural categorisations of television political comedy have been identified from many and varied sources and this demonstrates the soundness of this thesis’ pragmatic reception methodology. By addressing hundreds of different sources, this

thesis has demonstrated that the genre of political comedy has been understood in ways that are complementary and coherent at different times and in very different contexts. Individuals writing to the BBC in the 1960s share similar ways of understanding the genre as do journalists from the 1990s. Television reviewers from the early 1980s refer to similar discourses used by internet reviewers in 2007. Scholarly caution must always be advised but this work has demonstrated the shared ways in which political comedy is understood. Political comedy is dominated by a number of clearly identifiable discourses, showing that the genre is understood as a cultural category and that they have been expressed across a range of contexts. This method is a productive way of understanding television genre and historical reception research is a useful way of exploring some of the dominant ways in which people made meaning from television in the past.

Mittell's methods for exploring television genre has also been extended via the use of case studies and extensive reception research to infer the cultural categorisations of television political comedy, rather than establishing directly through interviews. This method is more labour-intensive than direct questioning but it allows for the historical project described above. An additional factor is that by addressing cultural categorisations through different textual examples it allows the exploration of generic complexity, particularly a genre's internal discursive hierarchy. This 'reception inference model' of genre studies is therefore proposed as an additional way of identifying television genres' cultural classifications and a method that allows for historical research. It also has the additional aspect of giving access to how viewers

culturally classify other aspects of television, such as broadcasting institutions, allowing the research to be led by the concerns of the historical audience, not just the history researcher.

Comedy

In relation to comedy studies, this work has demonstrated that comedy texts and comedy pleasure can be successfully explored via historical reception research. While there are previous examples of individual articles (Cripps 2003 and Bodroghkozy 2003), this thesis has also shown that it can be done on a larger scale. A key contribution to comedy studies is also the confirmation that the socio-cultural critiques that defined much textual analysis of comedy can be successfully pursued via empirical audience research, and that the conclusions are far better evidenced. The method of reception research has also shown that the contradictions of comedy texts, under which much textual analysis foundered, is actually the basis for much of this thesis' conclusions. The method of reception research allows us to embrace comedy's polysemy as a generator of the conflicts that illustrate cultural power relations, rather than flattening texts into either/or critiques.

Audience

Audience research is a time-consuming method that relies on gathering significant quantities of evidence. There has been little historical comedy audience research but this thesis suggests how it can be pursued in a replicable way. The BBC Written Archives,

the British Library and BFI newspaper archives, and the internet currently provide a range of ways to create a coherent, if not complete, access to historical reception. This could enable the field of historical television reception research to open up more generally, and expand upon many of the issues discussed here, including historical attitudes to texts, genres, channels, broadcasting institutions, stars, technology and innovation, scheduling and far more.

Finally, this work has demonstrated that all these fields can be combined. As discussed in the Introduction, television comedy studies has neglected the audience, and television audience studies has neglected history. The combination of all three to pursue a historical genre project demonstrates that they are in no way mutually exclusive and that they each benefit from the others' additional perspective.

Political comedy and its reception should therefore not be seen as people just writing about jokes that refer to news and current affairs but a subject for historical research that can reveal beliefs about television genre, the media and public life. By exploring texts that viewers have defined as television political comedy, this thesis has seen remarkable continuities across time and context whilst also uncovering different cultural standards and beliefs at different historical moments. The dominant cultural categorisation of television political comedy as a genre with effects and influences over real life means that its reception gives access to people's attitudes, showing how they relate to other people, institutions, cultures and hierarchies, and how these individuals understood a television programme in the context of how they believed the world is or should be. The

reception of television political comedy was never going to just be about politics and this thesis has shown that in writing about the genre people have expressed how they see the world, and how they believe the world can be shaped and re-shaped through seriousness, pleasure, power and television.

Appendix One

Broadcast details of the case study texts

That Was The Week That Was. BBC.

Season One, tx. 24 November 1962–27 April 1963. BBC Television.

Season Two, tx. 28 September 1963–28 December 1963. BBC Television.

Yes Minister. BBC.

Season One, tx. 25 February–7 April 1980. BBC Two.

Season Two, tx. 23 February–6 April 1981. BBC Two.

Season Three, tx. 11 November–23 December 1982. BBC Two.

Special, “Part Games,” tx. 17 December 1984. BBC Two.

Yes Prime Minister. BBC

Season One, tx. 9 January–27 February 1986. BBC Two.

Season Two, tx. 3 December 1987–28 January 1988. BBC Two.

Yes Prime Minister was revived in 2013, commissioned by and broadcast on Gold, a subscription television channel. Tx. 15 January 2–19 February 2013.

The New Statesman. Yorkshire Television; except * BBC.

Season One, tx. 13 September–25 October 1987. ITV.

Season Two, tx. 15 January–26 February 1989. ITV.

Special, “Who Shot Alan B’Stard,” tx. 14 January 1990. ITV.

Season Three, tx. 6 January–10 February 1991. ITV

Season Four, tx. 22 November 1992–26 December 1992. ITV.

Special,* “A B’Stard Exposed,” tx. 30 December 1994. BBC One.

The Thick of It. BBC.

Season One, tx. 19 May–2 June 2005. BBC Four.

Season Two, tx. 20 October–3 November 2005. BBC Four.

Special, “The Rise of the Nutters,” tx. 2 January 2007. BBC Four.

Special, “Spinner and Losers ,” tx. 3 July 2007. BBC Four.

Season Three, tx. 24 October–12 December 2009. BBC Two.

Season Four, tx. 8 September–27 October 2012. BBC Two.

Spitting Image, Central Television.

Season One, tx. 26 February–15 April 1984. ITV.

Season Two, tx. 13 May–17 June 1984. ITV.

Season Three, tx. 6 January–24 March 1985. ITV.

Season Four, tx. 5 January–9 February 1986. ITV.

Special, “Down And Out In The White House,” tx. 14 September 1986. ITV

Season Six, tx. 28 September–2 November 1986. ITV.

Special, “The *Spitting Image* 1987 Movie Awards,” 4 April 1987. ITV.

Special, “Election Special,” tx. 11 June 1987. ITV.

Season Seven, tx. 1 November–6 December 1987. ITV.

Special, “A Non-Denominational *Spitting Image* Holiday Special,” tx. 27 December 1987. ITV.

Special, “The Ronnie And Nancy Show,” tx. 17 April 1988. ITV.

Special, “Bumbledown - The Life and Times of Ronald Reagan,” tx. 29 October 1988. ITV.

Season Eight, tx. 6 November–11 December 1988. ITV.

Special, “The Sound Of Maggie!,” tx. 6 May 1989. ITV.

Season Nine, tx. 11 June - 9 July 1989. ITV.

Season Ten, tx. 12 November–17 December 1989. ITV.

Season Eleven, tx. 13 May–24 June 1990. ITV.

Season Twelve, tx. 11 November–16 December 1990. ITV.

Season Thirteen, tx. 14 April–19 May 1991. ITV.

Season Fourteen, tx. 10 November–15 December 1991. ITV.

Special, “Election Special,” tx. 8 April 1992. ITV.

Season Fifteen, tx. 12 April–17 May 1992. ITV.

Season Sixteen, tx. 4 October–8 November 1992. ITV.

Season Seventeen, tx. 16 May–20 June 1993. ITV.

Season Eighteen, tx. 7 November–12 December 1993. ITV.

Special, “The *Spitting Image* Pantomime,” tx. 26 December 1993. ITV.

Season Nineteen, tx. 1 May–5 June 1994. ITV.

Season Twenty, tx. 6 November–18 December 1994. ITV.

Special, “Ye Olde Spitting Image,” tx. 1 January 1995. ITV.

Season Twenty-One, tx. 14 January - 18 February 1996. ITV.

Brass Eye. Channel 4 Television.

Season One, tx. 29 January–5 March 1997. Channel 4.

Special, “Paedophile Special,” tx. 26 July 2001. Channel 4.

Appendix Two

**Saturday evening schedules on BBC Television during
1962 from the *Radio Times*.**

**AT 6.0**

Shirley Eaton
is one of the
girls
who will be trying
her wits
on the
**juke
box
jury**

5.25**GARRY HALLIDAY
AND THE SECRET OF
OMAR KHAYYAM**

A new serial in seven episodes
by DAVID WHITAKER
and MICHAEL HARAKI
based on characters created
by Justin Blaize

with
TERENCE LONGDON
BILL KEEFE
ELWYN BROOK-JONES
Maurice Kaufmann

OLIVER JOHNSTON

Episode 4: **A Key**

Cast in order of appearance:

Nigel Fox FREDERICK TREVOR
Leanne Martin JULIE MARTIN
Eddie Rothus BILL KEEFE
Garry Halliday TERENCE LONGDON
The Yoox ELWYN BROOK-JONES
Paul Brinker OLIVER JOHNSTON

Adolph Traumann MAURICE KAUFMANN
Nurse PAULINE WALLACE

Vicky Fox ANDREW NICHOLSON
Professor Isidor CLIFFORD JEFFERSON
Mrs Sanderson ANNEKE KREBS

Father JACK ROBERT

Tyrant JOHN MARSH

Tony RONALD FOX

Rita VALENTINE BELL

Fight arranged by Terry Baker
Flying and Airport sequences
by courtesy of BEAways Ltd.
Film cameraman, Douglas Wolfe
Film editor, Ron de Maitre
Designer, Stewart Marshall
Produced by Richard West
BBC recording

5.50**THE NEWS****5.53****TODAY'S SPORT**

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme
A summary of today's sporting highlights and the classified football results
Presented by the Sportswise Unit

6.0**DUKE BOX JURY**

A new disc—
a hit or a miss?
Comments and opinions on
the latest pop releases
This week's panel:
Shirley Eaton
Frank Muir
Pete Murray
Vera
In the chairs,
David Jacobs
Programmes devised by
Peter Peter
Presentation by Harry Corlett

JANUARY 27**SATURDAY****evening****6.30****DIXON
OF DOCK GREEN**

starring

JACK WARNER

Stories of a London Policeman

by TED WILLIS

An Escort for Harry

Characters in order of appearance:

P.C. George Dixon JACK WARNER

Harry Shattock DAVID KENNEDY

Det.-Sgt. Gartree JOHN DEACON

P.C. Scammell ROBERT DOWD

Det.-Sgt. Andy Crawford TERRY BYRNE

Det.-Inspector Cherry HERBERT CARMERON

Det.-Con. Jack Cotton MICHAEL NEGRONI

P.C. Lennox ROBERT DOWD

Sergeant Fletcher ARTHUR BLAKE

Prob. P.C. Jamie MacPherson DAVID WEBSTER

Mavis Taylor DIANE DANAHAN

W.P.C. Ray Shaw JOCHINTH HEDDERSON

Mary JEANNEETTE HUTCHINSON

Janice Wren HILDA FREEMAN

Bgt. Green TONY VEALE

Adrienne Timothy (Ady) PAULINE TAYLOR

Mrs. Reading ANTHONY LOVETT

Script associate, Fiona McDonald

Film cameraman, TONY LEAKE

Film editor, KEN COOPER

Designer, Penny Taylor

Produced by DOUGLAS MOORE

BBC recording

THE MITCHELL MINSTRELS

Conducted by George Mitchell

and also starring

LESLIE CROWTHER

MARGO HENDERSON

SUMPRINE

GEORGE CHISHOLM

AND HIS JAZZERS

PENNY NICHOLS

JOHN BOULTER

DAI FRANCIS, TONY MERCIER

HENRY GARCIA

THE JACKPOTS

THE TELEVISION TOPPERS

Tunes direction by Larry Gordon

Special effect by Eunice

Southhead-in-Sex

Orchestra conducted by

George Mitchell

"Laughing at Life" routine by

George Chisholm

Orchestrations by

Alan Bristow and Ray Terry

Orchestra conducted by

Eric Robinson

Settings by Stanley Dorfman

Devised and produced by

Gordon Isaacs

BBC recording

The Black and White Minstrel Show

at the Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool.

See page 3

8.0**PERRY MASON**

A film series

starring

RAYMOND BURR

as the famous lawyer investigator created by Erle Stanley Gardner

THE CASE OF THE CALENDAR GIRL

with

Barbara Hale, William Hoppe

William Talman, Ray Cullins

Perry Mason defends a building contractor who is charged with murder. One of two beautiful photographs' models must be lying; so Perry has to prove art-photographer is prove his client's innocence.

8.50**THE SATURDAY FILM**

presenting

Chance of a Lifetime

Produced and directed by Bernard Miles

Dictionnaire BASIL BARRETT

Bureau HERCULE MILNER

Master NELL MCGINNIE

Holper GENEVIEVE KENNEDY

Adam KENNETH MORE

Morris JULIAN MINTHES

It is one thing to groan at the way the business is run—quite another to run if yourself. This is soon evident when the factory is headed over by the boss. Maybe it is the character of a Master, but it could be a dinner failure.

See page 3

10.15**THE NEWS****10.25****FOOTBALL SPECIAL**

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme

Fourth Round of the F.A. Cup

At Victoria Ground

Keween-Wenona reports on

match between Stanley Matthews &

Stockton Rovers

At Home Park Alan Weeks reports on the home team's bid to win the Cup. Holders

Plymouth Hotspur

At Turf Moor Waller Barnes re-

ports on the Lancashire leaders

Burnley v. Leyton Orient

Programme edited by

Laver Higgins

Presented by Richard Tilling

10.55**WORLD SINGER**

Teresa Stich-Randall

accompanied and introduced by

Gerald Moore

Presented by Walter Todd

BBC recording

11.15**SUNDAY WEATHER**

Close Down



through four
countries . . .

The beauties of four countries can be admired and appreciated by this original and delightful concept of river cruising, visiting Holland, Germany, France & Switzerland. The botels "Amsterdam" and "Amiens" which are floating hotels, carry 60-80 passengers with every comfort. Rates from £100 inclusive of many excursions from 49 gns. for 8 days and 68 gns. for 15 days.

Weekly departures from March to October, also Spring cruises to Holland's bulb-fields.

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London, E.C.3.

Name: Member A.T.A.:

Please send me a free copy of your illustrated
"botel" cruise brochure []

"Star-e-Wise" each tour booklet []

Please tick requirements:

NAME:

ADDRESS:

TELEGRAMS:

TELEPHONE:

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS:

TELETYPE NUMBER:

TELEFAX NUMBER:



**Petula
Clark**

She gives her verdict on the latest pop releases on **JKU
BOX
JURY
AT 6.0**

5.25

**GARRY HALLIDAY
AND THE SECRET OF
OMAR KHAYYAM**

A serial in seven episodes by DAVID WHITAKER and MICHAEL HAROLD based on characters created by JAMES BLAIR with

TERENCE LONGDON, BILL KEMP, ELWIN BROOK-JONES, RAYMOND KAUFMANN, OLIVER JOHNSTON

Episode 1: Give and Take

Cast in order of appearance: Garry Halliday, Terence Longdon, Oliver Johnston, Elwin Brook-Jones, Bill Kemp, Raymond Kaufmann, Oliver Johnston

Costume designer: MARGARET KATHLEEN

Music supervisor: RICHARD KEEF

Production manager: NIGEL FOX

Art director: MR. KENNETH BEVAN

Set designer: MIKE HOGG

Sound recordist: DAVID MCQUADE

The York, The Elbow, David Jones

Production manager: GUY LINDNER

Production office manager: PAUL REEDER

Production office manager: HENRY LINDNER

Production office manager: BARBARA HOGG

Vicky Fox, ADRIENNE NEWMAN

Mr. Tomlinson, JAMES LAWRENCE

Miss Councillor: KIM PERIN

Second Councillor: PETER HENDERSON

Flying and Airport sequences by courtesy of Sigtavia Ltd.

Costume supervisor: DOUGLAS WOLFE

Music editor: BOB DE MATIAS

Designer: STEWART MARSHALL

Dressed by PAUL MACKELL

Produced by RICHARD WEST

BBC recording

5.50

THE NEWS

5.53

TODAY'S SPORT

Introduced by DAVID COLEMAN

Today's sporting highlights and the classified football results

Presented by the Sportsview Unit

6.0

**JKU
BOX
JURY**

A new disc—A Hit or a Miss?

Comments and opinions on the latest pop releases

This week's panel:

Petula Clark

George Ehrlich

Jean Metcalfe

Jimmy Young

In the chair,

David Jacobs

Programmes devised by Peter Potts

Presenting by Harry Corliss

FEBRUARY 17

BBC tv

**SATURDAY
evening**

6.30

**DIXON
OF DOCK GREEN**

starring

JACK WARNER

Stories of a London policeman by TUDOR WILLIS
The Cruel Streak
Characters in order of appearance:
Dr. George Dixon..... JACK WARNER
Ali Gorley..... ROLLY MULROY
Joe Gorley..... GORDON WADDE
Det.-Inspector Chappell..... ROBERT CAVILL
Det.-Sgt. Andy Crawford..... PETER BYRNE
Both Thurtle..... RUTH THURSTON
Det.-Officer Jack O'Brien..... MICHAEL NORTHGATE
P.C. Lauderdale..... GENEVIEVE XANAS
P.C. James Mathewson..... DAVID WEBSTER
Dick Thurtle..... KEVIN SHUTE
Royal..... DAVID BAILEY
Roslyn Phillips..... SALLY NOONE
Mrs. Gorley..... SARA HOBHOUSE
Bertram Flott..... ALFRED RIGG
W.P.C. Maxie..... JOSEPHINE LEEGER
W.P.C. Irene Barnes..... MARGOT FERRELL
Franklin Morgan..... MAX LAVENDER
Shirley Mortimer..... PATRICIA WILDE
Kaye Kay Shaw..... JEANNE RICHARD
Mrs. McEwan..... MICHAEL BALFOUR
Gordon..... RONALD LANE
Burton..... FRANK SPARROW
Mr. Dent..... WALTER STEPHENS
Mrs. Taylor..... ANITA BENTON
Mrs. Crookshank..... SALLY CASSIDY
Mary..... JENNIFER HUMPHREY
Script supervisor: PEGGY MCCONNELL
Film supervisor: A. A. BLOOMFIELD
Film editor: KEN COOPER
Designer: ANTHONY SPRINGS
Produced by DOUGLAS MOORE
BBC recording

7.15

**THE
BILLY COTTON
BAND SHOW**

In which



BILLY COTTON

calls

Walley-Wakey!

with

The regulars:

Alan Breeze

Kathie Kay

The High-Lights

The Leslie Roberts Silhouettes
and

MRS. MILLS

Special guest star:

DUCKIE HENDERSON

Associate conductor:

HARRY HAMPTON

Scoring by JIMMY GRAPES

Design by LIONEL RADFORD

Choreographer and

assistant producer:

Leslie Roberts

Production by

BILL ORRICK JNR.

8.0

PERRY MASON

A film series starring
RAYMOND BURR
as the famous lawyer investigator
and
EILEEN STANNETT, GARNER
**THE CASE OF
THE DIABOLIC BRIDESROOM**
with

Barbara Hale, William Hopper
When a beautiful blonde is caught climbing through Perry Mason's office window one night, it looks like burglary. She almost convinces Mason of her innocence—until she slips his face and escapes.

8.50

THE SATURDAY FILM

presenting
The Garden of Allah

starring
MARLENE DIETRICH
CHARLES BOYLE

Directed by Richard Boleslawski

Produced by David O. Selznick
Dominic Enblom..... MARLENE DIETRICH
Morris Androsky..... CHARLES BOYLE
Count Ferdinand Antons..... DAVID BOLESLOVSKY

Father Dominic..... C. ARTHUR SKID
Ratzen, the guide..... JOSEPH DELBUCHET
The Dancing Girl..... THALIA LYNN

See page 3

10.5

THE NEWS

10.15

FOOTBALL SPECIAL

Introduced by KENNETH WATKESHOLME

Fifth Round of the FA Cup

Three of today's matches include:

New Old Trafford: Dave Mackay reports on the "new Ruby Blues" who defeated Arsenal in the Fourth Round

Manchester United v. Sheffield Wednesday

At The Hawthorns: Alan Brazil reports on West Bromwich Albion v. Tottenham Hotspur

At Turf Moor: Tony Banks reports the clash between the Lancashire rivals

Burnley v. Everton

Edited by LAURENCE HOPKINS

Presented by RICHARD TILLING

10.45

THE TWENTIES

A series of six history lectures by

ALAN TAYLOR

Velvet of Magdalen College, Oxford

3: Peace-making

Produced by JANE ISWYN

BBC recording

The Lecture will be printed in "The Listener" (see February 22, March 2; "The General Strike")

11.15

THE WEATHER MAN

Close Down

FREE!
full-colour brochure
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Write today (post-free)
please for your free copy of
our new brochure and the
annual information folder
which give full details of the
many ways French Railways
can serve you.

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PARIS-BORDEAUX
PARIS-BOURGOGNE
PARIS-BREST
PARIS-NILAN

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Get more good
tomatoes for
your money

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CIRIO
whole peeled TOMATOES



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HAND-SELECTED
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label or stamp.

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ADDRESS _____

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This offer is applicable to U.K.

March 15, 1962

RADIO TIMES

5

5.25

GARRY HALLIDAY AND THE GUN-RUNNERS

A serial in six episodes
by RICHARD WADE
based on characters created
by JAMES BLACK
with

TERENCE LONGDON

BILL KEEF

ALICE BROOK-JONES

MURKIN KAUFMANN

MEGH LATIMER

Episode 4: *Unhappy Landing*

Cast in order of appearance:

Garry Halliday Terence Longdon

Inspector Roman Bill Keef

The Voice Alice Brook-Jones

Truman Maurice Kaufmann

Holmes Richard Darr

Major Fox Frederick Tait

Vicky Fox Andrea Nothola

Zeller Michael J. Harrison

Receptionist Penelope Lee

House Rosalie Brand

Simone Romane Lovell

First machine Michael Phillips

Second machine Noreen Hartley

Dispatcher Joanne Woodward

Flyer and Airport security

by courtesy of Skyswest Ltd.

Unit cameraman Leonard Neeson

Unit editor Ken Cooper

Script assistants Michael Harold

Designs Stewart Marshall

Produced by Brian West

5.50

THE NEWS

5.53

TODAY'S SPORT

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme.

Today's sporting highlights and the classified football results

Presented by the Sportview Unit.

6.0

DUKE BOX JURY

A new disc - a Hit or a Miss?

Comments and opinions on the latest pop releases

This week's panel:

Carole Gray, Millicent Martin

Edward J. Mason, Ray Orchard

In the chair:

David Jacobs

Programme devised by Peter Potter

Presentation by Harry Corlett

Millicent Martin appears by courtesy

of Associated British Picture Corp.

7.0

THE BILLY COTTON BAND SHOW

in which

BILLY COTTON

sings

Wisey-Wakey!

with

The regulars:

Alan Broers

Kathie Kay

The High-Lights

The Leslie Roberts Silhouettes

and

Mrs. Mills

and guest stars from

the world of entertainment

Assisting conductor:

Harry Bassman

Script by Jimmy Garrow

Design by Lionel Radford

Choreographer and

Dresser:

Leslie Roberts

Production by BILL COTTON JR.

7.45

PERRY MASON

A film series starring

RAYMOND BURR

as the famous lawyer investigator

created by Erle Stanley Gardner

THE CASE OF

THE GOLDEN FRAUD

with

Barbara Hale, William Hopper

William Talman, Bay Collins

See page 3

Millicent Martin

She gives her verdict on the latest pop releases on "Juke Box Jury" tonight at 6.0

MARCH 17

BBC **tv**

SATURDAY

evening

6.30

THE SIX PROUD

WALKERS

A serial in thirteen episodes

by DONALD WILSON

Polly Anne does not know that the necklace she wears is worth £15,000, for she has become unknowingly involved in a jewel robbery. The thieves set it for a shock, not so

Polly's old friend Detective-Inspector Roger Stanton.

2: The Rivals

Cast in order of appearance:

Marta Borris Julia Lethbridge

De Grant John Bas

Det.-Supt. Roger Stanton

See page 3

8.35

SATURDAY FILM

presenting

ROBERT MITCHUM

AVA GARDNER

My Forbidden Past

A drama

with

Melvyn Douglas

Directed by Robert Stevenson

See page 3

9.40

WORLD

FIGURE SKATING CHAMPIONSHIPS



from Prague

The free figures in the Ladies' Championship were held earlier this evening, and home interest was with the British champion Jacqueline Harbord.

Commentator: Alan Weeks

Broadcast in collaboration with the Czechoslovak Television Service

10.10

THE NEWS

10.20

FOOTBALL SPECIAL

introduced by

Kenneth Wolstenholme

At Turf Moor, White Hart Lane, and

Ports in the clash between the League champions and the present

League leaders.

Burnley v. Tottenham Hotspur

At Brisbane Road, Kenyon Way, and

Billy McLean report the highlights

of today's highly international

Scotland v. England.

Edited by Lewis Higgins

Presented by Brian Fordeham

10.50

THE TWENTIES

The last of

six history lectures by

ALAN TAYLOR

Folios of

Mansfield College, Oxford

6: The Great Depression

Produced by John Lewis

BBC recording

This lecture will be repeated in "The Listener" dated March 22.

11.20

THE WEATHER MAN

Close Down

From 15,
you can learn
a good trade in
today's R.A.F.

APPRENTICES. You must be 15-17 and
be able to pass the entrance exam. (G.C.E.
in specified subjects exempt you from
this exam). Your trade training is very
important. You will receive full pay during
your training, you will be a fully qualified
airman. More apprentices qualify
in Junior Technicians and, at 17,
even above £3 a week, all board. The
prospects of promotion are good—now
over 10,000 apprentices before you are 30.

BOY ENTRANTS. You must be 13-17
(15-17 in exceptional cases) and have a
good trade aptitude. Your training lasts
18 months and includes general education
and the technical training in your chosen
trade. After qualifying you will be serving
£7.50 a week, all board.

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details, and the excellent pay rates of
the many exciting trades in today's
R.A.F.

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affordable item compares with the most
expensive—the largest selection in the country—
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and full of helpful advice.

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5.50
THE NEWS

5.53
TODAY'S SPORT

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme
Today's sporting highlights and the classified football results
Presented by the Sportaview Unit

6.0
DUKE BOX JURY

A new disc—
a Hit or a Miss?
Comments and opinions on the latest pop releases
This week's panel:
Nina and Frederik
Alma Cogan
and
Neil Sedaka
In the chair,
David Jacobs
Programme devised by Peter Potter
Presentation by Johnnie Stewart

6.30
THE SIX PROUD WALKERS

A serial in thirteen episodes by DONALD WILKINSON

Polly pretends that she will help the gang struggle the grim roads out of the country and conceal it in a set of pottery figures. The Lilywhites discover who she is, but Wills Walker won't...

7. The Eighth Commandment

Cast in order of appearance:
Polly Arden LANA MORRIS
Steve KEVIN STREETER
Wills Walker ANDREW SACHS
Joey Walker DEREK PRYOR
Martha Barton JULIA LOCKWOOD
Tel-Simp Roger Stanton TONY BRITTON
Det-Sgt. Quinby WILFRED BARBAC
Sally Walker JACQUELINE HILL
Barry Walker TREVOR ALEXANDER
Airport Clerk MURRAY BRADSTON
Detector EDWARD HINGES
The Great Campion PAUL STEPHENS
Mr. Tindall ROBERT WILKINSON
Miss Mason ANNEKE CRAVEN
Mrs. Kite JOHN KELLY
Hansdorff ERIC DE VRIES
Movick LOUISE MARAISCH
Johns HAMILTON LYTTLE

Music composed by RON GRAINGER

Designed by Robert Macgowan

Produced by DUNLAP ALLEN

BBC recording



Tony Britton
Lana Morris
Julia Lockwood
Andrew Sachs in
tonight's episode of
**The Six
Proud Walkers**
AT 6.30

APRIL 21
SATURDAY
evening

7.0
THE BLACK AND WHITE MINSTREL SHOW

starring
THE MITCHELL MINSTRELS
Conducted by George Mitchell
and also starring
LESLIE CROWTHER
MARGO HENDERSON
SEMPHISI
GEORGE CHISHOLM AND HIS JAZZERS
PEONY NICHOLS
JOHN BOULTER
DAI FRANCIS
JEFF HEDDON
TONY HERBERT
BRUNNY GARCIA
THE JACKPOTS
THE TELEVISION TOPPERS

6
Drama direction by Larry Gordon
Visual arrangements by George Mitchell
Jazzers' routine by George Chisholm
Illustrations by Alan Stivell and Ray Terry
Orchestra conducted by Eric Robinson
Settings by Stanley Dorfman
Lighting and production by George Bird
See page 3

7.45
PERRY MASON

A film series
starring
RAYMOND BURBANK
as the famous lawyer investigator created by Eric Stanley Gardner
THE CASE OF THE FRANTIC FLYER
with Barbara Hale, William Hopper, William Talman, Ray Collins

A widow hires Perry Mason to clear her husband's name of theft. But the lawyer's investigations lead to the client herself being accused of murder.



Nina and Frederik
Tonight at 6.0, they give their verdict on the latest pop releases in *Juke Box Jury*

8.35
THE SATURDAY FILM

presenting
Since You Went Away
starring
CLAUDETTE COLBERT JOSEPH COHEN with JENNIFER JONES SHIRLEY TEMPLE Produced by David O. Selznick Directed by John Cromwell Anne Hilton CLAUDETTE COLBERT Lt.-Col. Tony Willett JOSEPH COHEN Jane Hilton JENNIFER JONES Bridget Hibson SHIRLEY TEMPLE Collette Sandell MONTY WOOLLEY The Clergyman LIONEL BARRYMORE Col. Bill Sandell ROBERT WILKINSON This is the moving story of an American mother in wartime unselfishly taking her absent husband's place as head of the family.
See page 3

10.45
THE NEWS

10.55
FOOTBALL SPECIAL

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme
The football season has reached its most crucial stage with clubs desperate to qualify for European competitions now. League championship honours or relegation KENNETH WOLSTENHOLME and ALAN WALKERS report on two of today's football matches which have a vital bearing on those issues. Edited by Lawrie Higgins Presented by Richard Tilling

11.25
THE LORD WILL ARISE

Tom Fleming reads from Isaiah and the Psalms in preparation for Easter BBC recording

11.30
THE WEATHER MAN
Close Down



**GUARANTEED
TO
STAY WHITE!
UNDER ALL CONDITIONS**

New STAWHITE gloss stays a true white for years... outside or inside, in kitchens, bathrooms and industrial atmospheres where ordinary white paints turn yellow in a few months. It's heat resistant, will not yellow even on hot pipes and radiators, tougher and harder than ordinary paint. Kingston Stawhite is guaranteed to stay white.

Get NEW KINGSTON
STAWHITE GLOSS

A. SANDERSON & CO., LTD., MUL

**ITALY'S
"Sun-Flavoured
TOMATOES**



Free!

Send us your name, address, I enclose 1 1/- postage stamp.

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ADDRESS _____

The Ciro Company Limited, Dept. R.T. 29
34 Queen Street, London, S.C.4
This offer is applicable in England

5.25**MR. PASTRY'S
PROGRESS**through six new adventures
starring**RICHARD HEARNE**

(Mr. Pastry)

6: Pastries Galore

Pastry of the world unites—and creates double trouble!

Cast in order of appearance:

Brian CAMELLIA SHIFFER
 Michael SISTER MAY
 Mr. Whitcomb VIVIAN PLATT
 Miss Finch BARBARA HENKE
 Airport Attendant ANTHONY WYNDEHAM
 Airport Official JOHN MILES
 Customs Officer NIGEL BRAFORD
 George Pastry BRIDGET BRETHOUR
 Jack Pastry JESSIE WOODHURST
 Bill Pastry GORDON ROLLINGE
 Designer, Malcolm Middleton
 Script by JAMES COOKSON
 with additional material by
 RICHARD HEARNE
 Film cameraman, JIMMY COURT
 Film editor, VALERIE BEAT
 Producer, DAVID GOODMAN
 BBC recording

5.50**THE NEWS****5.55****TODAY'S SPORT**Introduced by
Alan WrenA summary of
today's sporting highlights
Presented by the Sportview Unit**6.0****CRICKET**M.C.C. v. Pakistan
The end of the
first day's play
from Lord's**6.35****DUKE BOX JURY**A new disc—*A Hit or a Miss?*
Comments and opinions on
the latest pop releases
This week's panel:

Steve Race

Sean Connery

Jane Asher

and

Janet Munro

In the chair,

David Jacobs

Programme devised by

Peter Potter

Presentation by Johnnie Stewart

**Guest in
the House**

A FILM WITH

ANNE BAXTERand **RALPH BELLAMY**

Evelyn Heath, who comes to
spend her convalescence with
the Proctor family, is an ordinary
good but a malicious and
wilful girl who spares no one
in order to get what she wants

at 9.5

7.0**THE SIX PROUD
WALKERS**A serial in thirteen episodes
by DONALD WILSONUncle Robin turns up late at Martha's
wedding reception, his leaves almost
immediately for Oxford accompanied
by Bill Evans. Polly recognises the
sound of excitement...**11: Two into One**

Cast in order of appearance:

Martina Walker JULIA LOCHWOOD
 Polly Astyn LANA MOORE
 Uncle Robin SPENCER BRESNAHAN
 Bill Evans HOWARD PATE
 Dr. Sgt. Quigley WILFRED BARRETT
 Det.-Supt. Roger Stanton CLIFFORD HARRIS
 Mrs. Proctor PATRICIA MAHER
 Lady Bayliss JEAN HEDREN
 Willie Walker ANDREE SACHS
 Barbara EVA WEAVER JEVONS
 Brian GEORGE TOWNSEND
 Rufus Clegg ALAN TELFORD
 Lucy Walker DORIS FRANCIS
 Carl CARL REINHOLD
 Music composed by ROB GREENE
 Devised by Robert MacGowran
 Produced by Douglas Allam
 BBC recording

7.30**THE
KEN DODD SHOW**

starting

KEN DODD

with

**KENNY CALVERT
AND THE 'C' MEN**

JULIA DE PALMA

MURKIN OF YORKSHIRE

DUNNY BETTS

and

Jean Hurley, Joyce Adcock
 Annastasia, Sonny Day
 Carolyn Warden, Barbara Sibley
 Billy Dodd, Isobel Bennett
 Bobby Green
 The Denny Bettie Dancers
 Dance direction by Denny Bettie
 BBC Northern Dance Orchestra
 Leader, ERIC WILSON
 Conducted by
 BERNARD HERREMAN
 Orchestrations by
 Alan Holper and Pat Nash
 Script by
 KEN DODD, ERIC HERREMAN
 and RICHARD ANDREW
 Additional material by
 TIM GALTIER-BIRMINGHAM
 Design, Tim Harvey
 Produced by BANNER CINEMAS
 from the Pavilion Theatre,
 Winter Gardens, Blackpool
 BBC recording
 See page 3

**MAY 19****BBC tv****SATURDAY****evening****8.15****PERRY MASON**

A film series starring

RAYMOND BURRas the famous lawyer investigator
created by
EARL STANLEY GARDNER**THE CASE OF
THE MYTHICAL MONKEYS**

with

Barbara Hale, William Hopper

William Talman, Ray Collins

A mystery with a strange story involving a mysterious package, a ransacked apartment, and a curious visitor Perry Mason's aid. But when Mason gets check on his client is accused of murder.

9.5**THE SATURDAY FILM**

presenting

GUEST IN THE HOUSE

starring

ANNE BAXTER

and

RALPH BELLAMY

Directed by John Brahm

Produced by Hunt Stromberg

Freddy Heath ANNE BAXTER

Douglas Proctor RALPH BELLAMY

Anne Matthews ANNE MACMILLAN

Alec Preston RUTH WARREN

Mr. Hackell JEROME COHEN

Miriam MARIE McDONALD

10.40**THE NEWS****10.50****HERE'S HARRY**

starring

HARRY WORTHin a second showing
of**The Plant**

with

Leonard Williams

Vi Stevens

Geoffrey Hibbert

Gerald Anderson

Patrick Newell

Ian Roll

Pat Wallworth

Sandra Chalmers

Leslie Clark

Written by
YVONNE POWELL, MARTY DRIVER
and PEPPER BROWNSettings by
KENNETH LAWRENCEProduced by
JOHN ANDERSON

From the North

11.20**THE WEATHER MAN***Clothes Down***Now Meet
Instant Robin**

Now there's a bright, new addition to the Robin family — Instant Robin Starch. Just swish in cold water, and it's ready in a minute or two without stirring. Genuine, natural starch. It's a blessing to the busy housewife or the woman who prefers to wash a few things at a time rather than do a whole big wash at once. 1/9d.



To help you starch professionally well, write
for the booklet 'A Little Bird Told Me' to
DEPT. (J-S) HICKORY & SONS LIMITED, SHEFFIELD

5.50
THE NEWS

5.55
TODAY'S SPORT

Introduced by Alan Weeks
Presented by the Spectiview Unit

6.0
DUKE BOX JURY

A new disc—a Hit or a Miss?

Comments and opinions on

the latest pop releases

This week's panel:

Jack Jackson

Godfrey Winn

Catherine Boyle

and another guest

In the chair, David Jacobs

programme devised by Peter Polgar

Presentation by Johnna Stewart

6.30
THE BIG PULL

A science fiction serial

in six parts

by ROBERT GOULD

starring

WILLIAM DEXTER

with JUNE TOBIN

Produced by Terence Dudley

The missing men now number thirty-one, and the attacks from space have stopped—but for how long? Dexter knows the missing men must now find their way back to Earth. How else can it end? And what does

Earth mean the end of the world?

Part 6

Mr Robert Muller... WILLIAM DEXTER
Mrs... LAURA GRAHAM
Radio newsreader... JOHN GRAHAM
Dr Vic Tully... JIM ROBERTS
Sheriff... FRANK FENSTER
General Staff... PATRICK
Boyton... JAN CLARK
Mrs. Stann... JOHN PEAK
Lady Dexter... JUDY TURNER
Corporal... HARRY LITTLEWOOD
Private Wood... TOM SHERIDAN
Private Cook... CHRISTOPHER CLEA
Lance Corporal... DUGIE BRYANT
Major Black... LUCILLE WILSON
Baroness's dog-squad... EDWARD HEDGES
Pub customers... ANDREW MONTGOMERY
Act... JEAN LEE
V.L.P.s... MICHAEL DUNN
and ALAN JONES
Dame Law... NELL COLEMAN
Nurse's jeep driver... DAVID BREWER
Landowner... RYAN JELPS
Technicians... ROBERT FIFIE, DAVID FULLER
and DAVID COLEMAN-JONES
Music and special effects by
Ringtones Workshop
Film sequences... A. England
Editor, Second Lead...
Despatch, Lionel Radford
BBC recording



7.0
THE
SATURDAY SHOW

presenting

THE YELLOWS

ALFRED MARKS

AUDREY AKNO

THE COSSACKS

HENRY BETTS

THE DOLLS

VALLI NEWBY

THE AQUA LOVELIES

Introduced by

RON PARRY

BBC Northern Dance Orchestra

Leader, ERIK WATSON

Conducted by

BERNARD HERMANN

Choreography by DORIS BETTS

Scenography by Dorothy Satch

Orchestrations by Alan Roger

Designer, Kenneth Lawton

Production by BARNET CHAPMAN

BBC recording from the

Norwich Studio, Blackpool

The Hi-Fi set up by arrangement with Wilson Fitter Productions. The Aqua Lovelies are in "Aqua Cossacks" 1962—*A Spectacular Performance by the Royal Ballet*. Rosemary Rose Party is in "The Society Never Sleeps" at the Piccadilly Theatre.

See page 7.

7.40
THE
ROYAL TOURNAMENT

A first visit to this year's

spectacular event at

Karls Court, London

hosting

Motor Cycle Display by the

Royal Corps of Signals

The Police Dogs of the

Royal Air Force

Flight Deck with the

Fleet Air Arm

The Mounted Band of the

Household Cavalry

A graceful display by the

Women's Services

and in the Bandstand

The Band of

1st The Queen's Dragoon Guards

Commentator,

Geoffrey Wheeler

A Television Outside Broadcast

presented by John Vernon

BBC recording

See page 7.

8.25
THE SATURDAY FILM

presenting

Tony Draws a Horse

starring

CECIL PARKER

and

ANNE CRAWFORD

with

DEREK BOND

BARBARA MURRAY

Directed by

John Paddy Carstairs

Produced by Brock Williams

Dr. Howard Flory... CECIL PARKER

Clare Flory... ANNE CRAWFORD

Tim Shields... DEREK BOND

John Parsons... BARBARA MURRAY

Alfred Parsons... MARTIN JONES

Mrs. Parsons... BARBARA MURRAY

Granpapa... EDWARD BUST

See page 6.

9.50
THE NEWS

JULY 14

SATURDAY

BBC **tv**

evening

10.00

DICK POWELL SHOW

presents

Somebody's Waiting

starring

MICKEY ROONEY

Directed by Arthur Hiller

Angie... MURIEL ROBERTS

Clark... SUEAN OLIVER

Paul... TONY ANDREWS

Sophia... LUCILLE BREWER

See page 7.

AT 7.0

Ron

Parry



The Saturday Show



with Audrey Arno from France

10.50

TWIST!

with

DAVID JACOBS

and a host of friends

Music with a beat from

Don Lang and his Twisters

Tony Osborne

and the Melodium

Guitar star EDEN KANE

and THE BROOK BROTHERS

Twins Competition:

Red famous team v. Dennis Little team

Adjutor

David James and Lynne Carter

Settings by Malcolm Godwin

Directed by Sydney Lockett

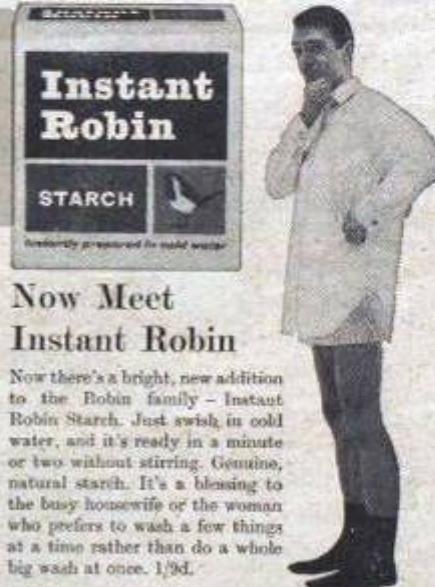
Produced by Jennifer Stewart

BBC recording

11.20

THE WEATHER MAN

Close Down



To help you starch professionally well, write for
the booklet "A Little Bird Told Me" to

Dept. J.J., RECKITT & SONS LIMITED, HULL

AUGUST 18

BBC TV

SATURDAY

5.50
THE NEWS5.53
TODAY'S SPORT

Introduced by John Langham
A summary of today's sporting headlines and the classified football results
Presented by the Spectator Unit

6.0
CRICKET

England v. Pakistan
FIFTH TEST MATCH
The end of the third day's play at The Oval

6.35
JUKE BOX JURY

A new disc-a-Hit or a Miss?
Comments and opinions on the latest pop releases
This week's picks:
Roy Conniff
Jean Metcalfe
Eric Sykes
Sylvia Syms
In the Chair
David Jacobs
Programme derived by Peter Potter
Presentation by Neville Warman

7.5
OUTBREAK OF MURDER

A new weekly thriller
in seven parts
by EDWARD J. MARON and TED WILLIS
starring GENE HODDING
ROBERT McDOWALL
JOHN GASHIER
LEO LAMOUR
with CHRISTOPHER BERNY
Continuing his investigations into the two murders, Det.-Inspector Mitchell arrives at the Hot Patisserie Club as Tago Bentley is claiming the lighter found by the police at Biggs' house. Tago is held for questioning. Mitchell's son, Ken, who is a member of the club, and David Ashton, who Mitchell believes was meant to be the third victim, have been asked to go to the Police Station.

5: The Long Night
Cast in order of appearance:
Ann Mitchell..... BETTY McDOWELL
Alice Biggs..... LUCILLE LAMOUR
Mrs. Biggs..... JEANNE COOPER
Maurice Bent..... CLIFFORD JACKSON
Det. Sgt. West..... NORMAN McDOUGAL
Det. Insp. Mitchell..... OLIVER BROWN
Ken Mitchell..... CHRISTOPHER BERNY
David Ashton..... DAVID GASHIER
Det. Constable Wilson HOWARD PAYK
Chief Supt. Kruger..... JOHN GASCAR
Tago Bentley..... DAVID GASHIER
Adams..... JAMES UNGAR
Jack Heywood..... MAUREEN BOKE
Incidental music composed and conducted by GORDON FRANKS
Settings by Richard Wilton
Film supervisor, Tony Legge
Film editor, Peter Pierro
Produced by RAYMOND CARTER
BBC recording
Betty McDowell is in "Period of Adjustment" at Edinburgh's Theatre Royal.

7.35

STARLIGHT
RENDEZVOUS

A high-speed glamour show featuring

DUCHESS VALENTINE
with some songs just for you
DON FELTWICK
The Story of Casanova
Script by George Stevens
THE THREE MONARCHS
Directed by Alan Aldridge
PAM WAN CHUNG
Stirring film star from China
VINCENT
International Juggler from Italy

THE WIMBLEDON GIRLS CHOIR
Cathy Green, Rosanne Parry

THE TWINKLE STRETETTES

WOOLLY PHILLIPS

and his ORCHESTRA

Choreography by Lee Marshall

Opening number arranged by Bob Miller

Designed by Andrew Scottell

Produced by Raymond James

BBC recording

Featuring appearing in its New York debut, The Story of Casanova, at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, from Monday, 13th August, at the Haymarket Theatre, London, from Tuesday at the Piccadilly Theatre,

See page 9

8.15

THE SATURDAY FILM

The Great John L.

STARRING

GREGG McCLELLAN

and

JANIS DARNELL

with BARBARA BRETON

Directed by Frank Tuttle

A BBC Crosby production

John L. Sullivan..... GREGG McCLELLAN
Anne..... LOUISE DIAMOND
Barry..... BARBARA BRETON
Mokey..... LEE SULLIVAN
McMurphy..... WALLACE FISH
Richard Martin..... OTIS KEEFE
James J. Corbett..... EUSTACE CHAPMAN

See page 9

9.50
THE NEWS10.0
SATURDAY SPORT

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme

The Start of the

1962 FOOTBALL SEASON

Two game reports of today's outstanding matches with all the action highlights

Leeds United v. Arsenal

An English Football Writers Association book of London's "underdogs" can attest that Division One defeat is against their tradition. However, the team includes newcomer Jim Baker

Manchester United v.

West Bromwich Albion

At Old Trafford ALAN WALKER comments on soccer's costliest player, Dennis Law, making his first appearance for the team

Edited by Lewie Higgins

Presented by Richard Tilley



AT 8.15

The Saturday
Film

starring

Gregg
McClellan

in

The Great
John L.



YOUR LOVE ALONE WILL NOT PROTECT

By 8 to 9 weeks your puppy has lost his natural immunity. Until after vaccination he has nothing to protect him against the deadly disease that threatens his life—and they are so common there's an even chance he'll be affected by one. They are, distemper (which includes hardpad), hepatitis and two forms of leptospirosis—and the sad thing is there is no certain cure for any. So ask about the latest developments in all-in protection and take your puppy to have him vaccinated before he comes into contact with other dogs.

See your
veterinary surgeon
about vaccination

Boehringer Ingelheim
Leverkusen, Germany

THIS IS THE AIR-KING

See the magnificent Rolex Oyster Perpetual Air-King, waterproof, self-winding and superbly accurate, at your nearest Rolex jeweller, or write for a fully illustrated catalogue.



8.00pm 18th 8.00pm 19th
Rolex Oyster 215.00
Rolex Oyster 215.00
Rolex Oyster 215.00



ROLEX OYSTER PERPETUAL AIR-KING

THE ROLEX WATCH COMPANY LIMITED
(H. Wilsdorf, Founder)
100 NEW BOND STREET, MAYFAIR, LONDON, W.1

12.5
THE WEATHER MAN

Close Down

SEPTEMBER 15

BBC TV

SATURDAY

**5.50 THE NEWS****5.53 TODAY'S SPORT**

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme
A summary of today's sporting highlights and the classified football results
Presented by the Sportscast Unit

6.0 JUKE BOX JURY

A new disc—a Hit or a Miss? Comments and opinions on the latest pop releases
See next's panel:
Eugene Davies

Dion
Fenella Fielding and another guest
In the chair,
David Jacobs
Programme derived by Peter Potts
Presented by Fenella Wootton

6.30 DIXON OF DOCK GREEN

Starring
JACK WARNER
Seen stories of a London Policeman
by Ted Willis

Duffy Snaffles a Rat

Characters in order of appearance
P.C. George Dixon... JACK WARNER
Edie Watson... ETHELWEBE BROOKS
Wickford Walters... STOKEY MCGOWAN
Sergeant Flint... ANTHONY RIGG
P.C. Lauderdale... GENEVIEVE ARMSTRONG
Mrs. Johnson... GWEN LEE
W.P. Sgt. Present... ANNE BREWER
Int. Sgt. Andy Crawford
P.C. Bush... MARLENE DYKES
P.C. Civil... CHRISTOPHER OLDFIELD
Superintendent... KAREN TIGLAN
Int. Inspector Cheshire... HERBERT GARDNER
Duffy... MARIE BOOTH
Mrs. Iver... OLIVER BRADSHAW
Bill Chandler... RAYMOND HOGG
P.M. Janice MacPherson... LINDA WILSON
Mr. Purchasing... ERIC FERGUSON
Shirley Lawrence... CATHERINE DENE
W.P.C. "Bessie"... RUTH LEECH
Sue Keen... BARBARA BRYANT
Terry Spike... DENNIS WILSON
See Thomas... TOM PARKER
Marp... JENNIFER HEDDERSON
Film cameraman... JOHN McGLOTHLIN
Designer... TONY CORMELL
Directed by Michael Goodwin
Production by DOUGLAS MOSS
BBC recording

See page 7

7.15 THE SATURDAY FILM

presenting
Silver Queen
starring
GEORGE BRENT
PRISCILLA LANE
Directed by Lloyd Bacon
James Kimball... GEORGE BRENT
Corde Adams... PRISCILLA LANE
Gerald Forsyth... BURTON CHASE
Hector Bailey... LYNN OVERMAN
Blackie... GENEVIEVE WILLIAMS
Mr. Adams... ROBERT PALMER
New York in the 1870s: James Kimball, a professional gambler, finds it easy to win a fortune, but harder to marry the woman he loves.

8.30 SWIMMING

The National Championships
The finals of some of the principal events
Commentators: Max Robertson and Harry Walker
TV presentation by Ray Leachland
From the Derby Baths, Blackpool

9.5 THE LAST NIGHT OF THE PROMS

Moscow Sinfonia
conducted by
BBC SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
Leader: Paul Bagley
Conducted by
Sir Malcolm Sargent
Pump and Circumstance March No. 1
From Bohemia Fields and Woods
London
Box Score... MR. HENRY WOOD
Role, Britain... ARTHUR JEROME
Jerusalem... PHILIP
The National Anthem
Introduced by
Tom Fleming
From the Albert Hall, London
Television presentation by Anthony Craxton
See page 4

10.0 THE NEWS**10.10 STARLIGHT RENDEZVOUS**

A high-speed glamour show featuring
DICKIE VALENTINE
with more songs just for you
THE DAGENHAM GIRL PEEPERS
The skirt of the paper
THE DE LAINE SISTERS
Vocal negotiations
GAIL & SES AMIGOS
Hot girls in the Latin-American style

THE TWELVE STARLETTES
Television's newest glamour line
THE MALCOLM PARKES SINGERS
Pretty girls with pretty voices
WOOLF PHILLIPS AND HIS ORCHESTRA
A new-style musical combination
Choreography by Les Kershaw
Choral direction by Malcolm Parkes
Opening number: *Woman*
Arranged by Bob Miller
Designed by Austin Southcott
Produced by Michael Astor
BBC recording

The *Twelve Starlettes* are appearing in the *Starlight Rendezvous* Show at the Hippodrome, Brighton.

10.50 SATURDAY SPORT

Introduced by Kenneth Wolstenholme
This extended edition includes all the main stories arising out of Saturday's sport
EUROPEAN ATHLETIC CHAMPIONSHIPS
The third edited recording. David Oglethorpe and Dennis McWhirter describe today's events in Belgrade
FOOTBALL
Belgrade, Botogov 4, Blackheath, Brixton, The Cupholders, Sparta, have already made another impressive start this season. At West Hart Lane, Arsenal, Wednesday night, reports: Alan Vida vs. Stanislav Uralov. At Villa Park, Aston Villa have invited Spain, killing their visitors this season. Sponsored by Lewishill Biscuits
Presented by Richard Tilting

11.35 THE WEATHER
Close Down**How to Relieve
TENSE NERVOUS
HEADACHES**

HOW THESE HEADACHES START
When you are "nervy", muscles in the neck and scalp tighten up, causing pressure. The pain resulting builds up more tightness, more pressure and makes your headache worse.

HOW ANADIN RELIEVES NERVOUS HEADACHES

"Anadin" tablets get straight to the root of the trouble, soothing nerves and relaxing tension as well as relieving pain. Anadin lifts depression too—leaves you calm, cheerful, relaxed.

Nothing acts faster than

ANADIN

Anadin tablets—20 for 2/-, 10 for 1/-
and 100 for 6/- (strength 500 mg.)

**Get more good
tomatoes for
your money**

CIRIO
whole peeled TOMATOES



Appendix Three

***Radio Times* articles from the week of *TW3's* first broadcast**

Your Weekend Saturday



The Francescos



The Mills Liberty Horses

BERTRAM MILLS CIRCUS



Suzette and her doves



The Flying Sylvests

BERTRAM MILLS under a Big Top may be a strange thought to those who associate this famous circus only with Olympia. But for eight months of the year Mills's green-and-red vans roll through the country and it was towards the end of their latest season on the road that tonight's show was recorded. Cyril and Bernard Mills believe so strongly in comedy that the bill includes twelve of the greatest laughter-makers in the circus world, and you can see the quintessence of all of them at 7.15.

But comedy must have contrast and this means thrills and daring. The two Gaudy brothers give an exciting performance at opposite ends of a high swaying pole. The Flying Sylvests on the trapeze take the matter of daring a stage further than usual: the flyer somersaults to the hands of the catcher blindfold and encased to the waist in a sack! The other major ingredient of a circus is provided by Norman Barrett who first as Ben Hur, and subsequently immaculate in tails, presents the beautiful Mills Liberty Horses and his wife Sweetie with a cloud of white doves in an act of great simplicity and beauty.

Perhaps it is to lighten the toughness of circus life that comedy is always present. And just as much of this goes on behind the scenes as does in front. For instance, the white-faced clown Francesco got the biggest laugh of the day during the rehearsal for tonight's programme when he unfurled the banner on his fanfare trumpet to start the show. I was stunned to see the words 'ATV Presents' in close-up on BBC-TV cameras. However, when Bertram Mills Circus later moved on to the next town Francesco's caravan bore a sign inscribed 'Bally Smart's Circus'—so maybe the BBC production team had the last laugh. And certainly you will when you watch tonight's sparkling show.

DEREK BURRELL-DAVIS

Sir Adrian Boult Conducts

THURSDAY Sir ADRIAN BOULT returns tonight for the first of three appearances as guest conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, whose first permanent conductor he was for a period of twenty years—from 1930 when the orchestra was founded. His programme contains a major work, *Job*, by Vaughan Williams, with whose music he has been closely identified. *Job* is in fact dedicated to Sir Adrian, and he has given many performances of it, having recorded it three times, and conducted it at Covent Garden.

The idea of creating a ballet to Blake's illustrations of the Book of Job was originally put to Diaghilev, who turned it down in horror—not because of the score, which had not then been written, but because he found the theme 'too English' and 'too old-fashioned' (what did Diaghilev mean?). So *Job* was first performed as a concert work, and only later staged as a ballet.

In the concert hall, as Sir Adrian once said, it is completely of the calibre of another symphony; in the theatre it is vivid and dramatic at times—think of Dolin, Helpmann, or Grant in the rôle of Satan; and sublimely moving at other times—the 'Saraband of the Sons of God' or the 'Pavane of the Sons of the Morning.' It is in beautiful movements such as these that I think of a remark made about Vaughan Williams: 'He can plod along even with common chords, but when he does so the heavens open.'

ALAN FRANK

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

FRIDAY From 11 to 12 o'clock on Saturday night has been described as the 'most irreverent hour of the week'. It is insulated from last week's worries by the slackness of Saturday, and from next week's anxieties by the assault of the Sunday papers. It is an hour in which to expand, complain, and guffaw. *That Was The Week That Was* which starts tonight will try to catch this irreverent hour with the most irreverent programme on television.

We hope that it will be funny and compelling, and that it will have a new structure and will establish a new type of relationship with the audience. Above all it is an experiment with an audience. We have a feeling that people are prepared to switch on their sets late on Saturday night without switching off their minds at the same time and we shall try to deal entertainingly, in television terms, with any subject that we feel is worth airing. Just as *Tonight* was based on the premise that there is a large audience in the early part of the evening anxious to listen to intelligent comment on a wide variety of subjects, *That Was The Week That Was* is based on the suspicion that there is a similar audience late on Saturday night, prepared to listen to comment which is funny and impudent and covers an equally wide range of subjects.

At 10.50 on a Saturday night we have all lived through a week together, and that week has

developed a character of its own. There are anxious weeks, farcical weeks, frustrating weeks, and weeks in which nothing much happens; we have lived through them together and we have a feeling you will welcome the opportunity of joining a group of people who are prepared to fall on the dead week and take it to pieces.

David Frost will lead. Millicent Martin, Kenneth Cope, David Kernan, Roy Kinnear, Bernard Levin, Lance Percival, and William Rushton through about sixty minutes of material, some of which will be written during the week, some on the day, and some as they speak.

NAN SHERRIN



David Frost



Millicent Martin

BBC II

The expansion of
BBC tv offers
opportunities for
PAID TRAINING
with the Largest
Television
Film Unit
in the World

Trainee Assistant Cameramen,
Recordists, Editors and
Projectionists

- British Subjects
- G.C.E.—O level
- Enterprise
- Positive interest in film making
- Age 18 to 25

Qualified Assistant Cameramen and Recordists have opportunities for World travel. Must be able to drive a car or be willing to learn (at BBC's expense).

Qualified Assistant Editors have opportunities for creative participation in production of the full range of Television programmes.

Qualified Projectionists given opportunities for further training in above fields.

RATES OF PAY: Trainee Assistant Cameramen, Recordists and Editors are paid £760 a year while being trained (£905-£1155 when qualified). Trainee Projectionists are paid £645 a year while being trained (£690-£830 when qualified).

PROSPECTS FOR PROMOTION THROUGHOUT TELEVISION SERVICE

HOW TO APPLY:

Requests for Application Forms, quoting reference 62G 4478 and stating category in which interested should reach Appointments Officer, Broadcasting House, London, W.I., by 30th November.



Sport

Grandstand (Saturday)
Horse-racing including the Hennessy Gold Cup at Newbury, ice skating, and snooker are among the events covered.

The Empire and Commonwealth Games (Monday and Friday)
Special reports from Perth. There will also be reports in the regular programmes such as *Sportspage*.

Sportspage (Wednesday)
This special edition is filled with reports from the Welsh International dual at Perth, Ipswich in the European Cup, Sugar Ray Robinson's big fight.

Association Football (Thursday)
A visit to the last thirty minutes of the First Division League & Division League game.

The World Today

Monitor (Sunday)
This edition includes Peter O'Toole talking about his appearance in the title-role part in the forthcoming film about Lawrence of Arabia.

Passerama (Monday)
Your window on the world—with Richard Dimbleby.

World Zone (Tuesday)

James Fisher visits Holland.

T. E. Lawrence, 1888-1935 (Tues.)
His story is told by the people who knew him, with the aid of film and photographs.

On Safari (Wednesday)
A look at the problems of moving big game from one reserve to another.

Adventure (Friday)
Fascinating film of the Kathakali dancers of South India.

T. E. Lawrence—the story of an enigmatic and controversial man in *Tuesday*



Norman Barrett as *Leslie the Jetman* in *'Bottom Mills Circus'* on Saturday.

For Children

The Big Flood (Tuesday)

The start of a three-part film about a group of Hungarian children.

Sooty (Thursday)

Starting this week he will be seen with Harry Corlett and Swoop fortnightly on *Thursdays*.

Plays

Lilac on a Lilac (Sunday)

Dudley Foster and Neil McCallum appear in this story of an ex-actress master who is accused of libelling her former colleague.

The Badger Game (Friday)

A dramatic comedy of Country life starring George A. Cooper, Frederick Jaeger, Jeanne Des, and Dennis Hensley.

Series and Serials

Dixon of Dock Green (Saturday)

Fay Compton makes a guest appearance as an old lady threatened with eviction.

The Old Curiosity Shop (Sunday)

The start of a thirteen-part adaptation of Dickens's novel with Michele Dotrice as Nell.

The drama background to our cover is from the *New Oxford Illustrated* Edition.

Malgret (Monday)

Le Patron releases a suspect in an attempt to solve a murder.

Compact (Tuesday and Thursday)

It's play Cupid between Ian and Betty—and later the editor puts a very important question to his sweetheart.

The Dick Powell Show (Tuesday)

The producer himself stars in a gripping tale of hate and revenge.

Z Cars (Wednesday)

The Newhaven police are led a merry dance but can make no arrests.

The Monsters (Thursday)

The final instalment of the science-fiction serial begins with the fate of mankind hanging in the balance.

Benny Hill begins a new series of *funny* adventures on Friday

HIGHLIGHTS

Light Entertainment

Bertie Mills Circus (Saturday)
A sparkling show recorded under the Big Top on tour.

That Was The Week That Was (Saturday)
An irreverent appraisal of the past week with David Frost, Michael Martin, and others.

The Black and White Masque Show (Sunday)
Mervyn乱 Henderson is this week's guest star.

Television Top of the Form (Monday)

The girls of Methodist College Belfast compete against King Edward VI Camp Hill School for Boys Birmingham.

COMEDY SERIES

Here's Harry (Monday)

Eric Worth sets off with two friends in his car to see a football match.

Six More Faces of Jim (Thursday)
Jimmy Edwards takes on "The Face of Wisdom" in a tale of the Far East.

Benny Hill (Friday)
He is back in a new series beginning with "The Mystery of Black Dog Manor".

Films

The Spiral Staircase (Saturday)
An eerie thriller starring Dorothy McGuire, George Brent, and Edith Barrett.

Perry Mason (Sunday)
The famous lawyer is asked to defend a boy accused of stealing jewellery.

Zero One (Wednesday)
While in America, Garrett helps a woman who has lost her memory.

Dr. Kildare (Friday)

The young intern and Dr. Gilligan are the victims of a public attack on television.



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