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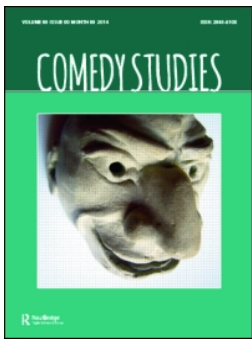
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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

Humour as Politics: The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy, by Nicholas Holm, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp., £67.99 (hardback), ISBN: 9783319509495

Humour as Politics. The Political Aesthetics of Contemporary Comedy by Nicholas Holm is one among several recent publications in Palgrave's new Studies in Comedy series. Holm's book is an elaborate study of mostly Anglo-American television and film comedy from the 1990s onwards (*The Simpsons*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *South Park*, *Seinfeld*, ...), with particular attention to a rich corpus of comedy from the 2000s (*Borat*, *Veep*, *Chappelle's Show*, *Jackass*, *The Sarah Silverman Program*, ...). The book's discussions and close analyses will certainly be useful to comedy scholars interested in the development of Anglo-American comedy on screen in the last two-and-a-half decades.

Methodologically, Holm inscribes *Humour as Politics* in 'the critical aesthetic tradition of Cultural Marxism in conjunction with the aesthetic theory of Jacques Rancière' (18). He later also explicitly links his discussion of contemporary Anglo-American comedy on screen to 'postmodernism', explicitly referring to theorists including 'Jean Baudrillard, Jean-Francois Lyotard and Frederic Jameson' (195). In other words, *Humour as Politics* situates itself in a tradition of critical theory and continental philosophy. While scholarship in this field can be complex, Holm has certainly aimed to make his book accessible to comedy scholars outside the tradition of critical continental theory. Still, *Humour as Politics* is a demanding read, full of challenging theoretical frameworks and arguments. I therefore assume that Holm's book will be most appealing to comedy and media scholars who already appreciate the insights and contributions of high theory.

I must admit, although I found the book erudite throughout, I did not always agree with Holm's arguments. Perhaps these disagreements really signal my misunderstanding. Regardless, I now list a summary of what I consider Holm's main arguments, with a few comments and challenges. Importantly, Holm distinguishes what he calls the 'political aesthetic' of contemporary comedy from comedy *about* politics. Specifically, Holm clarifies that 'the aesthetic aspect of a text – its form, style, palette, rhythm, narrative, structure and form – can do political work, by which I mean it can it [sic] intercede in the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power' (12). For Holm, the specific political impact of contemporary comedy is 'the production of radical politics that undermines the obviousness and clarity of systems of knowledge' (18).

I discern three movements in the development of Holm's argument that 'humour [functions] as an aesthetic of ever-expanding doubt that acts as form of 'epistemic acid' that brings all certainty into question' (18).

1. Since the 1990s, there has been a rise of new forms of comedy, like *Seinfeld*, which differ from older forms of comedy, like *Friends* (although 'new' comedy has not wholly replaced 'old' comedy). Holm specifies that '[w]here the humour of *Friends* arose in response to clear deviations from expected behaviour, the humour of *Seinfeld* was often a product of intense examination of those very codes of behaviour' (3). According to Holm, *Seinfeld's* comedy foreshadows 'the humour of awkwardness, provocation and even absurdity that would begin to assume a prominent role in popular humour over the next two decades' (6). In subsequent chapters, Holm

specifically analyses and discusses the awkwardness of reality comedy like *Jackass*, *The Office* (UK) and *Borat*; the provocative comedy of *Chappelle's Show*, *The Sarah Silverman Program* and *Four Lions*; and the absurdity of *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Family Guy*.

2. According to Holm, the key difference is that 'whereas traditional modes of humour are premised on noting or enacting a deviation from a norm (...) the uncomfortable, provocative and absurd modes of humour not only bring multiple frames of reference into conversation, but they do so in ways that leave the stability of frames or the dispositions between those frames unclear' (192). So, in 'humour of certainty' (think: *Friends*), 'comedy emerges through the clear breach of customs and rules presented as obvious and legitimate' (193-4) By contrast, the new 'critical logic of comic doubt' shies 'away from anointing any frame as correct in a final or confident manner' (194).
3. The upshot of these developments, Holm argues, is that '[t]he various manifestations of contemporary humour all act in different ways to enact a politics of postmodern doubt' (199). In this context, 'postmodernism emerges as an attitude marked by a constant awareness and suspicion of boundaries and structure' (195). Holm explains that 'postmodern humour emphatically disrupt[s] and disruptively emphasize[s] all stable social, cultural, economic and epistemological structures', specifically by 'constantly pushing at existing limits of meaningful and stable interpretation' (200). Thus 'contemporary modes of humour act to unsettle categories of thought and affect' and, so doing, cultivate 'an epistemology of uncertainty' (194).

I do not disagree with Holm that there is some distinction between the kinds of comedy outlined in (1). However, I am less convinced that so-called new comedy cultivates the radical doubt as outlined in (2) and (3). One way of framing Holm's claims is through an incongruity of humour. In this regard, Noël Carroll has argued that the incongruity relevant to humour is 'a deviation from some presupposed norm' or 'an anomaly (...) relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be' (2014, 17). So, Joey's behaviour in *Friends* is funny, often because it clashes with unspoken but accepted norms of intelligent and thoughtful behaviour. Concretely, if Joey asks if Homo Sapiens are extinct because they were really 'homo' Sapiens, we laugh because we dismiss his behaviour as normatively inadequate. Here, there is a clash between how Joey sees the world and how we ought to see it – and it clearly is the latter framework which is legitimate. By contrast, according to Holm, in newer forms of comedy, such clear legitimacy of one framework over another is destabilized.

Specifically, Holm argues that 'uncomfortable humour [like *The Office*] repeatedly refuses to permit either of the frames of reference – not the accepted norm nor its breach – to emerge as a dominant and correct interpretive and thereby resolve the incongruity' (112). He also argues 'it is difficult to read any final ethical or political statement from provocative humour [like *Chappelle's Show*], which both reinforces and transgresses political boundaries' (144). Finally, 'absurd humour [like *Family Guy*] focuses upon the lack of sense that informs everyday social rules and norms, political positions and discussions' (173).

However, I am not certain if what Holm identifies as new comedy is really so unstable. I do agree that whereas the inner workings of comic mechanisms of incongruity remain more hidden in sitcoms like *Friends*, they are often exposed, if not pushed to a breaking point, in shows like *The Office*, *Chappelle's Show* and *The Simpsons*. Still, whereas it is not always clear whether we should be amused at the behaviour of David Brent or feel ashamed in his place, his normative inadequacy does always remain obvious and stable. Likewise, while it may be unclear if Dave Chappelle's ironic ridicule of racial stereotypes

makes a political point or simply transgresses taboos for transgression's sake, it does always remain clear that a norm or taboo is being transgressed. Moreover, although Chappelle's comedy may put pressure on the legitimacy of a given norm or taboo, he ultimately defends relatively clear and stable conceptions about the legitimacy of one normative framework over the other. After all, Chappelle left his show amidst fears that some audiences would wrongly get their comic pleasures from indulging in racial stereotypes, rather than denouncing them.


Likewise, I agree that Peter Griffin's recurring fights with an anthropomorphic chicken in *Family Guy* are so absurdly random that they challenge the traditional comic sense in which a setup is followed by an incongruent punchline. Traditionally, a setup is introduced under the pretence that it will conclude in an interpretation that is normative adequate to how we think the world is or should be – an expectation which is then flouted in the punchline. By contrast, in absurd comedy, the set-up does no longer have any air of being normatively adequate to our conceptions of the real world. Thus, absurd comedy exposes and pokes fun at the artificial mechanics and constraints of more traditional forms of comedy. Concretely, at some points in *Family Guy*, Peter Griffin just happens to run into an anthropomorphic talking chicken and for some unspecified reason invariably gets into a fight. There is no pretence that this situation could in some way make sense – the incongruity from normal life is so far out there that the comedy is absurd.

Such absurd comedy does radically challenge more traditional forms of humour and indeed conjures up a wholly alternative logic to the social and physical laws of our ordinary environment. Still, in some way, I find such absurd humour very stable and formulaic. Instead of introducing a *credible* setup, the formula of absurd humour is simply the *incredulousness* of the setup, or the lack of setup altogether. Moreover, I am not certain how the recurrently absurd chicken fights of *Family Guy* really challenge the epistemological frameworks that structure our lives. To me, the very fact that they are absurd seems only to reinstate the validity of our ordinary epistemological frameworks that help us to make sense of the world we live in.

In conclusion, I am sceptical that the recent comedy of discomfort, provocation and absurdity identified by Holm really stimulates the kind of postmodern doubt he suggests, but I do find it a provocative position that merits further attention and commentary.

Reference

Carroll, Noël. 2014. *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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