

# HUMOUR AS AN ART OF DESCENT AND NEGATIVE DIALECTICS: A DELEUZIAN ANALYSIS OF THE FUNCTIONS OF HUMOUR IN TREVOR GRIFFITHS' COMEDIANS

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## **Abstract**

This essay undertakes an exploration of Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* to delineate the socio-cultural, moral and psychological functions of humour in it and to scrutinize how Griffiths adopts a negative-dialectical method to assay the socio-political efficacy of a socialist aesthetics by counterpointing various modes of humour against each other in this specific historical period (1970s). Nevertheless, the common thread here, as will be demonstrated, is that the modes of humour permeating *Comedians* are saliently tainted by various shades of tragedy. Chiefly drawing on Deleuze's distinction between humour and irony, the thrust of the argument here is that, in *Comedians*, humour features as a means of psychological and ontic-ontological descent (into the sub- or unconscious of personal or national history) and of critical movement between immanent social-historical surfaces. Humour, in its negative-dialectical mode is also argued to feature as a political strategy - where both sadistic irony and masochistic humour are possible strategies. More specifically, humour serves as a catalyst for putting metaphysics into motion. Metaphysics, in *Comedians*, designates the metaphysical conception of history, to wit, history as a determinate, teleological narrative. To put such a metaphysical history into motion means to expose its immanence and reveal it to be a historical process and a human construct, susceptible to being altered.

## **Key words**

*Griffiths; comedians; Deleuze; humour; negative dialectics; Grotesque realism*

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The last absurdity is that the peacefulness of the void and the peacefulness of reconciliation cannot be distinguished from one another. Hope skulks out of the world, which cannot conserve it any more than it can pap and pralines, and back to where it came from, death.

(Adorno, *Notes To Literature* 274–275)

## Introduction

Comedy, in keeping with its generically diffuse nature, in modern era has hardly ever been purely comic. As Alexander Leggatt in his introduction, entitled “Five centuries of a genre”, to *English Stage Comedy 1490-1990* acutely indicates: “There is no such thing as comedy, an abstract historical form; there are only comedies. But they accumulate to create a body of case law, a set of expectations within which writers and audiences operate” (Leggatt 1998: 1). Specifically indicating the then newly-emerged trends such as the “Theatre of Cruelty” and “Theatre of Absurd” as illustrative examples, Styan, in the 1968 edition of his *Dark Comedy*, discerns a similar erosion and encroachment of the conventional boundaries between tragedy and comedy. This trend, Styan argues, has been both consciously forged by post-WW1 and post-WW2 dramatists to subvert the habitual preconceptions of the audience and inadvertently adopted by the critics as a reflection of their confusion regarding the aforesaid situation (Styan 2009: 1–6).

The established definitions of classical comedy have tended to define it not only in terms of pluralization of order, bodies and masks, contingency of the moment and of the measure, fluidity of identities, class conflict, and transgression of norms; they have also determined it in terms of its restorative, reconciliatory and cathartic dynamics: “The compulsion of comedy to transform problems into solutions adumbrates its larger social task, which is to explore and then contain fraught social issues of the time within a lithesome and ultimately orderly performance narrative” (Charney 2005: 558). The cyclical-reconciliatory facets of comedy are explicitly captured in Northrope Frye’s archetypal theory of literature where “the ironic and the satiric” (considered as one category) in conjunction with “the romantic, the tragic and the comic” (Frye 1990: 162) constitute four principal narrative moods or categories. The subversive and satirical aspects of comedy, however, are reflected vividly in works, as characterized by Bakhtin, of grotesque realism. Bakhtin, in his reflections on the Rabelais, accentuates the counter-transcendental role of laughter/humour in such works: “The principle of laughter destroys all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities” (Bakhtin 1984: 49). And, finally, Bhabha attends to the ways in which humour is reflective of a desire for (cultural) appropriation (Bhabha 2004) and often deployed as a means of a disavowal of (socio-political) otherness and stereotypical categorisation (Bhabha 2004; and Barreca 1994). Furthermore, trends of comedy and comedic theory also differ in their respective privileging of the individual and the social (Hokenson 2006: 23–39). In the context of post-colonial writing and discourse, comedy is argued to primarily ‘reflect a struggle

for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release' (Reichl and Stein 2005, 9). Analogously, in the context of feminist writing, 'feminist humour is always, at some level, subversive [...being] both angry and affirming' (Gilbert 2004, 31); it is generally 'a force for [...revisionist] action' (Zwagerman 2010: 3).

The modern strands of comedy, however, invariably complicated and further extended the boundaries and limits of the classical definitions by incorporating grotesque, nihilistic and absurd elements in human existence and social life into the form and content. Sadistic, neurotic, and traumatic aspects of laughter imbue the modern drama, and propel comic humour beyond the questions of happiness and hedonism or even social and moral critique. They rather deployed it to question the abject origins of meaning, mastery, sovereign subjectivity, value, and the human (see Styan 2009: 1–45). In consequence, the boundaries between tragedy and comedy were increasingly eroded. This blurring of boundaries is vividly reflected in the following remark by Garcia Lorca who is reported by his brother to have said: "If in certain scenes the audience doesn't know what to do, whether to laugh or to cry, that will be a success for me". Having cited the foregoing passage, Styan proceeds to note that: "such a statement by a playwright could not easily have been made in any century but our own" (Ibid: 1). Similarly, Friedrich Dürrenmatt perceives the traditional boundaries between the two only as blurred and even artificial: "I have never understood the difference people make between the comic and the tragic. As the comic is an intuitive perception of the absurd, it seems to me more hopeless than the tragic. The comic offers no escape. I say 'hopeless', but in reality it lies outside the boundaries of hope and despair" (in Foster 2017: 101). This ambiguity reaches a more intense level of generic and psycho-social complexity when Eugene Ionesco states: "We laugh in order not to cry". And the historical underpinning of this generic overlap is interestingly foregrounded when Marx contends: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time a farce" (Marx 1984: 10). Here comedy and tragedy conjoin to engender a dialectical pattern of history, where both genres are conceived as metahistorical texts.

Modern comedy, thus, has tended to be either darkly or savagely comic (Osborne, Griffiths, Orton, Coward, Stoppard, Terry Johnson), grotesquely or absurdly comic (as in Dario Fo, Eugene Ionesco, Luigi Pirandello), or tragically comic (Beckett, Pinter, Shepard, Jez Butterworth), among other strains. This generic volatility, or imbrication, primarily stems from the particularly crisis-ridden landscape of twentieth-century history: a long history of colonization and imperialism, two World Wars, the Cold War, and Balkan Wars, to mention a few. One may add to this the rampant identity-crisis or -loss of the modern individual (in the wake of traumatic events of wars) and the tensions between the human and technology as well as that between morality and science due to the increasing mechanization of society.

Part of this anxiety also stems from the socio-culturally and historically precarious position of comedy-related figures and modes of practice, including music hall tradition and comic shows as live, communal social practices – rather than the passive, virtual modes represented by new media such as TV. The apathetic

or pruriently reified cultural consciousness shown by the public to the traditional comic practices has been recognized as symptomatic by certain playwrights. Indeed, one of the earliest and most prominent instances of post-WW2 drama – John Osborne’s *The Entertainer* (1957) – concerns itself with this issue. In *The Entertainer*, Osborne dramatizes the final episode in the fading career and unravelling life of an entertainer as a near-extinct career and job. The author’s note to the play vividly captures this elegiac sounding of the alarms: “The music hall is dying, and, with it, a significant part of England. Some of the heart of England has gone; something that once belonged to everyone, for this was truly a folk art” (n.p.).

Humour, by the same token, has had a vicissitudinous itinerary. Cataclysmic historical and socio-cultural circumstances have compelled the dramatists, in an attempt to simultaneously comprehend and criticise the customs and spirit of the age, to appeal to humour and comedy, even in their absurdist strains. This finds a cogent articulation in Camus’ statement: “... in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of absurdity.” (Camus 1979: 13). Gleaning our inklings from the host of uses of humour and comedy across literary history, the common thread we can discern is that humour is characterized by “ambiguity” and “contradiction” (see Styan 2009: 254–288). This is attested by Eco’s definition of humour as “the contradiction between the character and the frame the character can comply with” (Eco 8). These modern plays variously reflect the psychological, moral and socio-cultural subtleties at stake in humour. Tragi-comedy finds its full-fledged nuances in modern and contemporary drama. Based on the way it has been deployed across eras, two distinct functions can be articulated for tragi-comedy: either a reconciliatory palliative or a subversive use of contingency for re-invigorating or undermining social-moral absolutes manifested in a simultaneously physical and metaphysical revolt or disobedience.

Late modern and postmodern drama have also embraced humour and comic strains as an apt and effective medium to reflect on and tackle the chaos, nihilism, decadence, uncertainty and increasing de-realization of reality that permeate contemporary historical reality. Having emphasized that “comedy deserves a greater place in our contemporary cultural consciousness than it is currently given,” Demastes maintains that “seeing the world from a comic perspective” can contribute to the development of a culture freed from unnecessarily oppressive pathologies” (Demastes 2008: 8). Kirby Olson argues that “[p]ostmodernism and comedy are aligned in that they function by overturning master narratives and ridding metaphysics of transcendence and closure” (Olson 2001: 6) Olson effectively argues that “[c]omedy works by opening rationalism to its supposed opposite, irrationalism” (Ibid). It could be revealing to briefly dwell on one paradigmatic late-modernist writer whose work has expanded the uses and definitions of humour and tragicomedy, and propelled them into new terrains: Samuel Beckett. Few late-modernist writers have captured the existential and psychological subtleties of humour, laughter and tragi-comedy as insightfully as Beckett has.

Apart from his dramatic works being replete with various examples of tragicomic depictions of human behaviour, one of the most acutely articulated reflections on this issue occurs in *Watt*. Here Beckett significantly distinguishes between ethical (bitter), intellectual (hollow) and absurd (*risus purus*, self-reflexive) laughter or mode of humour:

The bitter, the hollow and, haw! haw! – the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well, well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout – haw! – so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy. (Beckett, 1953: 18)

Critchley can help us further unravel some of the psychological and anthropological complexities of humour in Beckett's tripartite distinction – a distinction that also tacitly underpins *Comedians*. Noting Adorno's neglect of humour in Beckett as one of the pivotal aspects of his aesthetics, Critchley hints at "the subtle but devastating force of Beckett's humour" (Critchley 2002: 184). Critchley's following observations are illuminating:

humour does not, as Adorno suggests, evaporate in Beckett 'along with the meaning of the punchline'; rather humour is this very experience of evaporation, which is the evaporation of a certain philosophical seriousness and interpretative earnestness. Humour does not evaporate in Beckett; rather laughter is the sound of language trying to commit suicide but being unable to do so, which is what is so tragically comic. (Critchley 2002: 185)

Most recently there has been a further surge of interest in studies of various dimensions and functions of humour in theory. These include *Cognitive Linguistics and Humour Research* (De Gruyter 2015) and Attardo's *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Humor* (2017) – both of which utilize new methodologies and disciplines to broach humour, including the applicability of Cognitive Linguistics to humor through an emphasis on the embodied nature of language and the way it is used by humans with particular sorts of brains and bodies, with particular physical and social goals in specific physical and social contexts (MacWhinney 1999; Chrisley and Ziemke 2002).

In the ensuing sections, initially I shall delineate the chief functions of humour and categories of comic and tragicomic with a particular focus on modern and contemporary theories. Predicating my analysis on the theoretical insights yielded into the foregoing issues, I will explore Trevor Griffiths' *Comedians* to demonstrate the socio-cultural, moral and psychological functions of humour in it and to scrutinize how Griffiths adopts a dialectical method to assay the socio-political efficacy of a socialist aesthetics by counterpointing various modes of humour against one another in this specific historical period (1970s). Mainly drawing

on Deleuze's distinction between humour and irony (see below), in conjunction with other pertinent theories of humour including those of Freud and Bergson, the thrust of the argument in the ensuing parts is that, in *Comedians*, humour features as a means of psychological-ontological descent (into the sub- or unconscious of personal or national history) and of critical movement between immanent (though hierarchical) social-historical surfaces as well as a political strategy (where both sadistic irony and masochistic humour are possible strategies). More specifically, humour serves as a catalyst for putting metaphysics into motion. Metaphysics in *Comedians* designates the metaphysical conception of history; history as metaphysics in the play can be argued to signify a deterministic account of history where ideological and class-based structures of moral, social-political and economic values and norms are immutable (history as the end of history where conditions of production are reproduced interminably). More strictly, it involves history as a determinate, teleological narrative; history as the culmination of the paradigm of enlightenment rationality and triumph of neo-liberal humanism, individual atomism, and capitalist economy – to which no alternative is conceivable, according to its proponents. To put such a metaphysical history into motion means to expose its immanence and demonstrate it to be a historical process and a human construct, susceptible to being altered.

The reason underlying the choice of *Comedians* is the polyphonic nature of its dramatic narrative coupled with its formally experimental nature. Add to this its meta-dramatic or meta-poetic features, where it contain implicit or explicit reflections on the nature and functions of humour in modern life. As we shall see, comedy in *Comedians* is saliently tainted by tragedy, hence humour always featuring as black humour.

## Modern and Contemporary Definitions and Theories of Humour

The element of humour informing modernist tragicomedies and social satires, wielded either for social criticism or moral commentary, precludes easy emotional or ideological identification with protagonists and does not flout ideological norms, moral vice or socio-cultural values necessarily with the hope that they may be rectified. This complicating feature often arises from their being steeped in dark humour (occasionally bordering on the absurd) which is intended to reveal the irrationality and injustice rampant in a society dominated by a reifying techno-scientific rationality and a decadent and amnesiac bourgeois class. The often savage humour and scathing irony of dark humour in modern drama are important developments in the history of modern drama because they are not only aimed at the injustices of social orderings but at the idea that any kind of order is simply an illusion with detrimental effects. By the same token, in the literature of the dark humour, social aberration is not only deemed a fraction of the chaos glimpsed in a vast anti-pathetic universe, but is often affirmed as an effective means of protecting the individual from the homogenizing forces of a monolithic social machine. In dark humour, generally, the deployment of humour can be divided into three categories: absurd, aggressive, and defensive

(see Styan 2009: 38–52; see also Demastes 2008: 2, 8, 157–159). As is evident in the literature, there are substantial overlaps between all three, to the point where it becomes sometimes impossible to disentangle the strands belonging to each.

Whether it assumes an intensely subjective stance (individual perceptions of characters) or an objective evaluation of chaos and fragmentation, *dark humour* pursues two purposes. Firstly, it serves as a coping device or means of survival through either aggressive reaction or suspending the consciousness of death, suffering an pain. Secondly, it serves a corrective function of exposing depravity or folly. This comedic defiance is what Freud calls humour “on a grand scale,” (Freud 1960: 285) for it acknowledges pain, suffering, and futility but reveals a “magnificent superiority over the real situation” (Freud 1961: 162). The either defensive or aggressive uses of humour, for as Freud has argued, “Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances” (Ibid.: 163). In the modern dark comedic imagination, however, the former function prevails. Finding the human condition alienating, the historical purpose chaotic and the ontological meaning of the universe inscrutable, even absurd, dark humour relinquishes the moral-corrective function thereby tending toward the dystopian by embracing an aggressive and quasi-absurdist humour that refuse to be overwhelmed by the absurdity of the world and insists on making (comic) sense out of non-sense. In the eyes of dark humour, every human or divine order is only established disorder (see Styan 2009: 290).

Although theories of humour and comedy can be traced back to Plato, the purpose of this essay is to articulate a scheme that can facilitate a critical analysis of modes of modernist humour in *Comedians*, rather than providing a survey of theories. Simon Critchley’s formalization can be helpful. Having surveyed various philosophical accounts of humour across philosophical history, Critchley articulates a triadic categorization to distinguish its functions (2002: 2–3). The first category is the narcissistic and superiority feeling theory (Plato, Hobbes, Aristotle and Quintilian); the second is incongruity theory (Hutcheson, Kant, Schopenhauer, Bergson and Nietzsche); and the third, the relief theory (Herbert Spencer, Freud). It is worth succinctly unfolding the mechanisms of each.

One of the most fully-fledged elaborations of the third category is Freud. Freud’s work indeed remains one of the most provocative and useful analyses of humour because of its multiple layers of meaning and its complicated examination of the site of the comic. According to Freud, the comedic arts (through their “substitute gratifications”) not only provide both psychological protection against the forays and frustrations of a pressing reality thereby serving as the palliative remedies for traumatic disillusionments; they also provide both aesthetic and psychological pleasure by diffusing fears and fending off suffering (Freud 1930: 14–5). Freud claims that the grandeur of humour lies in “the triumph of narcissism—the victorious assertion of the ego’s invulnerability” (Ibid.: 15). According to Freud, the individual ego, embroiled by forces that would annihilate it, refuses to “let itself be compelled to suffer” (Ibid.: 162) and uses instances of pain and trauma as occasions to gain pleasure in humour. All the forces that would reduce the individual to nothingness are transformed into a source of pleasure.

Modernism but it has generally meant a preoccupation with interior subjectivity or individual consciousness. The narcissism of humour, while aggressive and reducing everything to the interests of the ego, protects the individual from threat and pain.

Freud explored joke techniques through ‘reduction,’ dividing humour into verbal and referential groups (54). His twenty mechanisms function inside verbal/referential humour, these are reduced to condensation and displacement (55). Todorov suggests that ‘there is condensation each time that only one signifier takes us to the knowledge of more than one meaning’ (Ibid.). Displacement occurs ‘because the essential element is given by the diversion of the mental path, by the displacement of the psychic accent on a theme different from the initial one’ (Ibid). Freud (1905) emphasises that wit and humour express aggression or sexual feelings in an acceptable manner (Paulos 1980: 6).

Freud is not alone in his consideration of comedy as one of mankind’s crucial coping devices. As various theorists of the comic, ranging from Kant, Schiller, and Nietzsche to Baudelaire, Breton, and Bakhtin, have all posited, the importance of the comic experience resides in its revelation of the truth about the basic antinomies of existence, offering a vent (a psych-corporeal mechanism), a means of subverting (in a class-based society) or of converting fear and anxiety of the human predicament into tragic affirmation<sup>1</sup> and the possibility of understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Henri Bergson, in his incongruity (or oddness) theory of humour, argues that “the comic expresses, above all else, a special lack of adaptability to society” (Bergson 1980: 146), describing laughter as a “living thing,” which applies to humanity because we are all “living things” (Ibid.: 61). Bergson attributes three pivotal characteristics to humour/laughter. First, “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*,” laughter is caused by the resemblance to man (Ibid.: 62–63). Secondly, laughter both arises from and reveals the “*absence of feeling*” (Ibid.: 63). Finally, the comic would not be appreciated if one were isolated from others because “laughter is always the laughter of a group” (Ibid.: 64). As he further explains: “[Comedy] begins, in fact, with what might be called a growing callousness to social life. Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about getting in touch with the rest of his fellow-beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream” (Ibid.: 98). Bergson emphasizes laughter as having “a *social* signification,” (Ibid.: 65) it is instigated through a lack of elasticity, in which there is momentum and our muscles perform the same movement (Ibid.: 66). More specifically, laughter is due to “mechanical inelasticity” (Ibid.: 67). We laugh at faces because the automatism and inelasticity contract (Ibid.: 76) and at movements, because the body resembles a machine, its limbs rigid like a machine (Ibid.: 76-9).

Critchley, in his critical-comparative exploration of the various facets of humour, argues how humour reminds humans of their own humbleness and the inherent limitations of human life. Critchley emphasizes that in humour, the super-ego gives consolation to the ego rather than punishing its aberrations and errancies: “This is a positive super-ego that liberates and elevates by allowing the ego to find itself ridiculous” (Critchley 2002: 101–103). On this premise, humour



can feature as a morally superior option: “laughter at oneself is better than laughter at others” (Ibid.: 96, 108).

Notably, the “curious phenomenon” of humor, as Kirby Olson suggests, has proved equally “central to the postmodern enterprise” (2001: 4). Post-structuralist thinkers find an effective means into service of a given metanarrative, but the comedic literature of Modernism had shown that already. Humour has been associated by some contemporary theorists with logocentrism (involving normalizing and totalitarian conceptions of knowledge, morality and history). Thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard, however, underscore affinities between post-structuralist philosophical values and comedy-associated traits: “positive enjoyment of asymmetry, incongruity, hilarity, and irrationalism” (83).

Deleuze introduces humour and irony as two epistemologically and aesthetically distinct ways of critiquing and deconstructing the law: “The first way of overturning the law is ironic, where irony appears as an art of principles, of ascent towards the principles and of overturning principles. The second is humour, which is an art of consequences and descents, of suspensions and falls” (Deleuze 1994: 5). Deleuze further refines his distinction (between humour and irony) by defining the former as a movement towards the infinitely small and the latter as an orientation towards the infinitely large: “the art of the aesthetic is humour, a physical art of signals and signs ... an implicated art of intensive quantities” (Ibid.: 245). Humour is thus associated with Leibnizian monadology, immanent surfaces, sensible singularities (from which bodies, and relations, are composed) and abandonment of transcendence and mastery: “there is nothing to understand; there are only varying levels of humour” (Deleuze 1995: 142). To Deleuze, humour and irony deconstruct the transcendentalist and essentialist hierarchy of surface-depth by instigating an interplay between them where they mutually and immanently produce one another. The art of surface(s) is that of humor and perversion: “Humour is the art of surface , which is opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights” (Deleuze 1995b: 11). As he states: “In truth, there are never contradictions, apparent or real, but only degrees of humour. And inasmuch as reading itself has its degrees of humour, from black to white, with which it evaluates the coexisting degrees of what it reads, the sole problem is always one of allocation on a scale of intensities that assigns the position and use of each thing, being or scene: there is this and then that, and let’s make do with it, too bad if it doesn’t suit us” (*Anti-Oedipus* 1983: 76). Hence humour and irony are associated with an aesthetic-ethic process of constant self-cultivation and “becoming”.

Humour, as Deleuze argues, through its excessively differential and repetitive methods serves as an effective means of revealing the differential and repetitive processes underlying the apparently metaphysical laws and universal rules of morality, the world and the human subject. Humour maintains us in a dynamic and productive vacillation between chaos and cosmos, leading, in consequence, to the emergence of a non-linear and less totalitarian history. This accounts for why Deleuze finds embarking on “this adventure of humour” sobering and instructive (Deleuze 1990: 136) Humour, then, “shows how the seriousness of the moral law and of representations of moral value emerge out of an ambiguous

and variable set of repressive and creative processes” (Williams 2013: 39). That is why he conceives of relationship between humour and seriousness as two sides of the same coin: “We must not refuse to take Heidegger seriously, but rather we must rediscover the imperturbably serious side to Roussel (or Jarry). The serious ontological aspect needs a diabolical or phenomenological sense of humour” (Deleuze 1988: 111).

### “The Bitter, the Hollow and the Haw Haw” in Griffiths’ *Comedians*

“Because he is funny does not mean we shouldn’t be afraid of him. Fear the comic. Laugh, but hold the knife” (Howard Barker, *The Loud Boy’s Life*: 42).

Griffiths is an avowedly political playwright with leftist leanings. He has been associated with the “second wave” of left-wing writers, born after 1940 (including Arden, D’Arcy, McGrath, Hare), a cluster that “were largely persuaded of the imminent demise of capitalism” (Patterson 65). Griffiths’ now naïve-sounding statement confirms this point: “My plays are never about the battle between socialism and capitalism. I take that as being decisively won by socialism. What I’m really seeking is the way forward. How do we transform this husk of capitalist meaning into the reality of socialist enterprise?” (Griffiths 1976: 46). A critical attempt at exploring the means of reaching such a solution and a subtler rendition of the way the social is a tangle of conflicting and competing ideologies, coupled with the manner humour (comic arts) can serve as a critical force and negotiating factor for consolidation or destabilization, form the fulcrum of *Comedians*. As Griffiths himself acknowledges, *Comedians* constitutes a juncture in his artistic career: “*Comedians* eschews political theory, professional ideologies and historically sourced discourse on political revolution all the perceived hallmarks of my earlier pieces in favour of a more or less unmediated address on a range of particular contemporary issues including class, gender, race and society in modern Britain” (213). Patterson describes *Comedians* as “one of the best political plays of the decade” (75), characterizing it as an “interventionist”, as opposed to “reflectionist”, in its political aesthetics (75; see also 15-19). This description is consonant with Janelle Reinelt’s identification of the play as “a kind of Lehrstück [a Brechtian learning play]” (*After Brecht* 161). The intricately hyper-dialectical fabric of the play – in the sense of its attempt to scrutinize the efficacy of an approach which surpasses a dialectical approach by incorporating a third, heterogeneous element (Gethin’s grotesque humour) which defies dialectical assimilation and synthesis - is attested by Griffiths’ heteroglossic account of his composition of various voices/socio-cultural forces in the play: “Originally I saw the play as a conflict between Waters and Challenor, between integrity and commercialism. But after six or eight pages of the first draft, Gethin Price came through and superseded that confrontation making it a conflict liberal humanism and proletariat revolution” (Kerensky, *The New British Drama*, 204). Gethin’s mode of humour is described here as a hyper-dialectical element and a dissident force/voice that disrupts or transcends the dialectical dynamics between Water’s and Challenor’s.

Predicating our point of departure on the foregoing statement, we can argue that in *Comedians*, Griffith maintains a twofold approach to humour: humour is at once considered as concerned with a philosophical-anthropological problem and a moral-social problematic. In case of the former, humour begs the questions of the nature of the human coupled with those of the meaning, function and psychological dynamics of humour. As regards the latter, humour is reckoned as prominently intertwined with its socio-historical and political context, thereby deriving its critical bearings and effect from a certain discursive or ideological configuration of society. Humour, as such, can serve as a means of reproduction and re-instatement of hegemonic truths and ideological patterns. As Griffiths explains, the question of humour, for him, is concomitant with “the question why we laugh at certain things”; this issue, in turn, “becomes a metaphor for the question why we live the way we do” (in Innes 366).

*Comedians* can be characterized as a strained mode of social realism streaked with moments of grotesque and dark humour. It incorporates realism through mise-en-scene, socially recognizable and morally nuanced characters that represent diverse social and moral trends and forces. What, however, makes it transcend the “conservatism associated with naturalistic form” (see Murdock 163; see also Maria DiCenzo 43-8; see also MacGrath 1977), I would argue, lies in its approach to and deployment of the styles of *grotesque* and *dark humour*. Realism, in one salient instance, is subverted and transgressed by Price through his *grotesque mime*. Through staging this performative and meta-theatrical moment of mime, the play assays the limits and efficacy of realism both as presentational style and a political aesthetic. The play, thus, moves beyond the didactic towards a subtler mode of hyper-dialectical theatre (c.f. *Postmodern Brecht* 82-85). Price does a mime rather than relying solely on verbal humour. Patterson acutely delineates the subtle ways Griffiths’ naturalism in his crafting of language (speeches and monologues) and aesthetic style along with “employ[ing] elements from popular culture” (74). Here I will subject the aesthetic and ethical facets of humour as deployed by Griffiths in *Comedians*, to scrutiny with a specific focus on the questions of race, gender, and class. Significantly, the play contains meta-theatrical components, reflecting on its own dramaturgical foundations by scrutinizing three aesthetic approaches to socio-political problems: escapism (popular art and commercialism), representationalism (realist reflectionism) and interventionism (analytical modernism, praxis-driven non-essentialist humanism, revolutionary poetics). Challenor embodies the first, Waters the second and Price the third, although such a neat division is slightly problematic, since in the play there are notable imbrications between the latter two. In what follows I shall demonstrate how Griffiths uses humour to critique - *and offer alternatives to* - the way society handles minority groups, namely those of a lower class, women and different races to influence how they are treated through an aesthetics of descent (through humour) and immanent critique of transcendent class relations.

Trevor Griffiths’ *Comedians* depicts five aspirant comedians, all working-class men, in the 1970s Manchester. *Comedians* begins in a “classroom in a secondary school” in which “adults will return to school” (*Comedians* 7). Here we find them participating in a night class to hone their comic skills which are later performed

to a talent scout. The building is described as “now disappearing” with “chipped and fraying desks,” (Ibid) a description that reveals the decaying proletarian school environment. Although all five men are somehow employed - Gethin Price drives a van for British Rail, Mick George McBrain is a docker, Ged Murray is a milkman and Connor works on a construction site, while Phil Murray is an insurance salesman and Sammy Samuels owns his own club - the return of the adults suggests both a sense of economic desperation and existential crisis (need for escape) among the working-class men. It thus implies how they were unable to find worthwhile jobs in the capitalist world, hence the need to re-enter a disciplinary institute (night school) for re-education. This is emphasised by the caretaker sponging “recent graffiti from the blackboard” (Ibid) and the after-school setting which reflects a school detention. Detentions typically are intended to alter pupils’ delinquent behaviour (see Foucault *Discipline and Punishment* 25, 115-6). In the comedians’ case, the “detention” is used to voice, in a counterpoint manner, Challenor’s and Waters’ antithetical stances towards the moral functions and implications of jokes and the act of telling them. Peter Buse suggests that the mise-en-scene “signifies the beginnings of a new ideology of education put into place by the Labour government, whose post-war settlement included the expansion of secondary education to include all British youth,” as previously, further education was limited to bourgeois classes (97). However, the decaying description verifies “the failure’ of this ‘post-war ideology of inclusion,” (98) as the working-class characters have retreated back to school, unable to attain well-paid jobs, which are commonly secured by grammar school pupils (the majority consisting of the bourgeois) (Ibid). Therefore, Buse claims that “an ideology of self-improvement fills the void” and “the would-be comics are living that individualist ethos by training in [...] a notoriously individualist theatrical mode” (Ibid.). This “self-improvement” includes the comedy class, which is why they are grouped with other ‘self-improvement’ classes like ‘yoga, karate, cordon bleu cookery.’ (*Comedians* 7)

Adopting Althusser’s definition of ideology in conjunction with his proposed attendant categories of ISA (ideological state apparatus) and RSA (repressive status apparatus), Buse seeks to establish how the instruction/training (represented by Challenor) features as “an educational ISA” (Buse 97) - an attempt to embed in the comedians the values of an ethical ideology. The spatial dynamics of the school conjoined with the realistic mise-en-scene, metonymically, illustrate this discursive-epistemic atmosphere. Styan proposes that modern plays tend to combine tragedy and the comic by incorporating realism through which they portray an interpretation of life (34). Griffiths, I would suggest, deploys formalized realism by doing just that, reflecting on life through the mise-en-scene as most of society enter education.

Griffiths states in an interview that his plays are concerned with transforming “this husk of capitalist meaning into the reality of social enterprise” (Patterson 1). In other words, Griffiths does not want “a battle between socialism and capitalism,” which is why he does not critique the bourgeois class, instead, he is “seeking a way forward” (Ibid.). This is evident in Waters’ character who instructs his students how to change the way they depict minorities by eschewing stereotypes: “it’s not about the jokes [...] It’s what lies behind ‘em. It’s the attitude” (20-21).

Here, he emphasises the importance of the political unconscious or ideological substratum underlying a joke rather than the joke itself. Waters assumes his role as the teacher by evaluating Price's joke and telling him what should be avoided, "*a young lady called Pratt [...] She would jerk herself off / By sinking her teeth in her twat*" (21-22). Waters underlines that the joke 'hates women and sex' (22). By combining the fear of women and sex, it "traps it" and "doesn't do anything to change it" (23). Instead, the joke "recognizes" (23) the conscious or unconscious fear and reinforces it by instilling the fear in others. To Waters, humour or comedy should fulfil a humanistically redemptive, psychologically cathartic, and ideologically demystifying function: it should be truth-oriented. This is reflected in his claim that a good comedian "sees [...] a sort of truth" and his jokes "release the tension" by saying "the unsayable" and liberating "the will and the desire [...] to change the situation" (21).

Waters here articulates two functions for the joke: cathartic (à la Freud) and didactic (à la Bergson). It alleviates the tensions and it teaches lessons in moral and social tolerance, coordination co-habitation; a less class-based and power-driven society; an aesthetics of empathy and a politics of compassion. Waters is acutely attentive to the relationship between cultural sense and taste on the one hand, and the culture industry and commodification of sense/identity on the other. Waters describes the comedian as a diagnostician of moral-social symptoms and flaws a visionary of moral courage. According to Waters the aesthetic and value resides in its truth-content, "But when a joke bases itself upon a distortion – a stereotype, perhaps and gives the lie to the truth so as to win a laugh and stay in favour, we've moved away from a comic art and into the world of entertainment' and slick success. You're better than that, damn you. And even if you're not, you should bloody well want to be" (227). As he asserts: "It's not the jokes. It's what lies behind 'em. It's the attitude. A real comedian that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all, about what they want". (Ibid.) Water then proceeds to underscore the psychological effect of the joke in its subversion of taboos and transgression of social-moral-political laws and hierarchies: "A joke releases the tension, says the unsayable, any joke pretty well". Nevertheless, this function is not where his ambitious definition comes to a halt; Waters adds to the function by positing comedy as social praxis; an enunciative space for moral and social liberating and intervention: "But a true joke, a comedian's joke, has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to change the situation. There's very little won't take a joke.

Waters introduces his moralistic ideology of how jokes involving minorities should be told with a tongue twister game – "the traitor distrusts the truth" (*Comedians* 2007: 18) and lists racial slurs: "Say, Jew, say gold. Moneylenders [...] They have the nose for it [...] Hitler" stated "[...] the Jew will destroy civilization [...] Negroes. Cripples. Defectives. The mad. Women [...] Workers. Dirty" (Ibid.: 18–19). Waters targets minorities by associating stereotypical attributes to different groups, for example, the Jews with gold, large noses, and Hitler. The short sentences accentuate the harshness of the jokes because the sentences are rigid

and emotionless. The stage directions of “*uneasy laughter*,” “*coughing*,” and “*shuffling of feet*” (Ibid.: 19) accentuate that Waters’ students feel unsettled and non-plussed as to how to respond to the racism. By demonstrating to them what not to do, Waters uses irony to distinguish between moral and immoral jokes. Waters finishes his speech with “the traitor destroys the truth” (Ibid.: 19). His final statement is different from the exercise replacing “distrusts” with “destroys,” thereby implying that those who reinforce stereotypes violently diminish the truth by reproducing social labels rather than changing them. The consciousness-raising and defamiliarizing function both Waters and Price attribute to humour is resonant with Driessen’s idea that anthropologists are akin to comedians in that they both seek to defamiliarize certain phenomena and falsely held beliefs. As Henk Driessen acutely explains: “Anthropology shares with humour the basic strategy of defamiliarization: common sense is disrupted, the unexpected is evoked, familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, even shocking contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions” (in Critchley 2002: 65).

It can thus be inferred that Waters is suggesting that “jokes are *ideological* through and through” (Griffiths 2007: 90). This is because by telling the truth, jokes can overcome social taboos and personal-cultural prejudices (for instance about minorities) by exposing the ideological underpinnings and altering society’s perceptions.<sup>3</sup> The function of humour specifically in relation to minorities, as conceived here, is closely resonant with Lyotard’s determination of the nature of humour: “Humour says: there is no correct point of view ... Humour does not invoke a truth more universal than that of the masters; it does not even struggle in the name of the majority by incriminating the masters for being a minority. Humour wants rather to have this recognized: there are only minorities” (Lyotard 1993: 83). It can thus be argued that in *Comedians*, Griffiths intensifies realism by integrating moral concepts such as the ‘truth,’ as morals are interwoven into our everyday lives. Buse describes Waters’ actions as an attempt to interpellate his students with humanist comedy, (2001: 98) ascribing his ideology to the aspiring comedians. Similarly, Stanton Garner explains how for Griffiths “Laughter is a social act that is caught up in questions of inclusion and exclusion, liberation and entrapment, involvement and distance” (1999: 129). He adds: “Griffiths explores the politics of this ostensibly apolitical field” (Ibid.). Laughter reveals hierarchy and exposes structural inequality; laughter can be both as a means of perpetuation of status quo current cultural hegemony and social norms or a vector for de-naturalizing the ideologically-constructed naturalness of them.

Styan suggests that dark tones consist of “contrasting elements to widen the experience, the content of writing deriving from the opposite, the complementary impulses” (286). Griffiths establishes an antithesis for Waters’ dark, savagely satirical humour by introducing a commercially-minded and conformist-conservative attitude towards comic humour and its functions represented by Bert Challenor. Bert Challenor, the man in charge of the Comedy Artists and Managers Federation, counterpoints Waters’ moralistic perception that one must be ‘good first’ (2007: 227). In stark contrast to Waters, Challenor advises the comedians thus: “A couple of ... hints. Don’t try to be deep. Keep it simple. I’m not looking

for philosophers, I'm looking for comics. I'm looking for someone who sees what the people want and knows how to give it them ... We're servants, that's all. They demand, we supply. Any good comedian can lead an audience by the nose. But only in the direction they're going. And that direction is, quite simply ... escape" (Ibid.: 238). Comedy, in Challenor's escapist conception of it, panders to the hegemonic-normative needs and perceives itself as a neutral exchange value in the market wave and circle of demand and supply. The adjudicator exhorts them to appeal to conventional cynicism and integrationism as their principles, accentuating that "people don't learn, they don't want to, and if they did, they won't look to the likes of us to teach 'em' – alarmingly adding that "you're there on their terms, not your own" (Ibid.: 256). Whereas Challenor states he is "not looking for philosophers [...] I'm looking for someone who sees what the people want [...] It's the people pay the bills, remember, yours, mine [...] Mr. Water's. We're servants" (Ibid.: 238). In contrast to Waters' belief in the critical function of humour, Challenor underlines the reality of the situation: regardless of whether their jokes are prejudiced or not, the comedians are there to impress the audience, to make money and pay the bills. Buse illustrates that Challenor's ideological opponent is Waters because, for Challenor, Waters' idea of ideological jokes won't sell and vice versa, leaving the comedians with a moral choice – either to remain morally-ideologically critical or conform to stereotypes. Samuels states, "I want the tops, I want TV" (Ibid.: 230) and Connor admits, 'I want to be famous. I want to be rich and famous" (Ibid.: 21). Griffiths invokes realism by depicting how for the working-class to achieve economic and social status/success they need to conform to the norms and taste of the capitalist market and class-structure (see also Patterson who brands *Comedians* as a "realistic portrayal," because it "deals with specific topical issues" such as wealth and class (Patterson 2003: 65)).

Act Two is a moral test for the comedians, to either stray from Waters' advice or alter their acts to pander to Challenor's, who believes that morality is of no consequence when telling jokes. With subtle characterisation, Griffiths suggests how the characters' performances reflect their hopes, unconscious desire, fears, and identity crisis. One Irishman endeavours to follow Waters's educative liberal-humanist precepts with an artful subversion of the otherizing ideology of the colonial identity politics: 'I never knew we wuz troublemakers until I got to England. You don't, you know ... I mean, what are you lot, eh, do you know? ... You'd have to go to India or ... Africa ... or Ireland to find out. Mmmm?' (2007: 242) The other performances manifest tensions of objectives and a readiness to ditch principles for self-interest and commercial success. Price delivers an initially Grock-influenced act which takes his stylized self-transformation into 'half clown, half this year's version of bover boy' to its grim conclusion with an attack on two dummies representing 'well dressed beautiful people ... perhaps waiting for a cab to show after the theatre'. The crucial point at stake here is the meta-theatrical component of the play in conjunction with the tension-laden interplay between audience as and audience in their actual existential role. The theatre audience who have enjoyed the imaginative mobility of playing the working men's club audience, probably laughing with a mixture of irony and surprising directness at the preceding jokes, now find themselves backed into an imaginative corner,

stereotyped as aloof, arrogant and insulting by their very presence. Price's character tells the dummies "There's people'd call this envy, you know, it's not, it's hate"; then, having wreaked his bloody mischief, tells the audience "We're coming up there where we can gerrat you". The performance is too extreme to invite or permit any sense of solidarity: class, national or even liberal-sympathetic.

Accordingly, Connor and Price do not sell out; Phil and Ged's performance is bungled, because one tries to conform to Challenor's tenets and the other does not. Buse suggests that Price 'has been successfully interpellated by another ideology,' (Buse 100) however, does not mention Connor who has also been interpellated. This confirms that Price and Connor have adopted Waters' moralistic ideology. Samuels and McBrain both sell out and are chosen by Challenor. *Comedians* illustrates how the whole impetus and complex dynamics of the joke revolves around who "you" is. In keeping with the abjecting function of humour, and resonant with Styan's suggestion that we tend to laugh at people's bad luck (39), *Comedians* illustrates how those who experience 'bad luck', hence liable to jokes, tend to be society's disadvantaged, disabled, or minority groups. Samuels' performance is a vivid case in point. It begins with a shot that condenses all minorities and handicaps into an overdetermined figure: "a black Irish Jew, with a limp, and a stammer, half-blind" (2007: 40); his performance is finally garnished with a scathing caricature of women. He reinforces stereotypes by targeting minorities and through this mockery, he gives himself and the audience, through identificatory dynamics, a morally-existentially superior standpoint, thereby fostering a "sensus communis". McBrain, similarly, uses the stereotype of black men having large penises, then he jokes about the orangutan, subsequently suggesting a racist link between black men and orangutans. The mode of humour presented by McBrain and Samuels exemplifies the comedy of recognition, they reinforce racial, ethnic, class-based and gender stereotypes and do not venture to criticise the social order or change the situation (Critchley 2002: 11). In ethnic humour, for instance, the ethos of place is conveyed by laughing at people who are not like us, it is believed that foreigners are inferior to 'us' because they are not like 'us.' (Styan 2009: 69).

More specifically, they are different because of their skin colour, beliefs, religion, and class. This point is confirmed by Francis Hutcheson's argument (predicated on incongruity theory) that in order to have a shared understanding of a joke, there needs to be a congruence between the joke structure and the social structure (1750: 4). In other words, for a joke to be understood by a specific audience, primarily it should be anchored in the social norms and epistemological structures already entrenched, and the attempt at altering them invariably comes second at best. Indeed, this inextricable relation between the existence/deployment of jokes and the problematic nature of social-moral order of society is a well-recognized facet in the comedy scholarship. As James English observes: 'jokes occur because society is structured in contradiction; there are no jokes in paradise, or in the telos of the good society' (English 1994: 9). Hence, most of the jokes told by the comedians (which can be divided into three thematic categories: racist, sexist and class-based), in terms of their psychodynamics and socio-cultural functions, can be distinguished into two categories: narcissistic and sadistic.



If we assume that the audience in *Comedians* is essentially white, middle-class, it makes sense for McBrain and Samuels to be given contracts as their jokes make the audience feel superior to other races, a cathartic reassurance regarding their class status thereby perpetuating the social beliefs in place. This is further reinforced by Plato, Aristotle and Quintilian's superiority theory which states that we laugh because we experience feelings of superiority over others (Scott 2005: 2-3). Underscoring the libidinal gain and investment on the question of jokes, Freud in *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* tries to explain sexual jokes by suggesting that a joke involves three people: the one who makes the joke, the one who becomes the "object of hostile sexual aggressiveness" contained in it and a third in whom "the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled" (1960: 143-4). In Samuels' act, the 'second persons' include his wife, the Irish etc. These types of jokes keep minorities such as women marginalised and excluded, establishing "the borders of a social unit," (see Buse 104) to mark the boundaries of the males against the females. In Althusserian terms, 'jokes interpellate the third person as a subject.' (Ibid.) This suggests that those listening to the joke are invited to accept the sexist or racist ideology without the listener realising, thus, reinforcing collective identities, moral complicity and stereotypes through repeated ideologies.

The aforementioned dialectical tension between Waters and Challenor's views is further compounded when Griffiths introduces Gethin Price's take on humour. Price derides the audience, predominantly of middle-class. He uses middle-class dummies who are "*well dressed*" and in a "carriage" (2007: 50) – two symbols that mark their bourgeois affluence. Price attacks the couple verbally, for instance: "she's got a fair pair of knockers on her" (Ibid.: 51). This point attests to the manner political economy and sexual/gender politics are intertwined (power is sexualized and sexuality politicized) – both discursive strategies with an abjecting affect - in dark and pragmatic comedy. Challenor and Waters describe his act as "repulsive" (Ibid.: 60), objecting that he forgot the "truth" (Ibid.: 65). Truth, as implicitly conceived here, involves a question of method and epistemology) in other words it, both aesthetically and ethically, involves a conjunction of realistic content, critical balance and a dialectical form of theatricality. More specifically, Price, by deploying an excess of violence, ignores the social structures in place (the truth) which is why his act does not receive positive feedback. There was no social congruity between Price and the audience, hence there was no comic incongruity. (Critchley 2002: 4)

To foreground the difference between Waters and Price's approaches, Griffiths embeds aspects of, what I would describe as, 'grotesque realism' in Price's act to show how de-naturalizing art and non-natural humour, as well as de-humanizing ideology and inhuman morality, have subtle overlaps. As indicated above, the 'grotesque' is not only subversive of "autonomy and symmetry", but is also synonymous with the 'ridiculous, distorted, unnatural' and 'absurdity' (Clayborough 1965: 2). In my deployment of the term 'grotesque realism,' I am chiefly drawing on Bakhtin's elaborations of the term. Bakhtin characterizes grotesque realism as a form of symbolic deconstruction and a critique of dominant symbolic order that had set the terms of reality by exposing fundamental disunity and contradiction in lived social realities. Grotesque realism thus reveals sharp disjuncture

between the elites' self-image of righteousness and benevolence and their actual deeds. As such, grotesque realism foregrounds the ways in which ideology naturalized the mechanisms of domination by concealing their actual conditions (see Katsuya Hirano's *Grotesque Realism*, Chapter 4). Compared to comic realism, grotesques realism "is an affirmative negation of the given order (symbolic order) not by simply inverting it, but by deconstructing its hierarchical binary categories and realities" (Ibid.). The term has been mainly inspired by Bakhtin's take on Rabelais and his idea of carnivalesque and speech genres. Bakhtin defines the term thus: "The people's laughter which characterized all the forms of grotesque realism from immemorial time was linked with the bodily lower stratum. Laughter degrades and materializes" (Bakhtin 1984: 20). One of the stylistic means/manners through which grotesque realism operates, according to Bakhtin, is through the act/concept of degradation – a concept which involves an inherent ambivalence. Bakhtin defines it thus: "Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time" (Ibid.: 21). Bakhtin further elaborates on the revolutionary and transformative potential of "degradation" in following terms: "To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the body and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to the acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth" (Ibid.: 24)

It is my argument, by the same token, that one of the reasons why both the audience and the instructors (Challenor and Waters) find Gethin's performance 'repulsive' and alienating resides in its being 'degrading'. The former effect of the grotesque evinces itself in the culturally dissonant and socially subversive aspect of his performance. The latter effect is manifested in Price's 'ridiculous' attire of "bagging half-mast trousers, large sullen boots' and facial makeup: he is 'half clown" (2007: 49). Price's oversized clothing and make-up symbolises the clown, the paradigmatic grotesque figure.

Apart from the climactic, blood-ridden part of his performance, Gethin's jokes and humour can be argued to comprise two thematic-topical and affective parts: violence and sex. Gethin adopts a seductive albeit stark sexual/erotic language in relation to the dummy woman and a starkly violent language towards the dummy man. Addressing the husband, he says: "Eh. I bet she's a goer, int she, sunshine? She's got a fair pair of knockers on her too. Has she been around? Does she ever go dancing at Belle Vue, Saturdays? I think Eric Yates took her home one night. If it's her, she's a right goer, according to Eric" (2007: 250). Price primarily disrupts the codes of liberal-humanist and bourgeois morality and social-cultural decorum by pushing his jokes to the limits of obscenity, bawdiness and grotesque whilst weaving the ubiquitous disciplinary and normalizing forces of ISA and RSA into the fabric of his jokes (the police in the instance of his joke). The following exemplifies the point at issue: "Eh. Shall I make you laugh? This feller pays twenty pounds for this whore, right? Only she dunt fancy him and runs out of the room. He chases her, stark nekkid, down t'street. Cop stops him, says, Where's the fire, lad? Feller says, I've no idea, but if you see a nude bird running down street, fuck her, I's paid for. (Pause. Nothing.)" (Ibid.: 250). Equally crucially, the existential

impetus steering Gethin's aggressive humour and comedic performance comes more vividly to the fore when, addressing the man dummy, he says: "I don't know whether to thump you one or what. I suppose I could just give you a clout, just to let you know I exist" (Ibid.).

Then there appears a meta-theatrical moment – charged with political and ideological overtones and where the boundaries between the two audiences (the dummies and the larger audience in the hall) are blurred to the point of collapsing: "you can laugh, you know, I don't mind you laughing. I'm talking to you ... There's people'd call this envy, you know, it's not, it's hate: (Ibid.). The rancour, hostility in Gethin's new levels of intensity and explicitness when his stance and speech reaches towards the male dummy becomes inflected with emasculation and abjection. As he says: "Are you a bi-sexual or is that your sister? You'll never get a taxi here, they're all up at Piccadilly waiting for t' last train from London. [...] And don't interrupt when I'm talking, dint your mother ever tell you, it's rude" (Ibid.: 250).

By jeering at the bourgeois dummies, Price betrays discursive norms and identity politics of humour which usually consist of the dominant abjecting the inferior - for instance, lower class (see Critchley 2002: 12). By laughing at his superiors, Price transgresses both the generic norms and social harmony inhering in them, thereby breaching the boundary between the normal and the abnormal, the chaos-inducing characteristic of the grotesque (Edwards and Graulund 21-22). This transgression is marked by Price hostilely sticking a pin in between the lady mannequin's breasts, which forms '*a dark red stain, rapidly widening, begins to form behind the flower*' (Griffiths 2007: 52) and ends with '*PRICE's 'aaghs' become short barks of laughter.*' (52) The animalistic description of the pulsions of his psychosomatic discharge is noteworthy here. John Bull suggests that Price's aggression is 'warning' the middle-class audiences about 'the dangers of playing at revolutionary politics from the [...] theatre seat' (Ibid.). We can add to this, however, that Price's assault and laughter enhance the grotesque effect because his act is 'ridiculous.' This sheds a negative light on violent revolutionary actions and portrays them as less human and truth-revealing when gauged against Waters' much more poised approach. Deriving our hint from René Girard, it can be argued that Gethin's mime and grotesque performance bears striking resemblances to both a sacrificial ritual and a non-therapeutic enactment of his repressed fears and wishes (both of his personally and the class to which he belongs).

Waters grudgingly acknowledges Price's revolutionary style and offers sympathy (but not understanding) to Price: "You've always been a bit wild, it's why I liked you, reminded me of me at twenty-five". However, Price insists 'I can't paint your pictures'; "love, care, concern" were not discarded, but 'never there' in his 'brilliant' performance, which Waters nevertheless rejects as "ugly ... drowning in hate. You can't change today into tomorrow on that basis. You forget a thing called ... the truth" (Ibid.: 263). Reminding Waters of his institutionally and morally compromised position, however, Price counters: "You think the truth is beautiful? You've forgotten what it's like" and insists on his own right to 'stand upright', perform on his own terms and "bang [his] head on the ceiling" of convention.

Stung by Price's accusation of moral compromise and political inefficacy, "Maybe you lost your hate", Waters recounts a memory of a joke about a Jew

recounted by his friend. Touring various cities and sites in East Germany, he encounters a Nazi extermination camp, which he describes as “this extraordinary thing” – an experience which he proceeds to elaborate on thus: “In this hell-place, a special block, ‘Der-Straf-bloc’, ‘Punishment Block’. It took a minute to register, I almost laughed, it seemed so ludicrous. Then I saw it. It was a world like any other. It was the logic of our world ... extended” (Ibid.: 261). He then recounts how back in West Germany a comic friend of his told a joke about a Jew at which he refused to laugh. Crucially, he describes his refusal to laugh – his defiance of a symptomatic-sadistic collective ethos – an “exercise” (Ibid.: 262) – in social-cultural and political morality. The mode of humour informing the joke in the light of the experience of the Nazi camp, however, induces two contradictory sensations in him: repulsion and sexual-libidinal stimulation: “It wasn’t only repulsive [...] I got an erection in that ... place! An erection! Gethin. Something (He touches his stomach.) ... loved it, too” (Ibid.: 262).<sup>4</sup> The collective hatred shared in the camp is, to Waters, an equally violent primeval instinct. Waters’ incisively draws Gethin’s attention to the anthropological and moral dimensions of laughter and humour; resonant with Joseph Addison’s postulation<sup>5</sup>, its being what distinguishes us as humans from animals. As he affirms: “And I discovered ... there were no jokes left. Every joke was a little [cyanide] pellet, a ... final solution. We’re the only animal that laughs. The only one. You know when you see the chimpanzees on the PG Tips things snickering, do you know what that is? Fear. They’re signalling their terror. We’ve got to do some’at about it, Gethin” (262). By calling every joke a “final solution” (Ibid.: 262) – Hitler’s term (“final solution of the Jewish question”) regarding the inevitability of the extermination of the Jews, Waters accentuates the sadistic and fascistic nature of most jokes and the manner they reveal the ethos of every social group. Consequently, his determination – that: “We’ve gotta get deeper than hate” – ambivalently sounds as a morally more nuanced answer and a willed recoil from guilty imaginative complicity.

Gethin, nevertheless, further explains how he prefers Grock’s hard style of comics to Chaplin’s coy and kid-filled one. He then reveals one of rationale underpinning his performance (a combination of icy hatred and revolutionary fire) by recounting a poem (“Fire and Ice”) by Robert Frost. He thus reveals how he departs from the empathetic identification with the victim by denigrating the Jews’ spirit of defeatism (“The Jews still stayed in line”) thereby exposing his conception of the function of comics and humour. Here, crucially, Price’s hyper-dialectical stance (his negative dialectics) comes most saliently to the fore in his declaring: “I stand in no line. I refuse my consent” (Ibid.: 263).

At the end, even though “nothing’s changed” (Griffiths 2007: 64) and the rest of the comedians go back to their old jobs, there is a glimmer of hope when Waters invites Patel, a Hindu, to join the next comedians’ class. It illustrates the acceptance of minorities and other cultures rather than dominance over them. This acknowledgement indicates that small movements can effect fundamental alterations over time and violence is not necessarily the answer. The plot and jokes in *Comedians*, therefore, are used to critique the normalizing-hegemonic morality, and this position stems from Patterson’s immanent and “interventionist” aesthetics. As Styán suggests, didacticism dramatists are ‘aware of the ambiguities

and ugliness of life, and are not afraid to speak' (Ibid.: 297). The "ugliness" in *Comedians* partly consists of the poor treatment of minorities. By negotiating the socio-political issues (at stake in the play) through the mediation of comedy, *Comedians* exposes not only an ethics of humour but also an epistemology of it. The audience is shown to be complicit in the perpetuation and revealed to be subject to and the subject of discursive norms as well as institutional and media hegemonies. Griffiths uses the racist and sexist jokes in *Comedians* to reflect prevalent social stereotypes. While the comedians are learning from Waters, the audience learns too, they are sat around the performance, watching, absorbing the situation and passing "judgement on ourselves" (Styan 2009: 293).

Overall, Griffiths utilizes humour to comment, and take a critical-ameliorative action, on society's treatment of minorities and how a different politics of humour will lead to changes in the social order. He utilises aspects of dark comedy such as 'grotesque realism' (emblemized by the anarchic eccentricity of Gethin Price's mime performance) and antithetical patterning of characters to symbolise different views held by the dominant socio-symbolic discourse and to allow the audience to choose their own moral-psychological sides. Styan highlights that dark comedy primarily anatomizes, but it conducts this task to free us from hegemonically common-sensical, though arbitrary, norms, values, and attitudes (Styan 2009: 285). This implies that Griffiths' analysis of the way minorities feature as cultural signifiers in the hegemonic cultural discourse aims to 'free us' from ideologically-invested stereotypes. The jokes in *Comedians* are not funny because they are aimed to morally transform the audience's perceptions. The narrative structure, characters and grotesque qualities of humour coalesce to render *Comedians* a transformative play (intending to pursue aesthetic act/form as social praxis) based on a non-normative social morality, denigrating both identitarian/hegemonic and commodified, and violent, revolutionary attitudes.

In his grotesque and dark humour performance, Gethin Price reveals the blood under the lacquered surface of a society informed with deep-seated class-based inequality and disenfranchisement. Griffiths penetrates this surface through grotesque humour and realism. Bakhtin defines the grotesque body thus: "... A body in the act of becoming ... never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates" (Bakhtin 1984: 317-318). The bloody body at stake in Gethin's grotesque performance, similarly, is a body that thrusts/plunges the stasis of the dominant discourse and fixed power relations and its ideological-epistemological determinism into a dynamic chaos and a process of becoming. Such a body appears and is perceived not as the figure of cheerful vulgarity, but that of disfigurement that represented the moral bankruptcy (but also subliminal violence of the lower working class due to suppression and repression of their needs and desires) of ruling class/elites.

As regards the aesthetics of the play, as Rabey perceptively indicates, it anticipates the adoption of an aesthetically-thematically more transgressive, raw and subversive theatrical trends and movements in the subsequent decades. The callous blood-flourish expressed by the implacable maverick Price, devoid of irony or distancing mitigation, represents the start of a movement in British drama towards admitting more immediate, amoral and threatening perspectives in the late

1970s and early 1980s: “not looking back in anger, like the writers of the previous generation, but refusing consent, and looking forward with grim fascination to occasions when ‘anarchy is loosed upon the world’” (Rabey 78).

## Conclusion

As demonstrated above, comedy has overall been conceived by Griffiths as an art of twofold nature and function: simultaneously transcendent and immanent. In other words, modern comedy is posited as at once anchored in the historical conditions and social-cultural problems of its time and yet ontologically tangential to them by maintaining a critical distance from its norms and values. Comedy is utilised by Griffiths to critically reflect and comment on social morality and art’s relation to politics of sense and recognition/identity. *Comedians* incorporates heightened forms of psychological and grotesque realism and an antithetical pattern of characters (thereby foregrounding the cultural politics of humour) to criticise ideologically-determined cultural norms and social values informed by an exclusionary/abjecting politics of race, gender and class. *Comedians* wields dark humour and the grotesque to establish the idea that social change is essential in terms of how minority groups are treated. However, a forceful revolution, symbolised by Price’s act in which a middle-class female mannequin is violated, is far too extreme and can be perceived as senseless. Waters’ calm and moralistic approach is approvingly emphasised by Griffiths throughout with his use of long speeches. As such, humour can be argued to feature as an attempt to carve out an alternative heterotopic space for ‘finding a life between’ these extremes in *Comedians* (Demastes 2008: 113).

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* 347, 421. See also Jan Hokenson, *Serious Comedy: The Philosophical and Theological Significance of Tragic and Comic Writing in Western Tradition*; specifically see Chapter 15, “Nietzsche: From Tragedy to Comedy”.
- <sup>2</sup> Baudelaire describes the laughter of the man who lives with a sense of his own superiority; see Baudelaire (1956: 118).
- <sup>3</sup> Althusser holds that within a society the ‘ultimate condition of production is [...] the reproduction of the conditions of production’ (*Essays on Ideology* 1–2). These productions consist of ideologies for social values, such as race, class, and gender which society have accepted unconsciously: “ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.” These ideologies interpellate individuals as subjects, which means that typical social values are incorporated by those in society while believing these ideas are their own.
- <sup>4</sup> Waters’ analogy here is readily reminiscent of Agamben’s diagnosis of contemporary late capitalist form of political modernity as a perpetual state of exception/emergency where all citizens are precariously suspended between normal/social life (bios) and the possibility of bare/biological life (zoé) (see *Homo Sacer* 182, 186).
- <sup>5</sup> As Addison observes: “If we may believe our logicians, man is distinguished from all other animals by the faculty of laughter” (1712).

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