‘FUNNY MEN’: 
MASCULINITIES AND RIDICULE 
IN ANGLOPHONE CULTURES

PD DR STEFANIE SCHÄFER JENA
PD DR WIELAND SCHWANEBECK DRESDEN

TIME  Monday 1:15–3 pm
      Monday 3:30–5 pm
      Tuesday 3–4:30 pm

ROOM  S 124, Seminargebäude, 1st Floor

While “men in trouble” are always good for a laugh in comedy and beyond, scholarly perspectives on the relation between masculinity and humour are lagging behind. Humour studies have only recently engaged with the category of masculinity (Attardo; Wirth). By the same token, the field of masculinity studies has only seldom investigated humour, laughter, and comedy: amongst the various encyclopaedias in the field of masculinity studies that have appeared in the last 15 years, very few (Flood et al.; Horlacher et al.) include reflections on humour or address topics like the uses of masculine humour in patriarchal cultures and the sociology of laughter as part of male bonding scenarios (Kuipers).

Recent debates address women comedians and their ‘funny bones,’ thus revealing once more that men’s presence in comedy remains an invisible (and all the more powerful) norm. Likewise, renewed interest in the importance of a ‘sense of humour’ for British and American national identities revisits transatlantic genealogies, but sidetracks the normalisation of masculinity at the heart of the connection between self and laughter (Wickberg), while narratology offers a broadening of semantic humour theories with regard to longer and shorter narrative texts but neglects the question of who tells (Attardo). Last but not least, as ‘monolithic’ masculinities are on the rise in the political arena all over the world, laughter once again provides a powerful tool: it subjects (political) bodies to denigration, but also serves as a social glue that creates temporary communities of laughter, united in their shared acknowledgement of unspoken norms —see for instance the comedic gesturing used by Donald Trump during his bid for the Republican candidacy in the 2016 elections (Hall et al.), or UKIP leader Nigel Farage’s constant grinning, which earned him comparisons to the Cheshire Cat or the Grinch.
By its very nature, laughter is an ambivalent force, forever torn between transgressive critique and restorative tendencies. This is as true of politics as it is of cultural production, from Shakespearean comedy to cringeworthy ‘comedies of discomfort’, the work of controversial stand-up comedians like Ricky Gervais, Doc Brown, or Eddie Izzard (whose queer persona makes the challenging of established gender norms part of the stage experience), or the mocking of crisis-ridden middle-aged masculinity in contemporary film and television.

This section seeks to examine the uses of masculine/ist humour in anglophone cultures past and present. We would like to ask, for instance, how funny men (re)configure the performance of masculinities, how the allegedly rigid male body is loosened up and carnivalised as a comic effect, and how laughter and ridicule (re)write masculinist myths and narratives.


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In the history of comedy, many different, but often contingent principles have been identified as sources for laughter. Superiority, incongruity, inelasticity and subversion are only some of the most common candidates. Thomas Hobbes coined superiority as a possible explanation of laughter in the *Leviathan* in 1651 as a feeling of ‘sudden glory’ over another, while James Beattie claimed in 1764: “Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object.” (581) The principle of ‘camp’ is not typically included in this list. While contemporary usage suggests allegedly hyperbolically effeminate behaviour in (homosexual) men, Susan Sontag first defined camp as a ‘sensibility’ in art in 1964. According to Sontag, camp is “decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content” (278). Camp is the deliberately artificial, the deliberately hyperbolical in art. As Sontag states, “camp sees everything in quotation marks” (280).

I will argue that Dickens makes use of this aesthetic in the creation of his comic men. Dickens scholarship of the last decades has prioritised the so-called ‘dark’ Dickens, side-lining his comedy in favour of his more serious themes. However, the 19th century perceived Dickens first and foremost as a comic writer. This paper argues that it is time to resurrect the comic Dickens with a special focus on his conception of masculinity. His funny men stylise themselves as living art and create dramatic roles for themselves that allow them to escape the demands of Victorian concepts of masculinity. I would like to show in my paper that Dickens makes use of a number of comic principles, including ‘camp’ and incongruity, and thereby subverts Victorian gender ideologies. He creates funny men who unmask the false notion of a ‘true’ gender identity through the camp aesthetic.

MENTION THE WAR: BRITISH SITCOMS AND MILITARY MASCULINITY

PROF DR ANETTE PANKRATZ BOCHUM

SLOT Monday 1:15–3 pm ROOM S 124, Seminargebäude, 1st Floor

British sitcoms get great mileage out of mentioning or showing the war. Probably the most famous example is Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (1975–1979). He undermines his own imperative, “Don’t Mention the War”, offers his German guests “Colditz salad” and a parade in Prussian goose-step. Other sitcoms like *Dad’s Army* (1968–1977), *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum* (1974–1981) or *’Allo ’Allo!* (1984–1992) go even further and are set during the time of the Second World War. As soldiers or resistance fighters, the main characters contribute to the British war effort, either by keeping the home fires burning or bearing the White Man’s Burden abroad. The sitcoms operate with a double structure: they “mobilize […] popular memory” (Bowes 133), often with a nostalgic touch; at the same time, they debunk official historiography with its notion of great men making history (Korte/Lechner 14; cf. Sommer 201–202).

Within this framework, the traditional hegemonic imperial British masculinity, characterised by military discipline, patriotism and heroism serves as an implicit ideal type. The TV comedies deconstruct this ideal and show a group of men muddling through (Lenz 46). The types of masculinity run the gamut from Captain Mainwaring’s middle-aged middle-class mediocrity in *Dad’s Army* to the flamboyant entertainer ‘Gloria’ in *It Ain’t Half Hot, Mum*. National identity and Englishness/Britishness intersect with matters of class and ethnicity. Apart from contributing to the “popular memory” of the war, the sitcoms thereby also negotiate questions of contemporary masculinity projected into the past, looking for the Officers and Gentlemen as well as representing often subversive alternatives.

Ricky Gervais has earned a reputation as comedy’s enfant terrible and Golden Globe specter, but equally as comedic genius and all-rounder. His best-known global success is the uproarious mockumentary *The Office* (2001–2003), which he co-created with Stephen Merchant, but he has also gained critical acclaim for more melodramatic productions such as *Derek* (2012–2014). Since he frequently figures as the producer, director, and main actor of his projects, he blurs the line between such dyads as ‘author’/‘protagonist,’ ‘author’/‘narrator,’ or autobiography/fiction. Such doubling also complicates our understanding of different versions of masculinity that Gervais and his characters have toyed with throughout his career. Among the different “funny” versions of men highlighted in his various projects figures the stark contrast, for example, between *The Office*’s general manager-turned-rock star David Brent, who oscillates between the grotesquely funny and rude, and Derek Noakes, whose good-naturedness and naiveté endear him to his colleagues. Gervais’ own performance of masculinity in his stand-up programs and talk show appearances include his impersonations of the good-hearted loser, the grumpy middle-aged man, and both the victim and the perpetrator of fat-shaming. In short, he experiments with masculinity/ies very much “in relation to cringe humour, [and] the comedy of embarrassment” (CfP). This contribution wants to highlight the different ‘funny men’ and versions of masculinity we encounter in Gervais’ work – toxic, distorted, and otherwise. It pursues the question whether he uses such portrayals productively, as a version of what Rebecca Krefting calls “charged humor” (2014), or, rather, whether they serve as a strategy to promote his comedic mantra of “you can joke about anything you want” (see Facebook entry, Dec. 31, 2018).

Humour can be a powerful tool in challenging existing power relations. As humour deliberately violates norms and contests normativity, it “creates new, unusual perspectives on the object and thereby communicates sovereignty, creative power, and the freedom to intervene in the world” (Kothoff 5). Those who (deliberately) create laughter gain temporary control of a situation and thus manage to assert their dominance in the given social hierarchy (ibid. 8). This potential to intervene and to tip power structures in favour of the comedian can be considered a prerequisite for political comedy in general and late night comedy talk shows in particular (Niven et al. 118). Their hosts often use their sovereignty and creative power to hold those to account who exercise their influence and authority in spheres outside the respective show, mostly in political offices or other institutions of prestige.

The seismic shift in public discourse triggered by the #MeToo movement in late 2017 added a new dimension to what could, and should, publicly be said about those in power. In its wake, the concept of toxic masculinity and its far-reaching implications seemed to take shape in social as well as traditional media, laying open a well-known, albeit suddenly highly topical imbalance in gender relations. In that comments on current events belong to the standard repertoire of late night shows, the question was not so much if, but rather when and how the issue of toxic masculinity would have to become the target of their comedies.

This paper will examine how late night shows have broached this highly sensitive topic through the use of comedy. It will look at the humorous strategies employed and whether they succeed in navigating between ridicule and derision for displays of toxic masculinity, and empathy and respect for those confronted with it. Necessarily, the discussion will also take into account that the majority of late night hosts are male and will consequently have to negotiate their own concepts of masculinity in this context. After all, the success of their comic intervention will largely rely on how believable the comedian manages to distance himself, explicitly or implicitly, from any possible association with toxic masculinity.

The proposed paper reads Michael Winterbottom’s three mini-series *The Trip* (2010), *The Trip to Italy* (2014) and *The Trip to Spain* (2017) as a comical reflection on masculinity in midlife crisis that combines ridicule with pathos. The two male protagonists at the centre of the series, played by the two British star comedians Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon as fictionalised versions of themselves, are both in their mid- to late-forties and grapple with their careers, as well as their roles as fathers, their sexuality and, above all, their mortality. In my analysis, I want to concentrate on two interrelated aspects of the series, namely its evocation of existentialism, which is coupled with a theme of fragmented personalities conveyed by a web of intertextual references.

Going beyond a mere ridiculing of middle-aged masculinity, *The Trip* evokes an existentialist theme, which is contained in some key motifs (e.g. the trip/journey, food, lonely man in nature) as well as the narrative structure of the series. Moreover, the presentation of the protagonists bears traits of the theatre of the absurd: reminiscent of Beckett’s Vladimir and Estragon, yet much more self-aware of the absurdities of their own existence, they keep waiting for meaningful things to happen in their private and professional lives. Yet wholeness eludes them: *The Trip* shows Steve and Rob as ultimately fragmented personalities. The key device used in the series to convey this is the representation of the protagonists’ conversations and lives as an echo chamber where intertextual references to Romantic poetry, various TV genres and films, and to Rob’s and Steve’s comic programmes combine with the pair’s seemingly compulsive (and competitive) imitations of famous people to deconstruct the notion of the (comic) artist as original genius along with the notion of stable personalities. The series thus champions the notion of ‘man’ and ‘comedian’ as performative categories, which are the result of imitation and repetition (with variation).
A popular adage states that men age like fine wine, while, when it comes to women, ageing is more likened to cheese: “aged was only good to a degree [before] the mold and the inevitable casting aside” becomes a reality (Webb 33); a statement that Susan Sontag famously echoed when she stated that “men are ‘allowed’ to age without penalty, in several ways, that women are not” (31). Looking at advertisements for anti-ageing medicines such as Viagra and testosterone supplements which promise a continuously fit, attractive, tough and virile ageing male body, ageing seems to be a non-threatening re-affirmation of masculinity – as long as men are able to remain sexually active in later life. At the same time, the ageing man who shows continued sexual interest runs the risk of being labelled and marginalised as a “dirty old man”; a man whose virility and sexual desire defies expectations of a more serene sexuality and who, by adhering to hegemonic constructions of masculinity, often centred around youthful bodies, virility and sexual prowess, transgresses the image of an asexual grandfather-figure.

TV, especially the sitcom format, plays a significant role in this field of contradictions. It perpetuates, legitimises, transforms, and deconstructs stereotypical notions of age, gender and sexuality through its unique use of laughter and humour, both of which play a “disciplinary, corrective role in society [by] ridiculing the deviant behaviour of others” and also function as a site for “criticising social norms, unsettling hierarchies and depicting ‘the unsayable’” (Neumann/Kamm 5). While the BBC show Hold the Sunset (2018) seeks to ridicule the expectation of a continuously independent, tough, virile, assertive, emotionally restrictive and competitive man by focusing on humorous narrations of ageing bodies, emotional intimacy, widowerhood and care as central ways of understanding masculinity and sexuality in later life, From May to December (1989–1994) uses laughter in a more ambivalent way, by deriding forays into dating and relationships by older men and, simultaneously, ridiculing expectations of physical frailty, asexuality, senility, and hegemonic conceptions of masculinity in order to promote a heterogeneous and diverse representation of older men and ageing bodies.

My talk will focus on these two programmes to investigate how the hybrid serial format of the Britcom represents and constructs ageing male bodies and masculin-
ities in older age, and how it moves this discourse outside the binary (and stereotypical) ‘asexual’ vs. ‘highly sexual’ divide, thereby transcending and challenging the status quo.