

AUSTRALASIAN HUMOUR STUDIES NETWORK 2009 COLLOQUIUM

on “Perils and Pleasures of Humour”

HELD AT WOMENS COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Friday 20th and Saturday 21st February 2009

PROGRAM CONTACT:
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TIMETABLE FRIDAY 20 FEBRUARY

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| 10.30 – 11.00 | <i>Registration; Tea and Coffee</i> |
| 11.00 – 11.30 am | Dr David Rawlings, Psychology, University of Melbourne <i>Gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at) in Australian university students with different cultural backgrounds</i> |
| 11.30 – 12.00 | Dr Angus McLachlan, Psychology University of Ballarat <i>Humour questionnaires - A means to what end?</i> |
| 12.00 – 12.30 | Dr Bruce Findlay, Psychology, Swinburne University of Technology <i>The cartoonist as psychologist: William Hamilton’s social observations</i> |
| 12.30 – 1.00 | Discussion |
| 1.00 – 2.00 pm | <i>Lunch</i> |
| 2.00 – 2.30 | Maren Rawlings, Doctoral candidate, and Dr Bruce Findlay, Psychology, Swinburne University of Technology <i>Why we need positive humour at work</i> |
| 2.30 – 3.00 | Dr Mark Rolfe, Social Sciences and International Relations, UNSW <i>Pleasures & perils of humour in democratic politics</i> |
| 3.00 – 3.30 pm | <i>Afternoon Tea</i> |
| 3.30 – 4.10 | Em. Sc. Prof. Conal Condren, Centre for the History of European Discourses, University of Queensland <i>Humour and the history of early modern philosophy: Hobbes, his critics and the paradox of contextualisation</i> |
| 4.10 – 4.40 | Prof. Penny Gay, English, University of Sydney <i>What made the Elizabethans laugh? A new attempt at theorising Shakespearean comedy</i> |
| 4.40 – 5.00 | Discussant: Assoc. Prof. Robert Phiddian, Flinders Humanities Research Centre |
| 5.00 – 5.15 | Discussion |
| 5.15pm | <i>Announcement of Dinner Arrangements (optional, following Reception)</i> |
| 5.20 – 6.00 pm | <i>Reception – Womens College venue</i> |

TIMETABLE SATURDAY 21 FEBRUARY

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| 8.30 – 9.00 am | <i>Registration; Tea and Coffee</i> |
| 9.00 – 9.30 | Ms Mira Crouch, Social Science and International Studies, UNSW <i>What happens in the event of a joke?</i> |
| 9.30 – 10.00 | Deborah Klika, MA (Research), English, Media and Performance Studies, UNSW <i>'Look at moiye, look at moiye': Exploring TV sitcom and narrative comedy characters through theories of narcissism</i> |
| 10.00 – 10.30 | Mr Anton Crouch, Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, UNSW <i>Introducing Lord Epping: Leon Errol and Hollywood farce</i> |
| 10.30 – 11.00 | <i>Morning Refreshments</i> |
| 11.00 – 11.30 | Will Noonan PhD Candidate (Cotutelle) English, University of Sydney and UFR Lettres, Université de Provence <i>On the perils of talking to the French about humour: Eccentricity, reflexivity and the 19th century</i> |
| 11.30 – 12.00 | Assoc. Prof. Michael Ewans, Drama, University of Newcastle <i>Aristophanes today; perilous pleasures</i> |
| 12.00 – 12.30 | Sally McCausland, Lawyer, SBS Broadcasting <i>Cartoonists and comedians in court: cross-disciplinary approaches to humour and the implications for free speech</i> |
| 12.30 – 12.45 | Discussion |
| 12.45 – 1.45 pm | <i>Lunch</i> |
| Parallel Session A: | |
| 1.45 – 2.15 | Dr Birte Giesler, Germanic Studies, University of Sydney <i>Laughing at Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust? Perils and pleasures of humour in Igor Bauersima's play about human cloning, 'Futur de Luxe' (2002)</i> |
| 2.15 – 2.45 | Assoc. Prof. Robert Phiddian, Director, Flinders Humanities Research Centre, Flinders University <i>What's wrong with the theory of satire?</i> |
| Parallel Session B: | |
| 1.45 – 2.45 | Sylvia Alston, Doctoral candidate, Creative Studies, University of Canberra <i>Apocalyptic laughter (workshop)</i> |
| 2.45 – 3.15 | <i>Afternoon Tea</i> |
| 3.15 – 3.45 | Dr Paul Jewell, Philosophy, Flinders University and Dr Mike Lloyd, Sociology, Victoria University, NZ <i>Ten years of 'Naked Man' in the Melbourne Age</i> |
| 3.45 – 4.15 | Prof. Carmen Moran, Head, Humanities/Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University <i>Is there a typically Australian regional bush humour?</i> |
| 4.15 – 4.45 | Lillian Rose Holt, author, former PhD candidate, University of Melbourne <i>Aboriginal humour—a conversational corroboree</i> |
| 4.45–5.15 | Dr John Carmody, Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, and Physiology, University of Sydney <i>Humorous treatment of academic life in fiction: Laughing at death in the modern university</i> |
| 5.15 – 5.30 | Open Discussion |
| 5.30 – 6.00 | <i>Announcements, Farewell Refreshments and Departure</i> |
| 6.00 – 6.30 | Meeting of AHSN Review Panel |

ABSTRACTS

Ms Sylvia Alston, Doctoral candidate, Creative Studies, University of Canberra

Apocalyptic laughter

This workshop will explore the ways in which humour can help people to cope when faced with painful and challenging situations. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, it will examine the ways in which humour can restore the symbolic order and serve as a means of regaining control. They may not be able to change the situation but their use of humour may allow them to control the way they respond. Kristeva refers to the act of laughing at the abject as a kind of horrified 'apocalyptic laughter', a compulsion to confront that which repels (Kristeva, 1982: 204-206). Looking at the world through the lens of humour can allow individuals involved in even the most disturbing circumstances to feel less powerless. The aim of the workshop is to answer the question: is black humour good for us? Time and technology permitting, the presenter and participants will examine this question by looking at examples of black humour — some of it grotesque and some simply scatological. The examples will include poems, illustrations and extracts from the TV program *MASH*, Samuel Shem's *The House of God*, Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, and the scene in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in which King Arthur dismembers the Black Knight. Participants will be invited to share their stories and examples of the ways in which humour, including inappropriate and black humour, has helped someone to regain control of their life when the world as they knew it has been irrevocably transformed.

Dr John Carmody, Affiliate, Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine, and Hon. Assoc. Prof., Physiology, Faculty of Medicine, University of Sydney

Humorous treatment of academic life in fiction: laughing at death in the modern university

University administrators provide abundant opportunities for caricature though the opportunities are rarely grasped. The undergraduate press does a little, but what of our professional writers? Mostly they recognise that a 'Dreariness of Deans' will hardly provoke epic novels nor traditional epic theatre. Like end-of-term exam-cramming, a quick reflection brings to mind Williamson's *The Department*, Oakley's riotous *Let's hear it for Prendergast*, Wilding's unrisen soufflé, *Academia Nuts*, and Riemer's bitter-sweet, *Sandstone Gothic*. Do these have anything in common apart from satire and parody? British writers, mostly eschewing the "memorandum style" of Snow's *The Masters*, seem to have preferred comedy, too: Amis's *Lucky Jim*, Lodge's *Changing Places* and Bradbury's *The History Man* being fine examples. If laughter is the best medicine (how can it be when it tastes so good?), what does this tell us about life and intellectual death in the modern university?

Em. Sc. Prof. Conal Condren FAHA FASSA, Visiting Professor, Centre for the History of European Discourses, University of Queensland

Humour and the history of early modern philosophy: Hobbes, his critics and the paradox of contextualisation

In a concerted attempt to make the history of early modern philosophy more historical, less anachronistic and philosophically abstract, much stress has been placed on adequate contextualisation for the meaning of philosophical debate. One result has been to recognise the relevance of humour as integral to much philosophical reasoning. Its importance lies in exploring the centrality to philosophic activity of the persona of the philosopher. This paper takes the case of Thomas Hobbes and the hostile reception of his work, including its humour, and suggests that there were good philosophical grounds for Hobbes and his critics to have been arguing in ways that now seem philosophically improper. The paradoxical consequence is that better contextualisation can make interpretation not less, but more problematic than is often thought. The lessons to be learned may be equally important for investigation of more contemporary uses of humour.

Mr Anton Crouch, Hon. Visiting Fellow, Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, UNSW

Introducing Lord Epping: Leon Errol and Hollywood farce

Leon Errol (1881-1951) was born in Sydney but made his name in America in the early years of the 20th century. He got his start in Ziegfeld Follies, was well established in motion pictures by the mid-1920s and, today, is largely remembered for his superb comedic performances in the *Mexican Spitfire* series of movies in the early 1940s. Starring with Lupe Velez, Errol established the twin roles of Velez's Uncle Matt and the eccentric Scotch whisky producer, Lord Epping. The movies are relatively short (~70m) and Errol dominates the proceedings, which are essentially deception farces. The applicability of Milner Davis' Schemata of Farce-Plots to these movies will be examined, with attention paid to the effect film editing has on the 'uniqueness' of the Schemata categories. The issue of hybridisation and the possibility of an evolutionary classification of farce will also be raised. The paper will include short clips from some of the *Mexican Spitfire* movies.

Ms Mira Crouch, Visiting Fellow, Social Science and International Studies, UNSW

What happens in the event of a joke?

A complex dynamic obtains between teller and listener(s) when a joke is told. The form and content of a joke constrain the psychological aspect of this dynamic which realises the joke's structure in interaction. Freud sees pleasure to be the basic definer of a joke as an experience. As previously argued (in a paper I gave at AHSN February 2008), wit is a key element in jokes and joking; "wit-work" (Freud's term) leads to and combines

instinctual and epistemic pleasure (a cognitive tickle!) in ways which may not be the same for all participants in a joke. My paper will pursue this issue further in order to explore the nature of such pleasures – and of the interaction between them – in greater detail than has been done previously, the main question being: “What is really at play here?” Starting with an exegesis of the work of Freud, I also draw on John Morreall, John Marmysz, Edmund Wright, Ted Cohen and John Anderson. Recent research in neuroscience is taken into account, as are its philosophical implications. The paper is wholly conjectural; no claims to (immediately) testable hypotheses will be made.

Assoc. Prof. Michael Ewans FAHA, Drama, University of Newcastle

Aristophanes today; perilous pleasures

Each of Aristophanes' comedies was written for one performance on a particular festival occasion, in a culture quite remote from ours, nearly 2,500 years ago. And their language and style pose formidable problems to the translator. In the light of this, it is amazing that much of his humour continues to resonate, and to give pleasure to audiences, today. On the other hand, Aristophanic humour often transgresses the boundaries of our culture's ideas of social and political correctness. This paper takes the example of *Peace*, which the presenter will be directing in his own new translation in April 2009. It discusses examples of Aristophanic humour which present difficulties to modern actors and audiences, and possible strategies for overcoming those difficulties without weakening the strength of the playwright's original conception.

Dr Bruce Findlay, Psychology, Swinburne University of Technology

The cartoonist as psychologist: William Hamilton's social observations

William Hamilton has been publishing cartoons in the *New Yorker* for more than 40 years. This paper will present a selection of his cartoons, with a commentary on his ear for the psychological foibles of people in interpersonal relationships, business relationships, and academia. Because of the acuteness of Hamilton's observations, his cartoons are ideal examples of various social psychological theories and are therefore ideal for illustrating those theories to undergraduates.

Prof. Penny Gay FAHA, English, School of Letters, Art and Media, University of Sydney

What made the Elizabethans laugh? A new attempt at theorising Shakespearean comedy

This paper will summarise the trains of thought and curly questions that led to the publication of my recent book, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Comedies* (CUP, 2008). In particular, it will deal with the relations between words (especially puns), physical actions, and theatrical power, and the curious likeness between women and clowns, as portrayed in Shakespearean comedy.

Dr Birte Giesler, Germanic Studies, School of Languages and Cultures, University of Sydney

Laughing at Adolf Hitler and the Holocaust? - Perils and pleasures of humour in Igor Bauersima's play on human cloning 'Futur de Luxe' (2002)

Up until recently, German-speaking artists have been reluctant to make use of humour when dealing with Nazism. The paper will introduce the satiric play, *Futur de Luxe*, by Igor Bauersima. The drama is about Theo Klein (a family man, descendant of Holocaust survivors and biochemist of worldwide glory). One night, at the dinner-table and out of the blue, he tells his loved ones that the twin adult sons are clones: he had had them made, one from his own DNA and the second one from Hitler's, in order to prove whether Good and Evil are genetically determined or not. Family relationships go wild. He recounts how he obtained Hitler's finger, taken from the Führer in his last moments, and the play moves into video. Theatre reviewers have perceived the play as a political mind-game on the subject of biomedicine. This paper proposes a different interpretation: by using modern media as part of its stage techniques to achieve dramatic and theatrical irony, this play makes fun of people's gullibility, media hype and also genetics as a new religion.

Ms Lillian Holt

Author, former Doctoral candidate, University of Melbourne

Aboriginal Humour—a Conversational Corroboree

Paul Kelly, famous Australian musician, was quoted by Rachel Perkins, Film-maker and daughter of the late Aboriginal leader, Charles Perkins, on ABC Radio, on Monday, 29th October, 2001, as saying: “I've never met an Aborigine without a sense of humour”. I decided to share that statement with fellow Aboriginal people around Australia and ask them to comment on the topic of Aboriginal humour. In doing so, I found that there was much agreement with Kelly's statement and this paper is, in part, about those conversations and comments made by those fellow Aboriginal people about how they see humour. In that sense, it is a sharing of insights and conversations and comments from the interviewees, as well as about my own, as an Aboriginal person.

Dr Paul Jewell, Philosophy, Flinders University, and Dr Mike Lloyd, Sociology, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Ten years of 'Naked Man' in the Melbourne 'Age'

Ten years ago in *The Age*, Melbournites got their first glimpse of 'The Adventures of Naked Man' - a cartoon caption competition. Somewhat surprisingly, the competition continues today. The competition's protagonist is the sole naked person in a drawn setting where, because of some convenient object or body position, his penis is obscured from sight. Entrants to the competition submit captions to complete the drawn setting, and with the obscured penis as their implicit focus, most entrants constructed a 'dick joke'. This paper will provide examples of the cartoons and winning captions. As a result of interviews conducted by a collaboration of Mike Lloyd from Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, and Paul Jewell from Adelaide, this presentation describes the beginnings of the competition, and its unexpected longevity. It reports on discussions with the *Naked Man*'s creator, the commissioning editor and a competition judge. It describes their varying perspectives of the features of the cartoon and its place in *The Melbourne Age* and in Melbourne's culture.

Ms Deborah Klika, Post-graduate research student, English, Media and Performance Studies, UNSW
"Look at moiye, look at moiye": Exploring TV sitcom and narrative comedy characters through theories of narcissism

Many TV Sitcom and narrative comedy characters are often categorised or defined as 'types' such as 'the lovable loser', 'the idiot savant' or 'the operator'; many being descendants of their archetypal ancestors, the fool, trickster, rogue and comic hero. Such descriptors explain to some degree a character's comicality but not the character's perpetual compulsion to repeat, ensuring their entrapment and inability to change - marked characteristics of this form of comedy. This paper, utilising theories of narcissism, will observe the character of Kim from *Kath and Kim*.

Ms Sally McCausland, Lawyer, SBS Broadcasting
Cartoonists and comedians in court: cross-disciplinary approaches to humour and the implications for free speech

This paper examines the different conceptual approaches to parody and satire taken by judges, cartoonists, comedians and scholars of the arts. It draws on the experience of an 18 month project with Jessica Milner Davis, Conal Condren and Robert Phiddian on examining the new exception to copyright infringement for "parody or satire" introduced into the Australian Copyright Act in 2006, in an effort to arrive at "working definitions" to satisfy the needs of these different disciplines. The outcome of the project is two articles, one published and one in press, in the University of Melbourne-edited *Media Arts Law Review* Vol 13 (2008).

Dr Angus McLachlan, Psychology University of Ballarat
Humour questionnaires - A means to what end?

Though Martin's Humor Styles Questionnaire (HSQ) was always intended to be a measure of individual differences, an attempt was made to determine if the HSQ could show how people might modify their use of humour depending on their circumstances. This investigation was partly successful in that it revealed that mood could alter the likelihood of using different styles of humour. Regrettably, a more detailed inspection of the measure confirmed that, as a personality measure, the HSQ remains firmly in the essentialist camp. Researchers within this camp either seek to explain what humour is, or seek to describe what humorous people are. Further speculation will be offered that this search for intrinsic and immutable properties of forms of behaviour is grounded in a conservative ideology that cannot support any theory capable of addressing the manner in which humour is used purposefully.

Prof. Carmen Moran, Head, Humanities and Social Sciences, Charles Sturt University
Is there a typically Australian regional bush humour?

There is a widespread belief expressed throughout popular and academic writing that there is a 'typical Australian sense of humour', which is characterised by the idea of the laconic bush hero/anti-hero. In recent times, there has been a shift to a more metropolitan view of Australian humour, typically represented in television shows, but even this humour can be seen to pay homage to its 'bush' heritage. In this paper I consider whether the so-called bush humour is distinctively Australian, and assuming there is some distinct local flavour, I then examine the extent to which such humour is localised across the regions. I use as my examples the humour accessed through the CSU Archives as evidence for and against the idea of humour local to the Riverina and Southwest slopes of NSW and environs.

Mr Will Noonan, PhD candidate (Cotutelle), English, University of Sydney and UFR Lettres, Université de Provence

On the perils of talking to the French about humour: Eccentricity, reflexivity and the nineteenth century

French usage of the term *l'humour* is often puzzling to English speakers. Far from the broad and inclusive meaning of "humour" in English, *l'humour* is marked as an eighteenth-century borrowing, associated with the typically "English" attributes of whimsical eccentricity and the capacity for self-derision. The French Academy cites Swift and Sterne as "celebrated English humorists", and the notion of self-derision suggests a fruitful basis for exploring

the relationship between humour and the tradition of self-reflexive literature. However, French scholarship has tended to associate *l'humour* with specific historical and literary contexts and in particular with a group of nineteenth-century French Anglophiles influenced by the “non-sens” of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. This paper will explore the interplay between eccentricity and reflexivity in French and English debates about humour. Robert Alter has described the nineteenth century as a period of eclipse for self-conscious literature, while Daniel Grojnowski places nineteenth-century French humour at the beginning of what he terms “modern laughter”. The notoriously subjective nature of humour is reflected in the contrast between the contemporary English meaning of the term and the narrower, historicised French sense; however, this tension offers a useful site for thinking about the role of humour in literature.

Assoc. Prof. Robert Phiddian, Director, Flinders Humanities Research Centre, Flinders University

What's wrong with the theory of satire?

The theory of satire was much debated in the 1960s. Then the debate largely stopped. This has bemused me for the last quarter century, and this paper is my attempt to explain why this happened and what a more adequate and contemporary understanding of satire might look like. The central proposition is that the idea of the death of the author, propounded from 1968 and a hardened doctrine for two decades from the mid-1970s, made discussion of authorial purpose difficult to maintain within literary studies. As no account of satire as satire makes sense without an ascription of rhetorical purpose by the audience to the piece, satire was very hard to fit into this theoretical paradigm, unlike linked terms such as parody and irony which travel comfortably with indeterminacy of meaning. Satire has, however, very clearly continued to exist in the world, and now comes from a wider range of social sources than was the case mid-century. A theory of satire equipped to deal with the range and reach of contemporary satire needs to extend beyond strictly literary concerns. It should learn from both social science debates about freedom of speech and cognitive science discoveries about the emotions in thinking, especially the emotion of disgust. The purpose of this paper is to elaborate on the need for such a movement in satire theory.

Discussant for *Humour and the history of early modern philosophy: Hobbes, his critics and the paradox of contextualisation* and *What made the Elizabethans laugh? A new attempt at theorising Shakespearean comedy*

Dr David Rawlings, Senior Fellow, Psychology, University of Melbourne

Gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at) in Australian university students with different cultural backgrounds

Ruch and Proyer recently developed two questionnaires (the Geloph46 and the shorter Geloph15) to measure individual differences in gelotophobia (fear of being laughed at) and, in a large-scale cross cultural study, found a tendency for participants from South and East Asia to obtain higher scores on the shorter questionnaire than Westerners. An Australian sample, comprising students from Sydney and Melbourne universities, was included in the study, as described by Jessica Milner Davis at the 2007 AHSN meeting. The present paper describes a more detailed analysis of the Australian data, with particular reference to ethnic sub-groups within the sample. Participants were asked to indicate their ‘main cultural background’, and analyses based on this distinction produced results clearly supportive of the earlier cross-cultural findings: Chinese/East Asian students obtained higher scores on both questionnaires than ‘Australians’. The implications of the findings and the limitations, and advantages, of our sampling methods are discussed.

Mrs Maren Rawlings, PhD candidate, recipient, 2008 ISHS Graduate Student Award, and Dr Bruce Findlay, Psychology, Swinburne University of Technology

Why we need positive humour at work

Managers and human resources personnel will be interested in this study which reports on the effects of positive and negative humour on personal fear and anxiety at work and job satisfaction and productivity. Previous stages of this research presented to the AHSN included a survey of the field (2006) qualitative data analysis (2007) and the quantitative validation of the Humour at Work scale (2008). Humour is an unofficial form of communication made as a ‘break’ from serious concentrated endeavour. Positive humour suppresses negative humour in the workplace. Negative humour increases personal fear and anxiety at work, leading to a decrease in job satisfaction. Results indicate that job satisfaction explains nearly 40% of the variance of productivity. There is a direct effect of negative humour which explains 9% of the variance in productivity.

Dr Mark Rolfe, Social Sciences and International Relations UNSW

Pleasures & perils of humour in democratic politics

Ideals of democracy uphold the communal good and unity. But such standards exist alongside differences of political opinion and partisan conflict. This can lead people to take pleasure in malicious humour according to political preferences or to suspicions of the political class. This pleasurable spite has been exhibited in parliamentary discourse and in the very old stereotype of the crooked politician. Politicians and public alike have been keen to use the stereotype to promote or detract political credibility with the public. Generally, the stereotype functions as one of the ways for public opinion to control the political elite that is necessary to representative democracy. Belinda Neal and the early ALP will be discussed here. Further peril awaits politicians who attempt to use political humour, as in the case of Alexander Downer, or who cannot enlist humour to their cause, as in the 2008 US presidential election.