

The Importance of Mockery

An exploration of humour's role within art and culture

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Abstract

Laughter is a daily occurrence for most people, it makes us feel good and helps us bond. Despite that, it often doesn't receive the credit it deserves for its ability to soothe even particularly strong emotional and physical pain. The world humanity occupies is terribly complicated, confusing, and regularly depressing and dangerous, be it on its own, or due to our influence – It often happens, that the best thing for one to do in the face of this strife is to laugh. The idea for this thesis came from my own personal penchant for coping with hardship using comedy, as well as the belief that the aforementioned credit should be given. The purpose of this work is to illustrate and explore examples of this timeless, collective tendency to employ mockery as a revolt against suffering manifesting within various works of art throughout history, and the skill and sophistication required to wield humour in this manner effectively, as well as to stand as a counterargument to the somewhat-common regard of comedy as a 'lesser' art form. By analysing pieces of visual culture and the writing of prominent thinkers from different time periods, I was able to demonstrate just how widespread this 'endurance through humour' is and has been across the ages. Moreover, it became clear that the cognitive functions behind it have far more depth than many realize.

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Introduction

‘Laughter is the best medicine’ – This idiom is nearly universally known, and for good reason. Virtually everyone has first-hand experience with laughter and its merits; Most of us could indeed attest that laughing makes us feel better, as it has long been recognized for the various benefits it provides, both psychological and physical. Among many other effects, laughter causes increased blood flow (Miller *et al.*, 2006), strengthens the immune system by improving natural killer cell activity (Bennet *et al.*, 2003; Berk *et al.*, 2001), and releases endorphins within the brain, which mitigates stress and, amazingly, can even amplify one’s pain tolerance (Dunbar *et al.*, 2011). It is no surprise, then, that we so actively seek out amusement, especially during times of hardship.

There is intent and purpose behind the way we, as a species, so consistently often twist serious subject matter, and place our tragedies and misery within a comedic framework, whether it be in our paintings, drawings, etchings, movies, writing, or even personal anecdotes shared between friends. Put concisely, humans strive for peace of mind, an arguably impossible state for anyone to ever fully achieve in a world as profoundly apathetic towards us, as difficult to understand, and as full of daily stressors as the one we find ourselves being part of; Mocking these stressors, be they existential angst, poor physical conditions, or the evil of other people, provides a way to examine our situation with a degree of detachment, allowing us to accept our absurd reality for what it is and laugh at it, easing the pain it so constantly causes us. In even simpler terms, humour is a **coping mechanism**. That is the focus of this thesis.

Chapter 1 explores pain, death, and grief. It spotlights the cognitive systems behind both the fear of death, and the appreciation of comedy, and exemplifies its findings by discussing imagery that is simultaneously grim and humorous – Mainly, artworks from the Danse Macabre movement.

Chapter 2 continues the trend, with its main assertion being that, not only is death a relevant, terrifying issue for humanity, but life, as well, is inherently and deeply unsatisfactory. This chapter centres upon philosophy; Particularly, on absurdism, and its relation to comedy.

Chapter 3 is about the pain we cause each other. This chapter addresses war, violence, and bigotry, focusing on WWII-era propaganda posters and movies tackling various evils as subject matter. Here, mockery is examined as not only a tool for comfort, but a means to a certain level of retribution.

Anyway, without further ado:

Chapter 1: Laughing in the face of death

There exists a myriad of ways coping via humour manifests in our daily lives, culture, and art. There is no shortage of humorous songs about bad break-ups, or comedy movies about how irritating most jobs are. This thesis would be unnecessarily lengthy and tedious to read were it to attempt to discuss in depth every possible unpleasant situation that was ever joked about, and so, let us dramatically ‘jump into the deep end’ immediately, and analyse humanity’s long-standing mockery of possibly the single greatest stressor of all – **Death**.

To a certain extent, the fear of death may secure its place as the most pervasive and deeply rooted element of cognition known. After all, some primal, unconscious form of it dominates the minds of effectively every animal on Earth; Base survival instincts such as the drive to socialize and reproduce, the seeking of sustenance and shelter, and especially the avoidance of and response to danger are directly informed by the desire for self-preservation, or at least the continuation of one’s species, and an innate preference to remain alive, as opposed to annihilated (Chen, 2024; Zhao *et al.*, 2023; Wei, Talwar and Lin, 2021; Darwin, 1859).

It is one piece of the whole that we, humans, inherit this fundamental inclination to exist, but the greater blessing is our sentience; We are the only species on this planet capable of comprehending that death is not just the vaguely dreaded result of a surprise encounter with a predator, or the inability to find food, but an inevitability, regardless of the level of ‘survival success’.

Only we get to know not only precisely what those instincts are warning us of, but that no matter how much we act to heed them, our final fate always remains the same. Only we get to reflect upon the world we live in, the cultures we practice, the technologies we use, and the freedoms we enjoy all being owed to the combined efforts of the, approximately, 109 **billion** people who came before us (Routley, 2022), and whom we will all eventually join in oblivion.

Evidently, while a zebra, or an eel, or a hawk, too, may as well consider itself immortal, should it have access to enough resources and safety, man must grapple with constant existential angst, being able to see the full picture – An anxiety so prevalent and haunting, be it in the form of conscious acknowledgement in some, or indeterminate unease in others, it could very well be judged the default state of the mind (Yalom, 2008). No wonder, then, that renowned philosopher and psychologist William James called this knowledge the “worm at the core” of humanity’s claim to peace and happiness (James, 1902, p. 140). Becker (1973) goes as far as to argue that this awareness controls, whether an individual knows it or not, **all** human behaviour. As an aside, the usage of the word ‘worm’, usually referring to the small invertebrates which help break down dead matter, as metaphor for mental unrest is amusingly interesting – Even our rhetorical language, it seems, often revolves around death and decay, intentionally or otherwise.

All this to say, death deeply, incessantly troubles humanity. How can it be possible to attempt to make peace with such a crushing state of being?



Fig. 1. Michael Wolgemut, The Dance of Death, c. 1493.

Pictured above is Michael Wolgemut's rendition of the **Danse Macabre** (Fig. 1); An especially jovial offshoot of the **Memento Mori** movement, whose aim was, much like Memento Mori at large, to unabashedly put death front and centre, reminding the audience of the fragile and fleeting nature of earthly life.

Although, as is apparent, Danse Macabre is rather light-hearted, even comical, relative to its mother genre, with this particular illustration, first seen printed within the pages of Hartmann Schedel's "Nuremberg Chronicle", being one of the purest, most straight-to-the-point examples of humanity's tendency to employ farce and humour as a defence in response to hardship.

To begin, a brief analysis of the illustration is in order; Pictured, we see four skeletal corpses, dancing and celebrating around a pit in the ground, likely a grave, within which sits a fifth cadaver. The land around them seems barren and desolate, with no signs of actual life outside of what may be two worms hanging out of the sitting person's body, themselves being a symbol of deterioration, of course. The five characters all show varied levels of physical decay – Though, in their merriment, they are seemingly unaffected by it in any way other than visual. Now, what is so valuable about a five-hundred-year-old picture of a bunch of skeletons having a party?

In order to answer that, we must note the historical context surrounding the drawing. As is common knowledge, medieval Europe was rarely a pleasant place to live; Beginning with the early 14th century especially, it may seem shocking and inspiring in retrospect that the region's societies had not completely collapsed from the time period's numerous calamities. Between the Great Famine of 1315-1317, the Hundred Years' War and, of course, the Black Death, which claimed the life of **every third European**, the scale of devastation masquerading as daily life was outstanding in a way that's often hard to imagine today (Haywood, 1997, p. 52; Barraclough, 1988, p. 142). Understandably, death was an exceedingly difficult notion to attempt to ignore and distance oneself from, being an unrelenting, quotidian constant even during times of relative peace, and so, it is not difficult to imagine that the average person would not have been entirely pleased with the given arrangement. In fear, anger, and sorrow, people, as always, turned to expression; They turned to art. So began Memento Mori, and with it, the Danse Macabre.

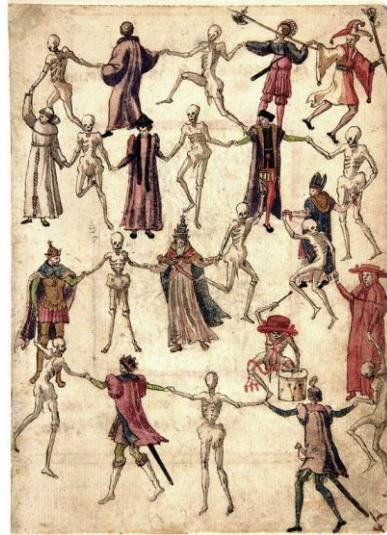


Fig. 2. Thomas Rowlandson, The Dance of Death, c. 1815.

Fig. 3. Unknown, Danse Macabre of the Holy Innocents' Cemetery, c. 1424.

Fig. 4. Hans Holbein, The Dance of Death, c. 1523 [Woodcut].

The eternally grinning skeletons invited all to their dance – Kings, priests, workers, peasants, the rich and poor alike, status means nothing in the end. Let us make no mistake, these joyful ambassadors of death were not benevolent; They wouldn't take 'no' for an answer, and were often depicted as forceful in their invitations, not to mention they may be considered a little scary to look at for some. These darker elements are essential to the success of the Danse Macabre as an effective allegory, after all.

Nevertheless, there is an undeniable playfulness to these depictions – In a time of disease, political upheaval, armed conflict, hunger, and destruction, the dancing skeletons' cheerful togetherness would indeed directly address the misery, but also poke fun at it, stand in defiance of it. To be able to laugh resiliently at the silliness of our bizarre, unfair existence, to not wait for comfort to find its way to us, but instead will it into being, in spite of adversity, is, in that way, a grasp at power. Ultimately, death reigns and pain is unavoidable, yet the dance rages on carelessly, as if to say not only 'remember you shall die', but 'remember to live'.

Furthermore, aside from being a timeless example of *what* humour does, these works also lend themselves fantastically to clearly illustrating the actual ways humour operates – *How* it does what it does. Comedy, for the most part, works within the realm of the unexpected; Something predictable will almost never be funny, of which philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer was a staunch proponent, writing:

The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity... All laughter then is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous (Schopenhauer, 1883, pp. 76-77).

Surprises and contradictions in opposition to some norm, executed with restraint and purpose, are essentially necessary for making something comical. This principle is the basis for the **incongruity theory**, one of the more influential and widely accepted of the many theories of humour (Warren and McGraw, 2015; Gervais and Wilson, 2005, p. 398; Mulder and Nijholt, 2002), some others of which will also be discussed later in this thesis.

Moreover, incongruity theory has some relevant overlap with the **relief theory**, which proposes that there exists a constant rise of a kind of ‘tension’, or ‘psychic strain’, within one’s mind and body, the excess of which has no benefit for - and is assumed by relief theorists to even be detrimental to - one’s well-being, and must be expelled in a physical, abrupt manner, which expresses itself through laughter (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002; Freud, 1966). Thus, this theory is often used as an argument in support of the beneficial effect of amusement on one’s health (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002). Put plainly, our rational assumptions about whatever it is we’re witnessing create expectations, which cause a rise in mental tension as we await their fulfilment; When the object of our theories subverts them in ridiculous fashion, it surprises our minds, leading to the expelling of that tension through laughter, making us feel better.

Keeping these theories in mind, if one were to have a look at a photograph of one of the many mass graves from the 14th century, chances are, some very unpleasant feelings would begin setting in; The imagery of a dozen or so real people’s remains, haphazardly thrown into an unmarked hole in the ground is harrowing, and only an echo of the misery felt around that time, as well as in some places today.

Operating from that headspace, seeing skeletons dancing and having fun, which is the last thing a lifeless body should be doing, is an enormous contradiction, it could be considered objectively absurd, and it is a key component of the comical and satirical nature of the Danse Macabre, thus a large contributing factor to how and why it resonated with, amused, and comforted the people most affected by the period's goings on.

Of course, to state the glaringly obvious, death is not a problem exclusive to medieval Europe, neither is pain, disease, or hunger. Despite large-scale improvements, misery and fear are still integral parts of the human experience – This connection is why the Danse Macabre has stood the test of time and remains significant to this day.



Fig. 5. Ub Iwerks, The Skeleton Dance, 1929 [Film still]. USA: Walt Disney Productions.

Even Disney and Co. would have their own take on the dance of death, generations later, in the 20th century. The “Skeleton Dance” - the very first of the studio’s “Silly Symphony” series of animated shorts - is decidedly a Danse Macabre piece, with its quirky portrayal of the deceased, and heavy focus on comedy and merriment.

Indeed, the movement's influence on art, comedy, and our general, collective attitude towards death cannot be understated; The shift, to which the Dance Macabre most definitely contributed, in our portrayals of skeletons and Grim-Reaper-like characters - from 'terrifying symbols of doom' to 'silly guys who like to have fun and sometimes scare people a little bit' - is undeniable, and its effects can be seen absolutely everywhere: Movies, books, cartoons, toys, comics, video games, to say nothing of cheap Halloween decorations. In an odd, partial conquering of our greatest plight, we've turned death imagery into a mere prop.



Fig. 6. Skeletons from various media, see list of figures for details

It is possible that humanity will never overcome death, and our hard-wired fear of it will likely remain a part of our biology for an incomprehensibly long time, but we are also remarkably stubborn. There exists a profound difference between simply surrendering to the inevitability of an end, and 'going down swinging' – The Danse Macabre is only one piece of evidence that we continuously choose the latter. For as long as one isn't dead, they can tell jokes, they can laugh, and dance, and trivialise the whole ordeal, and then, for a moment, it isn't so scary anymore.

In the words of van Wormer and Boes, this sort of 'gallows humour' "proposes an illogical, incongruous response to the most hopeless of situations and offers the person a triumph of sorts... [It] represents more of a philosophical attitude than a particular repertoire of jokes; it is a way to maintain sanity under insane circumstances" (van Wormer and Boes, 1997).

Put another way, mockery is the human spirit prevailing.

Chapter 2: Absurdism and finding joy in a meaningless universe

Let us get philosophical. Throughout history, the observations on death outlined in chapter 1 have largely contributed to the creation, refining, and propagation of many philosophies, but for the purposes of this thesis, three shall be outlined, of which one will be given particular attention for its unexpectedly rich bond with comedy.

Firstly, **nihilism**: For a long time, much of the knowledge we take for granted in modernity had been completely undiscovered. Still, as previously stated, humans yearn for meaning, and so, without the tools necessary to know one way or another, meaning was often simply assigned. Many cultures championed concepts such as the Sun being a sentient, divine entity, the Earth's place at the centre of the cosmos, and all things existing for the sole purpose of serving humankind (Guardiola, Alsina and Rego, 2014; Holy Bible, 2011, Genesis 1:26–28; Ptolemy, 1984; Neugebauer, 1975).

Nevertheless, relatively recently, things changed as our knowledge expanded rapidly – We began to recognize that the Sun is not a watchful guardian, but a star, burning away without a shred of care nor disdain for our species (NASA, 2024a; Green and Jones, 2015; Tayler, 1996), the efforts of Copernicus and Galileo led to a thorough dismantling of geocentrism, hence we know now that the Earth is less than merely a figurative speck of dust in comparison to the universe (NASA, 2024b; Copernicus, 1995; Galilei, 1953), and it became painfully apparent that all of existence has, in fact, not been arranged to serve humanity; That many, if not most, if not all of the things that are, aren't there for us, but that they simply *are*.

Revelations like these shook the foundations of our many forms of faith in a grand design to reality, wherein which we are the precious centrepiece, and formed the context crucial to the development of the nihilistic school of thought. Nihilism, rather straight-forwardly, asserts that, since we have no divinely ordained purpose, and we are all going to die and disappear, then nothing we do, think, or feel ultimately matters – To the nihilist, there is absolutely no objective meaning to anything (Pratt, 2021; Crosby, 1988).

As dramatic of a conclusion as that is, it's a saddeningly fair and honest one. All the same, nihilism obviously leaves things to be desired – It offers a coldly logical evaluation and definition of the problem, yet no solutions, hence why it was discussed first, as it could be considered merely the 'starting point' from which the following two philosophies emerge.

One ideology, which could be thought of as a response to nihilism, is **existentialism**. The existentialist concedes that the world offers us no inherent meaning or significance – However, where the verdict drives the nihilist to inner crisis, the existentialist finds it notably uplifting: From the existentialist point of view, this lack of assigned purpose means one is completely unshackled, beholden to no god, nor will outside one's own, and certainly not to any human 'authority'. Indeed, one's ethnicity, nationality, bloodline, sex, job, societal class or any other such aspect appointed to them by chance, or other people, is ultimately irrelevant.

One is free of imposed destiny and, even within the confines of the innumerable factors outside of their control, is given the opportunity to define themselves through their own choices and actions. In fact, this abundance of freedom is so overwhelming, that it becomes something of a problem in and of itself in the eye of the existentialist – Each person is condemned to freedom from the moment of birth, and thus condemned to ultimate responsibility for each choice made and action taken (Aho, 2023; Sartre, 2007; Sartre, 1956).

In short, existentialism asserts that, while reality is apparently entirely apathetic towards us, each person is therefore free to create their own meaning.

However, even that is unsatisfactory to thinkers like Albert Camus, the French Algerian philosopher and novelist, whose ideas largely contributed to the rise of another answer to nihilism; **Absurdism**.

To Camus, the real problem is not meaninglessness, but rather that we so desperately seek meaning in the first place. Camus was aware that the inherent human need for meaning, and the frustrating lack thereof in the world we inhabit are both factors that, as far as anyone knows, cannot be changed, ignored, or, most tragically, reconciled. It is the ultimate incompatibility between these factors, then, that gives rise to the 'absurd'. To Camus, there are only three courses of action available in a situation this ridiculous:

Firstly, suicide. The logical conclusion of the nihilistic school of thought – If life is meaningless, why live? Camus is not facetious here, but rather assigns the question immense weight, as he posits; “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” (Camus, 1965, p. 3). Ultimately, Camus rejects this option, arguing that death has no more meaning than life does, and so such a measure acts as simply evading the issue.

Secondly, one could take a ‘leap of faith’; That is, turn a blind eye to all evidence to the contrary and simply *hope* that there exists meaning, somewhere. This faith could be put toward anything, from organized religion to a belief that eating enough corn grants immortality. Camus finds this to be a suspension of rationality and a “philosophical suicide” (Camus, 1965, p. 30), which illuminates his dissatisfaction with what he ultimately views as escapism within existentialism. Existentialists, according to Camus, “deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them.” (Camus, 1965, p. 24).

To Camus, this blind trust in eventual salvation, whatever form it takes, is not only intellectually insincere, but can also lock oneself in only living for the future, unable to see the beauty of the present moment, as any attempt to ‘invent’ a meaning is doomed from the start and will never truly, fully satisfy a person.

This leads us to the **third option; Absurdism** – The complete recognition of our insane circumstances, and the embracing of them. The absurdist rejects any false satisfaction of their own hunger for purpose, knowing such satisfaction is impossible, instead allowing themselves to feel that fundamental discontent and living life regardless, for nothing more than the love of life (Camus, 1965). Much like the Danse Macabre’s rebellion against death, Absurdism is rebellion against meaninglessness itself – To understand that there truly is no reason for one to live, and, absurdly, to live anyway.



Fig. 7. Martin McDonagh / *Unknown*, *Seven Psychopaths*, 2012 / c. 2020s [Film still; Digital meme adaptation]. UK/USA: Film4. Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/Absurdism/comments/1dtvv6m/love_this_meme/ (Accessed: February 9th 2026).

Though, at first glance, the absurdist philosophy could be somewhat fairly compared to **stoicism** for their shared values of logical honesty and 'it is what it is' attitude, a critical distinction exists in the form of the latter's heavy placing of importance on the cultivation of emotional self-control, the mastery of the rational mind and the curbing of passions, while absurdism encourages the full embracing of the entire human experience to, one could say, an almost hedonistic degree, including any such passions, emotions, insecurities, or anxieties (Epictetus, 2008; Aurelius 2006; Camus, 1965).

That said, as already discussed, humour is a deeply ingrained part of that very same human experience, reliant on equal parts logic and emotion.

In fact, let us remind ourselves of the relief and incongruity theories of comedy through the words of Immanuel Kant:

Whatever is to arouse lively, convulsive laughter must contain something absurd (hence something that the understanding cannot like for its own sake). Laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing. This same transformation certainly does not gladden the understanding, but indirectly it still gladdens us in a very lively way for a moment (Kant, 1987, p. 203).

Although, through his usage of the word 'absurd', Kant obviously could not have been making any direct connection to the philosophy of Camus, which emerged over a century later, his observations nonetheless offer valuable insight into the ties between absurdism and humour, for what is more incongruent than reality itself?

Finally, we may dive into the true subject of this chapter; **Absurdist Comedy**. As one would suspect, this genre absolutely thrives on incongruity, irrationality, and extremely unconventional joke structure. The name of the game is; The less sense it makes, the funnier it is.



Fig. 8. Absurdist memes, see list of figures for details

Though such delightfully ridiculous works of art can be enjoyed by people of all ages, it seems that they are most appreciated by the younger generations. To wit, one study found an overwhelmingly high correlation between the ‘absurdity’ of an image and its perceived ‘funniness’ in the eyes of Gen Z students, which could be a reflection of young people’s growing disillusionment with the ‘stability’ of the world (Partlow and Talarczyk, 2021).



Fig. 9. Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld / Unknown, Seinfeld, 1989-1998 / c. 2020s [Show still; Digital meme adaptation]. Available at: <https://www.tumblr.com/i-kin-george-costanza/670641737381920768> (Accessed: February 9th 2026).

Moreover, this bizarre type of humour is not exclusive to silly internet memes shared between teenagers, but is, in actuality, quite widespread in modern entertainment: From the slightly more subtle lunacy of Monty Python's sketches to the utter insanity of animated series like Smiling Friends, or BoJack Horseman, to the pure chaos that is the Eric Andre Show – Absurdist comedy needs no explanation, because it can have none. It's a reflection of life, in the sense that things often just sort of happen with no real rhyme or reason, which only leaves one with the choice to either try desperately to make sense of it all, or, as Camus would, to 'roll with it'.

In the end, nothing matters, so we may as well live, love, and laugh.

However, aside from lifting oneself up, comedy can also be used to put others down.

Chapter 3: Comedy as ideological rebellion

As has now been thoroughly illustrated, comedy is an incredibly potent tool for the purposes of relieving grief and despair, particularly in response to the many unpleasantnesses of the nature of existence, such as death and meaningless misery. Indeed, as discussed, a vast amount of suffering can be categorized as arbitrary, almost completely up to chance – This thesis' analysis of humour as a reaction to that kind of random, cosmic pain is now complete. However, there is one more avenue to explore in regard to our usage of levity with intent to inspire comfort; Comedy as a response to **human-made** suffering.

It would be unwise not to dedicate a unique section to this theme within this paper. As anyone who has lived on Earth for a prolonged period of time can testify, suffering is not all random; People hurt other people, a lot. People also make fun of other people, often those who've wronged them, with the practical application of this humour being, obviously, different, and far more personal, than how it would be applied in reference to abstract ideas, like existential dread, or impermanence, as has been the focus of this text thus far. Particularly, this kind of humour is more in line with the **superiority theory** of comedy; That being, the notion that every humorous situation has a 'winner' and a 'loser'. As one laughs at others, they compete to assert themselves as the 'winner' (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002; Gruner, 1997). Humour as a means of 'winning' in that sense is actually rather timeless, and elements of the idea were noticed and expressed even by the ancient thinkers of Athens; In the "Philabus", for example, Plato (2017) suggests, through his fictionalized version of Socrates, that laughter arises from recognizing others' ignorance and ridiculousness, while feeling superior to them, with a mix of pity, of course.



Fig. 10. *The Morning Leader, Which Are You?*, 1907. London: *The Morning Leader*.

Fig. 11. *Unknown, Political meme*, 2025. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1110122727826359&set=a.463596775812294&id=100064859254076> (Accessed: 17 August 2025).

Though separated by over a century, Figure 10 (The Morning Leader, 1907) and Figure 11 (Unknown, 2025) are both stellar examples of superiority theory in practice.

Additionally, further connection can be drawn with the **affective disposition theory**, which asserts that, generally, within the context of media and entertainment, audiences find a relatively greater degree of amusement in depictions of a person facing misfortune, or being presented unfavourably, when that person is disliked, or seen as deserving of their ill circumstances – Or, in simpler terms, it is funnier when bad things happen to bad people, than when bad things happen to good people (Zillmann and Vorderer, 2000).

There are some caveats to this; Notably, despite its grim assertion that all humour is based on malicious competition, superiority theory obviously does not apply to every possible instance of comedy, and affective disposition theory was developed considering depictions of fictional characters. Nevertheless, these two theories offer observations relevant and valuable to contextualizing the desire to make fun of one's antagonist, and the mirth derived from it.

And so, keeping all of that in mind, this chapter shall outline, specifically, how mockery is utilized as a sort of retribution for, and rebellion against, suffering inflicted upon others, with intent, by people.

To paint a clear picture of precisely what is being discussed right off the bat, though a bit cliché at this point, let us use World War II as a backdrop.

As with a lot of historical topics, some of the lines are a little blurry, but the general consensus among historians is that World War II officially began with Nazi Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1st, 1939 (Wells, 2013; Weinberg, 2005), an invasion every bit as unwarranted, brutal, and inhumane as the entire global conflict it led to, quickly resulting in the Third Reich army tearing through Poland's defences, forcing Polish government leadership into hiding, and, within less than a month, reducing Warsaw to a smouldering wasteland, where a rubble-crushed corpse was as common a sight as a passing cloud, and dead horses rotting in the streets were the only reliable source of food to starving, terrified survivors (Evans, 2008; Czerniakow, 1979; Kaplan, 1965). This horrific prologue set the tone for what would become the deadliest conflict in human history; Estimates vary greatly, but most historians agree that, not even including deaths resulting from indirect causes, like disease and famine, around a staggering **50 million** people perished in the war (Royde-Smith and Hughes, 2019; Roberts, 2000, p. 432; Haywood, 1997, p. 130; Keegan, 1990, p. 590; Barraclough, 1988, p. 272), a harrowing number, that is at the same time difficult to imagine, and somehow not even among the highest estimates. Yet, even during such a traumatic time, humour found a place and a purpose among the struggling humanity.



Fig. 12. Unknown, X-Ray Photo of Mussolini's Brain, c. 1943.

Fig. 13. Unknown, Are you shedding your blood to fatten him?, 1945.

Fig. 14. Unknown, Let's Catch Him with His "Panzers" Down!, c. 1942.

Pictured above is a collection of propaganda illustrations dating back to the epoch (Fig. 12, c. 1943; Fig. 13, c. 1945; Fig. 14, c. 1942), depicting fascist and totalitarian dictators in a variety of notably disrespectful approaches.

On the left, Benito Mussolini, infamous Duce of Italy and founder of the oppressive, violent movement of fascism, which spread throughout the continent and resulted in untold misery (Sappino, 2025; Paxton, 2004; Bosworth, 2002). In the middle, Joseph Stalin, ruthless Soviet leader, responsible for millions of deaths across his Gulag network, of foreigners and his own citizens alike, countless acts of genocide, and numerous executions serving to keep himself in power (Naimark, 2012).

And, of course, on the right, Adolf Hitler, the man whose name in modern times is often colloquially used as a synonym for 'Evil', the Führer of the Third Reich, the authority behind innumerable atrocities, such as the Holocaust, in which some 6 million Jewish people were hunted, forced to work and murdered in death camps for their perceived inferiority to the Germans (Royde-Smith and Hughes, 2019; Roberts, 2000, pp. 428-429; Haywood, 1997, p. 126; Keegan, 1990, pp. 288-289; Barraclough, 1988, p. 272), and the very same megalomaniac accountable for the 1939 invasion of Poland, and therefore, the beginning of World War II.

Let us not mince words; Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, as well as others like them, both past and present – These people were callous, power-hungry, spineless, short-sighted, cowardly, selfish bullies, whose actions and ideals ended, or ruined, innumerable human lives, and so, it is deeply unsurprising that they would find themselves to be objects of ridicule. Not unlike the previously investigated comedic works responding to existential concepts and intentionless pain, these illustrations serve to comfort and inspire the victimized audience; One would be hard-pressed not to find even a slight degree of amusement in an image of their oppressor visualized as an empty-headed dunce, a grotesquely bloated swine, or a pants-less buffoon, after all. However, they also carry a secondary purpose, a reverse of the first one, that is to hurt the work's object. Art like these graphics is made, partially, with the ambition to ideologically strike back at the portrayed initiator of suffering – Should the depictee, or anyone who shares in their views, or actions, see these artworks, they are meant to feel humiliated, they are meant to feel small, criticized and shamed for their transgressions, playing both into the affective disposition theory, and superiority theory, making them 'lose' to us, the virtuous, laughing audience. In accord with this notion, Bergson (1911, p. 196) dramatically concludes that laughter is "above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it." In that sense, mockery becomes not only a tool for passive comfort, not only an application of active rebellion, but a tangible counterattack.

Continuing, these ideas extend to be present within many artforms, not just posters, a prominent example being film.



Fig. 15. Taika Waititi / Unknown poster designer, Jojo Rabbit, 2019 [Film poster].

USA: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

A modern movie, “Jojo Rabbit”, directed by Taika Waititi, is a 2019 satirical drama about a 10-year-old boy growing up in Nazi Germany. From the very first scene, we see the effect Jojo’s environment has had on him, indoctrination from such a young age turned him into a Hitler-worshipping fanatic, striving to personally kill a Jewish person and present their body to the dictator in hopes of becoming part of his personal guard. As Jojo gets sent to a Hitler Youth camp, however, it quickly becomes apparent that he is, indeed, just a manipulated child who wishes to belong.

Undoubtedly, there is something to be said about the difficulties of a full feature film dealing with such subject matter, as opposed to a single static picture. Due to its length, and the need for a coherent story, the task of exploring serious topics through a comedic lens becomes far more complicated, and so, a dark comedy

movie typically runs a larger risk of misusing humour. It could potentially water down the injustices it's portraying, or make those most affected by them feel like they're the ones being made fun of. "Jojo Rabbit", however, certainly did not fall into these pitfalls.

The film, obviously, is funny, as evidenced by its usage in this thesis; It is riddled with wordplay and visual gags, Adolf Hitler is Jojo's goofy, imaginary best friend, and the Nazis are portrayed as utter bumbling morons, constantly spouting lines such as "If you see a Jew, you tell us, we tell the Gestapo, they tell the SS and then they go out and they kill the Jew. And anyone who helped the Jew. And, because these are very paranoid times, probably some other people just in case. It's a pretty drawn-out process." (*Jojo Rabbit*, 2019, 00:35:13), "It happened to my uncle. A Jew hypnotised him, and he became a massive drunk, and a gambler, and he cheated on his wife, and he had an inappropriate relationship with my sister, and then he drowned in an unrelated accident, but it was the Jew's fault." (*Jojo Rabbit*, 2019, 00:35:42), and "Just go and shoot anybody who looks different to us!" (*Jojo Rabbit*, 2019, 01:26:31).

At the same time, however, it handles itself with enormous care – Throughout the entire movie, not a single joke is made at the expense of the war's victims. Storylines like the stolen life and forced hiding of a Jewish girl, Jojo's rebel mother's execution, and the senseless death and destruction throughout the town, are played completely straight, at no point is there confusion about who the butt of the joke is. The message is clear; Hitler and his Nazis were bigoted, ridiculous, close-minded people, who committed atrocities for absurd reasons, all of which is portrayed in a relatively light, approachable manner, while maintaining respect to those hurt.

Yet, as well-crafted as “Jojo Rabbit” is, perhaps it isn’t the best representation of an ‘ideological counterattack’. After all, the film had not existed until a full seven decades had passed since Nazi Germany’s fall. It is an expression of the now-near-consensus, and may have, at best, changed the minds of some people with ideas paralleling, but not quite on par with, the philosophies of the Third Reich. Therefore, to find true rebellion in film, having now learned what makes a successful dark comedy tick, we must once more return to the time period in question.

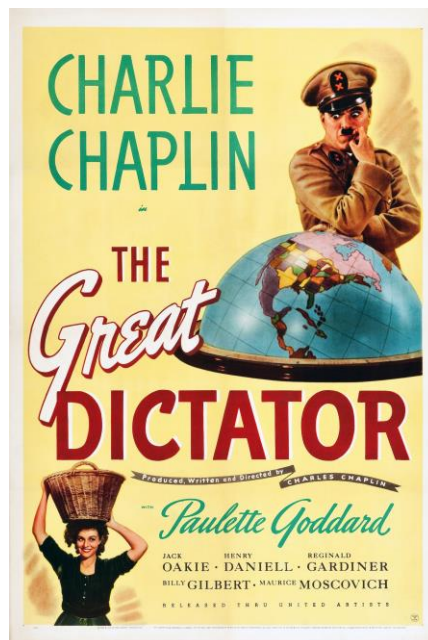


Fig. 16. Charlie Chaplin / Unknown poster designer, The Great Dictator, 1940 [Film poster]. USA: United Artists.

Comedy legend Charlie Chaplin was no fan of the Führer either. In his first true non-silent film, “The Great Dictator”, which was written, directed, and produced by him, Chaplin plays Adenoid Hynkel, the foolish, impulsive, cruel leader of the ‘fictional’ Tomainian Regime, and a rather obvious stand-in for Hitler.

The movie follows a formula very similar to what was analysed in “Jojo Rabbit” - A clear, immediate distinction between the intentional mockery of fascism, and the great care taken to humanize, empathize with, and comfort the Reich’s victims. The key difference is the timing; It’s absolutely imperative to note that “The Great Dictator” was released in the midst of the war, while Hitler was still alive, and Hollywood elites did regular business with Nazi Germany – It simply wasn’t as widely acceptable to loudly and publicly renounce the Führer in the, at the time, neutral and isolationist United States, much less in a feature film (Cole, 2001). Despite that, or perhaps because of it, the bravery and sincerity of “The Great Dictator” spoke to the people, and it soon became Chaplin’s most commercially successful project (Vance, 2003, p. 246).

It must be stated that Chaplin would not have had the heart to make this movie, had he been aware of the full extent of Nazi barbarity at the time, stating in his autobiography; “Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made The Great Dictator, I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis” (Chaplin, 1964, p. 392). However, I must argue that it’s a good thing that he did – Not only did the film deeply connect with the suffering audience and help them through an immensely tragic time, not only does it continue to do so to this day, but there is evidence that it even reached Hitler himself.

Film historian and Chaplin biographer, Jeffrey Vance, recounts an anecdote told to Chaplin, writing; “According to an agent who fled Germany after working in the film division of the Nazi Ministry of Culture, Nazi authorities procured a print and Hitler screened the film one evening in solitude. The following evening he again watched the film all by himself.” (Vance, 2003, p. 250).

There is no record of Adolf Hitler’s thoughts on “The Great Dictator” – However, seeing as the movie was fully, officially banned in all countries under Nazi occupation (Cole, 2001), one may assume he was not pleased. That is a triumph. That is the importance of mockery.

Evidently, satire is very effective ammunition in the cultural war against fascism. Part of the reason for it is because, to work, satire **must** have underlain truth to it. Done correctly, it promotes honesty, free-thinking, and individualism; All things which fascism directly opposes and oppresses. There could not be a more fitting tool for dismantling its backwards notions.

Bigotry, nevertheless, is not exclusively an element of war, nor is it only observable during it; It is, sadly, an everyday occurrence, and response to it within art, film, and comedy, is equally common. And so, let us typify this with a non-war film:

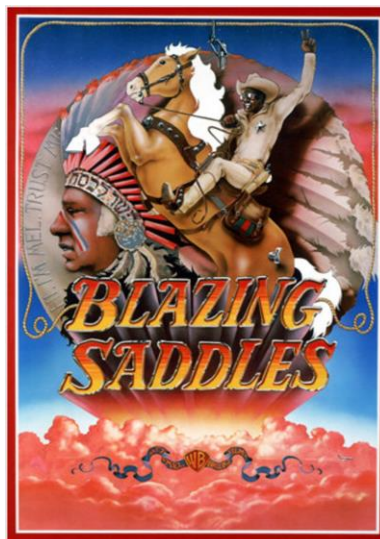


Fig. 17. Mel Brooks / John Alvin, Blazing Saddles, 1974 [Film poster]. USA: Warner Bros.

Mel Brooks' "Blazing Saddles" follows the story of Bart, a smart, charismatic, and handsome railroad worker in 1870s Wild West America, who becomes the sheriff of Rock Ridge, a small town, threatened by goons and raiders. The plot's main conflict stems from the fact that the residents of Rock Ridge happen to be remarkably racist, and Bart, incidentally, happens to be black. The movie has its detractors – In particular, its liberal use of racial slurs within the script is seen as a product of its time and unnecessary for getting its point across (Reilly, 2024).

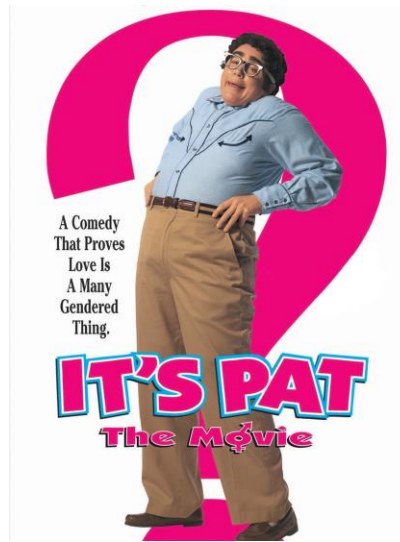
Additionally, as Ebert (1974) notes, the film's structure is rather crude, unpolished, and chaotic. All the same, despite its flaws, "Blazing Saddles" stands regarded as a brilliant, passionate deconstruction of intolerance, and exemplary of all the very same principles this text has been discussing thus far; Bart is just a regular person, if a little exaggerated to fit the genre, but he is never the butt of the joke – It is clear that the movie's intent is exposing the absurdity of racism, and it is only those who debase themselves enough to hold such asinine ideas that "Blazing Saddles" portrays as objects of ridicule.



Fig. 18. Mel Brooks, *Blazing Saddles*, 1974 [Film still]. USA: Warner Bros.

As Gene Wilder's character, Jim 'The Waco Kid' puts it, after Bart fails to win the approval of Rock Ridge's residents: "What did you expect? 'Welcome, sonny'? 'Make yourself at home'? 'Marry my daughter'? You've got to remember that these are just simple farmers. These are people of the land. The common clay of the new West. You know. Morons." (*Blazing Saddles*, 1974, 00:45:05)

Finally, it must be highlighted that it is far clearer to see what works thanks to comparison with what doesn't – Everything is relative. And so, to truly appreciate the incredible pieces examined up until this point, it will be good to compare and contrast them against a work which supposedly shares similar values regarding levity, and was clearly meant to employ matching tactics, but falls short of its presumed goal, and ends up misusing comedy in the manner alluded to prior in the section on "Jojo Rabbit".



*Fig. 19. Adam Bernstein / Unknown poster designer, It's Pat, 1994 [Film poster].
USA: Touchstone Pictures.*

"It's Pat", directed by Adam Bernstein, tackles queer identity, what it's like to live outside of the norm, and the struggle to be accepted for what one is. It is the story of the titular Pat Riley, a short, chubby, unremarkable person, who, importantly, presents as extremely androgynous. The entire movie centres around the fact that no one is able to determine Pat's gender, manifesting most intensely through the main 'villain'; Pat's neighbour, Kyle, who is obsessed with identifying the protagonist's physical sex, to the point of stalking and assault.

The supposed message of "It's Pat" is one of self-acceptance, it strives to showcase the beauty of confidence, and how it does not matter what one's gender is or isn't, or how their body is constructed. On paper, it is meant to be a humour-powered counterattack against sexual and identity-based prejudice, akin to how "Blazing Saddles" used comedy to become a counterattack against racism. But it falls flat, because, unlike in "Blazing Saddles", or "The Great Dictator", the sufferer often *is* the butt of the joke.

Pat is consistently portrayed as creepy, obnoxious, and dreadfully stupid, they are framed as undesirable by the film itself, and this simply can't be alleviated by any amount of absurdity in the way the villain is depicted, or a happy ending. The movie simply ends up seeming message-less, directionless and needlessly offensive, like an arrow shot by a spinning, blindfolded archer in a crowd. The most important real-world effect to note here, is that whether this is all to be pinned on the creators' incompetence, or some theoretical, hidden level of malice, is irrelevant – The story stands as an example of failure to responsibly wield comedy's power all the same, the intent of its satire is muddy, its context lost, and it ends up hurting those it was supposed to comfort. It is a masterclass in what not to do.

Regardless, for every "It's Pat", there is a "Jojo Rabbit" – Failures should not dissuade us from recognizing and using the immense cultural and communicative potential of comedy, but to emphasize how we can hone and perfect it, as we continue to do until now.



Fig. 20. A collection of modern political cartoons, see list of figures for details.

Indeed, these practices and philosophies stretch much farther back in time, possibly to the very first time one human wronged another, and persist until today. There is no reason for them not to have. Presently, there is no shortage of tragedies and deeply misguided people in power enforcing, supporting, or enabling them.

Crises such as Vladimir Putin's, at the time of writing, still ongoing, senseless war in Ukraine, which has killed thousands and displaced millions (Haque et al., 2022), and what must be acknowledged as a genocide perpetrated by Israel, masquerading as 'regular' warfare, if such a thing exists, in the Gaza Strip (Sultany, 2024). Not to mention, though progress is being made, we, as a species, have still yet to rid ourselves of commonplace tribalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and just plain unpleasantness. It seems that conflict may be part of our nature, but so is kindness, and the desire to comfort ourselves and others around us, and to stand in solidarity through all the pain. And so, just as before, comedy offers power back to the mistreated, as Ukrainian cartoonist Oleksandr Barabanshchikov, author of the, seen above, middle-left image, states; "Caricature is a weapon that helps us fight in the same way as journalists with words. Their weapon is the pen, ours the pencil... We have freedom in Ukraine." (Opanasyk, 2022). Demonstrably, the power of humour is timeless, and it will long outlive the modern day – One can only hope it may outlive all strife altogether.

Conclusion

In summary, each and every person leads a fundamentally absurd existence, within an inherently uncaring and occasionally hostile universe. This thesis has discussed the suffering and death we are forced to endure in its first chapter, the painful insignificance of our purposeless lives in its second, and finally, the needless cruelty we seem to be unable to stop employing against each other in its third.

This is all rather depressing stuff, but ultimately, we've also learned that humans are, have been, and will most definitely continue to be fiercely resilient creatures – We cope. We cope through time with loved ones, and through art, and through humour. Laughter soothes us. Moreover, it inspires us to keep going despite all doubt. To laugh is to hold power, and to make others laugh is to be kind.

That is the importance of mockery.

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