

**Think
pieces**

the UCL IAS review

Laughter

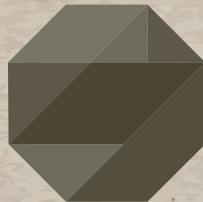
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Editor in-Chief
Nicola Miller

Academic Editors
Timothy Carroll
Jane Gilbert

Managing Editor & Graphic Design
Albert Brenchat-Aguilar

Guest Editors #Laughter
Andrew Dean
Alice Rudge

Printing
Belmont Press

Contact
instituteofadvancedstudies
@ucl.ac.uk

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University College London
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT
Cover
Zunar, *Sedition Act*, 2014

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Catherine Stokes.

Next Issues
04 #Waste
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Below
William Hogarth, *The Laughing Audience*, 1733



Foreword

The theme of Laughter deftly touches upon many of the key questions of our age. Thinking about the extent to which jokes can be understood, or even recognised as such, across different cultures and periods of history helps us to test the limits of historical imagination and cross-cultural translation. Is there anything that can be said to be universally human? As neuro-scientists investigate what combination of physiological processes configures human mental life, one window on to the problem is laughter: usually expressed in bodily terms, from an involuntary response to the physical act of tickling to belly laughs, hearty chuckles, wry smiles and raised eyebrows, it is also a response to linguistic and conceptual play. Laughter can also be revealing about relations between concentrated and diffuse power, as indicated by variations in the social acceptability of deriving humour from mocking those with greater or lesser status: what stand-up comedians call punching up or punching down. Is laughter always a hair's breadth away from cruelty or sentimentality? Or is it more of a source of freedom and flexibility in thinking and relating, as suggested by Henri Bergson, one of the few Western philosophers to focus on laughter. And, in the age of the Anthropocene, laughter invites us to think about what we share with other animals, now that laughter-like responses have been identified in apes, dolphins, dogs, rats and even some birds.

All these questions, and many more, about laughter were investigated and debated at the IAS during 2018-19, ably led by Junior Research Fellows Andrew Dean and Alice Rudge, but the follow-up work on this issue of *Think Pieces* has been done since Covid-19 brought profound changes to the way that we all think and work. In these circumstances, special acknowledgement is due to everyone involved for the rigour, care and commitment with which they have thought about how to position the contents to speak to the experiences of 2020. Heartfelt thanks to all of our contributors and to our editorial team: Academic Editors Timothy Carroll and Jane Gilbert; Editorial Manager, Albert Brenchat; and Guest Editors, Andrew Dean and Alice Rudge. In their Editorial, Andrew and Alice reflect on the significance of laughter in the current moment. As they note, thinking about Laughter in the age of Covid-19 may at first sight seem irrelevant or even inappropriate, but on reading these varied pieces I hope you will come to agree that in fundamental ways it could not be more timely.

Andrew Dean and
Alice Rudge

On Laughter

As 2020 draws to a close, who's still laughing? Confined to the home, many have longed for laughter's light relief. Yet there is little that has been less funny than finding city streets emptied, schools and universities shuttered, and communities awash with fear.

Some have bravely attempted to find the funny side, even if what they have found has often been grim and maudlin. Could it have been any other way? In the months since March, the scale of our vulnerabilities has taken centre stage — not traditionally good material for laughter. The popular British satirical television show, *Have I Got News For You*, contrasted our different frailties in one tweet from April: 'MPs offered an extra £10,000 each to work from home, coming as a great comfort to nurses wearing bin bags to protect themselves from coronavirus.' It's a good joke without being funny: it is humour as bitterness.

This year may have been unsettlingly intense, as we write in what feels like the 200th day of March. Yet has there not been an odd, mirthless laughter circulating for some time? This is the kind of laughter that is the special preserve of the internet. Think, for example, of the video of former UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, dancing at a South African primary school. Memes circulated of her struggle: one foot stepping uncertainly in front of the other, her arms locked to her side, shoulders moving like a spinning top. Her response to the mockery she received was to dance onto stage at the Tory party conference, to the tune of 'Dancing Queen' — which set off yet further memes. None of this was funny — not quite that — but nonetheless these memes upon memes produced

that strange, awkward laughter that feels distinctive to this moment. It's enough to make one want to hide in a fridge.

Laughter has never been neutral. Six years ago, the Turkish deputy Prime Minister said that women should not laugh out loud — a fault that he listed alongside mobile phones and soap operas. 'Women should know what is decent and what is not decent,' he said.¹ But laughter's strangeness is what now demands our attention. We can say that it supports or legitimises one political agenda or another, but the harder we look, the less certain we become. Laughter today feels public, shared and newly hard to decipher.

This issue of *Think Pieces* draws from a series of events hosted by the Institute of Advanced Studies. Each of the contributions in this volume attempts to better understand the different dimensions of laughter — its relationships with history, form, economy, and much more. The uncertainty that laughter provokes is central in each contribution: what is laughter good for? How might it work for us — and against us? Academic **Devorah Baum** and comedian **David Schneider** discuss their lives in comedy, from mothers, to memes, to mortality. **Dominic Davies** reflects on graphic novels by contemporary artists and academics, thinking their relationship with serious-minded academic study. Malaysian cartoonist **Zunar**, and the responses by **Natasha Eaton**, explore how laughter can directly address political failings. **Andrei Rogatchevski** offers a brief history of one of the more unusual episodes in the history of satire (if it is even that): the Russian genre of *stiob* in the hands of its leading practitioner, Sergey Kuryokhin. **Casper Addyman** explores the earliest experiences of laughter — the laughter of babies — and how these experiences are ways of discovering others. The issue closes with two accounts of the same film, Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence* (1982). **Keina Yoshida** focuses on the disturbing, and potentially liberating, effects of laughter for women in the film. **Laura**

Mulvey compares two different viewings of the work, separated by four decades of political experience.

Despite laughter's ambivalences, what would life be without it? When we do eventually emerge more fully from our homes, it will be shared laughter around a restaurant table, or the crowd laughter of a stand-up routine, that will bring us back to our richer social selves. Aristotle celebrates *euprepelia*, that ready-wittedness between boorishness and buffoonery. This is part of what human flourishing consists of, as many of us are discovering in its absence. Isn't laughter supposed to be the best medicine? This collection explores laughter's medicinal properties — and its side effects.

¹ Agence France-Presse in Istanbul, 'Turkish deputy prime minister says women should not laugh out loud', *Guardian*, 29 July 2014. < <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/29/turkish-minister-women-laugh-loud-bulenta> > [accessed 9 December 2020]

Having completed her postdoctoral fellowship on laughter in the Institute of Advanced Studies, **Alice Rudge** has now taken up a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship in UCL's Department of Anthropology. Her writing on laughter and ethics among Batek hunter-gatherers can be found in *American Ethnologist*.

Andrew Dean is a Lecturer in Writing and Literature at Deakin University, Victoria, Australia. He is the author of the 2015 book, *Ruth, Roger and Me: Debts and Legacies* (Bridget Williams Books).

Devorah Baum and

David Schneider

A Jewish Joke

Mother Love

Devorah Baum. How was your childhood?

David Schneider. It was great for a comedian. I was bullied. I was obsessed with my mum.

DB. At what point in that childhood did you or anybody else notice that you might be funny?

DS. At school. I had no friends until I was fifteen or sixteen, bar one other person who was funny. After that, I don't know what happened. I went to sixth-form and then I started doing drama, making people laugh, and it's then that I realized: 'Well I'm funny.'

DB. I always found you an unusual comedian. I've met quite a few, and they're normally not funny. I find comedians can be the most earnest people. The moment they're off stage, there's a tremendous aura of seriousness about them. They rarely laugh at jokes.

DS. I've aged into loving the experience of a good joke. I'm thinking of an expression such as 'as useless as a marzipan dildo', which is from *The Thick of It*. It gives me such pleasure (not the marzipan dildo itself). You can see how the joke has emerged. A *chocolate* dildo is fairly funny, but there's *marzipan*, something from childhood. It's a funny word. Then there's the idea, visually, of a *marzipan* dildo. It's like tasting a beautiful wine — in that moment, it's a perfect piece of art. I'm not saying it's Michelangelo's *David*, but from the comedian's point of view, when you see a bit of poetry in comedy form, it gives you joy.

DB. Joy would be what we intuitively as-

sociate comedy with — the happy side of life. But then we think about the sad side too. In your childhood you were bullied. The origins story that you gave me is probably one we are very familiar with: dealing with aggression by turning that aggression on its head.

DS. By being self-deprecating.

DB. That was the mode it took: not to turn it on others, but to turn it back on yourself.

DS. If you can insult yourself funnier than they're about to insult you, then it takes the power away from them, and you can defend yourself. For me, it's inevitably linked to Jewishness, the Jewish experience, and the Jewish fool — the *badkhn*. That's the sort of fool trying to make his way or her way through the world through wits, because that's all they have. In a sense, all comedians are Jewish, all people are Jewish. Everyone is a little bit defensive and has to fight their way out of it. This is really your territory, Devorah, with your books. Do you think everyone is a Jew?

DB. It turns out that they're not. That's what I found out over the last few years since claiming that they were. But that's just their opinion. Can we talk about your mother?

DS. Yes. How long have you got?

DB. So what does your mother have to do with it?

DS. My mum never laughed at anything I said or did. The most I'd get out of her was 'not bad'. My nightmare is of an audience of people saying: 'Not bad.' I'm nervous talking about my mum. My mum's been dead for two or three years now, but I feel that she's watching all the time. When

we had the stone setting for her, I was responsible for putting the stone up and for inscribing it. It was next to my dad's. I thought, 'make it look nice, let's get the same type of inscription, and nice words.' Then, on the way to the stone setting, I just couldn't get there. Like a dream, it was like a dream. I booked two Zipcars. One wasn't working, the other one was trashed by these drug addicts. I tried to get an Uber, and the account wasn't working. And then when I got to the cemetery, the rabbi was outside, telling me to hurry up — he has to churn them through. So I ran. Then when I went to pick up the prayer book, my trousers ripped completely. Luckily it was in the winter and I had a coat on. I knew that this was all my mum's doing. It was her sense of humour. When I got to the stone setting itself — the stones, the grave — I could see that I'd done quite a good job. But at the bottom, where it said on my dad's [stone] 'may he rest in peace', I'd forgotten to say it on my mum's. I'd forgotten to say, 'may she rest in peace'. I'm convinced that that's my mum's sense of humour. She loved slapstick, she loved Jerry Lewis. I think she pushed me to be funnier and funnier in the hope that she would laugh at me one day.

DB. If this was a Lacanian session, we'd end it there.

DS. I'm cured.

Meme Generation

DB. It's a confusing moment in comedy: whose side are jokes on? There was a very long period, perhaps until 2015–16, where joking seemed to be the art of liberals. Then we met Milo Yiannopoulos.



Alejandro Negueruela, *My Evening at the Houses of Parliament*, 2019. © Alejandro Negueruela. Courtesy of the artist.

He said that the political right should no longer present as sincere. He took the language of the internet and the making of memes and made these tools tilt to the alt-right. Slowly but surely it's become clear to liberals that jokes can no longer be relied on. They are as slippery as their punchlines.

DS. Or they can be, at least. The great thing for the right is the view that they can make jokes and be uninhibited by who they hurt. They use jokes to hide their truth. Think of 'lulz', used by the Daily Stormer blog. They do have these very offensive views, but as long as they can say 'I was joking'....

DB. You know, I observe you secretly online. And on the whole, I dislike everybody I find online, everyone, I dislike them all, almost without exception. They're horrible! And this includes people I agree with — particularly the ones I agree with. They seem to have exactly the same problems in their voice — in the posturing — as the people I don't agree with. They just all seem the same to me. But — and I say this honestly — you are an exception to the rule.

DS. Because we are friends....

DB. No! I've been watching my friends! And I don't like them either! I find you a really curious combination of profoundly politically engaged, meaning it, really wanting to make a difference, extraordinarily funny, and very polite.

DS. I think politeness is so important on social media. If more people could be respectful then maybe Twitter wouldn't be such a hell hole. Sometimes I say, 'stop spreading hate and division'. Then people from the right — or people who disagree with me — quite rightly point out that all my little satires are targeted at Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, and that makes division as well.

DB. What's humour doing there, in these political engagements?

DS. For me, humour is like a Trojan Horse. Whenever I see something and become angry, I could just tweet, 'Bloody

Nigel Farage saying that we should privatize the NHS.' People might agree with it to a certain degree, but on its own it won't spread widely. That's where humour comes in. The other day I tweeted: '2016: "Let's give the NHS £350 million a week." 2019: "Let's make £350 million a week from the NHS." This isn't a brilliant joke — I'm not going to win a BAFTA for that joke — but it's phrased in a joke form, so it becomes what might be called a *jokeme*: the essence of a joke is there, and it's more likely to spread. But there is a danger in this: it can make you feel better without doing much at all. We think we all share a laugh about Nigel Farage or the far right — we all make a joke about it, we make a meme, and then we feel we've done something — whereas we should really get politically engaged. Peter Cook, a satirist in the '70s, once said: 'The 1930s in Germany was a boom time for satire.' There was so much to satirize. But does satire really change anything?

DB. This is something that people are becoming aware of, isn't it? Inviting people like Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees-Mogg onto *Have I Got News For You* turns them into household names and allows them to be funny and cuddly. But that was where they recruited a fan base, and it was these performances that enabled them to propel a populist insurgency later on. You take somebody and you make them funny and —

DS. — they are funny, Boris is funny, Boris plays funny —

DB. — I think Jacob Rees-Mogg is funny, too, he does his character so well —

DS. — they've been given a platform. But there's another way of saying it, and if we weren't such liberal lefties, we would say: they know how to be funny, how to use being funny to progress their agenda. That's where we might be left behind by the right.

DB. Yes.

DS. Yes, fun.

DB. You've been left behind? I haven't thought enough about that. But it's true

they've been much more successfully funny than you....

DS. I feel good about myself now.

DB. Unless — and who knows? — maybe more is going on. Perhaps you're doing more than we are aware of.

DS. I'm writing Boris's jokes.

DB. The point of the *Have I Got News For You* example was that there was an assumption that this was satire from the left. We thought that they were being portrayed as buffoons by a liberal sensibility. But in fact it was their platform and they were using it in their own ways. That said, I genuinely think that being funny in the way that you are online has the capacity to change people's thoughts and feelings in a way that other kinds of humour and politics do not.

DS. I hope so. Among the few people who have changed an opinion on Twitter — changing your mind must be against the terms and conditions — it's not so much that satire has changed their minds, but rather politeness. That's what really throws people. I am an arch-Remainer, and this is something that Remainers must learn. The biggest weapon that we have that we are not really accessing is politeness: listening and listening politely, engaging politely. Perhaps that could be more effective than satire.

[...]

Death and dying

DS. I did stand-up for many years. I've died on stage, and the experience is nightmarish. When you come off stage, no one looks at you, it's like you're not there. But also, when you're dying, you have an out-of-body experience. You say: 'This normally works.' Time slows down. You watch yourself, you float away, hovering, leaving your body behind. You think: 'That joke normally kills it.' That, to me, feels like death. But you've had a death, too, haven't you?

DB. Yes. You were there.

DS. Tell me about when you died.



David Schneider @davidschneider · Mar 7, 2019

•••

2016:

"£350m a week more for the NHS"

2019:



9

209

432



DB. You were there because we did an event together. You and I were on that scary panel with Julie Burchill. That night I tried to tell a joke and nobody laughed at all. It was so painful. Then I was asked what my thoughts were about the contemporary political moment. I feel as though we are living in a time where what happens in your dreams at night might well take place the next day. And I've had this dream — and then this literally happened to me — a big audience of people, I'd just told a joke, and nobody laughed. Then somebody asked, 'What are your thoughts about the future of politics?' and I said, 'I have no ideas, only my fears.' That happens in my dreams. I go in front of a big group of people, and then that's all I have: my fears, nothing else.

DS. That was the Lacanian therapy session — and we're about to end it. The event you're describing was a Jewish event, and I think what you said was really well expressed. A lot of people had fears in that room. You simply did what a good comedian does, and made an observation.

DB. That was the most anti-comic moment in the panel. All I had was fear. I had nothing else. That's basically the root of everything for me.

DS. That's the root of comedy, you could say.

DB. Why do we talk about Jews so much?

DS. We're Jews and we're self-obsessed.

DB. Is that the answer?

DS. No one else will have us.

DB. I quote you in my book, *The Jewish Joke*. Your mother was a Holocaust survivor. You really do come out of this history. It's strange that that's where your comedy comes from, but I think it does. In that sense it's a little like the best Holocaust joke I included in my book, which is this one: 'A Holocaust survivor dies, gets up to heaven, meets God, and tells God a Holocaust joke. God doesn't laugh. The survivor shrugs: "I guess you had to be there." It's a brilliant, deep joke.'

DS. It's a very complex joke. You couldn't

just say, 'Where was God during the Holocaust?' No one listens. But you tell that joke and then, *wow*.

DS. Think about that Julie Burchill moment. She loves Jews —

DB. — in quite a weird way —

DS. — we take what we can get. She said something like: 'Jews are so clever.' And I heckled her — I should never do *that* again — and said, 'Well, there's quite a few stupid ones.' She came back straight away: 'Yes, those that back Corbyn' — meaning *me*. There's part of me that thought, 'oh, bloody hell'. But part of me just enjoyed the reply. As with the joke you told, it's so enjoyable because it's so out there. It's dangerous, it's playing with a taboo, and it's intelligent — it's just a piece of art. And that's what jokes are like at their best.

The Child

DB. One of the first abilities that seems to appear in the child is laughter, and being able to distinguish the joke from the non-joke.

DS. And that's the world. We're all in this adult world, we're all individuated into this terrible oppressive world of the super-ego. But a joke, for a moment, destroys it — just as poetry can. For an instant we're children. The same as with a pun — a really good pun or a bad good pun — which can just take the structure of language that sits oppressively on us, and refuse it all. A pun like that can say: 'No, actually I'm in control.' Just for a moment, we're children again, and we're not oppressed by the word and the father. And that's what a great joke, a truly great pun can do. We are reminded of the pleasure of being children again, of being tickled. That's why I love good jokes.

DB. That was very beautiful. So that's there where we end the psychoanalytic session. I'm on my third glass of wine.

David Schneider is a comedy writer, performer, and director. David co-wrote the BIFA-winning and BAFTA-nominated film, *The Death of Stalin*. He wrote and appeared in *Alan Partridge: Knowing Me, Knowing You*, and many other TV shows.

Dr Devorah Baum is an Associate Professor in English Literature and Critical Theory at the University of Southampton. She is the author of *Feeling Jewish (A Book for Just About Anyone)* (Yale, 2017) and *The Jewish Joke: An Essay with Examples (Less Essay, More Examples)* (Profile Books, 2017). She also co-directed the feature film, *The New Man* (2016).

Graphic Humour: Comics Studies, Literary Studies, and Laughter

IAS: LAUGHTER COMIC BOOKS & LAUGHTER



Emily Spicer, *Comic Books and Laughter*, 2019. © Emily Spicer. Courtesy of the artist.

On 25 April 2019, UCL's Institute of Advanced Studies (IAS) hosted 'Comic Books and Laughter: History, Politics, and Aesthetics' as part of its seminar series exploring the relationship between literary studies and laughter. If the driving question of this series has tended to see that relationship as a negative one — why isn't there a better relationship between literary studies and laughter? — the discussion of comics bucks this trend. This is hardly surprising. After all, comics take their name from the 'funnies', cartoon strips published in newspapers in the first decades of the twentieth century with the explicit intention of making readers laugh. As comics evolved from simple strips to serialized magazines (both superhero-themed and otherwise) and then to codex-bound books (the 'graphic novel'), that word 'comics' was slowly decoupled from its affective roots. By the 1980s, it was used to describe almost any kind of story that was told through a series of artistic panels or drawings, sequentially arranged into a coherent narrative, and this is how it is most commonly used today. Indeed, that we now use the term 'comics' to describe graphic novels that deal with the most 'unfunny' of subjects, from Art Spiegelman's treatment of his father's memory of the Holocaust in *Maus* to Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical reflections on the Iranian revolution in *Persepolis*, shows just how far the word has migrated from its original meaning.

And yet, even in these graphic depictions of sometimes horrific events, humour often slips into the frame, bringing with it a nod to the rich heritage, cultural movements, and artistic traditions that lie behind books like *Maus* and *Persepolis*.

As for Comics Studies, although it is a growing discipline in the UK (it now has a couple of MA programmes and even a BA programme to its name), it is accustomed to existing on the fringes of other subjects. Comics scholars squat at the edges of Media and Film Studies departments, and more recently, Literature departments, too. Coupled with the sometimes disparaging dismissal of its subject material as 'popular' or 'low culture', primarily 'for kids', this disciplinary marginalization begins to explain why Comics Studies does not tend to take itself as seriously as, say, literary studies. It is true that Comics scholars get upset when the term 'graphic novel' is used by literary scholars to describe a vast range of visual-narrative media. This is because they see in this blanket designation a 'land grab' that aims to peel off the 'high'-cultural 'graphic novel' for Literature, thereby depriving and purifying it of the form's historical rootedness in the radical subcultures of head shops, art colleges, ephemeral 'zines, breaches of copyright production, and explicitly sexualized content, among other things. In other words, they dislike literary scholars wielding 'graphic novels' in such a way as to suggest that now, finally, comics will

be *taken seriously* — as though Comics scholars had not been doing precisely that, all along.

Professor Roger Sabin, a pioneering figure in UK Comics Studies and the author of several field-defining books, therefore began the seminar on 25 April by digging into the history of the word 'comics', mapping its migration from music hall stage to newspaper page. The earliest comics characters were directly adapted from the celebrated actors and stand-up 'comics' who populated the music hall, a space much celebrated for its popular and working-class culture, and a far cry from the stuffy 'seriousness' of the university library. In this stage-to-page transfer, which defined their early years, comics' beginnings invert the well-known page-to-screen transfer of Marvel and DC comics superheroes that has dominated recent decades. Comics were so-named because they were funny, but also because they were often actual drawings of human comics themselves. It seems that comics have always been a *transmedial* form, breaking down the disciplinary boundaries that structure and regulate the modern university, and that divide something as 'menial' as mere laughter from something as 'serious' as literary studies.

The next speaker, Dr Nicola Streeten, an author and artist who was the UK's first female graphic memoirist with her wonderful book, *Billy, Me, & You* (2011), and who has recently published a

ALWAYS THERE by Nicola Streeten

In the 1960's when my siblings and I were little, mum took us for picnics in a Secluded part of the Park



In the 1970's, as a Schoolgirl, I used Laughter as my weapon as Hélène Cixous urged



In the 1980's, my family got a big dog, designed to guard



In the 21st Century I worry about my daughter's Safety
And I ask when will women not have to feel fear?

Nicola Streeten, *Always There*, 2017 © Nicola Streeten. Courtesy of the artist.

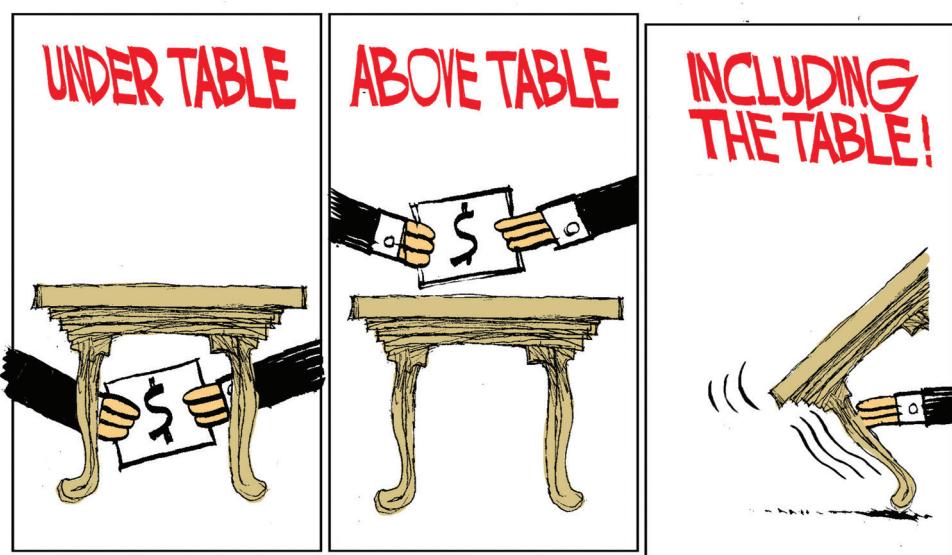
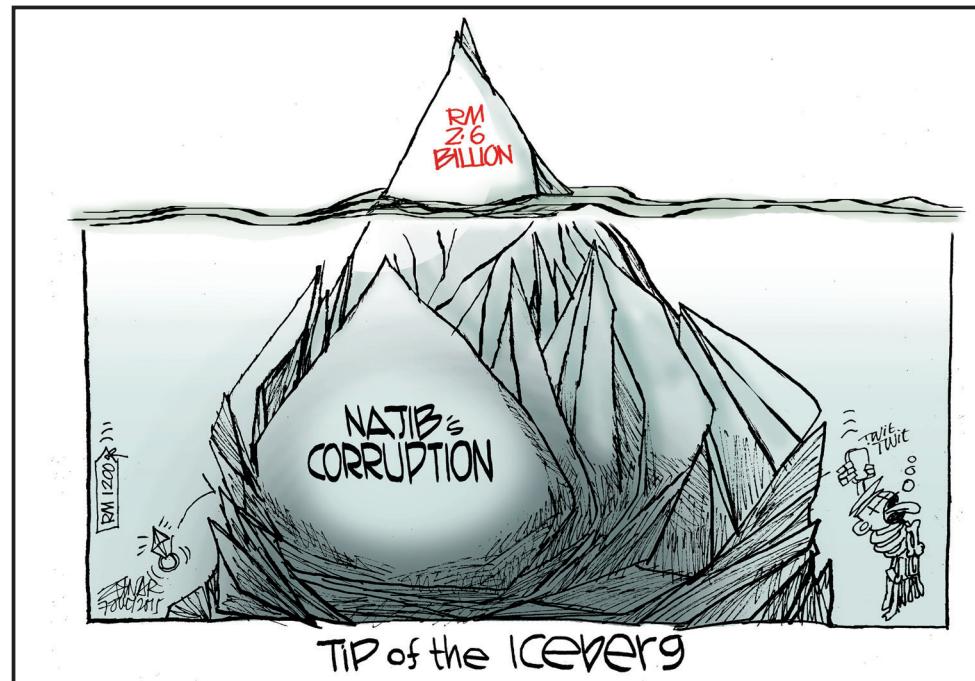
ground-breaking study, *UK Feminist Cartoons: A Critical Survey* (2020), reflected on the importance of humour to feminist comics artists, herself included. Beginning with the misogynist's archetypal defences — ‘I was only joking’, ‘Why do you take yourself so seriously?’ — Dr Streeten showed how comics have been pivotal to feminist attempts to reclaim humour from patriarchy. Her own artistic work is very much in the tradition of these movements, and she epitomizes a common blend in Comics Studies between critical analysis and creative practice, spheres that in literary fields are more rigorously — and unhelpfully — patrolled.

Finally, Dr Nina Mickwitz, whose work explores the intersections of comics, activism, and documentary form, alerted us to the specifically formal mechanisms of comics that make them so amenable to the telling of a joke. If it has become something of a cliché in Comics Studies to say that comics are all about timing, it remains true nonetheless. Some of the earliest Comics criticism, interested especially in the formal and semiotic dynamism of graphic narrative, pointed to the way in which comics — because they are comprised of sequential static images, rather than smooth linear sentences or unbroken film frames — convey time as space. The gap between panels (known as ‘the gutter’) signifies to readers that time has passed, allowing comics artists suddenly to launch new information upon us, to reveal context, or to change our perspective, much like the punchline in a joke. To demonstrate this, Dr Mickwitz

pointed to Ernie Bushmiller’s *Nancy* comic strips, which use the rhythm of their sequences to line up hilarious visual gags. Google them: you will get, simultaneously, a quick laugh, and evidence of the formal innovation of comics.

The seminar captured the current and growing richness of Comics Studies today: a field that had broken off into strands of historical, political, practical, and formal analysis, which critics are now bringing back together in provocative ways. And the discipline’s deep-seated comfort with humour (deriving perhaps from its close affiliation with forms of so-called ‘low’ culture) speaks back to literary studies too in interesting ways. Comics Studies challenges literary studies to wonder whether it might not benefit from a little more humility, and perhaps a little less separation between itself and the rest of the world — a separation which, at best, suggests an inflated sense of its own importance, and, at worst, betrays an underlying insecurity. ‘Have a laugh,’ it seems to say, ‘and most importantly, at yourself. Doing so won’t delegitimize your disciplinary practice. You may even find it sharpens your critical teeth.’

Dominic Davies is a Senior Lecturer in English at City, University of London. He is the author of *Urban Comics: Infrastructure & the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (2019) and the co-editor of *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage* (2020).



Zunar: Laughter as a political tool

How can laughter be used as a tool to challenge existing political structures? This is a question that Zunar addresses through his cartoons, in which he has challenged and exposed corruption and abuses of power by the government in his home country of Malaysia.

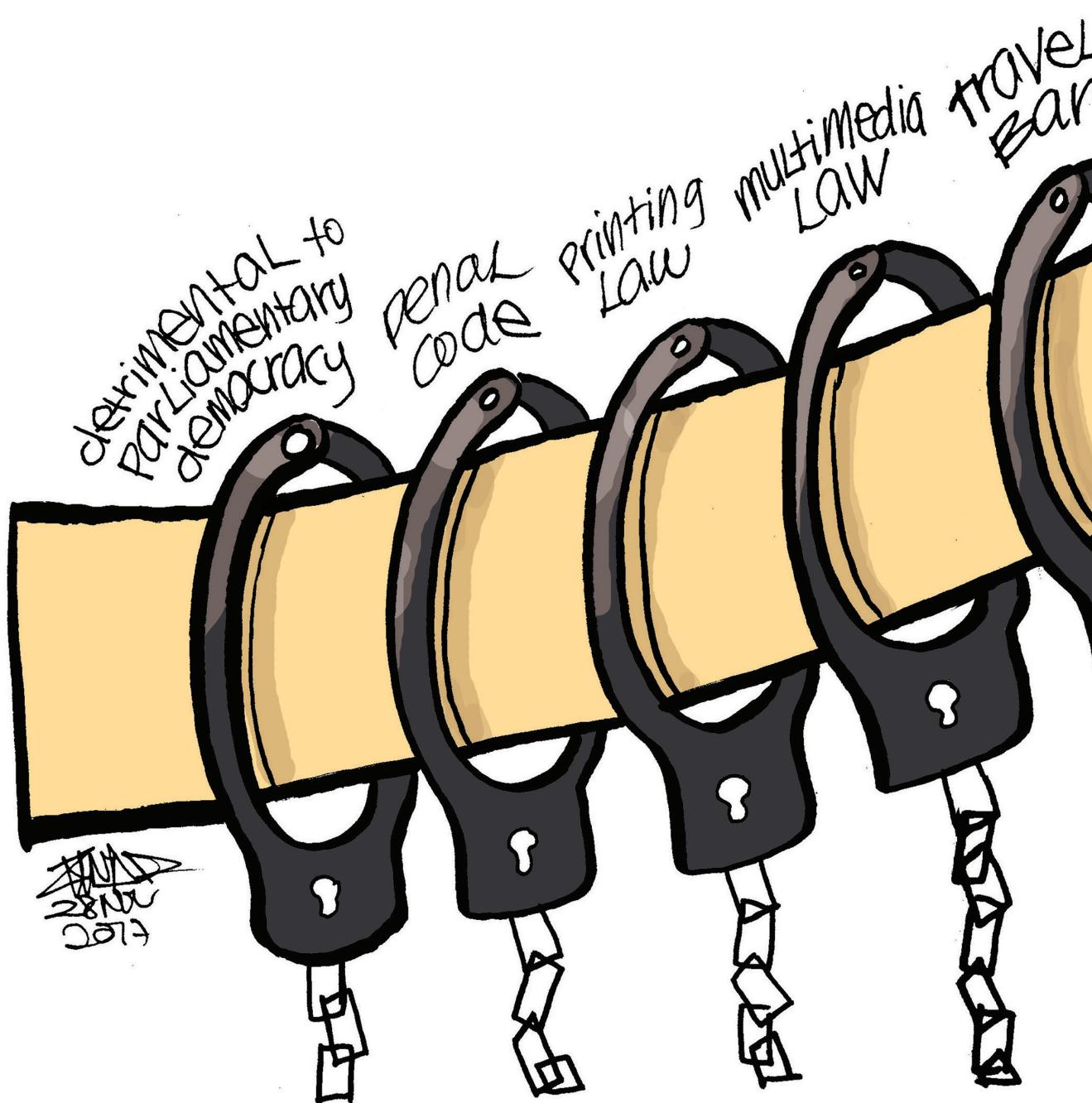
His art is a form of resistance. It has caused him to be attacked, arrested, detained, and investigated under the Sedition Act and the Penal Code for doing so. Five of his cartoon books have been banned by the Malaysian government on the grounds that the contents are ‘detrimental to public order’. His office in Kuala Lumpur has been raided, and thousands of cartoon books confiscated. Printers, vendors, and booksellers have been harassed.

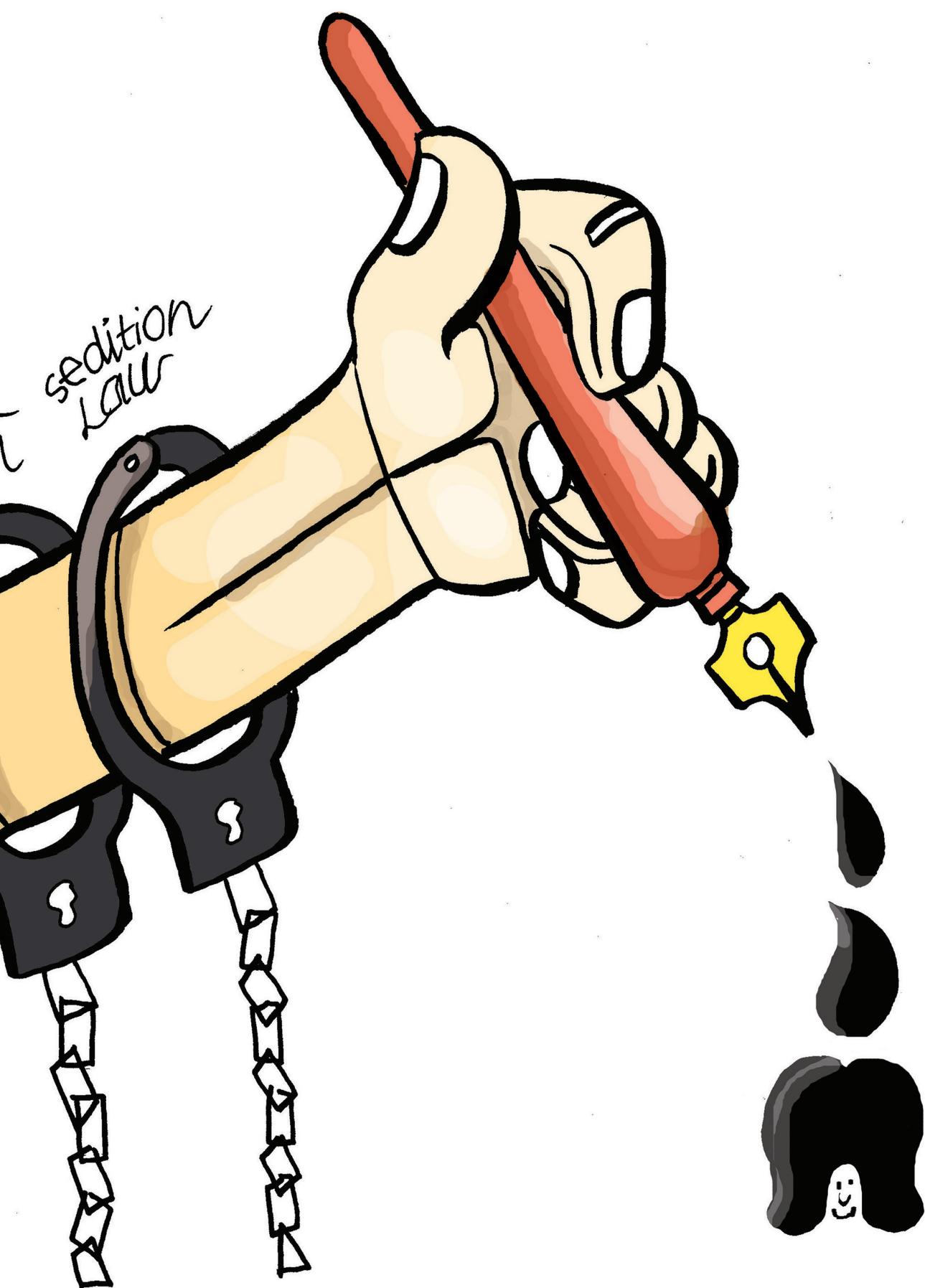
Zunar is the only Malaysian selected by Amnesty International for their biggest annual international campaign, ‘Write for Rights (#W4R) 2015’. He holds that when one’s country is facing a moral crisis and beset by corruption, abuse of power and violations of human rights, then it is one’s duty to take a firm stand against those responsible for it. As a cartoonist, Zunar feels compelled to show this stand in his work. Drawing cartoons, to him, becomes a fight for justice.

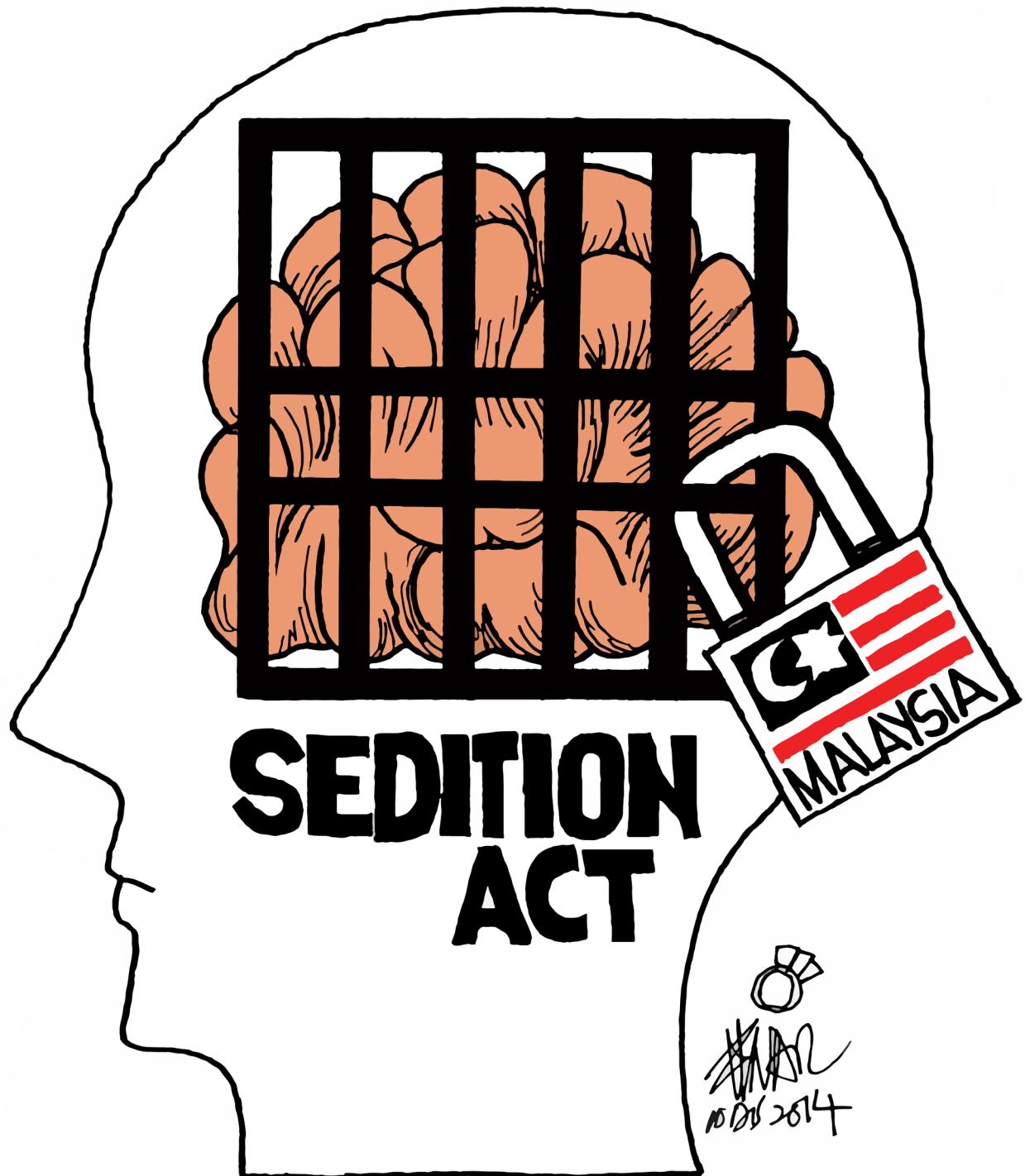
Figure 1 (top). © Zunar. Courtesy of the artist. Through the metaphor of an iceberg, this cartoon implies that the corruption of the previous prime minister, Najib Razak, is much greater than the 2.67 billion Ringgit which he is accused of channelling from a government-run development agency to his own personal accounts.

Figure 2 (centre). © Zunar. Courtesy of the artist. This image shows the previous prime minister, Najib Razak, dressed in the stripes and mask of a cartoon robber, sneakily changing the word ‘corruption’ to ‘donation’.

Figure 3 (bottom). © Zunar. Courtesy of the artist. This image jokes that previously, corruption had to happen under the table, and that Razak’s government was so blatant about it that they can take the table as well.







Natasha Eaton

Cartoon-o-phobia

CARTOON-O-PHOBIA

Whose flaming ink burns.
For passion, for laughter, for acuity.

Laughter: etymology Old English *hlaehahan*, onomatopoeic in tone (almost). *Rire* in all its ambiguity — and how Joyce made Derrida laugh.

Does laughter invite aphorism, whether verbal or visual? Laughter's flight, its vision: Ulysses, Dionysus, and more.

We should consider every truth false unless it is accompanied by at least one laugh
— Nietzsche.

To laugh is, as Kluge and Negt suggest, to raise the diaphragm.¹ Those laughs which draw from deep within the body – their gymnastics and their silence. Laughter, then, as catharsis — the *modus operandi* for venturing into the public sphere. What this public sphere might be is not easy to determine: sedition, censorship, the sly violence of images, ...? The public, laughing — is this more than the raucous, the noise of the crowd? And what does it mean for an image to laugh? Not the smile nor the pragmatism of Bergson, who argues for a certain vitalism – how the body explodes in laughter.² Laughter is far more and far less than Butler's excitable speech.³

1 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an analysis of the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (London: Routledge, 2016), p.123.

2 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: S.I. Allen, 1911).

3 Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A politics of the performative* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Left hand cuffed six times but the ink still drips. State violence. Zunar's economy of line, state lies, state hysteria, detention, accusations, impending imprisonment for the poetics of the brush held quietly, at first, in the notebooks Zunar carries. Books whose effulgence and biting satire the state cannot take. Humour which frees the body, the mind, the soul. Survival. State off.

Sedition Act where all the nationalistic aspirations of the flag are but a prison. Ripples of iron which merely torture those for whom the imagination can terrify.

Figure 4 (previous page). © Zunar. Courtesy of the artist. This image depicts the Malaysia Sedition Act of 1948. Originally implemented by the colonial authorities, this act criminalizes 'seditious speech', and has been used to crack down on anti-corruption activists.

Figure 5 (following page). © Zunar. Courtesy of the artist. This image shows a string of handcuffs representing the various acts that have been used to criticize Zunar's work.

Natasha Eaton is Reader in the History of Art, UCL. She is author of *Travel, Art and Collecting in South Asia: Vertiginous exchange*, (London: Routledge, 2020) and is an Editor of *Third Text*.

Andrei Rogatchevski

Kuryokhin's *Stiob*: Lenin as a Mushroom, Popular Mechanics and the National-Bolshevik Party



LENIN WAS A MUSHROOM

What is *stiob*?

Stiob (from the Russian *stebat*, to lash or slash out) is a form of humour that came to prominence in the former Soviet Union in the early to mid-1990s. It entered academic discourse with Viktor Matizen's 1993 article, which defined the phenomenon as 'a playful parodic construction of parallel reality from an old cultural material that used to be sacred'.¹ Soon after, Boris Dubin pointed at the role of informal, close, non-mainstream intellectual circles (*kruzki*) in the dissemination of *stiob* to the general public. Such circles habitually use *stiob* as a mechanism and sign of negative identification, distancing themselves from whatever happens in the world to which, they feel, they do not belong. Yet at a time of major cultural and political shifts, which gives *kruzki* members access to mass media, *stiobbing* practices are shared with much broader audiences and may gain a wide popularity.²

In the mid-2000s, Alexei Yurchak focused on *stiob*'s formal properties. According to him, *stiob* requires an 'overidentification with the object, person, or idea, at which this *stiob* was directed' — to the point that is 'often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two'. Crucially, the 'practitioners of *stiob*' would not be drawn on their positions, 'producing an incredible combination of seriousness and irony'.³ This unusual kind of mockery can be interpreted as a reasonably safe strategy of poking fun at an authoritarian regime (e.g. the USSR) when such a regime is going into decline and is no longer scary enough to laugh at in secret only — but is still scary enough not to laugh at openly.

Sergey Kuryokhin

Among notable *stiob* practitioners was the influential multimedia artist and countercultural and political activist Sergey Kuryokhin (1954–96), whose 65th birth anniversary was marked at an IAS UCL seminar in December 2018.⁴ Kuryokhin's arguably most mem-

orable *stiob* action took place in early 1991, when, in a popular current affairs programme broadcast by Leningrad television,⁵ Kuryokhin claimed that 'the Russian revolution of October 1917 was made by people who for years had been taking [hallucinogenic] mushrooms. In the process of consumption, these mushrooms altered people's personalities, so that people [effectively] became mushrooms [themselves]. [...] Lenin was a mushroom'.⁶

This claim ridiculed the image of Lenin, the last untouchable figure in the pantheon of Soviet leaders. This pantheon's credibility and authority had already been undermined by Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*, in which much that was previously unknown about the communist regime was made public. Kuryokhin's broadcast involved a poker-faced pseudo-scientific interview, containing randomly collated facts, quotations, and terminology designed to lead the viewer to a logical conclusion based on false premises. The *stiob* worked: soon after it went to air, a delegation of old Bolsheviks (brought up in the atmosphere of unquestioning trust in Soviet media outlets) visited a regional Communist Party Secretary for Ideology demanding to know the truth.

Kuryokhin and Popular Mechanics

Kuryokhin's unorthodox approach to authority is also evident in the way he conducted performances of his musical ensemble Popular Mechanics, founded in 1984. Popular Mechanics did not have permanent members but from time to time united some of Kuryokhin's friends and acquaintances (artists and even politicians) for a specific conceptual performance, different every time, depending on who was available. According to the leading expert on Kuryokhin, Aleksandr Kan, Popular Mechanics' trademark was 'piling up layers — a rock band, a jazz band, a classical orchestra, folk musicians,

circus performers, a military orchestra, [...] ballerinas, animals and much more'.⁷ As Kuryokhin himself put it in the 1986 BBC documentary *Comrades: All That Jazz*, produced by Olivia Lichtenstein, 'I've gathered first-class musicians together who just feel very constrained by what they do on the professional stage. They want something livelier. That's why they come to Popular Mechanics'.⁸

Popular Mechanics' increasingly complex shows demanded sophisticated musical directing, and Kuryokhin, who studied piano and conducting at the Leningrad Institute of Culture (but was expelled 'for non-conformity and non-attendance'), assumed the role himself. His personal conducting style was unusual. He often conducted with his legs.

His account of his role as conductor involves another kind of *stiob*: 'I have thought up my own way of conducting', he said in 'Comrades: All that Jazz'. 'It seems the most effective. [...] I've invented a system of gestures that my musicians know well. So they know what to play when. If, for example, I jump with my left foot in the air, they know they should play Shostakovich. When I jump with my right leg up, they must play, say, jazz or bebop'.⁹

Kuryokhin and the National Bolshevik Party

Kuryokhin's most controversial acts, however, were still to come. In the final years of his life, Kuryokhin became an ardent and efficient supporter of the notorious National Bolshevik Party (NBP), an epitome of close-knit countercultural *kruzki* that Dubin writes about. The NBP was formed in 1993 and banned in 2007 for extremism. Kuryokhin was issued a party membership card (no. 418). The NBP's co-founder, the author Eduard Limonov, defined the party's stance in a party newspaper as 'the leftmost of the right-wing parties and the rightmost of the left-wing parties'.¹⁰ According to the journalist Peter Pomerantsey, the NBP 'started as an art project, became an anti-oligarch revo-



Sergey Kuryokhin, *Lenin was a Mushroom*, redrawn from his sketch by Albert Brenchat-Aguilar.

lutionary party mixing Trotskyism and Fascism, and then transformed again to become a Kremlin ally.¹¹

The first party flag merged Nazi and Communist visual imagery (a red field with a white circle at its centre, containing a hammer and sickle instead of a swastika). The first NBP programme deliberately evoked the twenty-five point plan announced in the National Socialist manifesto of 1920, adding a twenty-sixth point to symbolize a further step forward.

How did it happen that, faced with the choice of about seventy political parties standing for election to the Russian Duma in 1995, Kuryokhin, who was Jewish, chose a neo-Nazi party that was not even on the ballot paper (another NBP co-founder, the countercultural philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, formally stood as an independent candidate in St Petersburg)? Was it some kind of *stiob*, reminiscent of the so-called 'Jewish punk' of the mid-1970s, when the Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, also Jewish, and Jewish members of the Ramones developed a fascination with Nazi regalia (including Iron Crosses and swastikas)?

For Dugin, Kuryokhin's move was a development of his artistic practice: 'In his Popular Mechanics, Kuryokhin collects almost all types of art: ballet, music, melodeclamation, circus, theatricals and puppet theatre, erotic performance, painting, decorative art, cinema, etc. [...] The expansion beyond genre limitations [...] leads logically to the political realm, where particularly large quantities (history, social teachings, the masses) are operated with. Naturally, [...] the desire to push for artistic limits is transformed into a passion for political radicalism.'¹²

In contrast, a number of Kuryokhin's friends and collaborators, as well as experts on his life and art, downplay the seriousness of Kuryokhin's NBP involvement or explain it away as a symptom of some more acceptable malaise. The saxophonist Sergei Letov, who worked with Kuryokhin, says: 'It seems to me that Kuryokhin's passion for [the NBP] was of the same nature as his interest in Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Bran-

ca's guitar and John Zorn's compositions' — that is, an academic interest — while Aleksandr Kushnir, author of a 2013 monograph on Kuryokhin, asserts that his 'fascination with National Bolshevik ideas may have been a defensive reaction against Russia's omnipresent winter and society's deep slumber'.¹³

Can Kuryokhin's puzzling affair with the NBP be attributed to his fondness for *stiob*?¹⁴ This is entirely possible, given that *stiob* has been interpreted 'as a dominant discursive mode in the rhetoric of the early NBP', whose 'appropriation and reinvention of a fascist [...] aesthetics and ideology [...] should be seen at the same time as a politically and morally disengaged act of protest [...] and as a return to a romanticized utopian ideal of the revolution'.¹⁵

It is hardly surprising that Kuryokhin's controversial actions, such as siding with the NBP, can be understood in many different, sometimes mutually inconsistent ways. As Mischa Gabowitsch puts it, 'the risk of seeing one's intentions misunderstood is implicit in the success of a *stiob* project'.¹⁶ However, the last word, at least for now, shall go to Aleksandr Kan, Kuryokhin's closest friend since 1978 and the foremost authority on his life and art, who is unlikely to misinterpret anything Kuryokhin had ever said or done.

Kan suggests that what became the final stage in Kuryokhin's evolution may have emerged as an interplay between his genuine convictions and his irrepressible desire to goad those around him: 'Kuryokhin was a well-known aesthetic, artistic and political provocateur. The liberal idea by that time had become the banner of the intellectual establishment, and provoking the establishment was Kuryokhin's style. He often believed in his provocative ideas, though'.¹⁷ Either way, such an ambivalent mix of seriousness and irony fits Yurchak's definition of *stiob* rather well.¹⁸ Kuryokhin, *stiob*'s practitioner, remains an enigma.

1 Viktor Matzen, 'Stiob kak fenomen kul'tury', *Iskusstvo kino*, 9, 1993, p. 62; my translation.

2 Boris Dubin, *Slovo – pis'mo – literatura: Ocherki po sotsiologii sovremennoi kul'tury* (Moscow: NLO, 2001), pp. 163–74.

3 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 250.

4 For details, see <ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/events/2018>

5 Analysed in minute detail in Yurchak's article 'A Parasite from the Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhan Proved That Lenin Was a Mushroom', *Slavic Review* 70, no. 2, 2011, pp. 307–33.

6 Sergey Kuryokhin, 'Lenin Was a Mushroom', Part 2 (1991) <www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExXDxpBF-FR0> (minute 2:27–2:38).

7 Aleksandr Kan, *Kuryokhin: Shkiper o kapitane* (St Petersburg: Amfora, 2012), p. 156.

8 'Comrades: All That Jazz', BBC2, 1 December 1985, 20.10pm <www.youtube.com/watch?v=ib-Y2IXdgdnM> (minute 4:25–4:36).

9 'Comrades: All That Jazz' (minute 8:00–8:26).

10 Eduard Limonov, 'Pereiti pustyniu', *Limonka*, 45 (1996), p. 2.

11 Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* (London: Faber, 2015), pp. 207–208.

12 Aleksandr Dugin, '418 Masok Sub'ekta: (Esse o Sergee Kuryokhine)', *Arktogeya* (1997) <www.arcto.ru/article/103>

13 Sergei Letov, 'Pominal'nye zametki o Sergee Kuryokhine', *Yahha* (2007) <www.yahha.com/article.php?sid=126>; and Aleksandr Kushnir, *Sergei Kurekhan: Bezumnaia mekhanika russkogo roka* (Moscow: Bertelsmann Media Moscow, 2013), p. 211.

14 In the opinion of Michael Klebanov, '*stiob* as a skilful combination of shock, hidden message, and probably Surrealist attitude as well served Kurechin as a dominant modus operandi'; see Klebanov, 'Sergej Kurechin: The Performance of Laughter for the Post-Totalitarian Society of spectacle', *Russian Literature* (Amsterdam) LXXIV, nos I–II, 2013, p. 243.

15 Fabrizio Fenghi, *It Will Be Fun and Terrifying*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), pp. 59–60.

16 Mischa Gabowitsch, 'Fascism as *Stiob*', *Kultura* 4, 2009, pp. 6–7.

17 Aleksandr Kan, *Kuryokhin*, p. 261.

18 Yurchak's explanation of Kuryokhin's alliance with the NBP is also similar to Kan's, cf.: 'by overidentifying with Dugin's illiberal rhetoric, [...] Kuryokhin provoked the moral outrage of the liberal intelligentsia', Yurchak, 'A Parasite from Outer Space', p. 329.

Andrei Rogatchevski is a graduate of the Moscow State University (MGU) and the University of Glasgow. Since 2014, he has been Professor of Russian Literature and Culture at UiT The Arctic University of Norway. In 2018, he was a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at IAS UCL.

Caspar Addyman

Why is peekaboo the ultimate in baby comedy?

Peeeek-aaa	Boo!	(English)
Kuu kuck	Daa!	(German)
Inai inai	Ba!	(Japanese)
Naaaaan	Ku!	(Xhosa)

When I ran a global survey of baby laughter in 2012, I asked parents: 'What is the funniest game to play with your baby?' I had responses from over twenty countries, and in every one, the clear winner was peekaboo. Since then I have been asking what's so funny, and what explains the universal appeal of the game. The short answer is, that peekaboo gets to the heart of what human laughter really means.

In 1993, Anne Fernald and Daniela O'Neill conducted a survey of psychological and anthropological research on peekaboo.¹ They concluded that it spread far across the globe, and that variants always shared many similarities. They recorded mothers playing the game in at least seventeen different languages. The words changed, but the acoustic properties were remarkably constant. Even if you did not know the language, you would recognize the game. So would a baby. We do not know if every culture has a version of the game, or when our species first started playing it, but I guarantee that every baby in the world would like to play.

The biggest fans of peekaboo are babies under a year. In the earliest forms of the game, with babies under three or four months old, hiding is not really important. New parents will spend lots of time just staring and cooing at their little miracles. Together they discover a mutually rewarding game: mummy or daddy

looming a little closer to the baby, getting clearer in its blurry vision, provokes a little smile or squeak. Peekaboo has begun. It does not yet need all the theatrics, there is no script and very few stage directions. But like all good comedy, the secret is in the timing.

To keep getting the squeaks and the smiles, a parent must carefully attend to the excitement and boredom of the child. They play with the baby's interest and expectations to get the biggest smiles and coos in return, instinctively adapting their rhythm to keep their baby entertained. Californian infancy researcher John Watson, who called this 'the game', found that by three months old, babies respond better when the timing is slightly unpredictable.² Watson claimed the importance of the game was in the very fact that they were interacting with another person:

'The Game' is NOT important to the infant because people play it, but rather people become important to the infant because they play 'The Game'.³

Personally, I think Watson was exaggerating. Peekaboo is important and enthralling to babies not for itself, but because it grows with them.

Peekaboo is statistical, it is rule-based, it is surprising, and it adapts, so that it appeals differently to babies of different ages.

It is not true that even very young babies think that you stop existing when you hide, although psychologists used to think so. In Jean Piaget's theories, babies under one year lacked 'object permanence'. In other words, he thought their tiny minds lacked the conceptual machinery to track things that were not there: out of sight was out of mind was out of existence. Thanks to research by Renée Baillargeon and Elizabeth Spelke, we now know babies are better at this than they get credit for.⁴ You hide, and they seem to forget because of their very short attention span. If you are out of sight, their mind might fill with

something else. But when you come back, they remember what game was being played. From around six months old, they anticipate your return. They are surprised and highly delighted when you do.

At first their surprise is purely statistical — i.e. a reaction to the quantitative relation of actions of the adult. But keep playing peekaboo, and the consistent pairing of expectation and reward evolves into something more. It may even become a baby's first explicit theory about the world, her first scientific hypothesis, shaped by the eager complicity of adults who already know the rules. Each squeak of pleasure at the adult's return marks another prediction confirmed. As American psychologist Jerome Bruner wrote, about peekaboo and the learning of rules: 'It is hard to imagine any function for peekaboo aside from practice in the learning of rules in converting "gut play" into play with conventions'.⁵

These conventions are all within the realm of social connection. Playing peekaboo, babies are learning a lot more than just that you will return. The real game for them is to learn how to have a conversation. Peekaboo is pure social interaction, stripped of all the confusing words, content, and external references. It is the simplest conversation you could have with someone. It needs to be simple, for babies, but it is still rewarding and packed with meaning. Babies learn as much from their own actions as from yours. They must react to keep you playing. Your laughs and smiles are valuable data about their behaviour. It is their first taste of a sense of agency, and it tastes good. This shows that surprise only takes us so far when trying to understand the global appeal of peekaboo.

The real magic of laughter and peekaboo is how they connect babies to other people. Babies are born social; there is nothing more fascinating to them than other people. There is nothing more enigmatic, either. The best thing about the game, for babies, is that you are playing

with them. You are playing it as equals, and to play it effectively you must give them your full attention, and they find this in your eyes.

Peekaboo is all about eye gaze: a potent signal that is central to our social interactions. Any adult should recognize this. Just think about a time you swapped glances with a potential romantic partner, and the rush of reward if the glance was reciprocated, became a mutual gaze. Eye contact has a powerful effect on all of us. Even newborns will turn towards faces that are looking directly at them.⁶ It is likely that the whites of our eyes have been optimized by evolution for communication. The shape and colouration of our eyes let us signal to each other who and what we are looking at. Out of eighty-eight primate species, humans are the only one with exposed, white sclera.⁷ Other primates disguise their gaze; we advertise it.

Mutual gaze is mutually rewarding. But turning gaze into a form of communication is a skill that we must master. One disarming thing about small babies is how they can hold your gaze for such a long time. Enter a staring context with a small baby, and you will usually lose. But, with time, they learn that they are seen, and what this means. To adults it happened so long ago that it has become invisible — though we still get it wrong, often with comic effect. Babies are just joining the conversation. Peekaboo and other ‘conversations’ with adults are where they learn how we construct this understanding of others through eye contact.

But why does this connection provoke laughter in babies — and, let’s not forget, also in the person playing peekaboo with them? The answer is that laughter is a social currency. It exists to be shared. Robin Dunbar hypothesizes that laughter evolved in humans to replace the grooming found in other primates.⁸ Grooming is an important investment of time, by which primates maintain their social relationships. Human social groups

grew too large to support endless rounds of backscratching, and laughter is an alternative ‘honest signal’ that could be shared between larger numbers. We laugh with our friends. A study of my own confirms this, where we showed that toddlers laugh eight times as much when watching a funny cartoon in company as they do when watching it on their own.⁹

This is the final piece of the puzzle of peekaboo. Laughter is a human innovation, that evolved so that we can connect with others. Peekaboo is the ultimate in baby laughter because it is their ultimate form of conversation and connection with the people around them. When babies laugh in peekaboo, and when you laugh back, you are sharing in a form of bonding that is central to our story as a species.

*This article was adapted from Caspar’s book *The Laughing Baby: The extraordinary science behind what makes babies happy* (London: Unbound Publishing, 2020).*

1 Anne Fernald and Daniela K O’Neill, ‘Peekaboo across cultures: How mothers and infants play with voices, faces, and expectations’ in *Parent-Child Play: Descriptions and Implications*, ed. by Kevin MacDonald (New York: New York Press, 1993), pp. 259–285.

2 John S. Watson, ‘Smiling, Cooing and “The Game”’ in *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development*, 18 (1972), pp. 323–339.

3 John S. Watson, ‘Smiling’, p. 338.

4 Renée Baillargeon, ‘Innate ideas revisited for a principle of persistence in infants’ physical reasoning’ in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 3(2008), pp. 2–13.

5 Jerome S. Bruner and V. Sherwood, ‘Peekaboo and the learning of rule structures’ in *Play: Its role in development and evolution*, ed. by Jerome S. Bruner, Allison Jolly and Kathy Sylva (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1976), pp. 277–285 (p.184).

6 Teresa Farroni, Gergely Csibra, Francesca Simion, and Mark H. Johnson, ‘Eye contact detection in humans from birth’ in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 99 (2002), pp. 9602–9605.

7 Hiromi Kobayashi and Kazuhide Hashiya, ‘The gaze that grooms: Contribution of social factors to the evolution of primate eye morphology’ in *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 32(2011), pp. 157–165.

8 Robyn Dunbar, ‘Bridging the bonding gap: The transition from primates to humans’ in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences*, 367 (2012), pp. 1837–1846.

9 Caspar Addyman, Charlotte Fogelquist, Lenka Levakova and Sarah Rees, ‘Social Facilitation of Laughter and Smiles in Preschool Children’ in *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), p. 1048.

Caspar Addyman is a psychologist and director of the InfantLab at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has investigated how babies acquire language, concepts, and their sense of time. Since 2012 he has studied how laughter helps babies bond and learn.

Keina Yoshida

A Feminist Laughter that Silences the Law?



Marleen Gorris (Dir.), *A Question of Silence* (*De stilte rond Christine M.*), 1982. © EYE Film Institute Netherlands.

Cinematic Jurisprudence

The idea that a film can be analysed for its legal content or its jurisprudential value has been termed ‘cinematic jurisprudence’. This was first defined by Anthony Chase as ‘a way of looking at law through the lens of cinema that projects an alternative view of legality, one every bit as likely to undermine ruling ideas about fairness and formal legal equality as to reinforce them’.¹ Orit Kamir has argued that the medium of film allows for multi-layered narratives which can evoke complex and emotional responses to the legal issues on screen.² As trials and hearings themselves have moved online, legal scholars have become increasingly interested in film. Far more people are likely to watch trials in movies and on television than will read the thousands of pages of transcripts and judgments produced by courts and tribunals. This is why, for lawyers, studying film matters.

Feminist films’ portrayal of the law can challenge its implicit masculinity, either by exposing the gendered ways in which supposedly neutral laws operate, or by showing how procedural rules silence women’s narratives. Films such as *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Adam’s Rib* (1949), and *Legally Blonde* (2001) highlight how intersectional feminist advocacy can be used successfully to challenge discriminatory or masculinist approaches to the law. Through the personal struggles of the women on screen, these films, while entertaining, also make very important points about the law, showing how it can operate as an obstacle to women’s equality in and even outside the courtroom.

A woman in the courtroom can highlight the law’s complicity with patriarchy, and invite audiences to laugh at traditional masculine approaches to proceedings and judgment. This is exactly what *A Question of Silence* (1982), Marleen Gorris’s feminist film classic and debut, does so well. The film invites audiences to judge not only the women who are the defendants in a murder trial, but also the entire legal and social system.

Can laughter be a tool to challenge the law?

A Question of Silence centres around the fictional case of three women who spontaneously kill a man they do not know. The women are also unknown to each other until they find themselves by chance one day in a clothes shop, where they brutally kill the owner of the shop while the other customers, all women, watch in silence. The film’s main character is Janine, a criminal psychiatrist appointed as an expert to determine the women’s sanity. Janine’s relationship with her lawyer husband, a relationship which initially seems fairly egalitarian, comes under strain during the film due to her realization that the women all had a common motive for the murder: patriarchy.

The viewer is made aware of patriarchy’s role through Janine’s interviews and conversations with the women. She asks one of them — Andrea, a secretary — if the three would have killed a woman. Of course not, Andrea retorts. In flashbacks portraying the women’s lives, we see Andrea’s voice silenced in the boardroom, her ideas appropriated by men. She is belittled, ignored, and undervalued. Strikingly, another of the accused — Christine, a housewife — remains silent throughout the film. We see Janine interview Christine’s husband, who complains that his wife has nothing to do, being at home all day. He is blind to her reproductive work in the household. As another of the women informs Janine, Christine has stopped speaking because no one listens to her.

The women’s silencing echoes feminist legal literature that analyses how the justice system suppresses women’s narratives and voices in the courtroom. Even Janine’s husband admits that the justice system is not impartial and that every-

Introduction

Everybody loves a courtroom drama scene. From John Cleese as a barrister in *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988) to the televised trial of O.J. Simpson, the public seems to have an insatiable appetite for criminal prosecutions, their drama and, at times, even the laughter that emerges from them. For some legal academics, studying cinema is important because it feeds the public imagination about the law.

thing is decided beforehand — a further indictment of patriarchy in action, although he does not mean it that way (the comment occurs at a dinner party, in an act of conversational male bonding). This lack of impartiality is also evident in the climactic courtroom scene, where the key actors — lawyers, judges, and those in positions of authority — are all men.

When Janine is called to testify, she is questioned by the three judges (male) and prosecutor (male) and interrupted by defence counsel (male). The prosecutor cross-examining her is constantly sexist in his language, for instance in questioning her objectivity ('What you mean by "objectivity" is your [own] attitude,' Janine responds). The film culminates with the three accused laughing at the prosecutor, and joined by the women in the public gallery who witnessed the killing and have seemingly attended the hearing out of solidarity. Even Janine laughs at the prosecutor's assessment that the case would be absolutely no different had the three women killed a female shopkeeper, or even if three men had killed a female shopkeeper. The failure of this male representative of the state and the law to grasp the women's motive become a laughing matter. The women laugh at the law's gender blindness and stupidity, and their laughter is a feminist tool of solidarity against patriarchy's constrictions and constructions.

Conclusion

Courtroom proceedings are commonly orientated to the shutting down of natural narrative and emotion.³ Scholars have written about how films portray and stereotype female lawyers as emotional, or as professionally successful but emotionally unfulfilled. In Cynthia Lucia's analysis:

By their very presence, women in law throw into relief the condition of women in patriarchal culture, whether in terms of female gender performance or female agency, as both are inflected and regulated by the law and conventional narrative form.⁴

Yet emotion generally, and laughter specifically, can be powerful means to contest the sterility, ritual, and order of the proceedings. They disrupt the decorum and the performance of the law where everyone is meant to play specific roles. In *A Question of Silence*, the women use laughter to challenge the gender blindness of the courtroom and the law. Judith Resnik and Carolyn Heilbrun have argued that 'the silencing of women has not [...] been complete: stories have and do emerge. Women break out of the roles given to them, as they make their way toward generating their own stories — sometimes even before they can be heard.'⁵ In this film, we see the women break their silence and break out of their roles through laughter.

1 Anthony Chase, *Movies on Trial: The Legal System on the Silver Screen* (New York: New Press, 2002).

2 Orit Kamir, *Framed: Women in Law and Film* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3.

3 *Prosecutor v. Kunarac*, March 21 2000, Trial Transcript, 21 March 2000, p. 592.

4 Cynthia Lucia, *Framing Female Lawyers: Women on Trial in Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010) p. 24.

5 Carolyn Heilbrun and Judith Resnik, 'Convergences: Law, Literature, and Feminism' in *Yale Law Journal*, 99 (1990), pp. 1913, 1916; Maria Aristodemou, *Law and Literature: Journeys from Her to Eternity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Keina Yoshida is a Research Officer in the LSE Centre for Women, Peace, and Security. Keina is researching the links between the environment, nature, sustainable development goals, the gendered causes and impacts of violence against women, and structural inequalities in the context of international legal conceptions of peace and security. Keina is barrister at Doughty Street Chambers where she also forms part of the Doughty Street International team. She is a member of the editorial board of *Feminist Legal Studies*.

Past and Present of A Question of Silence

Marlene Gorris' film *A Question of Silence*, released in 1982, clearly emerged out of the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s and the subsequent dissemination of its influence. I would like to begin by summing up its story and then reflect on the dilemma it posed for those women, of which I was one, who had campaigned for a radical feminist cinema throughout the 1970s. Gorris's film begins with a murder. Three women, who happen to be in the same shop at the same time, respond to the owner's patronising embodiment of patriarchal power by spontaneously and collectively killing him. Their act is both arbitrary and over-determined; it is at once a subversive, almost surreal, gesture of feminist anger and also empty, outside any coherent political discourse. The film's narrative then revolves around the woman psychologist who agrees to testify in the three women's defence in court and is faced with their silence, a refusal of speech that transforms the initial act of violence into a more complex challenge to patriarchal power. During the trial, the 'question' of the women's silence gradually confronts the legitimacy of male power, symbolically epitomized in the legal process and embodied, in turn, by its professionals, that is, the administration of the court's authority and, of course, the judge himself. The implicit absurdity of this drama of non-communication erupts at the end of the film in laughter, in an outburst from the three women into which their psychologist is drawn. This is the film's compelling and, in many ways, fascinating point. On the one hand stands the law, with its command of the language

that regulates society in the interest of men; on the other hand, women, invisible and mute, for whom silence and laughter offer refuge and resistance. And here, the film is very much in keeping with the spirit of the present event 'The Laughter that Silences the Law'.

When I saw *A Question of Silence*, on its release, my response to the film was coloured by the movement for a feminist avant-garde aesthetic with which I had been deeply involved, both as a critic and as a film-maker, during the 1970s. For this movement too, the question of language and silence was of the essence, but extended, crucially, to the language of film itself as a repository of and mechanism for patriarchal power. The films that we supported, and indeed made, challenged or broke with those cinematic conventions that had, for instance, constructed the female figure as an object for male visual pleasure. And a mode of transparent narrative and naturalized characterization underpinned the given conventions of film language. In order to fight for a new cinema, the movement turned to an avant-garde or negative aesthetic, a kind of return-to-zero, that would make the relation between material and meaning newly visible and therefore open to challenge. The mid to late '70s had been the high point of feminist avant-garde cinema. Remarkable films had been made that seemed to herald a new dawn, for instance, to cite a few landmarks: Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), Yvonne Rainer's *Lives of Performers* (1972) and *Film About a Woman Who...* (1974), Valie Export's *Invisible Adversaries* (1977). Peter Wollen's and my *Riddles*

of the Sphinx (1977) also took part in the critical debates and experimental aesthetics of the time. However varied they might have been, these films questioned the language of cinema and experimented with alternative film forms, insisting, as it were, that a radically political cinema must also be radical aesthetically. From this, feminist-formalist, perspective, *A Question of Silence* was disappointing. Although from time to time a bit stylistically clunky, the film was shot conventionally and edited traditionally, using such familiar cinematic devices as close-ups and shot/counter shot. Narrative, character and event were woven unquestioningly around audience identification, without any gesture towards distanciation, self-referentiality, or the splitting open the sign, all significant devices for avant-garde cinema of the time.

With the passing of the decades between 1982 and 2019, some aspects of *A Question of Silence* now seem to have more in common with certain cultural concerns of 1970s feminism than I was, perhaps, aware at the time. I was part of a strand of the Women's Liberation Movement that had found in psychoanalytic theory a useful tool for making visible the patriarchal unconscious underlying society. We were influenced most of all by Freud, but also by Jacques Lacan, and I found the latter's concept of the Symbolic Order of particular relevance for cultural criticism, capturing precisely how patriarchy structured women's oppression and sustained its own authority through its language, its culture, and, above all, its law. These issues are, of course, central to *A Question of Silence*. A question of silence

must also be a question of language. The three silent women on trial are therefore characterized by their deviant use of language and rational defiance of rationality, and the drama ultimately challenges the phallocentric ritual of the law itself.

A few days before the UCL IAS event, ‘The Laughter that Silences the Law’, I participated in a panel discussion about the very early days of women’s film festivals. Discussing the way that these festivals had constituted a breaking of the silence that had surrounded films made by women across the history of cinema, I found two quotations particularly relevant. Preparing this presentation for the IAS, I felt that they are also relevant to the fictional world of women in *A Question of Silence*. Ursula Owen, when asked about the collective’s motives for founding Virago Press in 1975, said: ‘Silences. Perhaps the most important issue addressed in our early publications was the absence of women’s voices and experiences in the culture. We wanted to publish books about lives that had been invisible and with sentiments that had been unthinkable.’ And Sheila Rowbotham said in *Women’s Consciousness Man’s World*:

The oppressed without hope are mysteriously quiet. When the conception of change is beyond the limits of the possible, there are no words to articulate discontent so it is sometimes held not to exist. This mistaken belief arises because we can only grasp silence in the moment in which it is breaking.¹

Laughter is, of course, famously subversive. In Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, the established order is turned upside down when the oppressed ridicule their oppressors. In the same spirit, Hélène Cixous ends ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, her discussion of the male castration anxiety that so dominates Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, by saying: ‘You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s

beautiful and she’s laughing’.² But while the outburst of laughter at the end of *A Question of Silence* belongs to this carnivalesque tradition, it also evokes the relation between women and language that runs throughout the film. The women’s laughter functions as a non-verbal mode of communication, mutual and exchangeable, at once a collective gesture outside the restrictions of male language and an affront to the ritual site of that language’s authority: the court of law. In psychoanalytic terms, their laughter refers to the close relation between the body, emotion, and expression that characterizes the pre-Oedipal mother-child relationship theorized by Julia Kristeva.

Although we were only semi-aware of it in the early 1980s, the concentrated period of feminist avant-garde film was coming to an end. At the time, *A Question of Silence* seemed to look backwards; it was traditionally narrated and stylistically safe. But, with hindsight, this film might also have been a forerunner of another kind of women’s cinema: more committed to finding a general audience and to inserting its provocation as nearly as possible into the mainstream. And, however safe it might have seemed stylistically, the public space of neo-liberalism, then emerging over the horizon, would not necessarily be all that safe for a film like *A Question of Silence*.

1 Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) p. 30.

2 Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875-93 (885).

Laura Mulvey is Professor of Film and Media Studies at Birkbeck College, University of London. She was Director of Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image (BIMI) from 2012 to 2015. Her most recent book is *Afterimages: On Cinema, Women and Changing Times* (2019). Her latest edited books are *Feminisms* (2015); and *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and British Experimental Film in the 1970s* (2017). Mulvey made six films in collaboration with Peter Wollen, including *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), and two films with artist and filmmaker Mark Lewis. Her work has helped shift the orientation of film theory at its intersection with psychoanalysis, and feminism.



Caravaggio, *Head of Medusa*, 1598-99, Oil on canvas mounted on wood, diameter 58 cm, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence © Public domain.

#Laughter Events at the IAS

Laughter in a Post-ironic Turn: Sincerity and humour in contemporary expressions of irony

Larne Abse Gogarty (UCL), Shumi Bose (CSM), Seth Graham (UCL), Pil and Galia Kollectiv (RCA, Reading), and Florian Mussgnug (UCL)

Is it a laughing matter? Curating the funny side

Margot Heller (South London Gallery), Sarah McCrory (Goldsmiths CCA), Beatrice Gassman De Sousa (The Agency Gallery), Gary Stevens (UCL) and Marko Ilic (UCL, Courtauld)

Kuryokhin's Stiob: Postmodernist Laughter in the Postcommunist Dark

Alexander Kan (BBC), Anna Kan (social and cultural historian), Hannelore Fobo (art critic and curator) and Andrei Rogatchevski (UCL / UiT)

Laughter as a Political Tool: Zunar in Malaysia, an exhibition

With responses from Alena Ledeneva (UCL), Natasha Eaton (UCL), and Jeff Howard (UCL). Curated by Alice Rudge (IAS) and Albert Brenchat-Aguilar (IAS).

Laughter as a political tool: Zunar in Malaysia, a talk

Zunar (cartoonist)

Why So Serious? Laughter and Literary Studies

Patrick Hayes (Oxford), Huw Marsh (QMUL), Katie Fleming (QMUL) and Julia Jordan (UCL)

Selling Laughter

Steen Raskopoulos (comedian), Kat Buckle (Curtis Brown) and Owen Donovan (comedy producer)

Comic Books and Laughter: History, Politics, and Aesthetics

Nina Mickwitz (UAL), Nicola Streeten (artist), Roger Sabin (UAL) and Dominic

Davies (City University)

Freud, Jokes and Humour: a transdisciplinary workshop

Lionel Bailly (UCL) and Seb Coxon (UCL)

Laughing Gas: Science and Satire in Nineteenth-century Medical Culture

Caroline Rance (author) and Matthew Crampton (storyteller, writer and singer)

Jewish Comedy: A serious history

Jeremy Dauber (Columbia)

The Laughter that Silences the Law

Laura Mulvey (BBK), Nina Power (Humanities, Roehampton) and Keina Yoshida (LSE).

David Schneider (comedian, screenwriter, and performer) in conversation with Devorah Baum (Southampton)

Laughing at Architecture: Architectural Histories of Humour, Satire and Wit

Michela Rosso (Politecnico di Torino), Angela Becher (Liverpool), Alan Powers (LSA), Christoph Lueder (Kingston School of Art) and Adrian Forty (UCL).

The Rimmers

Alex Eisenberg, Candy Gigi and Tom Joseph (The Rimmers) and Raz Weiner (Royal Holloway)

Medieval Fiction and its Contraries

Julie Orlemanski (Chicago)

Democracy and (dis)trust in the experts

Alfred Moore (York) and Zeynep Pamuk (Oxford)

'On Laughter': a two-day conference

Morten Kringelbach (Oxford), Yasmine Musharbash (ANU), Devorah Baum (Southampton), Caspar Addyman (Goldsmiths), Yousef Barahmeh (Portsmouth), Tereza Capelos (Birmingham), Katherine Owen (Birmingham), Shun-liang Chao (National Chengchi), Peter Chonka (KCL), Polona Curk (Essex), Andrew Dean

(IAS), Andrea Bravo Díaz (UCL), Katharina Donn (Augsburg),

Phil Emmerson (Birmingham), Elena Fejdić (UEL), Hannah Fagin (MoMA), Stephen Forcer (Birmingham), Laura S. Martin (Sheffield), Shudarshana Gupta (Mental Health Research Clinic, Kolkata), Thomas Hintze (California), Christine Howes (Gothenburg), Peter Jones (Tyumen), Chloe Julius (UCL), Christian Keller (Humboldt/KCL), Chris Knight (UCL), Christoula Lionis (Manchester), Birte Loschenkohl (Essex), Carolyn McGettigan (UCL), Lina Molokotos-Liederman (UAL), Addison Niemeyer (UCL), Daniel Norman (Durham), Elisa Padilla (Sussex), Jahdiel Perez (Oxford), Camilla Power (UEL), Andrei Rogatchevski (IAS / UiT), Alice Rudge (IAS), Maryam Sikander (SOAS), Emily Upson (UCL), Matthew Ward (Birmingham), Ian Wilkie (Salford), Natalie Didams (Manchester), Tarek Younis (UCL), and Carolin Zieringer (Frankfurt)

Canons and Values in Contemporary Literary Studies

Andrew Dean (UCL), Hugh Foley (QMUL), Sarah Ilott (Manchester Met), Adam J Smith (York St John), Jo Waugh (York St John), Christopher Webb (UCL), Lina Aboujieb (Palgrave), Mark Ford (UCL), Huw Marsh (QMUL)

Mafalda - A Social and Political History of Latin America's Global Comic

Isabella Cosse (Buenos Aires)

