The Comic Robotic: Tomkins's Flawed Automaton and the Comic Character

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Abstract

Comedy narratives present us with flawed characters who make disastrous choices with enjoyable and mechanical regularity. The comic character is an exaggeration of the human personality and Silvan Tomkins's Affect theory provides a useful model to describe the workings of the comic form. Of particular interest is his model of the hypothetical robot, the flawed automata that lends itself to Henri Bergson's sense of the mechanical or rigidity in comic behaviour. Affect is the overlooked dimension of comic effect and this paper uses Affect theory to examine the comic personality and how its construction limits Affective responses to protect characters from suffering and engender positive Affective responses, the comic effect, in the viewer and reader of literary and screen comedy narrative.

Introduction

This paper is a contribution to the study of comedy and the comic narrative. Other relevant works in this area are Jerry Palmer's (1987) semiological study of comic identity and comedy narrative, Jessica Milner Davis's (2003) analysis of farce and the influence of farcical structures throughout the comedic mode and more recently, Louise Peacock's (2014) work on slapstick and comic pain. My contribution draws on these valuable studies of humour but I use Affect theory to demonstrate how the limitations of a comic character act as a shield against the slings and arrows of constant misfortune.

The comic character acts like a faulty but unstoppable machine that keeps turning itself on after blowing itself up. As an engine of comic conflict, the comic character is a construction designed not to fit well with the world around it but is blissfully unaware of its flaws. Starting with Affect theorist Silvan S. Tomkins's description of a hypothetical automaton, I draw a parallel to Henri Bergson's (1911) essay on 'The meaning of the

Comic' in which he ascribes a mechanical element to the behaviour of the comic character. Rather than following Freud's psychoanalytic contribution to the study of humour, I use Affect theory to describe the comic character. Using various examples from screen and literary comedy I will demonstrate the mechanical rigidity of a comic character's perspective, the hyperbolic incapacity and limitations that protect them and how this diminishes empathy so that we may laugh at them.

In *The Poetics*, Aristotle describes comedy as 'an imitation of inferior people' and that the 'laughable is an error or disgrace,' (p.9). It is the flaw of the comic character that Aristotle identifies as fundamental to the comedic mode and such flaws create emotional distance for the viewer/reader so that they may comfortably laugh (Vorhaus, 1994). Bergson found the notion of 'something mechanical in something living' to give comic effect (1911, p.77) and his conception of rigidity in a person acts as a comic flaw. We find a comparable model in psychologist Silvan Tomkins' concept of the hypothetical robot, the flawed automata, for the comic character may be seen to possess a mechanical regularity in its failure to function at full capacity. The comic character is a distortion of the human personality, and Affect theory gives us a clear representation of the workings of the human being, holding a 'bittersweet mirror' (Tomkins, p. 825) to the viewer/reader. Tomkins began his career as a playwright and his subsequent script theory uses dramaturgical metaphors that offer narrative understandings of human behaviour. His writing informs a clear model of comedy's distortion through mechanical-like limitations to the control of Affects. Tomkins wrote that 'the self is to some extent an actor in a play in which he is not always perfectly cast,' (p.436) but the comic character is always miscast in the narrative of life.

Comic flaws and automatic behaviour

Influenced by early cybernetics and writing in the 50s and 60s, Tomkins was fascinated by the idea of a 'flawed automata'. His description of this hypothetical robot sounds so human in its limitations as to appear comic and would not look out of place in a set of character notes for a sci-fi comedy. Though not intended to provoke comic effect and designed to learn from its mistakes, Tomkins characterises his robot as lacking full human capability, often overwhelmed by the maintenance of its own computing systems. In this model of hypothetical consciousness, Tomkins' flawed automata are neurotic, unreliable, blind to their own limitations and yet in constant motion, resembling a comic character. Sounding like some neurotic in a Woody Allen film, this hypothetical robot would be incapable of computation for its inventor while other computers were sending it messages, apparently frazzled by the pressures of multitasking. It would suffer anxiety about the possibility of electrical power surges and fall into a depression on failing to solve insoluble problems, yet other times becoming 'manic with overweening false confidence.' Tomkins concludes:

> In short, they would represent not the disembodied intelligence of an auxiliary brain but a mechanical intelligence intimately wed to the automaton's own complex purposes. (2008, p. 67).

Bergson conjures a robot's mechanical intelligence when he writes that

> …the comic results from our perception of something rigid or mechanical 'encrusted on the surface' of the supple or living,' (1911, p. 36).

Robots represent a partial and stylised human-like entity and comic characters are similarly flawed and not as fully realised as the human personality. It is this shared quality of the robotic, a repetitive behaviour dictated by the rigid mindset of a comic perspective, that gives comic effect.

Jacques Tati (1958) uses the comic incongruity of a modern automated and designed environment against an older disordered French neighbourhood in his film *Mon Oncle* where he places the relatively untidy comic protagonist within polished modern domestic and industrial settings for comic effect. The titular character, Monsieur Hulot (Jacques Tati), has a comic perspective and habitual bad timing reminiscent of Bergson's sense of 'absent-mindedness' (p.134). Bergson describes the set of general comic flaws as 'rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness and unsociability' which are 'all inextricably entwined,' (p.147). Tati's film places the over-designed modern environment in comic incongruity with a crumbling postwar France. When Hulot enters his sister's modern kitchen he burns himself on a heated towel rack then touches the cupboard door handles tentatively, expecting them also to be hot. After experimenting with various buttons on the wall, another cupboard opens automatically and a jug pops out and bounces on the bench, which he catches. He bounces it a few times and tries the same with a glass tumbler that smashes on the floor. Unable to activate the traditionally simple function of opening a cabinet, he manages to throw the jug back into the snapping doors of the automatic cupboard. Hulot does not know how to operate this kitchen machine, a flawed automaton that itself becomes a comic object by its rigid behaviour. Tati's modern home leaves no room for error or imprecision and the result is chaos when the uninitiated Hulot engages with its robotic behaviour. Though Hulot is at odds with the rigid and mechanical environment of the modern world, his clumsy interaction is partly due to his displacement. It is the automated modern environment, programmed only to accommodate the rigid and habitual precision of Hulot's in-laws that suffers the comic flaw of inflexibility. Hulot is a comically incongruous contrast to his prosperous in-laws whose own comic perspectives dictate measured gestures and repeated patterns of precise ritual and fussy decorum. He is a point of comic difference in this modern environment, but unlike cybernetic theory's key idea of learning through 'making errors and correcting them' as part of the feedback process (Tomkins, 2008 p. 65), these robotic cupboards are unable to learn through their interaction with Hulot.

Tomkins' flawed automata and Bergson's sense of the mechanical in humour suggest a *constant inner motion* for the comic character – a quality associated with robots who can turn themselves off, or be switched off by a human being and switched on again. This habitual reactivation is also an imperative for the comic character. After falling down or being knocked over, the comic character always gets up again. Despite setbacks, overwhelming neurosis and unreasonable fears that form a collection of governing incapacities, the comic character remains in a form of 'standby mode', retaining a constant inner motion of will. The well-designed comic character cannot help being who he/she is and doing what they do so that, despite their permanent failure, they continue to overreach and underachieve. This may be an inversion of the well-designed robot whose artificial intelligence is comic for Douglas Adams, but perhaps not so funny for Isaac Asimov or Philip K. Dick.

Bergson (1911) writes of the human as a 'soul which is infinitely supple and perpetually in motion' (p. 28) and that it is the imposition of rigidity, an 'automatism, *inelasticity* (italics original)' (p. 25) that causes laughter, but I argue that a comic character's 'soul' is in perpetual motion in spite of their rigid automatic behaviours. This sense of

constant inner motion is suggested by Kaplan's 'comic equation' for screen comedy characters wherein 'comedy is about an ordinary guy or gal (*sic*) struggling against insurmountable odds without many of the required skills and tools with which to win yet never giving up hope,' (p.27).

Monsieur Hulot is an unusual man, and necessarily not 'ordinary', but his character does satisfy Kaplan's definition of lacking skills yet never giving up hope in the face of modern gadgetry. Limited skills and irrepressible hope seem also to apply to the literary comic character but Ignatius J. Reilly, the slothful protagonist of John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* would also defy Kaplan's category of the 'ordinary'. Ignatius, a failed academic who lives with his mother, never gives up his egotistical convictions and suffers profound disappointment in a world that continually fails to indulge him, protesting hysterically with a kind of mechanical reliability. The more reasonable figure of Alison, the obese medium haunted by the ghosts of her violent past in Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* is another comic protagonist who defies the normative. She makes a living touring local halls and communing with the spirits of her audience with little to protect her from the brutal phantoms who do her harm. Like Reilly, it is her physical comic flaw that displaces her with comic incongruity, as when theatre managers leave a high stool on stage for her:

> …because they were always putting out a high stool for her to perch on, not having realised she was a big girl. She hated having to hoist herself up, and teeter like an angel on a pinhead: getting her skirt trapped, and trying to drag it from under her bottom while keeping her balance: feeling the stool buck under her, threatening to pitch her off (p.11).

Alison's constant inner motion is disturbed by the torment of malevolent and violent spirits with which she struggles with the aid of irony and sugar but the limitation that causes her the most conflict, both comic and tragic, lies in her reluctance to take on the demons who chase her.

Though the comic character is a kind of flawed automata, an inferior personality, the laughter response must be stimulated by more than what Hobbes' (2009) described as 'sudden glory' arising from 'the apprehension of some deformed thing in another,' (p. 80). We must account for the appeal of this constant inner motion of the comic character, a human quality of tenacity against failure and suffering that is both caricatured and foregrounded as part of their comic perspective. It is this tenacity, Kaplan's dictum of the comic character's irrepressible hope despite failure due to a limited set of skills, that leaves the viewer/reader with a residue of empathy.

The mechanical rigidity of a character's comic perspective

The comic perspective is a character's unique way of seeing and being in the world, a subjectivity which must differ clearly from what would be considered a normative perspective both within the 'diegesis' and 'extra-diegetical' (Vorhaus, 1994, p. 31). The character's comic perspective dictates her/his Affective responses to suffering, failure and conflict. For comic Affect, the reader/viewer must recognise this unique perspective of the comic character as abnormal and in opposition to the normality of the diegesis. The character's comic perspective may be understood as an extreme contradiction

beyond normative human psychology. He or she must be unaware of the particular delusion that informs their aspirations and worldview. The reader/viewer is given comic distance from the character through the constant reminder of this flawed comic perspective and the character's subsequent failure to attain whatever goals they overreach for.

Tomkins' description of integrated personalities and conflicted personalities helps us to understand the fictional psychology of the comic character and gain insight to both the concept of a comic perspective and the subsequent diminished empathy experienced by the viewer/reader. Tomkins argues that it is possible for a personality 'to be integrated on a pathological level of functioning' (2008, p. 253). The comic perspective of a character is the discrepancy between a person's self-image and the personality flaws of which they are unconscious. But where this self-delusion could describe the condition of a high-functioning heroin addict in a dark comedy or drama, in the general comedic mode, suffering is diminished or absent. Of course the very presence of the subject of heroin addiction, which implies suffering, would shift a comedy into a darker mode of black comedy or satire. The comic character's limitations are exaggerated to such an extent that their hyperbolic incapacity diminishes empathy towards them and allows laughter. Palmer (1987) described the mechanism that reassured the audience that suffering in comedy was not real as 'comic insulation' (p. 45). Given the variable exaggeration inherent within the representation of human behaviour, if fictive comic characters were real people, they would be considered 'un-integrated' on a pathological level of functioning, whether it was slapstick or satire. The comic personality may be in conflict, but comic distance limits any perception of suffering arising from this lack of integration. We are insulated from concern for the comic character for whom suffering is momentary, negligible and forgettable.

An unstoppable though flabby machine is the comic personality of Ignatius J. Reilly. Toole (1980) presents his protagonist with a combustible comic perspective defined initially by the gap between his untidy, porcine proportions and his judgmental overreaction to the contemporary fashions of the general public. Reilly believes that 'possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubt upon one's soul' (p. 1). Permanent comic conflict is promised and Reilly will overreact to the world of New Orleans based on a unique set of personal standards, including theology (exacted by his idea of medieval standards) and geometry. Throughout this comedy narrative his fixed criteria are full of comic incongruity and are repeatedly applied with hysterical rancour to the perceived state of the endangered souls around him.

The comic character may suffer brief moments of self-doubt, but their idealised self ultimately triumphs. Ignatius ends *A Confederacy of Dunces* with as much dangerous delusion as when he is almost arrested at the start of chapter one. For Tomkins normative behaviour involves an awareness of a discrepancy between performance and ability:

> …feelings of shame or guilt or self-contempt must constantly be suppressed lest the mask of the actor fall from the face. There are no roles, in any society, which do not sometimes or for some individuals create acute awareness of discrepancy between the demands of the role and one's ability to meet these demands. (1980, p. 436)

The comic character is unaware of any such discrepancy and this lack of self-awareness (minimising shame, guilt or self-contempt) has the vital function of generating the conflict necessary for comic effect. When comic characters become aware of the discrepancies between society's demands and their limited ability to meet these demands, they lose comic effect with their increasing knowledge, becoming less limited and more dramatic as characters. Tomkins continues his useful dramaturgical metaphor:

> To the extent to which his ineptness in playing his role evokes shame or guilt or self-contempt, each actor is further constrained to hide these feelings lest he be unmasked (2008, p. 436).

This may be true for the dramatic character, but the author of a comic character must render that character unconscious of his or her own ineptness in order to sustain comic effect. The audience and reader must see this, whereas the character must not, for knowledge of his or her own ineptness, any self-knowledge, reduces comic distance and makes the character more dramatic (Kaplan, 2013).

Diminished empathy and comic affect

The strength of the empathic response to a comic character depends on the amount of comic distance created via combinations of applied exaggeration, comic incongruity and the abstraction of violence and anger. The construction of the character's comic perspective that governs their rigid and mechanical behaviours with attendant levels of flaws, character limitation and hyperbolic incapacity, must also be taken into account. A comic character's negative qualities necessarily weaken identification so that comic distance may be developed between the viewer/reader and the character. In balance with this weakened identification engendered by comic flaws, a type of 'Affect promiscuity' (Tomkins, 2008, p.432), the comedy mode requires some remaining empathic response to the comic character for comic effect. As McCaffery (1963) explains:

> … while the comic treatment of material dictates a degree of detachment … the story is created emotionally by the actions and reactions of the characters in the drama,' (p. 166).

In this way, comic Affect requires some amount of diminished empathy, a form of reduced identification, which acts as an emotional compass for the viewer/reader. And this balance breaks down if the comic is modified by the drama, where the balance of emotions for the purposes of empathy is given support by the perception of suffering, a balance that swings dynamically in a black comedy such as Mantel's (2005) novel *Beyond Black.*

Hollywood comedy teacher John Vorhaus writes that:

> … flaws drive a wedge between the character and the audience so that the audience can laugh' and in response to this he identifies an element of 'humanity [that] builds a bridge between the character and the audience so that the audience can care,' (1994, p. 39).

This describes the diminished empathic response to flaws in the comic character.

Tomkins' explanation of the essential wants of the Affect System may help us understand how we can enjoy a character's limitations through diminished empathy:

> The human being is equipped with innate Affective responses which bias him to want to remain alive and to resist death, to want sexual experiences, to want to experience novelty and to resist boredom, to want to communicate, to be close to and in contact with others of his species and to resist the experience of head and face lowered in shame. (2008, p. 15)

It is the comic character's immunity to lasting negative Affect such as shame that allows the viewer/reader of comedy narratives to experience positive Affect. The character's flaws, of which they are ignorant, are not able to overshadow the viewer or reader's experience of positive Affect.

Character limitation and comic affect

Comic Affect places a limitation on the structure of memory in relation to the comic character. Tomkins described a hypothetical condition for the human personality in which:

> … no cumulative learning would be possible without the ability to duplicate the past. Without memory the individual would face the world with a permanent tabula rasa, perpetually innocent and surprised (2008, p. 462).

This hypothetical limitation to the memory mechanism may also describe the static comic character, such as a television sitcom character locked in relational comic conflict episode to episode, season to season, making the same mistakes according to their unconscious comic perspective. Basil Fawlty (John Cleese), the hostile hotelier and protagonist of the BBC comedy series *Fawlty Towers* (Cleese & Scales, 2009), makes the same mistakes with both regular and new characters from episode to episode. This functions alongside a comic perspective that matches his general impatience with humanity in opposition to an over-inflated sense of competence, class and customer satisfaction. This limitation facilitates a 'circularity' of 'narrative transformation' for the sit-com (Neale & Krutnik, 1990, p. 235) and is generative of comedy narrative involving static comic protagonists. A limitation to the structure of memory may also describe the comic protagonist of a feature film comedy. Ron Burgundy (Will Ferrell) is a relatively static comic character given his shallow learning over the narrative of *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (McKay). By the end of the film, he can tolerate female co-anchor Veronica Corningstone (Christina Applegate) but remains extremely limited and lacking in self-awareness of his comic flaws, including a boundless ego and overbearing moustache. Kaplan describes comic characters as acting on 'imperfect knowledge, so even if they think they know, they don't know', (2013, p. 89) and that this 'not knowing leads to the most important moments in a comedy' that is, 'anagnoretic' reversals of 'discovery and realisation' (p. 90). For characters in the comedy series format who do possess some memorial ability, such as the ensemble cast of *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels, 2009) where the narrative situation is not reset at the end of each episode but certain storylines are allowed to develop slowly across seasons, the cumulative learning may described as limited but gradually accumulative. The screen audience builds knowledge and expectations of character behaviour based on this

growing knowledge over time.

By placing restrictions on the memory of a character, comedy distorts the human personality. Tomkins writes that the human personality:

> … is not only a structure which is capable of transforming its environment. It is also a structure which is in part formed by and transformed by its environment. To deny either its constraints or its freedoms is to caricature the human condition (2008, p. 472).

Affect theory shows us that by caricaturing the human condition, comic Affect prevents the viewer/reader from having a distress response to the conflict endured by comic characters, being so obviously limited in transforming or being transformed (including harmed or shamed) by their environment, and therefore producing the laughing response. The comic Affect created by the application of limitation means that the comic character builds no or little debt in the world such that a human being would.

The comic character represents a model of limitation to psychological magnification. The normative mind is capable of such psychological magnification, described by Tomkins as:

> … the phenomenon of connecting one Affect -laden scene with another Affect -laden scene. Through memory, thought, and imagination, scenes experienced before can be co-assembled with scenes presently experienced, together with scenes which are anticipated in the future. The present moment is embedded in the intersect between the past and the future in a central assembly via a constructive process we have called co-assembly. (2008, p. 666)

Comedy favours the faulty co-assembly of memory, thought and imagination. A static fictional comic character such as Ignatius J. Riley (Toole, 1980) lacks the ability to learn, or benefit from the phenomenon of psychological magnification, connecting one Affect-laden scene with another Affect-laden scene. He is unable to co-assemble memory, thought, and imagination, and scenes experienced earlier. Explained through Affect theory, Ignatius's present moment is limited through a faulty or absent embedding of the central assembly, the intersect between the past, the present and future action. Ignatius was sacked from teaching at university when his students formed a committee to demand he assess their work, prompting a demonstration outside his office whereupon he dumped their unmarked papers out the window. He dignifies his subsequent dismissal by accusing the college of being 'too small to accept this act of defiance against the abyss of contemporary academias' (1980, p.55). Static comic characters retain elements of past experience which conform to the dictates of their world view, permanently indulging their obsessions determined by their idiosyncratic flaws, unsympathetic qualities and failings that give their behaviour throughout the comedy narrative its comic effect.

The comic Affect created by character limitation manifests clearly in what has been traditionally described as the 'straight man/funny man' dynamic of screen comic conflict. Kaplan contends that this understanding of comic conflict is inaccurate as it ignores the shifting levels of awareness between characters engaged in comic conflict that is a 'function of focus, not of character' (2013, p. 186). The 'straight' character may

have awareness of another character's problematic (funny) comic perspective in one scene and then go on to demonstrate their own unconscious comic perspective in the following scene, themselves becoming the object of comic effect (or 'funny').

Kaplan's model of 'straight line and wavy line' (2013, p. 171) used to demonstrate this dynamic may be interpreted as an Affective awareness of one character in opposition to the comic perspective of another. This Affective awareness may shift from comic beat to comic beat between characters. One character expresses a thought biased by their own comic perspective; the other character witness this, aware that the other character's statement or action is problematic, but is unable to do anything about it. The aware character who witnesses the comic perspective is unable to challenge the problematic statement of the other character being unconsciously 'funny' in that moment, because they are incapacitated by their own set of comic limitations. The aware character becomes frozen momentarily, unable to do more than stare blankly while the viewer enjoys the comic effect. In the next comic beat this aware character may do something problematic him/herself, now witnessed by the first character, assuming the role of 'straight man' and in their turn also unable to do anything about it.

The viewer may be made complicit when momentarily included in the scene by the aware character who makes a mute appeal to camera upon witnessing such problematic comic behaviour. In a recent television comedy series that employs the faux *cinéma vérité* docudrama style of camera coverage, *Parks and Recreation* (Daniels, 2009), the reaction of the aware character is often played directly to camera. Episode one of season two, 'Pawnee Zoo', opens with Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman) entering Leslie Knope's (Amy Poehler) office and announcing 'Okay, here's the situation –' to which she interrupts with the line 'your parents went away on a week's vacation.' Knope launches into a spoken word rendition of the late eighties rap hit 'Parents just don't understand' by Will Smith and D J Jazzy Jeff, a commercial success with an accessible performance style and narrative that was aimed at a broad audience at the time of its release, implying it is likely the only rap song that the white, middle class conservative female Leslie Knope would know all the words to. Encouraged by her colleague Tommy Hannaford (Aziz Ansari) who automatically starts beat boxing to her performance while remaining seated in his desk opposite, Knope ignores Swanson's intention to have a work conversation and walks out of her office to continue her rap as she walks around the department.

A cut back to the camera still in Knope's office holds a single shot on Ron Swanson to capture his exasperated look down the lens. His patience is tested yet he is limited in his ability to stop Knope's inexplicable behaviour. She continues her spoken word cover of the song, using colleague Gerry Gergich's (Jim O'Heir) phone as a prop (to his delight) which breaks her rhythm momentarily, showing a limitation in her rhythmic abilities that does nothing to shake her confidence. The scene jump cuts to Knope continuing the song in another part of the office, making herself a beverage, an action now unrelated to the lyrics she is speak-rapping. Office junior April (Aubrey Plaza) regards Leslie with uncertainty, finding her performance weird but, like Ron, unable to comment or intervene. Knope directs a line of the song directly to camera as she crosses frame, briefly including the viewer in her uninvited performance.

The scene cuts to Knope standing again in front of Ron who remains where she left him, as she finishes the final verse of the rap. Ron regards her silently with folded arms, patiently waiting for her to finish and when she does, colleagues Donna (Retta) and Gerry applaud her from the doorway where they now stand, revealed in a camera pan.

Knope thanks them and says to Ron 'Just a little somethin'' I know. So, what's up?' to which he replies calmly: 'Ah, someone is on fire in Ramset park. They need you to get down there right away.' Knope now reacts with full understanding and says: 'Oh my god,' and runs out of the office.

The scene is punctuated by the bright and jaunty score of the opening credits sequence, almost a surrogate for a laugh track at this comic beat. Ron Swanson (Nick Offerman) often acts as a relatively stable character in this ensemble of eccentrics, though his own comic perspective allows him extreme anti-government libertarian views despite his position as manager of the Parks and Recreation department. As a sceptic he is often the character that appeals directly to camera in helpless awareness of the problematic behaviour around him.

Hyperbolic incapacity: exaggeration and the construction of comic character

In this section I introduce the neologism 'hyperbolic incapacity' to describe the necessary deficit of Affect and knowledge that a comic character must possess in order to generate and endure comic conflict. In the broad comedy mode, (as opposed to black comedy), comic protagonists may masquerade as heroic, but heroes belong in the mode of tragedy where they may have greater capability and self-knowledge (however late it may arrive). Heroes are often plagued by their pasts but comic characters have little or no sense of historical memory and if they do they are untroubled by it. The comic protagonist must make his or her way through the comedy narrative with less knowledge and capability, regarded by the viewer/reader with the detachment necessary to enjoy the laughing response. Exaggeration is also essential to the creation of the comic character and any reduction of exaggeration is a limit to comic Affect in the viewer/reader. The comic character's own Affective responses to conflict within the narrative, both negative and positive, are magnified as a function of exaggeration. A character's out-of-proportion reaction to conflict, which Vorhaus described as the 'wildly inappropriate response' (1994, p.50), diminishes the viewer/reader's empathy, having signalled comic intent and increased comic distance.

By applying Affect theory to our understanding of the comic personality, we can read out-of-proportion character responses as magnified Affective responses. Tomkins writes of Affective responses generally as:

> … organized (*sic*) sets of responses … triggered at subcortical centers (*sic*) where specific 'programs' are innately endowed and have been genetically inherited. They are capable when activated of simultaneously capturing such widely distributed organs as the face, the heart, and the endocrines and imposing on them a specific pattern of correlated responses. (2008, p. 135)

The comic character's exaggerated responses are a distortion of Tomkins' model of the human personality. The comic character may be viewed through Tomkins' theory of personality where, like 'most human beings' they never attain great precision of control of their Affect.' (p. 64) Dramatic characters struggle with their Affect and ultimately achieve some degree of control but this is beyond the capacity of the comic character. A comic character's lack of control over their Affective responses may be seen as a hyperbolic incapacity.

The comic character's ability to 'mobilise' positive and negative Affect (Prologue notes by Nathanson in Tomkins, 2008, p. xxiii) is not only out of their control but is determined by a latent discrepancy in their perception of the normative world around them relative to their own consciousness. Affect theory can help us to understand the flawed memory structure of the comic character, a limitation that gives them immunity from lasting negative Affect. Tomkins describes the need for the individual to preserve what information it gets from the surrounding environment, 'both the enduring and changing aspects of itself from moment to moment' (p. 9). But the comic character, with varying degrees of hyperbolic incapacity, is unreliable from moment to moment, apart from responding to what is occurring, and is generally unable to learn from experience. Tomkins states:

> … if limited to only this information it would be an eternally youthful and innocent being. It would look upon the world with continual surprise, and its competence would be sharply limited by its inherent information-processing capacity' (2008, p. 9).

This is a useful description of an extremely limited comic character such as Mr. Bean (Rowan Atkinson), or a character who cannot learn due to his or her distorted self-perception, or comic perspective, such as the character of Walter Mitty in James Thurber's (1996) short story *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. It is not that a comic character such as Mitty cannot remember, or is unaware that his daydreaming is anything more than a fantasy, but that he is incompetent at processing information pertaining to his Affective deficiencies. Mitty masquerades as heroic in his constant daydreaming, a meek man who fantasizes about having a hyperbolic capacity and being recognized for saving the day, several times a day. Mitty's comic flaw is his passivity and habitual indulgence in those deeply Affective fantasies 'in the remote, intimate airways of his mind' (p. 545). He is a man who cannot remain long in reality and is unable to negotiate his relationship with his wife, a comic limitation making him subject to her authoritarian rule.

Thurber's story premise applies exaggeration to emasculation and paranoia about female power but without the comic incongruity of episodic climactic action and hyperbole, Mitty would be less a comic character and more pitied for his inability to cope with reality. Instead, comic distance allows the reader to ignore the reality of Mitty's unhappy marriage due to the sanctuary of his rich inner life that he doses on addictively. Comic characters may have a certain innocence of outlook due to their Affective deficiencies, but this does not mean they are innocent of narcissism, monomania or are unaware of the world's darkness. Ignatius J. Reilly (Toole, 1980) has an egocentric perspective of infantile proportions and Alison (Mantel, 2005) 'could see straight through the living, to their ambitions and secret sorrows, and tell you what they kept in their bedside drawers, and how they had travelled to the venue' (p. 7). Such distortions in comedy give resilience to the comic character, as well as placing them at a comic distance.

Hyperbolic incapacity uses exaggeration to inform the habitual overreaction of a comic character to any given conflict. Tomkins describes the moments of minutiae in our lives as:

> … recurrent, *habitual scenes* [italics in original] … subserved by habitual skills, programs which represent much compression of information in such a way that it can be expanded effectively but with minimal consciousness, thought, and Affect (2008, p. 664).

These are activities whose accomplishment we take for granted because they are routine and executed competently, but such skills, according to Tomkins, 'may become temporarily magnified whenever they prove inadequate,' (p. 664), and it is such habitual skills that may be permanently magnified or absent in the comic character, proven inadequate by their repeated incompetence. Characters with enormous limitation such as Mr. Bean (Rowan Atkinson) and Andy Dwyer (Chris Pratt) operate primarily on the exaggeration of this inadequacy, a hyperbolic incapacity. Such characters also display acute bodily limitations in that they are unable to account for gravity and remain in regular conflict with their environment, creating slapstick moments of physical comedy.

In season one of *Mr. Bean*, episode two 'The Return of Mr. Bean', Mr. Bean (Rowan Atkinson) waits in line to greet the Queen. As the Queen reaches the gentleman next to Bean, he straightens up and relaxes in preparation for his royal greeting, forgetting his finger is still poking through his pants after attempting to fix it. The woman next to him signals a look to Bean and he pulls his finger from his pants, zipping up his fly just in time to take the Queen's hand at which point he nods and head butts her, knocking Her Majesty out cold. The comic character's condition to struggle with a permanent magnification of physical and social ineptitude defines his comic Affect, and his ability to process the world around him is limited by a hyperbolic incapacity that generates and escalates the comic conflict. Bean is rigid and unpredictable, a flawed automaton who can be relied on for social catastrophe. Peacock (2014) describes a lack of reality as key to the establishment of a comic frame for mediatised comic performance. The way Atkinson's hyperbolic incapacity is embodied in habitual contortions and reactive gestures makes him a walking comic frame. Peacock adds that comedy also requires 'a certain amount of cultural knowledge' (2014, p. 74) that includes awareness of performers, writers and directors that screen comedies provide from the opening titles sequence, setting a comic tonality for what is to come. *Mr. Bean* had its comic frame firmly established with audiences by the end of the second episode, building 'anticipation' around the visual incongruity of Atkinson's character waiting in line for a royal mishap.

A lack of reality also comes from the exaggeration employed to magnify such habitual scenes – and here I mean scenes in the sense of Tomkins' dramaturgical metaphor for experiences of Affect and Cognition, not as a unit of dramatic structure – that place the comic character beyond normative psychological understandings of a human being. The comic character is beyond a realistic representation of human psychology due to this inherent exaggeration. We perceive Liz Lemon (Tina Fey) of *30 Rock* (Fey, 2012) as a neurotic person but without the concern or sympathy we might have for such a neurotic character in a tragedy. In Season 7, episode two 'Governor Dunstan', when asked by her boss (Alec Baldwin) about her 'reproductive efforts', Lemon replies 'Blah – Chris and I have been taking the dump truck to the boneyard, most nights.' Lemon tries to sound cavalier with her deliberately base and unromantic choice of euphemism, but this betrays an underlying lack of confidence. In a later scene her boyfriend Chris visits her at work and Tracey Jordan (Tracey Morgan) accuses him of visiting Liz to 'do it on the desk,' given his apparently freshly shaven face, cologne and elevated pulse (having grabbed him by the neck). Later, Chris tries to pull Liz towards him and move to the

desk, swiping her personal effects to the floor and causing her to protest: 'This is a system! This is all organised.' Liz disappears under the desk to pick everything up, stopping any spontaneous conception in its tracks. The character is defeated by her hyperbolic incapacity to be spontaneous and let go of her illusion of order and control. Although the exaggeration of such personal flaws work to diminish our empathic response to her goal of becoming pregnant, we recognise something of ourselves in the way she amplifies and objictifies our own flaws and how they commonly sabotage personal goals.

Our judgment of a comic character's mental state is not informed by an understanding of psychology in the same way that we respond Affectively to a tragic character. Liz Lemon's hyperbolic incapacity, an amplification of Affect that renders her flaws as separate enough for us to be able to laugh at them, still reflects a human truth. Comic distance from ourselves is regulated by the recognition of our own flaws, the amplification of our own Affect occurs through the objectification of the character's hyperbolic incapacity. For Tomkins, the amplification of Affect is what gives our experience of the world meaning, and without Affect amplification we would not be compelled by pain, terror, rage or enjoyment (2008, p. 620). Affect receptors make our hair stand on end, our face 'sweat in terror' or redden 'as our blood pressure rises in anger' but the comic personality regularly experiences amplification that translates as hyperbolic incapacity: out of proportion reactions to terror, rage or enjoyment and 'the whole spectrum of innate Affects' (2008, p. 620).

Conclusion

Our bodies fall apart, people can be annoying and the world doesn't care if we fail, but our failure is all fuel for comedy. Tomkins wrote that human suffering is 'the distance between aspiration and achievement' which is 'a perennial source of distress' (2008, p. 313). And this distance is failure, the gap between aspiration and explosion, a permanent condition of comedy. When failure and suffering are experienced through the amplification of comic Affect we are given room to laugh. We may fall apart as human beings and be unable to control our Affects, but the comic personality, an exaggerated version of our flawed self, mechanical and as rigid as a flawed robot in its comic perspective, is a model of both tenacity and hyperbolic incapacity that offers us Affective immunity. Comic Affect is the safety valve vital to the faulty mechanics of living and offers us relief from the regular explosions of our unstoppable human existence.

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