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## **The More, the Merrier? British Comedy and the Community of Laughter**

Amongst the many myths surrounding the birth of comedy in the ancient world is one which claims that comedy came into being as a deliberate antithesis to the solemn nature of tragedy. According to this myth, comedy was conceived when "a rowdy, drunken band of revelers mov[ed] unsteadily and noisily through the street" to mock the elaborate tragic verse which dominated the ritual festivities (Alan Sommerstein qtd. in Weitz 2010, 41). While this story is not true (at least not regarding its factual content), it does nevertheless appear as a fitting invention, for there is definitely a social aspect about comedy which renders it an experience both inclusive and exclusive at the same time. Though comedy has been identified as an essentially antisocial phenomenon by some observers – for laughter derives from challenging norms and from moving its heroes outside the accepted order into the realm of "[the] destructive and [the] anarchic" (Charney 1990, 171) – its social implications and its community-building effects are not to be overlooked. As F.H. Buckley argues in *The Morality of Laughter*, shared laughter builds societies and even has an economic dimension, since "[b]y establishing a bond between jester and listener, laughter permits them to promote their trust in each other. With the trust comes a greater ability to exploit profitable opportunities for joint gain" (2003, 178). The following pages will elaborate on these ideas and characterise the traditional relationship between the genre of comedy and the idea of community. I will demonstrate how this relationship is reflected within British popular culture and how a recent tendency in televised humour challenges the role which the communal aspect usually plays within comedy.

### **Comedy and Community**

The most influential concept to emphasise the link between communities and comedy is the so-called "community of laughter" (*Lachgemeinschaft*), a term not coined but immensely popularised by the works of Werner Röcke and Hans Rudolf Velten. In their research, which is dedicated to the role of laughter in political negotiations in the Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, Röcke and Velten argue that, since the Middle Ages lacked a wide range of institutionalised means of resolving conflict, various forms of communication had to be used to organise social exchange and cooperation, especially when it came to ritualised gatherings like feasts, games, or political meetings (Röcke and Velten 2005, xvii). This notion of the merry community applies to other contexts as well, for laughter effectively serves as a key device in (and producer of) all kinds of personal relationships (Douglas 1968). By focusing on laughter as a form of (social) communication, Röcke and Velten investigate the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion which create spontaneous communities, communities that are united by what they perceive as funny. Thus, laughter "presupposes shared worlds, shared codes, and shared values," which is the reason that it can wield "cohesive powers," strengthening a community from within (Reichl and

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Stein 2005, 13). Insofar as it creates communities of an unforeseeable nature, laughter is a performative act with social consequences, creating communities which are constantly in flux and which can dissolve as quickly as they came into being (Röcke and Velten 2005, x). Although they do not explicitly focus on the genre of comedy – and we should be careful not to take laughter, humour and comedy to be one and the same thing – Röcke and Velten's theory also works on the level of genre, for whilst they argue that the creation of a community of laughter is, generally, a spontaneous act, the overwhelming majority of examples in their collection point to the opposite. Communities of laughter *can* arise spontaneously, yet they follow conventionalised practices and produce generic forms. This principle is anything but new: in texts like the *Facetiae* (Giovanni Francesco Poggio Bracciolini's well-known joke anthology of the Renaissance, c. 1470), the community is written into the tale, strengthening the punchline as a triumphant group treats itself to a bit of healing laughter against common adversaries (like the tax collector).

Recent studies in the fields of sociology, psychology, and anthropology support the idea that laughter is a social phenomenon. Not only are we more likely to laugh (and to laugh more intensively) when in a group (Glenn 2003, 26-31), but humour works as a basic mode of communication to help us "incorporat[e], embrac[e], and even celebrat[e] the contradictions, incongruities, and ambiguities inherent in interpersonal relationships," something that traditional theories of laughter often fail to take into account (Martin 2007, 115). Within the genre of comedy, the social aspect translates well into the basic generic pattern: we frequently witness the temporary abolition of a set of rules in favour of a more anarchic, carnivalesque spirit which has implications for the whole *dramatis personae*. In the Shakespearean canon, the best-known example may well be the Forest of Arden in *As You Like It* (c. 1599), a place which acts as a counter-world to the oppressive regime of Duke Frederick, where hierarchies of birth and nobility are suspended, where one is "free from peril" and does not feel "the penalty of Adam" (2.1.4-5), and where the characters are free to subvert the established hierarchy: Orlando de Boys carries his servant on his back; Rosalind employs a gender masquerade to act the part of Ganymede. Crucially, however, the Forest proves no long-term solution for the characters in the play. A return to the kingdom is inevitable for this temporary community which is united in its derisive laughter; laughter that frequently occurs at the expense of the peasants whose realm the merry folks have effectively invaded. For all its sweetness, it is easy to overlook the often cruel tone of the Shakespearean comedy: for every happy couple and each wise-cracking fool, there is a William (in *As You Like It*) or a Malvolio (in *Twelfth Night*, c. 1601) to remind us that "communities of laughter arise at the expense of some outsiders," integrating them merely in order to "pick other targets" (Sollors 1986, 132). Evidently, the aspect of *Schadenfreude* is not to be ignored, for it is laughter directed at others which "can strengthen boundaries, solidifying members in their group identity" (Glenn 2003, 30). *As You Like It* would conclude in complete merriment, were it not for melancholy Jacques, who explicitly refutes the notion of belonging and who commits to solitude and meditation instead, ordering the others, "to your pleasures, / I am for other than for dancing measures" (V.4.190-191). Rosalind and the rest, however, cheerfully adapt to newfound circumstances together, as a group. No wonder that some scholars have identified "the essential role that the community plays in bringing individuals to a full sense of identity" as the key theme

of Shakespeare's work (Meidlinger 2000, 702). This pattern was to remain influential and largely intact within the genre of comedy, nowhere more so than in British popular culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### The Ealing Paradigm

Maybe *the* most fitting example of the community of laughter at work in the British context can be found in Ealing comedies, named after the legendary film studio that was headed by producer Michael Balcon during its so-called golden era (1948-1955). When it comes to the role of the community of laughter in British popular culture, it is worth including the Ealing paradigm since it remains one of the most cherished treasures in British film history and cultural memory. For film critic Simon Braund, Ealing films belong within "a time capsule with a collection of artefacts representing Britain at its best, alongside Shakespeare's sonnets, *The White Album* and a jar of Frank Cooper's Oxford marmalade" (2011, 146). The dominant narrative of Ealing studios is strongly linked to the notion of nostalgia, not only because Ealing's heyday coincides with the Golden Age of British film (the so-called "Wartime Wedding") – an era before the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, before the downfall of the British Empire, and before the supposed dismantling of traditional British identity concepts – but also because Ealing's output itself openly mourns the loss of traditional Britishness. The key virtue of the studio, which is said to have inspired legions of contemporary British filmmakers, was its self-proclaimed spirit of "collective benevolence" (Barr 1998, 51), an idea that applies both to the studio's history, the way it is said to have been run,<sup>1</sup> and the themes addressed in its comedies. Balcon himself describes the spirit of the films as being characterised by "mild anarchy" (qtd. in Pulleine 1997, 117), a phrase which may well serve as an overall characterisation of comedy, for the genre tends to focus on a temporary suspension of rules and their subsequent restoration.

The prototypical Ealing comedy<sup>2</sup> – the formula of which would apply to classic films such as *Passport to Pimlico* (dir. Henry Cornelius, 1949), *Whisky Galore!* (dir. Alexander Mackendrick, 1949), or *The Titfield Thunderbolt* (dir. Charles Crichton, 1953) – celebrates "democracy of the Dickensian type," and "breathe[s] with the Little Englander's refusal to be homogenised, while – nonetheless – desiring to be part of the happy crowd" (Newton 2003, 12). Typically, Ealing films focus on the struggle of a small group of individuals, often a village community inhabiting "a liminal space on the margins of the nation" (Higson 2000, 45), who courageously defend their property against a brutish bully trying to do away with their old ways. The bully is typically represented by experts, managers, and/or bureaucrats, i.e. representatives of the state, serving as the classic comedic blocking figures (Geraghty 2000, 55-75). In the end, the small man remains victorious and emerges with his honour intact, although the spirit of reconciliation permeating the endings also means that the anarchic quality is

1 Charles Barr chronicles how this powerful Ealing myth came into being, how it was strengthened by the tales surrounding the legendary struggle Balcon put up against the overpowering influence of American competitors and the exodus of British talent to the US, and how it relied on the idea of the 'Ealing Roundtable,' the regular pub meetings which the studio's employees held (1998, 7).

2 Though comedies only amount to a tiny segment amongst the more than 100 films which were produced during the studio's heyday, they remain Ealing's major legacy and even overshadow classic films which the studio was to contribute to other genres, such as the horror film (*Dead of Night*, 1945) or the adventure film (*Scott of the Antarctic*, 1948).

disposed of rather conveniently; there is no permanent vacancy in the Forest of Arden. In Ealing's *Passport to Pimlico*, for instance, the inhabitants of London's Pimlico district discover an ancient document which reveals that Pimlico does, in fact, belong to the descendants of the Duke of Burgundy and that the locals are therefore, legally, Burgundians, not English. Although they are English patriots at heart, the new-Burgundians immediately shred their ID cards because calling on their inherited privilege ("Blimey! I'm a foreigner!") allows the small community to temporarily free itself from post-war food rationing and the bureaucratic interference of Whitehall. This exercising of a mildly anarchic form of resistance allows the film to poke fun at institutions and authorities along the way, and the overall tone is not anti-English at all, but ultimately affirmative of what the films depict as genuine national virtues.<sup>3</sup> In *Passport to Pimlico*, these virtues not only include shrewdness but also a highly stubborn exhibition of obstinacy: "We've always been English and we'll always be English," as the film's most famous quote (voiced by one of Pimlico's residents) insists, "and it's precisely because we are English that we're sticking up for our right to be Burgundians!" On the surface, Ealing films negotiate questions of Englishness, but since the films prove rather flexible in their location (sometimes dispensing the London setting for a Scottish one, as in *Whisky Galore!*), they are more of a statement on Britishness, invoking the spirit of resistance and of community that was so characteristic of the war-time films, with their appeal to the British as one nation to rise up against the enemy on the continent.<sup>4</sup>

*Passport to Pimlico* concludes with a banquet scene that brings the former rivals together in a reconciliatory gesture and establishes an economic relationship of mutual benefits, with the 'Burgundians' loaning their accumulated wealth to the British government and receiving all the benefits of being British in return (including the weather, as rain begins to pour during the final shots). It is the prototypical comedic ending if ever there was one – the expulsion from the Forest of Arden coinciding with restoration of all the rules that were temporarily suspended, which results in the overall impression of Ealing films being, by and large, consensus pictures, though there is trouble to be found beneath the surface (Higson 2000, 44; Geraghty 2000, 56). This reading ties in with discussions surrounding the genre of comedy as a whole, for laughter itself may be directed at incongruities, yet it is often laughter which also "ultimately buttresses and thereby upholds the power imbalance" (Reichl and Stein 2005, 10). What is notable is that the generic formula favoured by the Ealing films is inextricably linked to the idea of the community, for at the heart of nearly all their films rests "the daydream of a benevolent community" (Barr 1998, 81). This formula continues to be called upon in more recent British comedy successes. Charles Barr's assessment that the Thatcherite era (today widely acknowledged to have promoted an atmosphere of selfish individualism rather than mutual solidarity) "effectively [wiped Ealing] off the map" (1998, 182) should at least be modified in the light of more recent, post-Thatcher working-class comedies such as

3 Ealing officially pledged allegiance to these virtues by way of its unofficial charter, engraved outside the studio walls: "Here during a quarter of a century many films were made projecting Britain and the British character."

4 The war parallels in *Passport to Pimlico* are obvious: When the government cuts off Pimlico from the outside world to put pressure on its inhabitants, the rest of London organises "Bundles for Burgundy," donations, and an air lift, providing them with food supplies.

*Brassed Off* (dir. Mark Herman, 1996), *The Full Monty* (dir. Peter Cattaneo, 1997), *Made in Dagenham* (dir. Nigel Cole, 2010), *Pride* (dir. Matthew Warchus, 2014), or narratives that similarly revolve around disobedient 'islanders' like *The Boat that Rocked* (dir. Richard Curtis, 2009) or *Attack the Block* (dir. Joe Cornish, 2011), all of which continue to invoke the Ealing pattern and its mildly rebellious, but ultimately conciliatory, spirit. They depict minor acts of resistance put up by an emasculated group of individuals who have fallen on hard times and who learn to rely upon the solidarity of their fellow citizens.

The same pattern used to hold true for the small screen, most markedly so in sitcoms, which often attempt to invoke a communal spirit by providing an artificial laughter track, encouraging the viewers to join in and not to laugh on their own. Moreover, British TV comedy has been traditionally linked to the ensemble paradigm, for it frequently depicts the struggles of a closely-knit group of individuals both in contemporary as well as historical settings. There have been influential sitcoms set amongst the home guard (*Dad's Army*, 1968-1977), amongst flatmates (*The Young Ones*, 1982-1984), or frequently amongst villagers who gather at the local pub or at the grocer's (*Open All Hours*, 1973-1985). When judged against this tradition, the small screen has arguably undergone a small comedic revolution in recent years, one with considerable implications for the role of the community of laughter.

### **Cringe Humour: Communities of Suffering**

The success story that began more than a decade ago with Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant's series, *The Office* (which premiered on BBC2 in 2001), put British comedy on the map again and can be seen as the starting point for one of the most influential trends in comedy of the past decade: cringe humour. The phenomenon was not new: the notion of discomfort and its major theatrical technique, the awkward pause, had not only been staples in various British media since Harold Pinter popularised them in the 1950s. One can also find them in Mike Nichols' dark anti-establishment comedies of the New Hollywood movement (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, 1966; *The Graduate*, 1967). With *The Office* and the shows it would inspire, however, the phenomenon conquered the small screen. On paper, the concept of *The Office* sounds tame and very much in line with the traditional staples of comedy and community within the genre. Adopting the look of a documentary programme, the show focuses on life in the workplace (the small company of Wernham-Hogg, a paper merchant), and how the staff deal with personal relationships, with the imminent danger of being downsized, as well as with their narcissistic boss, David Brent (played by co-creator Gervais), who constantly tries to show off his qualities as an entertainer to the camera. It could well be the Ealing-inspired story of a community strengthened by the challenges imposed on it, were it not for the very special brand of humour which the show (as well as subsequent cringe shows inspired by *The Office*'s success) employs. There are no jokes as such, and the viewer is presented with a series of unpleasant, highly embarrassing situations which some will even find unbearable, as Eric Weitz notes: "some people have trouble watching [cringe shows], so psychically painful are some of the social situations portrayed" (2010, 71). Amongst the various monikers applied to the phenomenon, we find not only cringe humour, but also the 'comedy of awkwardness,' 'humiliation comedy,' or 'irritainment.'

Cringe humour may well be the most suitable term, for it highlights the physical reaction which this kind of comedy affects in us: instead of shaking with laughter, we find ourselves experiencing an "involuntary inward shiver" ("cringe" 2011), and certainly not the "pleasant psychological shift" which the philosopher John Morreall has identified as the smallest common denominator of all kinds of laughter (1987, 133).<sup>5</sup>

The laughter which arises from watching cringe shows appears to be a measure of self-defence, for as we witness a seemingly harmless situation take a turn for the disastrous due to outrageous, inappropriate behaviour, the scenes often end in a death blow to the idea of community in general: awkward silence, psychological distress, characters avoiding eye-contact and isolating themselves from each other.

Where traditional situation comedies generally make unpleasant situations more bearable (Mellencamp 1997, 73), *The Office* does the opposite: it makes them even more irritating. What renders the show truly innovative, if not revolutionary, was the removal of the viewer's safety net (Van der Werff 2011), providing neither a laughter track nor a classic laughter cue. This does not mean that the show radically departs from the traditional sitcom agenda – far from it. The individual episodes still resolve one main problem over the course of one day at the office, they are characterised by a Bakhtinian celebration of excess and carnival, especially in those episodes depicting Brent's rather desperate attempts to infuse the workplace with pleasure (Stear 2009, 277-282), and they rely on stereotypical, static characters, such as the foolish hedonist (Brent) or the double-act of one straight-man and one half-wit (Tim and Gareth). Moreover, *The Office* is indebted to the traditional comedy of manners, which is primarily interested in how people behave in a distinct social context and how they adapt to the rules of social conduct in their various relationships (Pierson 2005, 35). Yet, where traditional comedy gently mocks the customs of social conduct and reaffirms them in the end, *The Office* heads for total collapse; it is one of the few sitcoms to end its regular run without a happy ending.

Characters like David Brent, who regularly upsets his co-workers, who insults ethnic groups and the handicapped, and who is essentially tragic in his self-delusions, are not new within the Britcom tradition: Alf Garnett (*Till Death Do Us Part*, 1965-1975), Edmund Blackadder (*Blackadder*, 1983-1989), Basil Fawlty (*Fawlty Towers*, 1975-1979), or Alan Partridge (*I'm Alan Partridge*, 1997-2002) were similarly despicable cynics and a far cry from the 'likely lads' of the more conventional shows (which stopped neither of them from becoming cult figures). But, while all of these characters share some comedic DNA, a relationship traced by Zadie Smith in her almost Biblical genealogy of the Britcom,<sup>6</sup> the documentary format of *The Office* serves as a powerful intensifier of its particular brand of humour (and of its subtext on media critique and political correctness), using its distinct mise-en-scène and editing

5 Morreall readily admits that laughter which is linked to embarrassment presents a problem for his theory: we sometimes laugh out of politeness in certain situations. Interestingly, the example he uses here – employees willing themselves to laugh at their boss's corny joke (1987, 137) – could be lifted straight from *The Office*. It allows him to conclude that these situations do not show genuine laughter at all, an explanation which may account for the strained laughter which some of the characters in the show display in some scenes (as they have to put up with Brent's ill-timed jokes), but which does not explain why we laugh at Brent's outrageous behaviour.

6 Smith writes: "Hancock begot Basil Fawlty, and Fawlty begot Alan Partridge, and Partridge begot the immortal David Brent" (2009, 240).

strategies in order to make the experience harder to bear for the viewer.<sup>7</sup> Theorising the mechanisms of laughter involved thus becomes an increasingly difficult task. Part of our amusement may be down to sheer relief that, unlike Brent, we do not have to directly participate in the humiliation game, yet the timing and rhythm of cringe sequences effectively sabotages that model of explanation. It is hard to view cringe scenes and feel comfortable throughout, unless we assume there is a masochistic component involved which triggers us to tune in again next week in spite of the makers of the programme denying us any comfort.

From all this follows that the traditional concept of the community of laughter no longer holds. Traditional theories of laughter – usually subsumed under the headings of the superiority theory, the incongruity theory or the psychic release theory (cf. Horlacher 2009, 25-31; Bevis 2013, 80-82) – depend, to varying degrees, on the assumption that the parties involved acknowledge their indebtedness to social norms. This norm is at work in cringe humour, too, but the pattern of the norm's temporary suspension and subsequent restoration is broken, so that laughter can no longer work as a liberating gesture of slight disapproval towards the norm. If there is a social, group-building effect for the participants at all, it works on the basis of shared embarrassment. The outcome frequently depicts solitude, not a communal gathering, reminding us that the German word for embarrassing, *peinlich*, shares an etymological root with 'pain' in English, in spite of comedy's traditional exclusion of the notion of pain, which Aristotle sees exclusively at work in tragedy (1987, 36).

A model case of this mechanism is offered in the meta-comedic first episode of *The Office's* second series, which directly addresses the topic of laughter and its importance for group-building dynamics, thus commenting on its own brand of humour by way of a comparison with conventional sitcom techniques. As head of one of the company's branches, David Brent welcomes new employees into his team. A welcome party is organised for them, and their former boss, Neil (who is Brent's superior, too), is present as well. Brent is clearly intimidated by Neil, who exhibits so many of the qualities that he himself lacks: Neil is popular, charming, witty, good-looking, and has an easy rapport with his colleagues. As he tries to out rival Neil in front of the others, Brent repeatedly makes a fool of himself, attempting (and failing) to joke his way into their hearts. When everyone is having a glass of wine during the informal gathering, Brent sneaks up to one group and intrudes on their conversation, cracking a joke (which nobody gets, since they do not know the frame of reference), so that he has to ask somebody standing nearby to explain it. However, Brent remains the only one who giggles, and the group hardly acknowledges his presence.

Brent's jealousy of Neil also makes a mess of the official welcome for the new colleagues, where both men address the crowd, though with very different results. Neil's performance clearly has the group-building effect desired in comedy: by cracking some jokes at the expense of Slough ("It's great to be in Slough, it really is – I've just spent a year in Beirut!") and of his predecessor, Brent, he eases possible tensions

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7 This is also the reason why cringe humour works a lot more efficiently in performative media. Situations become even more unbearable and cringe-worthy when we cannot escape and have to watch uninterruptedly – a feature somewhat challenged by the fact that more and more viewers watch their programmes of choice by streaming them on the web or by buying DVDs, for it will allow them to relieve some of the pain by pausing the show when it becomes all too unbearable.

and creates a temporary community, reducing nervousness amongst the staff members who are still in the process of getting acquainted with one another.

Brent's miserable performance, on the other hand, fails to score an honest laugh because he cracks jokes which are either outdated ("I'm not used to public squeaking – I pisspronunciate a lot of my worms! [...] That is classic stuff!") or which involve frames of reference that nobody knows about ("Do you not know who Eric Hitchmo is?"), following his poor impression of a fellow salesman whom few of the audience members have met). The scene is also symptomatic of *The Office's* larger comedic agenda: it only sets up the traditional community of laughter in order to ditch it. Instead of comforting the viewer with a traditional, comedic happy ending (as a group overcomes its differences and alienation in order to stand united), it reinforces the notion of painful embarrassment – even more so when the show moves onto the battlefield of political correctness and uses its documentary aesthetic to reveal characters like Brent (who fancies himself open-minded and likable) as prejudiced, catching their various verbal slips 'live' on camera.<sup>8</sup> Brent's delusions and his way of being totally oblivious to his effect on others may make him a modern-day Malvolio, who is collectively derided by the other dramatis personae of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, but we (and the intradiegetic witnesses) are far too terrified of this man to enjoy the scene. After all, this fool no longer is a disposable element of comic relief which is not integral to the plot. As the main protagonist, Brent not only *is* the plot, but he is also the boss of the other characters, which makes for a quite different hierarchy and group dynamics than in traditional British communities of laughter.

British TV formats of the past decade in particular have subverted the traditional notion of the community, more so than British feature films which continue to evoke the benign spirit of Ealing – certainly because cringe humour does not translate well into the cinematic realm and its reception context.<sup>9</sup> Other shows have contributed to this development: One could turn to *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002), where the pre-industrial 'Merrie England' village trope is subverted and turned into a horrific, dystopian community of cannibals and perverts;<sup>10</sup> *The Thick of It* (2005-2012), which adapts the setting of the mild political comedy *Yes Minister* (1980-1988) into a conspiracy show of almost Jacobean proportions without any reliably likable characters to identify with; or any of the *Office*-inspired cringe shows which have blossomed in recent years on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>11</sup> All of them dispose of the

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8 The remainder of the same episode depicts Brent's disastrous attempts to deal with the consequences of having told a racist joke. As he is forced to apologise for his behaviour, he overcompensates, declaring the mixed-race background of one staff member to be "my favourite!"

9 Part of cringe comedy's difficulty to find success on the big screen may have to do with this communal aspect. It will be hard to fill a movie-theatre with spectators if the communal effect does not make for a pleasurable viewing experience, so cringe humour may work better when viewed at home.

10 Naturally, the trope of the village was far from unspoiled before *The League* in British popular culture: some of the most gruesome British horror films are set amongst seemingly idyllic, rural communities (*Village of the Damned*, 1960; *The Wicker Man*, 1973). Interestingly, the underlying narrative mechanism works similarly to the comedic pattern, for the community must, again, be defended against an enemy from the outside.

11 In addition to Steve Coogan's various outings as Alan Partridge, one could name *Da Ali G Show* (2000), *The Catherine Tate Show* (2004-2006), Gervais and Merchant's two follow-up shows to *The Office* (*Extras*, 2005-2007; *Life's Too Short*, 2011) or – in the American network-context – the HBO-produced *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (2000-).



idea of a community based on mutual solidarity, causing discomfort and pain to its characters and audience alike.

### Conclusion

Cringe humour has turned into a mass phenomenon in recent years, and it is still blossoming. Its impact or effect on the viewer, however, may be somewhat diminished due to the inevitable emotional blunting towards the depicted scenarios and due to cringe humour's key players having crossed over into the mainstream: Gervais-as-Brent now rocks Wembley Stadium<sup>12</sup> and is set to appear in a feature film, Sacha Baron Cohen has conquered Hollywood, and even Steve Coogan's Alan Partridge character has starred in his own, *Die Hard*-inspired action comedy (*Alan Partridge: Alpha Papa*, dir. Declan Lowney, 2013).

In the past decade, a few theorists have attempted to put forward explanations for cringe humour's increasing popularity (Walters 2005; Page 2008; Wisniewski 2008), yet they frequently remain on a merely descriptive level, as opposed to engaging with historical or media-specific questions which are integral to fully understanding the phenomenon: Where did cringe humour arise for the first time and what role does its involvement with counter-culture play? Why has post-Thatcherite Britain proved to be a fertile ground for cringe humour and is there a link to general debates about vanishing solidarity in neo-liberal societies? How does cringe humour address issues such as race and gender? And, perhaps most bafflingly: How are we to account for the mystery why we still manage to laugh at David Brent's antics? Is it laughter out of sheer desperation? Does it occur because the viewers experience a form of comedic Stockholm syndrome, closing ranks with the character that is actually responsible for their suffering? Could it be that, for a brief moment, our subconscious identifies with a creature like Brent, reminding us of the fragility of social decorum? This would be a Bakhtinian view that stresses our exposure as naked, vulnerable creatures, even though cringe humour works without grotesque exaggerations. In a more traditional reading, a strong case could be made for Brent acting as a figure of identification after all, for there is a definite trace of the anti-hero about him: Brent puts up resistance against the inhumane working conditions of the office cubicle system by acting as a totally inept boss, thus sabotaging that system. At the same time, the office cubicle is a fitting meta-emblem of the kind of challenge the show imposes upon the traditional concept of the community of laughter. In theory, everyone partakes in a communal room (as the workplace is traditionally perceived of as a space of social interaction), yet the employees who inhabit this kind of space, which "neither provide[s] privacy nor foster[s] interaction" (Budd 2013, 7), are effectively isolated from their co-workers. Similarly, the show itself imposes its antisocial brand of humour upon the viewer while seemingly contributing to a genre dedicated to the community of laughter.

Yet, it would be wrong to conclude that the show's farewell to the traditional Ealing paradigm of British comedy is indicative of a general crisis of the idea of a community held together by grand narratives, which Knut Hickethier views as a fundamental function of television series (2012). Cringe shows may contain no laughter track, yet it is not a fully-blown community of suffering which is brought

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12 Gervais (in character as Brent) performed a song at the *Concert for Diana* in Wembley Stadium in 2007. In 2013, he played several sold-out gigs with his band, Foregone Conclusion, throughout the UK.

together by the collective experience. For it is merely the collapse of the community-building effects of comedy on the *diegetic* level which *The Office* hints at. Its impressive success story – the show was not only frequently copied but also adapted in several countries, most notably into a highly successful if more digestible and less cringeworthy NBC show on American television (2005-2013) – bears testimony to the fact that there is, of course, still an *extratextual* community of millions of viewers following the show comfortably in their living-rooms, though be it in isolation.

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