

Revenge of the N[Z]erds? *Flight of the Conchords* as Good Humour¹

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If the critical social psychologist Michael Billig is to be believed, 'good humour' is hard to find. In *Laughter and Ridicule*,² his recent and important contribution to humour scholarship, Billig argues that there is nothing essentially desirable about humour. In his view, many humour scholars have got it wrong in thinking that humour is intrinsically good, and in believing that their own work on humour could raise a laugh or two. On the contrary, Billig thinks that humour scholarship should be explicitly anti-humour, because if we position ourselves on the side of humour we miss its negative effects, chiefly its key role in ridicule. Billig offers a remarkably ambitious and overarching theory, claiming that all social life requires the disciplinary force of ridicule, this supposedly explaining why humour is to be found in all cultures.

Those who believe that 'critique' is the essence of socio-cultural inquiry will like the sound of Billig's argument. However, it has received mixed reviews in the field of humour research.³ Billig is not the only one who argues that humour is essentially negative, but remaining with him we can quickly note two main shortcomings of his argument. First, his work provides a very general survey of the existing literature on humour, rather than offering empirical analysis. This is something he admits: 'no systematic analysis of the state of contemporary humour is provided here [in his book]. That is a task for others. This is, as it were, a preliminary analysis that seeks to understand humour in terms of general, rather than particular, features'.⁴ There is merit in such an approach, as we can easily find 'butts' in most jokes, and satire and caricature obviously have targets who are ridiculed. However, the lack of particulars puts severe limits on the ultimate persuasiveness of the book. The claim is made that we are moving 'towards' an important theory of humour, but when the end is reached it is unclear exactly where we have moved 'towards'. It might be that the missing particulars are crucial to making something more of the journey. Second, to borrow an expression from Latour, 'if something [humour] is merely an "instance of" some state of affairs [ridicule], go study this state of affairs instead'.⁵ In other words, by jumping straight to a focus on ridicule and

the supposed negative functions of humour, Billig has left unexamined a substantial part of the phenomenology of humour.

With these points noted, it should be clear that I do not want to begin from a position of generalised sociological irony that sees the task of academic inquiry as to correct what goes on in everyday life. That is, whereas everyday people think humour is good and place great value on having a laugh, the task of the academic following this method is to show that not everything is as it seems – much humour has bad effects. I wish to avoid such a superior approach. In contrast, without first agonising about the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ humour, I want to present a case study of *Flight of the Conchords*, and, in a sense, let the details speak for themselves about the issue of how we should frame humour. The paper does begin with an example of the ‘bad’ side of humour: the Australian television comedy series *Kath and Kim*. Considering this example is a logical step on the way to discussing good humour, for, if there is such a thing, it should minimise or avoid the characteristics of bad humour. Once we move to consider the *Flight of the Conchords* as good humour, the theme of this special issue – ‘Watching the Kiwis’ – kicks in, as what we find is that a basic resource of the Conchords’ humour is New Zealand, both as a physical place and as the home of a kind of people. The question is, are place and people positioned in a positive or negative manner in this humorous television series? If it is positive, as I argue, how is this accomplished?

‘Look at moiye’: unease about Kath and Kim

Many readers will be familiar with the ABC television series *Kath and Kim*, which first screened in 2002. In New Zealand, it experienced a degree of popularity similar to that received in Australia, where it achieved a kind of public recognition and cult status rare for home-grown television. *Kath and Kim* not only centred around two female characters, it was also mainly written and produced by women. These positives aside, Turnbull comments that ‘something felt wrong about this exuberant celebration of the Australian suburban dream turned nightmare. Although I sometimes laughed, I also found the scenes at times hard to watch and deeply discomforting’.⁶ Consistent with my critique of Billig’s approach, it may concern us that Turnbull is examining a piece of popular culture with too critical an eye. In this case, however, I have a great deal of sympathy with her argument, and in contrast to Billig, it is based on a consideration of particulars.

She begins by noting that *Kath and Kim* fits within an international development of new hybrid comedy forms. Mills has called these ‘comedy verite’, that is, an extension of the sitcom that particularly engages with the structure of the documentary.⁷ It is the latter that can give comedy verite a social commentary role, as exemplified by *The Office*.⁸ Importantly, as

Turnbull argues, *Kath and Kim* is not sure of the relative weight it gives to its sitcom and documentary elements: it 'frequently seems to forget its documentary intentions altogether and reverts to being "just a sitcom" or at least a fairly straightforward comedy drama'. She goes on to quote Turner, one of the producers, who says *Kath and Kim* 'is sort of reality television situation comedy'.⁹ The important point here is that this mixed genre approach is a key feature in Turnbull's unease about *Kath and Kim*.

Specifically, the 'reality' aspect of the show tends to encourage viewers to adopt an attitude of condescension. Turnbull draws upon Purdie's work¹⁰ to argue that most humour features rule-breaking of some kind, which can be empowering in female characters if they are shown to take control of the joking discourse through their comic performance. Herein lies the core of Turnbull's unease about *Kath and Kim*: she asks whether the show's main characters are unruly women who break the rules while taking charge of the comic discourse, or whether they are simply characters who become ridiculous, and therefore laughable, through breaking rules *without* being in charge of the various humour mechanisms. In other words, if the key to a comedy is portraying characters whose tastes are rendered laughable, to avoid ridicule being too specific, the social construction of taste in general has to be called into question. There can be no absolute grounds for saying one type of taste is essentially better than another, but unless the arbitrary nature of taste itself, and its full range, are put on view, then this point can easily be overlooked. This latter outcome could well be a result of the 'reality' dimension predominating over the sitcom elements, something that does seem to occur in *Kath and Kim*. The core of Turnbull's argument is worth a relatively lengthy quote:

Is this [*Kath and Kim*] funny? Watching these scenes for the first time, I was intensely uncomfortable because I felt I was being invited to laugh at Kath and Kim in ways which denigrated them while reinforcing the superiority of the viewer. And this is so because, in recognising the rule of taste which has been broken, we are being called upon to mark the break with our own knowledge of what might constitute good taste. The comedy of *Kath and Kim* thus depends on a type of cultural condescension which asks us to laugh at those who apparently don't know any better.

Kath and Kim's failure to make the right choices thus places them in a culturally inferior position to that of the viewer . . . [Hence] we are left with the image of the pair as losers whose failures in taste and lack of cultural capital are intended as the primary source of our laughter.¹¹

Thus, the form and content of *Kath and Kim* make salient Billig's concerns about the centrality of ridicule to humour. If we can bracket the natural

reaction to laugh while watching this and reflect upon the show's dynamics, we see it is based upon a solid core of negative ridicule. This may be accentuated when cross-cultural elements enter the mix, as when New Zealanders view *Kath and Kim* and gain a 'superior' laugh at the expense of supposedly crude 'Australasian' culture. There is an idiomatic expression that wonderfully sums up these concerns: 'it is better to laugh with, rather than at, someone'. In this regard, it matters little where the audience comes from, for if what they are laughing at has its source in real people and their real expressions of taste, then the humour risks being 'at' rather than 'with', thus having a negative ridicule function.

We can now move to consider *Flight of the Conchords* in the context of four key questions raised in the above discussion. One, what form of humorous genre is employed? Two, as an analyst, do I have any sense of unease about it? Three, are viewers encouraged to adopt a position where they treat the key characters as objects of ridicule? Four, alternatively, can the key characters be seen to have mastery of the comic discourse? These questions will be considered in tandem with a description of the basic format of the show and a presentation of illustrative material.

The Flight of the Conchords hybrid comedy

The *Flight of the Conchords* (hereafter, 'the Conchords') premiered on American HBO television in June 2007, rapidly attaining 'cult'-like status. Its stars, New Zealanders Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie, have won several awards, including a 2008 Grammy award for their comedy album. At the time of writing they are in the running for an Emmy award for the television series, while the second series of the Conchords is in production.

It is not readily apparent what the title of the series refers to. At first glance, it appears to involve a play on the word 'conchord': the *concorde* was a distinctively shaped Anglo-French jet airliner, but *concord* also means a state of agreement or harmony, and the addition of the h makes allusion to music making, a key part of the show. However, part of the widely known background to the Conchords is that they first applied for funding for the series in New Zealand but were turned down. Thus a feasible reading is to interpret 'flight' in the sense of fleeing New Zealand.¹²

This is reinforced by the plot of the series, more than adequately represented at the back of the double DVD set thus:

Meet Jemaine Clement and Bret McKenzie – a.k.a. Flight of the Conchords. They may be "New Zealand's 4th Most Popular Folk Parody Duo," but now they're in a strange new world – New York City – and determined to conquer America one fan at a time . . . literally! This 2-disc set features all 12 episodes of the acclaimed HBO series. Watch

as our heroes contend with unrequited love, bohemian parties, inept criminals and their (single) obsessed fan, breaking into song as they clumsily attempt to break into the New York scene.

As one commentator aptly put it, 'Americans loved its Monty Python-like humour. "It's a New Zealand take on the American dream, which we've forgotten about over here. Americans still appreciate that story."' ¹³ This identification of the 'American dream' is useful, for, essentially, the Conchords is a humorous insertion of the category New Zealander into the great American immigration story.

As such, it is close to the 'comedy verite' category of humorous television show. The American Dream provides a 'reality' backdrop to the show, as it is a well-documented historical process that needs little or no formulation in terms of its key characteristics and the narratives it sets in train. However, the Conchords differs from the standard historical story, and this brings it closer to traditional sitcom. For one, it does not involve boatloads of migrants, but a 'folk parody' duo, and it does not occur in the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, but the early twenty-first century. Also, it is shot in conventional sitcom style, that is, there are no hidden camera shots as found in 'docusoaps' (employed to great effect in *The Office*). On the other hand, unlike standard sitcom, the Conchords has no laughter track, and, like the docusoap, it does 'follow' the activities of the protagonists in a verite-like manner. That is, the two key characters are *not* shown to be performing their character identities; with one exception, discussed below, the characters act as if the camera were not present, as if they were being 'followed' about as they have their experiences. Further genre mixing can be seen in the fact that while the Conchords does not conform to the standard sitcom element of focusing on one setting, it does conform to three other key elements: there are recurring characters, conflicting personalities and a single narrative problem in each episode.¹⁴

Difficulties in positioning the Conchords aside, the basic storyline is abundantly clear. It is primarily about *failure* to attain the American dream, with the humour built around Bret and Jemaine's experiences as this failure unfolds about them, and how they are almost blissfully unaware of their own ineptitude.¹⁵ As the series progresses, there is no mistaking that they are failures, for they have only one fan, few people turn up to their gigs, and they have a Kiwi über-nerd for a manager (see discussion of Murray below). This is wonderfully summed up in episode 11, 'The Actor', where a 'semi-professional actor' on the make comes up to Bret and Jemaine after an almost empty gig, effusing: 'Hey look, watching you guys out there, I was *blown* away man. Your act is *sensational*. I love the attention to detail with your stage characters. I mean the idea of a pair of naïve idiots from New Zealand, it's so simple, it's genius. You just pick an obscure backwards

country that nobody knows anything about. Very funny, very funny. So, where are you guys from? The Julia Music Performing Arts School?' Which of course draws the deadpan answer from Jemaine: 'We're from New Zealand.'

This focus on failure rather than success is a tried and true device in a great deal of successful television humour. For example, *Fawlty Towers*¹⁶ follows the bumbling exploits of Basil Fawlty as he runs a highly inefficient hotel; *The Office's* David Brent is extremely deluded about his management abilities, and we watch as the paper company he middle-manages faces a merger and redundancies; and the mockumentary *This is Spinal Tap*¹⁷ follows the hilariously bad heavy metal group Spinal Tap as they stumble from one disaster to another. To take us full circle, *Kath and Kim* features obvious failures: Kim works in a call-centre, she is on a perennial diet that doesn't work, her marriage has failed, and what friends she has are worse 'losers' than she is; Kath, while she has more trappings of success, still comes across as an 'airhead' who, as a foil to Kim, simply serves to reiterate their collective failings.

Bret and Jemaine: the details

Given the frequent use of the failure device in humour, Turnbull's concerns are worth attention. We need to consider the 'health' of this kind of humour. Specifically, we must ask, 'what kind of failures are Bret and Jemaine?' Are they failures like Kath and Kim, who viewers are encouraged to ridicule? The best way to answer this is to consider material from the series. Below is a transcript¹⁸ of the very first seconds of the first episode, 'Sally'. We see Bret and Jemaine walking down the sidewalk of a New York street carrying their guitar cases, with Bret holding a piece of paper that he appears to be consulting for directions:

Jemaine: Man, back in New Zealand I was getting it on with lots of chicks.

Bret: Who?

J: Well, ah, Sarah . . . Fitzpatrick, ah, Michelle Fitzpatrick . . . Claire Fitzpatrick . . . The list goes on.

B: And that was all of them?

J: Well, triple figures.

B: No, that's not triple figures, that's three.

J: [speaking a bit glumly] Here though I don't seem to get with any women, I just talk about getting with women.

B: Yeh, but the ones you talk about are hot – they're a lot hotter than the ones you got with in New Zealand.

J: That's true . . . I do talk about getting with some pretty hot women.

B: You don't just talk about it man, you talk about it a lot.

J: [with smiley voice] Yehhh, I suppose I do talk about getting with some *verrry* hot women.

[pause in dialogue, Bret consults his piece of paper, and they stop on the pavement]

There is a lot of 'keying'¹⁹ work being done here. Even before words are spoken, we see Bret and Jemaine carrying guitar cases, visually establishing that they are musicians. Then, in the first line of spoken dialogue, we get a combination of a lexical item typically associated with musicians – 'Man' – and then the 'back in New Zealand' that explicitly establishes where these two 'migrants' are from. Given that the series was first aired in the US, this is quite crucial ground-setting work. The dialogue then goes on to set up the first instance of the 'failure' storyline, that 'here' Jemaine can't 'get with' any chicks (in a sense this is a double failure given that musicians are supposed to 'get plenty of chicks').

The specifics of the dialogue deserve close attention. There is the fairly typical sitcom fare of tension being created between the protagonists. Through his own words, Jemaine is set up as a 'nerd', that is, someone who is socially inept, unsophisticated and awkward, particularly with the opposite sex. But it is through Bret's questioning that this comes out: instead of openly disagreeing that Jemaine had lots of chicks 'back in New Zealand', he simply asks 'who?'. When Jemaine gives three names, Bret's 'and that was all of them?' implies that he speaks from a superior position in the 'chick-stakes', this being emphasised when he makes it clear that three does not constitute 'triple figures'. Note, also, that there is something of a reference to the smallness of New Zealand built into this dialogue. That is, the three 'chicks' Jemaine lists all have the same surname, making it reasonable to infer that they are sisters; the implication is that it is only in a small place that a male is forced to 'date' three sisters.

Within these opening lines we see the establishment of something that could easily turn into ridicule. That is, Jemaine, at least, is being built up as a 'nerd', and a nerd from a place that is being set up as a small, insular country. Bret acts as a foil here, but it is also clear that he is from the same small country. However, it is important to note the fullness of the dialogue, particularly the way it ends with a restorative bridge. Jemaine admits the depressing fact that, for a guy of his age, a musician nonetheless, he can only talk about getting with women in New York. Bret then makes the sympathetic comment that 'Yeh, but the ones you talk about are hot – they're a lot hotter than the ones you got with in New Zealand', which gains agreement from Jemaine. With this, Jemaine's mood noticeably changes, and, with a

smile across his face, he notes that the ones he talks about are 'verrry hot'. Consequently, whereas the humour is based around a relatively common and simple put-down device, there is a positive upshot to the tension built through denigration. That is, the character pointing out the fault of another ultimately comes to their salvation. It remains clear throughout the rest of the series that Jemaine and Bret will experience tensions, and this will often involve one or the other being positioned as a nerd, thus fulfilling the ridicule role. However, there will always be a final supportive move.

Moreover, other character types are brought into this ridicule-support relationship, and in interesting ways that also position them according to their country of origin or, more correctly, their culture. This can be seen if we continue our transcript from where we left off above (Bret and Jemaine had stopped on the pavement):

B: This should be it.

J: Yeh, Dave's place, it's Dave's party.

B: Oh right, well we didn't need a map, we just live down there.

This brief dialogue, with the mistake about carrying the map, re-establishes the nerdiness of both Bret and Jemaine. With this in place, the theme music of the series cuts in and we have the introduction proper with the credits rolling. Once finished, we are into the second scene, a party, with the camera focusing on a guy, Dave, with a can of beer in hand, casually dressed, with a blue bandana, leaning on a door frame and looking a bit disengaged. Into this scene walk Bret, also with can of beer in hand, and Jemaine. The dialogue begins:

B: Hey, Dave, this is an awesome party, man.

Dave: Yeh [with American accent, no change to stance, no eye contact with Bret].

J: Great decorations.

D: Uh uh.

B: How's it going?

D: [turning to Bret and Jemaine] Yeh, it's good, but look guys, I don't want to be a dick, but could you guys like move away. I'm trying to look lonely.

J: Lonely . . . what for?

D: [exasperated] Uh, chicks are attracted to lonely guys. It's a psychological analogy.

B: What about Eugene? [camera pans to a guy by himself standing eating, then back to Bret, Jemaine, and Dave looking at him]

D: [nodding his head] He knows what he's doing.

B: Well, you just look like you're waiting.

D: [looks annoyed, turns to Bret, about to speak]

B: You look good, but you look like you're waiting.

D: Guysss! Go have a samosa, have you tried the gulab jamins, they're off the hook.

[camera cuts to Bret and Jemaine sitting on a couch eating samosas]

B: What I was trying to say before is that after six or seven weeks, girls find me boring.

J: [eating] Mmm

B: But, I'm not sure what happens, coz I mean that's about how long it takes to get to know someone.

J: [still eating] Mmm . . .

J: [while chewing] Can you move away Bret.

B: Sure, how long for?

J: 30 minutes.

B: [looking at clock] Okay.

The dialogue from this scene ends here and we then see Jemaine watching Bret talking to a girl across the room.

There is a lot in the above transcript, but we can clearly see that it builds on the central narrative problem established in the first dialogue of the episode. This time, the 'trouble getting with chicks' theme is juxtaposed against the native New Yorker's strategy. Note that Dave is the first 'native' introduced in the series, and he plays an important role as a comparator. We see that he is very focused, bordering on being rude. He hedges the rudeness by saying he 'doesn't want to be a dick', but it is clear as Bret and Jemaine continue to interject with naïve questions – 'how's it going?'; 'you look good, but you look like you're waiting' – that he is increasingly annoyed with them. Ultimately, he tells them to leave him alone and just go and eat. Dave clearly has a strategy for 'getting with chicks' and he won't be distracted from it. He even knows that Eugene, who just appears to be eating a samosa, also has a strategy. Because the Conchords is set in New York, Bret and Jemaine, as Kiwis, are actually the 'other' to the native New Yorkers, but the latter also have to be set out as certain kinds of people. Dave plays a true-to-type, brash, loud New Yorker, and Bret and Jemaine's wide-eyed approaches to him are thus further evidence of their nerdiness.

It is all very funny, but it is also very subtle. For one, when we cut to Bret and Jemaine on the couch we get an important reversal of the positioning that occurred in the first dialogue scene. That is, we find Bret admitting that after six or seven weeks, girls find him boring. In reaction, Jemaine

keeps eating, simply muttering non-committal mmms, which ultimately leads to the hilariously deadpanned delivery (whilst eating): 'can you move away Bret'. So we see that whereas Jemaine may talk about getting with chicks, he is also prepared to learn, specifically, from Dave's strategy just played out in front of him. This adds further depth to the humour as we are also encouraged to chuckle at Dave's character: he has wonderful command of New York argot – e.g. 'off the hook' – and, as though following some rah-rah marketing mantra, he is impressively committed to his strategy, even if we don't see it paying off (we don't see him with a girl). Moreover, calling it a 'psychological analogy' is something of a malapropism. Hence, whereas Dave definitely does not appear as a nerd, his own actions in setting Jemaine and Bret up as nerds are equally stereotypical, adding an important cross-cultural subtlety to the humour.

Transition to music

The above scene then leads to the first music track, this being a significant feature of the Conchords. In short, this is a key area where Bret and Jemaine take charge of the comic discourse (to use Turnbull and Purdie's phrase), and this is the only place where, in departure from comedy verite style, they are seen to directly 'play' to the camera. Continuing with the description, this is what happens in the scene that follows on from where we left off above, where Jemaine asked Bret to go away:

Jemaine looks around, a slightly depressed look on his face, and as a group of girls move apart, he sees one attractive girl left alone. At this point, acoustic guitar music starts. Then the camera cuts back to Jemaine, who starts singing the song 'The most beautiful girl in the room', which starts out like a traditional pop-love song, but rapidly turns into an obvious parody:

Yehhh, looking around the room, I can tell that you are the most beautiful girl in the room, [cut to Bret who sings: in the whole wide room], oooh, and when you're in the street, depending on the street, I bet you are definitely in the top three good looking girls on the street, [Bret: depending on the street].

As the song progresses, the lyrics get even more parodic, with Jemaine continuing:

You're so beautiful, you could be a waitress, you're so beautiful, you could be an air hostess, in the 60s, you're so beautiful, you could be a part-time model . . . [Jemaine dancing with Sally, very goofily, then cuts to Jemaine and Sally having a kebab meal in a deli, where Bret also appears], you're so beautiful, like a dream, or a high-class prostitute . . . you could be a part-time model, but you'd probably have to keep your normal job.

The scene then cuts to Jemaine and Sally sitting on the couch at Jemaine's place. The music ends with the camera face-on to Jemaine puckering up to Sally, then switches to side-on as Sally and Jemaine begin to kiss, at which point a light switches on, interrupting the kiss. It's Bret, who says, 'hi guys', which is the prompt for Sally to leave.

Bret's interruption of Jemaine's nearly successful 'hook-up' with Sally then becomes part of the next scene – an extended dialogue about what Jemaine did wrong to make Sally leave. In this way there is a seamless continuation of the opening theme of the episode – Jemaine's failure with women – but it is also extended to Bret's nerdiness through his inability to see that his switching on the light ended Jemaine's chances with Sally.

The key thing I want to note is the nature and importance of the music. Without it, the kind of unease that Turnbull expressed about *Kath and Kim* may apply to the Conchords. That is, the duo would tend to be a little one-dimensional, inviting ridicule because of their blatant incompetence at making it (musically, and with 'chicks') in New York. However, in and through the music, Bret and Jemaine are elevated above nerds. Whatever your taste in music, it is obvious that the duo are talented. Their compositions, being parodies, involve a certain amount of mimicry. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of skill required to put these together. There is no better example than the 'Bowie' episode, where Jemaine does a remarkable imitation of both the spoken accent and musical voice of David Bowie.

Additionally, there is obvious humorous skill in the act of musical parody itself. For example, the song described above – 'the most beautiful girl in the room' – successfully pokes fun at the hyperbolic excesses of the standard pop love song, while at the same time being good music. There are two or three songs in every episode, and all draw attention to aspects of the artifice and conventionality that musical styles depend upon. Also, it is in making this music that Bret and Jemaine transcend the conflicting personalities and differentials of status that so much sitcom depends upon. Thus, our previously positioned nerds are able to turn the tables and make humour, not solely based on their own incompetence, but by parodying modern pop music. This does not descend into a reverse kind of ridiculing of some type of individual or social group; it is more targeted at the conventions of musical style, something that is one step removed from individual tastes, thus minimising the ridicule element.

Enter Murray

It would not do the Conchords justice were we to finish without a quick consideration of Murray, their über-nerd manager. The following brief description is also useful for the way it shows how the humour in the series is partly based around New Zealand itself.

After waking on Friday morning and having a discussion about exactly why Jemaine failed with Sally, the duo go down the lift, continuing their discussion, and the next shot is of a modest three storey building. With this in view, we hear an unknown New Zealand voice say: 'Okay guys, band meeting'. Before we see who is speaking, there is a still shot of the building's address board:

3A ALL ASIAN MASSAGE

3B NEW ZEALAND CONSULATE

3C ZAKEER FLOOD CONTROL

3D STEWART'S WHOLESALE MEAT

Then we see Murray, in a small fake-wood-panelled office, seated at a desk with paper and pencil in hand. He is wearing a shirt and tie, and sports a very David Brent-ish (*The Office*) goatee beard, except that his hair and beard are ginger. Murray goes through the roll call for the band, a routine that is repeated in several episodes in the series. While Murray, Bret and Jemaine begin a dialogue, the camera pans around the office and we see a glimpse of Murray's nameplate, giving his position as 'Deputy Cultural Attaché', and several posters on the wall:

New Zealand Don't expect too much – you will love it (over an image of snow capped mountains)

New Zealand Like Lord of the Rings (over bush scenery)

Murray begins the band meeting by asking about Dave's party and questioning the Conchords about whether they knew he had not been invited. In this, Murray is heard using typical New Zealand speech forms. For example, he asks Jemaine, 'you knew, eh?' Murray is clearly marked as a New Zealander, but right from the beginning he is positioned, if it is possible, as even more of a nerd than Jemaine. Let's consider one final dialogue to get the flavour:

Jemaine: Do we have any gigs Murray?

Murray: [agitated] Yeh, I'm getting to that . . . I've got a lot on my plate Jemaine. I'm not just a band manager.

[knock on door, camera pans to a man who stands at the open door]

Man: [in American accent] Murray?

Murray: Yeh.

Man: Ah, I want you to okay the new, ah, subway poster [he unrolls a poster of a very large coastal rock formation, captioned NEW ZEALAND . . . ROCKS!!!!]

Murray: Oh wow, Greg . . . what about another exclamation mark?

Greg: I don't think that's necessary.

Murray: It's not necessary, nah, good [with a glance at the duo, Greg leaves].

Bret: What happened with the gig at the aquarium?

Murray: [looking nervous] There was kind of a misunderstanding, um, there was a typo in the ad . . . it was sand they wanted, sand – you know that wavy font, looks like a b but it was an s. But I sent the demo, the good news is that, ah, they liked it, they might play it in the lobby.

[Bret and Jemaine look downcast]

Jemaine: Okay, well that's positive.

Murray: Item 2 . . . that's it, have you guys got any ideas?

The above segment is worth brief comment before wrapping up the discussion. One thing that may only be partly obvious, due to limitations of the textual medium, is the strong visual element to the humour. For example, the building address board is only shown for a second or two, but strongly reinforces the general theme of the series, that Jemaine and Bret are 'a pair of naïve idiots from New Zealand . . . an obscure backwards country that nobody knows anything about', as the 'actor' in episode 11 so succinctly put it. The New Zealand consulate in New York is even housed between a massage parlour, a flood control service and a wholesale meats office. How appropriate, then, that it employs someone like Murray as 'deputy cultural attaché'. Murray is obsessed with bureaucratic process, insisting on a roll call for the band meeting even though there are only three people involved. Then, as we look around the office, the small nature of New Zealand is reinforced, and, similar to the first encounter with Dave, this is juxtaposed against the well-known 'emphasise the positive' of capitalist American culture. That is, even the posters promoting New Zealand have a distinctively low-key, almost apologetic, nature: 'New Zealand – don't expect too much – you will love it'. The visual humour and Murray's incompetence are then combined in the 'New Zealand . . . Rocks!!!' poster²⁰ dialogue, which then moves into the brilliantly funny exchange where Murray explains why the 'aquarium gig' fell through.

Murray is, perhaps, the character we are most encouraged to laugh at, to ridicule. Physically and performatively there are ample things to laugh at. He has poor dress sense, with his ginger hair and pale skin shown off when he wears walk-shorts and trainers with white ankle length socks. In one scene, he microwaves his underpants in his office to dry them. He is clearly an incompetent band manager, and from time to time we also see that he is incompetent at his 'deputy cultural attaché' work (e.g. see the 'poster dialogue' above). By inference, Murray is still back in New Zealand rather

than in tune with the New York scene. For example, one day he decides to take the boys on a tour of cultural spots – he turns up wearing shorts, carrying a backpack and holding a small branch as a walking stick.²¹

Unfortunately, there is not space to answer this question regarding Murray and ridicule, suffice it to say that in following episodes Murray's character significantly develops.²² We find, just as Jemaine is prepared to learn from Dave and just as Bret may turn out to be a nerd, that there are reversals and twists to the fortunes of this apparent über-nerd band manager. Murray is seen to give up a lot of his own time and energy to help the boys, and he seems indefatigable in the face of obstacles. Importantly, he also contributes from time to time to the Conchords' music-making. In episode seven, Murray sings and stars in the song 'Leggy blonde', and we find that he has a good voice. Ultimately, Murray actually makes it in New York. You will have to watch the full series and find out for yourself how this happens.

Conclusion

I began by using one type of argument as a point of departure. That is, I noted the importance of Billig's recent work on humour as primarily a negative force, and very briefly indicated why I did not find his position fully convincing. A key reason was its lack of detail – a lack of actual analysis of humour in action. It needs to be pointed out, though, that there is scholarship on humour compatible with Billig's argument that does attempt to offer empirical analysis.²³ I briefly discussed Turnbull's work on *Kath and Kim*, and while this was published before Billig's book, it is supportive of his argument. More recently, in a forthcoming article on the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy,²⁴ Moira Smith eloquently argues, making use of Billig's concept of 'unlaughter', that most humour scholars agree that some humour has an exclusionary effect. In a useful summary passage she states:

As Paul Lewis put it in his analysis of the cartoon controversy, "Humor brings people together except when it tears them apart" (2006b). In reality, only shared humor – humor that meets with support from all audience members – contributes to social solidarity. When jokes are aimed at outsiders or marginal group members, shared laughter is not always expected; instead, the unlaughter of these salient individuals, contrasted with the shared laughter of the rest of the group, heightens group boundaries by mocking and ostracizing them.

Whereas I have not had sufficient space to do full justice to the complexities of the Conchords, my argument is that it *does* achieve shared laughter, and it successfully minimises the tendency to mock and ostracise. Unlike *Kath and Kim*, there is no class element in the Conchords to create a sense of unease. It encourages whole groups of people to laugh at themselves

– New Zealanders, musicians, Americans, New Yorkers – as opposed to middle class people (both audience and comedians) laughing down at the uneducated working class Kath and Kim. Consequently, it is simply good humour. This must be seen as quite an achievement, as there is no doubt that the Conchords adheres to a central narrative of failure, a cultural trope that invites the natural response of mockery and ridicule.

In my discussion, I have tried to mobilise illustrative material to show how this good humour is achieved. In sum, it is through producing a hybrid form of humour. The Conchords does have a standard sitcom element, and this is particularly played out via the failure theme and the concomitant conflict among personalities, but there is a good-heartedness pervading the series. This is wonderfully captured in some comments from the actor Rhys Darby, talking about the character of Murray Hewitt whom he plays: ‘I saw Murray as someone who was full of beans, a lot of heart but not too much going on upstairs, who desperately wanted to be part of the cool gang. I just wanted him to be an honest Kiwi bloke, true to himself . . . David Brent [of *the Office*] is very funny, but he is a prick. And I wanted to make Murray not a prick’.²⁵ The Conchords also employs very subtle visual elements, and every episode has two or three key musical segments which very much establish Bret and Jemaine as masters of the comic discourse. Additionally, it employs intertextual references (it is probably no accident Murray has a David Brent goatee beard), and it also makes strong use of the comedy verite documentary form.²⁶

Collectively, these elements account for the undoubted ‘goodness’ of the humour. Finally, it should be noted that the title of this article has a question mark after ‘Revenge of the N[Z]erds?’, the point being that actually the Conchords does *not* directly follow a revenge-type trajectory. This is because there is no revenge needed – no one else need take the place of the Conchords to be laughed at – hence, we are never laughing at, but always with, them. There is no better way to explain this, and to end, than via a Kipling poem:

Father, Mother and me,
 Sister and Auntie say
 All the people like us are We
 And everyone else is They.
 And They live over the sea,
 While We live over the way.
 But – would you believe it? – They look upon We
 As only a sort of They!²⁷

In the Conchords, the ‘we’ and ‘they’ are both caught up in attempting to ‘make it’ in New York. It is the ‘caught up’ nature of these attempts

that captures our interest, rather than the attribution of essential qualities to character types, thus perhaps qualifying as what Brabazon calls 'de-globalising' comedy.²⁸ It is good humour because it successfully minimises the tendency to ridicule particular types of people, as the caught up nature of the shared activities makes the attribution of 'we' and 'they' relatively unimportant. If this is accepted, the Conchords represents another important contribution to removing the infamous cultural cringe that has beleaguered the reception of so much New Zealand creative endeavour, this time in the field of humour. By setting a comedy series in New York, and featuring two Kiwi musicians trying to make it there, the Conchords have turned the cultural cringe on its head and significantly enhanced the new 'feel-good'²⁹ sensibility in New Zealand creative activity.

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- 1 Thanks to the editors and referees for their comments and feedback. Also, thanks to: Moira Smith for a pre-publication copy of her article cited below; Trish Nickel for encouragement and discussions offering an American insight into the Conchords; Ed Nickel for a quick translation of what I mistakenly heard as 'globjamins'; and Lesley Patterson for setting up the office accommodation where this article was produced.
 - 2 M. Billig, *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London, 2005.
 - 3 In a review of Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule* the esteemed humour scholar Christie Davies actually called Billig a sausage, albeit by an obvious wordplay on 'frankfurter' – referring to Billig's allegiance to the Frankfurt critical theorists – clearly showing that he did not like the book (see C. Davies, *Humor*, 20, 2 (2007), pp.205-8). For other reviews see: M. Lloyd, *Thesis Eleven*, 89 (2007), pp.136-38; M. Smith, *British Journal of Sociology*, 58, 3 (2007), p.495.
 - 4 Billig, p.8.
 - 5 B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, Oxford, 2005, p.143.
 - 6 S. Turnbull, "'Look at moiye, Kimmie, look at moiye!": *Kath and Kim* and the Australian comedy of taste', *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 113 (2004), p.99.
 - 7 B. Mills, 'Comedy verite: contemporary sitcom form', *Screen*, 45, 1 (2004), pp.63-78; Also see J. Middleton, 'Documentary comedy', *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 104 (2002), pp.55-66.
 - 8 *The Office*, BBC2 (2001–2002).
 - 9 Turnbull, p.102.
 - 10 S. Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, Toronto, 1992.
 - 11 Turnbull, pp.105, 107.
 - 12 The other obvious wordplay here involves kiwis being flightless birds: here are two Kiwis that had to flee their homeland to make their humour, which did indeed fly overseas.
 - 13 A. Chalmers, 'A bit of a jam at hush-hush Conchords gig', *Dominion Post*, 17 March 2008.
 - 14 See B. Mills, p.69.
 - 15 Incongruity is a fundamental feature of almost all humour, and Bret and Jemaine's seeming lack of awareness of their own failings is a key incongruous element that helps frame the series as humour.
 - 16 BBC2 (1975–1979).

- 17 K. Murphy, prod., Embassy Pictures, 1984.
- 18 All transcriptions in this article have been made by the author from the DVD of the television series, *Flight of the Conchords – The complete first series*, HBO Home Video (2007). It was hard work, but someone had to do it!
- 19 See E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, Cambridge, MA, 1974, pp.43-44.
- 20 In subsequent episodes, as we again find ourselves watching ‘band meetings’ in Murray’s office, the posters change, but with exactly the same effect. For example, there is one with New Zealand scenery captioned: ‘New Zealand – It’s not part of Australia’.
- 21 This small scene exemplifies an interesting point about the Conchords. It strikes me that an American audience would not fully understand the typical ‘Kiwi’ nature of what Murray is doing here – i.e. going for a bushwalk/tramp armed with backpack and stick – whereas most New Zealanders would. So, its humour works on a number of levels, depending on the cultural background of the viewer. This is one reason it was successful both in the US and back ‘home’ in New Zealand.
- 22 For those wanting a shortcut, go to youtube.com and search under ‘Classic Murray Hewitt (a.k.a. Gingerballs)’ to see a lengthy collection of Murray scenes from the Conchords.
- 23 Let me make it clear that I am well aware there is much more literature on humour and negativity that could be discussed. However, my aim has not been to review such literature, it has been to provide discussion and analysis of the Conchords material. Additionally, I will admit that my use of the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ humour requires further discussion. There is not the space to pursue this here, suffice it to say that I am trying to get at a responsive feeling: when I watch *Kath and Kim* I do laugh, but am well aware of an unsavoury aspect to this laughter; when I watch the Conchords the laughter is free of any nagging doubts. This is key to what I mean here by ‘good’ or ‘bad’ humour.
- 24 M. Smith, ‘Humor, unlaughter, and boundary maintenance’, *American Journal of Folklore*, (forthcoming).
- 25 J. McCrone, ‘The Flight of the Kiwi’, *The Dominion Post*, 13 September 2008, ‘Your Weekend’ p.11
- 26 A British comedy series that bears some resemblance to the Conchords, particularly in the use of music, is *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC3, 2004-). However, this relies far more on farce and surreal humour, and has almost nothing of the documentary style of comedy verite.
- 27 R. Kipling, ‘We and They’ (1926) cited in A. Schutz, *Studies in Social Theory*, Vol 2, The Hague, Nijhof, 1964, p.243.
- 28 T. Brabazon, ‘‘What Have You Ever Done on the Telly?’ *The Office*, (Post) Reality Television and (Post) Work’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8, 1 (2005), pp.101-17.
- 29 G. Lealand, ‘Life After Hobbits: The New Zealand Screen Industry in 2006’, *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 121, November (2006), pp.11-14.