

Painfully Funny: Cringe Comedy, Benign Masochism, and Not-So-Benign Violations

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Human Nature and Pop Culture



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ABSTRACT

Cringe comedies differ from traditional embarrassment humour by being explicitly aimed at evoking not just the positive emotion of amusement but also the decidedly negative emotion of vicarious embarrassment (i.e. ‘cringe’) in their audiences. Drawing on Warren and McGraw’s benign violation theory of humour and the concept of benign masochism, I offer a biocultural account of how they achieve this effect and why audiences counterintuitively seem to find it enjoyable. I argue that whereas a farce like *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) employs psychological distance in order to render its embarrassing violations thoroughly benign and thus singularly conducive to amusement, cringe comedies like *The Office* (2001-2003) and *The Inbetweeners* (2008-2010) comparatively decrease psychological distance in order also to evoke high levels of vicarious embarrassment. Finally, I argue that audiences find benignly masochistic pleasure in such cringe-inducing media because they offer vicarious experiences with social worst-case scenarios.

Keywords: cringe comedy; benign violation; benign masochism; vicarious embarrassment; humour; evolutionary theory; *Fawlty Towers*; *The Office*; *The Inbetweeners*; Human Nature and Pop Culture

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Introduction

In recent years, one of the stranger trends in British television has been the rise of cringe comedy. One need look no further than the episodic farce *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979), hailed by many as Britain's all-time greatest sitcom (Kitchener 2015), to confirm that embarrassment has always played an integral role in British comedy. But as Leon Hunt notes:

The phrase 'cringe comedy', however, suggests something more than that, a dissolution of whatever distance we might maintain between the embarrassment experienced by a character and an embarrassment that we somehow feel ourselves. If dark or cruel comedy 'anesthetize the heart' then cringe makes us feel too much of something that we would usually not want to feel at all (2015).

Like horror, cringe is then a genre defined by and named after the reaction it produces in its audience: *to cringe* means '[t]o experience an involuntary inward shiver of embarrassment' or 'to feel extremely embarrassed or uncomfortable' ('cringe, v.' 2010). This is the paradox of cringe comedy: shows like *The Office* (2001-2003) and *The Inbetweeners* (2008-2010) thrive on producing high levels of vicarious embarrassment—a decidedly *negative* emotion—in their audiences. How might we explain this curious trend in popular culture?

Since the 1990s, evolutionary and cognitive approaches to the arts have steadily been gaining traction. Biocultural critics like Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall have long been using evolutionary theory to explore the human preoccupation with storytelling, literature, and film. As Carroll writes, the biocultural approach is predicated on the idea that '[i]f the mind has evolved, and if the evolved character of the mind influences the products of the mind, scholarly and scientific commentary on those products would benefit from being explicitly lodged within an evolutionary conceptual framework' (2013, 9). We have evolved our basic emotions and preferences in an adaptive relationship with our environment (9), and consequently an evolutionary study of cringe comedies should explicate not just how they evoke vicarious embarrassment in their audiences but also why audiences would find them enjoyable. The concept of benign masochism coupled with Warren and McGraw's benign violation theory of humour, which integrates previous humour research with evolutionary psychology, provide a theoretical framework through which to do so.

It is therefore my purpose here to offer a biocultural account of how cringe comedy works, arguing that whereas a farce like *Fawlty Towers* employs psychological distance in order to render its embarrassing violations thoroughly benign and thus singularly conducive to amusement, cringe comedies like *The Office* and *The Inbetweeners* comparatively decrease psychological distance in order also to evoke high levels of vicarious embarrassment in their audiences. Furthermore, I will argue that audiences find benignly masochistic pleasure in such cringe-inducing media because they offer vicarious experiences with social worst-case scenarios.

Benign Violations and Embarrassment Humour

Historically, three theories have dominated humour research: the relief theory (Freud 1905), which holds that humour involves the sudden release of repressed nervous energy; the superiority theory (Hobbes 1651), which holds that the cause of laughter is a feeling of superiority towards some victim; and finally, the incongruity theory, with Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard among its notable espousers, which holds that humour relies upon incongruity, violations of our normal mental patterns and expectations (Morreall 2009, 11). The superiority and relief theory are largely considered scientifically obsolete, while variants of the incongruity theory have gone on to become the dominant theories of humour in psychology and philosophy (9-23). A joke, for instance, is commonly theorized to be funny when its set-up successfully *sets up* an expectation that its punchline then violates (3). However, though the incongruity theory may describe an antecedent of humour, it does not put forth anything close to sufficient conditions, seeing as incongruity also appears in plenty of non-humorous contexts (13). This is what Warren and McGraw have attempted to amend.

The benign violation theory builds upon the incongruity theory while specifying the conditions for humour more precisely. According to the benign violation theory, something is humorous when it is simultaneously appraised as a violation (i.e. something that is wrong, bad, or threatening) and benign (i.e. something that is not to be worried about). As Warren and McGraw point out, the violations necessary for humour must have a negative valence instead of simply departing incongruously from one's expectations or mental patterns, hence why slipping on a banana peel is often considered humorous while winning the lottery is not. To account for this, Warren and McGraw define a violation as anything that departs from a person's view of how things *should* be, instead of simply departing from how they usually are. Violations of this kind also exist in non-humorous contexts like tragedy, but here they are not benign and therefore elicit negative emotions instead of humour. Revising the incongruity theory by including the condition of benignity and narrowing the definition of a violation thus enables it to more accurately differentiate what is humorous from what is non-humorous, and multiple studies carried out by Warren and McGraw have indeed proven the benign violation theory more accurate in predicting humour than its predecessor (2015, 1-5).

Another problem of the incongruity theory is encapsulated in what philosopher John Morreall calls 'the Irrationality Objection': if humour consists of violations of our conceptual patterns, why do we find it pleasurable? (2009, 13). Positive emotions, after all, evolved during our evolutionary trajectory to motivate adaptive action and cause physiological changes that together would have promoted our fitness (28). When something is humorous, it causes the positive emotion of amusement and the physiological response of laughter, yet it is not obvious what evolutionary benefit would have been provided by either in the face of incongruity (28). As Morreall notes, our conceptual patterns

are ‘the ways we process our experiences, understand, and get along in the world’, and so taking pleasure in their failings seems positively absurd (2008, 228). However, Warren and McGraw circumvent the Irrationality Objection by offering a coherent account of the benefits of humour and how it came about through evolution (2010, 1142; 2015, 19; Warner and McGraw 2014, 76-8).

From an evolutionary perspective, the humorous amusement evoked by a benign violation most likely serves to motivate us to explore and play socially and cognitively with its implications while our laughter in turn recruits others to do the same (78). In their seminal work on the evolution of humour, Gervais and Wilson argue that laughter originated as a play signal with an antecedent manifested in the panting vocalization that accompanies the ‘play face’ of chimpanzees (2005, 410-1). Primates like humans maintain social bonds and learn vital skills through rough-and-tumble play, and here play signals like laughter indicate that all physical violations are intended and construed as benign, ensuring no misunderstandings occur that could escalate the play fighting into actual violence (407). The first violations to elicit laughter and ‘protohumour’ were then the apparent physical threats that constituted the rough-and-tumble play of early humans (398). According to the benign violation theory (Warren and McGraw 2010, 1142), the situations that would elicit humour were then gradually expanded during human evolution to include other kinds of violations, like violations of personal dignity (e.g., slapstick), communicative norms (e.g., puns and wordplay), and moral norms (e.g., black humour). As such, humour allowed humans to relieve the tension potentially caused by benign violations to instead utilize them for spontaneous and peer-bonding exploratory play.

The benign violation theory thus provides a framework firmly grounded in evolutionary theory through which to understand embarrassment humour. Embarrassment is a negative emotion triggered when we appraise ourselves as having, often inadvertently, violated a social norm and consequently anticipate a negative evaluation by others (Harris 2006, 524). From an evolutionary perspective, the loss of social status that could potentially be caused by such a negative evaluation from our peers would be catastrophic, seeing as social status in turn determines who has greater access to key resources that contribute to both survival and reproduction (Buss 2015, 110). In the face of having violated a social norm, embarrassment consequently evolved to signal our prosociality in spite of our social blunder to our peers through appeasement displays like blushing, face touching, and gaze aversion, and through the ‘intense dread’ of experiencing the emotion to deter us from repeating the offense in the future (Harris 2006, 526). In this last regard, embarrassment may even be regarded as a social counterpart to physical pain (526). As such, situations that cause embarrassment clearly contain the potential for humour in the form of a negatively valenced violation.

However, for an embarrassing violation to be humorous it must simultaneously be appraised as benign, and here a problem is posed by the human propensity for empathy. In order to regulate social interactions, humans have evolved a capacity for empathic perspective-taking with vicarious emotional arousal (de Waal 2008, 285). This spontaneous ‘sharing of affect’ can be provoked simply

by witnessing, hearing about, or imagining another’s situation and condition—even if that person is a non-existent character in a fictional narrative (Keen 2013). When we observe someone violating a social norm, even a fictional character, we are consequently disposed to experience vicarious embarrassment on their behalf (Krach et al. 2010). This is what Schwind terms the ‘empathy “problem”’ of embarrassment humour (2015, 58), and vicarious embarrassment can indeed be an uncomfortable and highly aversive experience (Krach et al. 2010). Fortunately, as with most vicarious emotional responses, it is modulated by psychological distance (Williams and Bargh 2008; Stocks et al. 2011).

Psychological distance largely determines how abstractly we construe an event and therefore also our emotional response to that event (McGraw, Williams, and Warren 2014, 567). Fundamentally, it can be categorized into four dimensions: temporal distance (i.e. how long ago did it happen?); social distance (i.e. how familiar or relatable is the person it affected?); spatial distance (i.e. how far away is it?); and hypothetical distance (i.e. does it seem real?). In multiple experiments, Warren and McGraw have manipulated these four dimensions of distance in order to show that increasing them positively influences benign appraisals and consequently humour (Warren and McGraw 2015). For example, participants rated an initially aversive image of a physical abnormality more humorous when it was physically further away from them, i.e. spatially distant, or when told it was not real, i.e. hypothetically distant (3-13). As such, it follows that a psychologically distant embarrassing violation of a social norm constitutes a benign violation. As we shall see, however, comedies may vary in how psychologically distant they make their embarrassing violations and hence how much vicarious embarrassment they let their audiences experience.

Psychological Distancing in *Fawlty Towers*

In an interview conducted for the 2001 re-release of *Fawlty Towers* on DVD, John Cleese expounded upon the experience of writing the show with Connie Booth, remarking that

there was an extraordinary emotional reaction we used to have when we [thought] of things that would happen to Basil, because in a sense we were like gods playing with this man’s life, and sometimes when we [thought] of what would happen next we would howl with laughter, and then we would think ‘oh, poor man’. Because as somebody pointed out years ago, comedy is very like tragedy; it’s just a question of whether you are sympathetic to the people who are suffering or whether you’re standing back a bit and laughing at them.

This notion of ‘standing back a bit’ is nothing less than a proverbial phrasing of the concept of psychological distance. As we shall see, however, this distanced stance is not just an attitude adopted autonomously by the audience but rather the product of identifiable attributes of the material itself. In *Farce*, Jessica Milner Davis even names this a distinguishing trait of the genre, defining the ‘comic spirit’ of farce as one which ‘tends to debar empathy for its victims’ (2003, 2). Consequently, we can use examples from *Fawlty Towers* to illustrate how a comedy can employ psychological distance in order to render its embarrassing violations thoroughly benign.

In a fictional narrative, social distance can be seen as the extent to which audiences can relate to, sympathize with, and mirror themselves in a character—in a phrase, *character identification* (see Keen 2007, 93-6). Here, a useful distinction to make is between that of ‘round’ and ‘flat’ characters: ‘flat’ characters are one-dimensional and static, whereas a ‘round’ character is complicated, approximates real human individuality, and changes throughout the course of their narrative so that audiences can invest themselves in their development, identify with their recognizable humanity, and empathize with their struggle (Forster 1927, 103-18; Keen 2007, 93). Many comedic forms are populated exclusively by flat kinds of characters: jokes, for example, are often little stories with a set-up and a punchline as their narrative arcs, yet their characters are rarely given as much as a name or a background. Instead, they are simply identified by one generic key quality, e.g. ‘a blonde, an Irishman, and a policeman walk into a bar...’. As an audience, we do not *feel* for the characters nor wonder about their dreams and ambitions, their personal history, or the hidden depths of their souls exactly because they have none of those things: they exist solely as one-dimensional, generic type-characters and consequently their follies do not draw our sympathies or activate our empathy.

So too farces like *Fawlty Towers* are populated by ‘types’ or ‘caricatures-in-action’ defined by their singular ‘mental set’ through which they view the world (Davis 2003, 4). In the case of Basil Fawlty, this mental set is one of perpetual indignation, i.e. a dissatisfaction with his current social status and the lack of respect the world has bestowed upon him (see Davies 2016). As a malcontent member of the middle class, what he wants and moreover feels he deserves is the esteem of the upper stratum, yet as the manager of a struggling hotel he is forced to serve the very people he interchangeably refers to as the ‘ignorant rabble’, the ‘commoners’, and the ‘riff raff’ (‘A Touch of Class’). Consequently, he walks around in a constant state of indignation, and much of the show’s humour is derived from Basil’s unwillingness or inability to contain his disgust at the base customs of his customers, especially when they then dare ask him to fluff their pillows, redo their meals, or ‘any [such] request that involves Basil lifting a single, solitary finger’ for them (McGee 2013).

In fact, entire episodes revolve around Basil’s want of social status leading him to inadvertently and embarrassingly violate social norms, yet audiences may appraise these violations as benign in part because they are at the expense of such an unengaging and unsympathetic character. In ‘Gourmet Night’, for instance, he holds a gourmet dinner and advertises it in an expensive magazine to attract

‘a higher class of customer’—even going as far as to specify ‘no riff raff’ in his advertisement. However, throughout the night he does nothing but embarrass himself while alienating the few high-class customers who bothered to turn up. For instance, nervousness causes him to accidentally refer to the rather petite Mrs. Hall as ‘Mrs. Small’, and through a series of complications he even ends up not being able to serve his guests anything but a trifle. Basil is left thoroughly embarrassed, having inadvertently broken every social norm regulating how one should behave at a gourmet dinner. His suffering, however, is that of an indignant snob’s, and is therefore hardly likely to evoke our sympathy or empathy. This frees us to enjoy his misfortunes as benignly humorous.

In film and television, directors obviously cannot control how physically distant viewers sit from their TV sets, but through framing they can manipulate viewers’ *perceived* spatial distance from the scenes depicted (Boggs and Petrie 1996, 134-6). Mirroring how most audience members would have sat literally distant from the stage during the classic theatrical farces, *Fawlty Towers* thus shies away from close framing—the entire 30-minute pilot episode, for instance, contains not a single close-up (‘A Touch of Class’). This spatial distance is in turn compensated by John Cleese’s acting style, which is almost reminiscent of commedia dell’arte in its stylized and exaggerated physicality: when Basil is agitated, for example, he runs emphatically around the set (‘The Builders’), and when brought to emotional ruin he palms his head and jumps up and down in what has been referred to as ‘the John Cleese manoeuvre’ (‘The Psychiatrist’). As commedia dell’arte expert Micke Klingvall notes, this style of acting in itself contributes to ‘create distance’ by presenting characters as stylized and unreal—by being ‘bigger than life’, they are simultaneously ‘reduced as humans’ (2016). In this way, spatial distance reinforces social distance by dictating an exaggerated style of acting.

Similarly, fictions are obviously all hypothetically distant to some extent, but they may vary in their realism and the lengths at which they go to hide their artifice and feign authenticity. *Fawlty Towers*, for example, makes no qualms about appearing synthetic and staged. For one thing, the non-diegetic laughter of its studio audience functions as a perpetual ‘play signal’ reminding viewers of the depicted events’ fictitiousness and ultimate benignity. Furthermore, with its severely limited number of sets, its over-the-top acting, and most of its shots taken from the distanced vantage point of the studio audience, the show looks most of all like a recorded stage play. As such, every aspect of *Fawlty Towers*’s format seems to advertise its fundamental inauthenticity.

Hypothetical distance, however, does not restrict itself to aesthetics. Cleese and Booth also employ what Selby and Cowdery term ‘structured’ plots that make no attempt at veiling their contrived nature (1995, 95). Whereas an ‘organic’ plot hides its own ‘processes of structuration’ in order to affect a ‘slice-of-life’-quality, *Fawlty Towers* does not leave us in doubt that ‘we are in the presence of a “made” and edited account’ by structurally relying on unlikely coincidences and escalations (95). In ‘Wedding Party’, for instance, Basil prudishly chastises an unmarried couple for wanting to stay in the same room. The rest of the episode is consequently structured around Basil

repeatedly being caught by the couple in seemingly comprising and embarrassing positions. A female guest arrives back late and drunkenly trips over Basil as he picks up her dropped purse, ending up sitting on top of him. At this unfortunate moment, the young couple walks in on them. Later, a drunk Manuel inadvertently hits Basil over the head with his umbrella. As Basil lies writing on the floor in pain, Manuel sits over him saying ‘Mr. Fawcety, I love you, I love you’. Once again, the young couple walks in on them. Lastly, Basil is sent downstairs in his underwear late at night by Sybil, who thinks she has heard a burglar. In the dark lobby, he hits Manuel over the head with a frying pan, thinking him to be an intruder. As he crouches on top of Manuel’s unconscious body, the young couple of course *again* walks in on them. Here, the threefold repetition, the gradual escalation in embarrassment, and the unlikeliness of each scenario thus expose the clear structuration of plot and thereby the events’ fictitiousness.

As we have seen, a farce like *Fawlty Towers* thus renders its embarrassing violations thoroughly benign by making them hypothetically, spatially, and socially distant. In cinematic terms, this in turn means that they are unrealistic, employ distant framing, and are at the expense of an unrelatable and unsympathetic character. No wonder, then, that audiences can disengage empathically and construe them abstractly. With a strong emphasis on benignity, the embarrassing violations of *Fawlty Towers* are thus aimed at producing amusement and nothing but amusement. Now, however, we shall turn to the embarrassing violations aimed at causing cringe.

Vicarious Embarrassment and Tragedy in *The Office*

A major flaw in most theories of humour is that they describe it as an exclusively positive emotional experience (Warren and McGraw 2010, 1145). Cringe comedy, just by virtue of its existence as a genre, is proof that it does not have to be. In this respect, the benign violation theory is thus superior: not only does it allow for humour to evoke negative emotions in addition to amusement, it is predicated on the notion that humour requires such mixed emotions (1145). A comedy is a cringe comedy when, and only when, it simultaneously produces amusement *and* high levels of vicarious embarrassment in its audience. The embarrassing violations of cringe comedies must therefore be psychologically close enough to produce high levels of vicarious embarrassment yet distant enough to still register as benignly humorous. As the archetypal cringe comedy, Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant’s *The Office* is the perfect example of keeping this balance. Before we turn to how it decreases psychological distance in comparison to *Fawlty Towers*, we shall therefore mark the one category of distance it does not reduce, namely social distance.

David Brent, the show’s socially bumbling branch manager and its primary object of cringe, remains just as much of a flat type-character as Basil. He is a show-off without any social skills—and that is *all* he is (see Schwind 2015, 54; Zunsine 2008). Consequently, he enters every situation

wanting wholeheartedly to impress but bereft of the ability to do so. Up until the very last episode of series two, he remains exactly this predictable and one-dimensional, not once passing up an opportunity to embarrass himself by trying too hard to impress those around him. Unlike Basil Fawlty, who only wanted the esteem of the upper class and could not care less about the opinion of the ‘ignorant rabble’, David desperately seeks the approval of everyone: when around the lower-class workers in the warehouse he ungracefully attempts to join in on their sexist jokes (‘Work Experience’), just as when talking to a black office worker he forces his appreciation of African-American actor Denzel Washington awkwardly into the conversation (‘Appraisals’). His defining quality may be rooted in something in itself relatable and human—Gervais himself, for instance, proposes that ‘we *all* want to be loved, to think we’re popular and respected, to be thought of as interesting’ (2016; emphasis added); but as it is made all-encompassing of David’s personality, it turns him flat and unsympathetic as a character. As such, social distance is not significantly diminished in comparison to *Fawlty Towers*.

The ingenuity of *The Office*, however, lies in taking this type-character and placing him in a hyperrealistic context with hypothetical distance severely decreased. As a mock-documentary, or ‘mockumentary’, the entire format of *The Office* is in fact devoted to making it appear like a documentary of *real* people in *real* situations experiencing *real* emotions (Jacobi 2016, 298). The show employs trademarks of the documentary genre by having characters address the camera directly and by interspersing action with talking head interviews where main characters expound upon the events of the episode. Similarly, all camera movement is visibly handheld just like all lighting and sound is diegetic. Gone, importantly, is the reassuring laughter of the studio audience, replaced instead with the dreary office humdrum of telephones ringing and copiers printing. The show was even shot in a real office, and the mise-en-scene with its bare walls and tiled ceilings in flat and cheerless lighting fully embrace what Jacobi calls the office life’s relatable ‘sense of entrapment’ (2016, 301). *The Office* thus seizes every aesthetic opportunity to decrease hypothetical distance and make the show seem real and authentic.

As opposed to the structured plots of *Fawlty Towers*, *The Office* similarly relies on organic plots where what is most interesting is ‘the response of characters to the various events that seem to grow and develop in a natural (“organic”) way around them’ (Selby and Cowdery 1995, 95). Instead of relying on unlikely coincidences and comic fortuitousness, David’s embarrassing violations are then simply products of his lack of self-awareness. In ‘Merger’, for example, when he is supposed to make a short speech welcoming the new employees from Swindon, he overeagerly approaches it like a late night standup performance, opening with the wildly inappropriate and crass double entendre ‘I’m not gay—I can honestly say I’ve never come over a little queer’ accompanied by a masturbating hand gesture. The joke is met with muted polite chuckles from the audience, while a reaction shot depicts them averting their eyes or covering their faces in embarrassment. David’s second joke evokes a

similar reaction, while his third is met with utter silence, faces of disgust, and a cringing ‘ugh’ from Tim. David continues his speech getting gradually more dry-mouthed, desperate, and annoyed at the lack of laughs until he quits in exasperation saying ‘oh, come on!’. Admittedly, the scenario does require audiences to accept David’s lack of self-awareness, but beyond that it is entirely plausible and involves no unreasonably bad luck on David’s part. As such, it is hypothetically much closer than any violation from *Fawlty Towers*.

Spatially, distance is also severely decreased, with most shots being medium close-ups that transition in and out of actual close-ups, which in turn allows for nuanced, subtle, and naturalistic acting to be picked up on by the viewer. David may be a type-character, but as Schwind notes, Ricky Gervais ‘defines the character through a series of well-crafted mannerisms, speech patterns, facial expressions and body language’ (2015, 55). What in turn comes to light through Gervais’s naturalistic portrayal is the fact that David as a character *never* acts naturally—all Gervais has to do is throw a sly glance towards the camera during a social interaction, and it becomes apparent that David is ‘putting on a show’ (Jacobi 2016, 301). Similarly, David does not like Basil run around or jump up and down when agitated or embarrassed, but instead absorbs the blow to his social status and powers through only slightly more dry-mouthed and desperate (‘Merger’). These subtle markers work to give David, an otherwise caricaturish and flat character, authenticity and a real human resemblance.

In order to document the effect of this reduced psychological distance, we may turn to audience reactions as expressed in online comments. Two of the most cringe-inducing scenes have been uploaded in full to YouTube by the official BBC Worldwide channel, both garnering around one million views. Both scenes’ embarrassing violations are again caused by David not understanding what is expected of him in the workplace. The first clip is from ‘Motivation’, where he has been hired to give a speech offering his advice as a local business leader. Misguided as he is, he ineptly assumes the manner of a rousing motivational speaker. His inappropriately excited speech is in turn interspersed with reaction shots of his audience’s emotionless faces and crossed arms as they presumably judge him negatively. The second clip is from ‘New Girl’ and features David interviewing a female candidate to be his assistant while clumsily attempting to charm her, already slouching seductively on his table when she enters his office. The most liked commenters on each clip express both amusement and discomfort. One commenter claims not to be able to watch the clip without ‘pausing, cringing then continuing’ (William Roberts 2016), while another admits pure defeat, writing ‘I just can’t watch this. It’s too awkward :D’ (Kleavers 2015), with the finishing smiley face denoting their apparent ambivalence. On the clip from ‘Motivation’, a viewer similarly praises it as ‘the only scene in the series [they] have to skip because its [sic] too uncomfortable’ (Jonathan Forster 2015), while another describes their very physical reaction watching the clip thus: ‘Buttocks CLENCHED....toes (all of them) CURLED, eyes SQUINTED’ (UBZUKKI 2015).

Interestingly, *The Office* even veers into non-humorous tragic violations. As alluded to earlier, David's one-dimensionality is finally splintered in the concluding scene of series two ('Interview'). Having been made redundant, he begs Neil and Jennifer to let him keep his job. For the first time in all 12 episodes, David here willingly exposes his true vulnerable self and owns up to his faults, admitting he has 'been complacent' and promising that he will try 'twice as hard'. Showing himself capable of self-reflection, he thus ceases to be the flat and buffoonish type-character he has so far inadvertently made himself out to be. Additionally, his watery eyes and cracking voice show him to be in real emotional pain, and just as he says the words 'don't make me redundant, please', the camera even zooms in for an uncomfortably tight close-up. The display is an embarrassing violation—the 'proper' way of handling his redundancy would presumably be with a dignified stiff upper lip—but it is not a violation that audiences report finding humorous. YouTube commenters instead report crying, describe the scene as 'heartbreaking' (PorroFirst 2011), and profess that it 'rips [their] heart out' (kamikrazi123 2009). With the last barrier of social distance thus diminished, the violation is no longer appraised as benign and consequently turns tragic.

As a cringe comedy, *The Office* thus carefully regulates its variables of psychological distance. First, it decreases hypothetical and spatial distance so that its embarrassing violations evoke high levels of vicarious embarrassment in addition to amusement. In this way, it complicates the humorous experience by making its most amusing moments painful and almost physically straining to sit through. Finally, it then decreases social distance to suddenly give its unsuspecting audience a directly negative emotional experience that is not mediated by amusement. As David is suddenly 'rounded' as a character, the audience is in turn invited to empathize fully with his struggle. This makes his ambiguously happy ending in the concluding 'Christmas Special', in which it seems at least possible that he has finally found someone who can appreciate his 'charm', all the more gratifying. This redemption, though, only comes after 11 episodes mostly dedicated to exposing his faults and garnering laughs from his deserved humiliation. As we shall see with *The Inbetweeners*, however, cringe comedy does not necessarily have to be at the expense of socially distant type-characters.

Adolescent Cringe and Sympathetic Fools in *The Inbetweeners*

Since Plato, philosophers have periodically criticized humour as predicated on malevolence or hostility (Moreall 2009, 4). Hobbes's superiority theory was merely another instantiation of this view of laughter as expressing antipathy (6). So far, however, our examples of embarrassment humour have done nothing to prove them wrong, as they have all been at the expense of unsympathetic fools whose suffering is indeed partly rendered benign through antipathy. Yet social distance is only one contributing factor to benignity—we are often able, for example, to see the funny side of our *own* embarrassing violations in retrospect, i.e. with temporal distance (Weisfeld and Weisfeld 2014, 73).

Many even report having ‘felt like laughing at themselves’ immediately, still red-faced from their social blunder (68). In order to demonstrate that cringe comedy does not need to be at the expense of knavish type-characters, we therefore now turn to Beesley and Morris’s *The Inbetweeners*.

Instead of relying on a high-strung snob or inept buffoon for its embarrassing violations, *The Inbetweeners* simply follows a self-admittedly ‘average’ group of four 16-18 years olds as they stumblingly attempt to navigate the social minefield of adolescence (‘First Day’). Adolescents are not only prone to embarrassment on account of their lack of familiarity with established social norms, they are also especially sensitive to its effects (Blakemore and Mills 2014; Pickhardt 2014). Where David’s social ineptness was intolerable on account of his status as an employer and an adult who should know better, the adolescent inelegance of the youths in *The Inbetweeners* is then more understandable. In fact, reviewers and fans have consistently praised the show for the relatable awkwardness of its adolescent characters (e.g., Gilbert 2010; Genzlinger 2010; Dean 2009), and no wonder: if they have experienced adolescence themselves, they have most likely suffered from that very same awkwardness.

The adolescent protagonists of the show similarly display a roundedness that encourages character identification. As we have seen, flat characters like Basil and David remain static: no matter what social embarrassment they have suffered, we can rest assured they will unalterably resume their maladaptive behaviour the very next episode. *The Inbetweeners*, on the other hand, chronicles not just its characters’ continual embarrassments but also their gradual development and maturation—every episode, in fact, is concluded by a narrating Will summarizing what he has learned from its preceding events. Will may start out a shunned and bespectacled posh nerd, but by the end of the first series he has already assimilated himself into a comparatively plebeian group of friends (‘Xmas Party’). Similarly, Simon may be a selfish and neurotic romantic, yet he chooses to spend the Christmas party at the end of the first series hanging out with his dweebish comrades instead of pining after Carli (‘Xmas Party’). Though the protagonists may display faults, their continual maturation and ability to improve thus redeem them and encourage audiences to invest themselves in their development and empathize with their struggles.

Not unlike *The Office*, the show’s setting similarly imbues it with relatability and marked authenticity. Its drearily suburban backdrop seems perpetually perturbed by dull and overcast weather and its middle class youths continually find themselves with nothing to do. Instead of casting conventionally attractive actors, all four principal characters are similarly portrayed by average-looking young men who have been styled to look especially awkward: Will, with his short curls and thin framed glasses; Simon, with his much too gelled spikes and ‘hoodies your mum would buy’ (Palmer 2012); Jay, with his straight blond hair puzzlingly cut to frame his face like a drooping bowl cut; and Neil, with his hair short and messy to complement his lanky body and his dopey facial expression. As Dean notes, characters even speak in a vernacular approximating that of real British

youth without shying away from markedly crass language and lewd jokes about ‘your mum’ (2009). Both characters and their surroundings are thus relatably common and unexceptional.

Aesthetically, the show does not provide much hypothetical distance either. Although its format may not be as singularly devoted to feigning authenticity as *The Office*, it is still characterized by a propensity towards realism: a laugh track, for one thing, is omitted, and non-diegetic music, though it does intersperse certain scenes, is kept to a minimum. Similarly, camera movement is often visibly handheld and unlike *Fawlty Towers* the show does not shy away from close framing. As such, it occupies a middle ground between the hyperrealism of *The Office* and *Fawlty Towers*’s blatant disregard for hypothetical credibility.

Instead of relying on comic fortuitousness and unlikely coincidences, its embarrassing violations similarly stem simply from characters’ insecurity or inexperience within a certain social context. The show’s two perhaps cringiest scenes involve Will and Jay attempting and failing—on account of their insecurity and inexperience—to charm a girl through humour. In ‘The Field Trip’, Will is jealous that Simon is hitting it off with the pretty new girl Lauren, and consequently he attempts to simultaneously grab her attention and charm her by doing an impression of Yoda from *Star Wars*. Loud and proud, he belches out ‘feisty one you are’ in Yoda-speak, but is met with utter confusion from both Simon and Lauren. He then repeats his failed attempt at humour, only for a flustered Lauren to sincerely ask him why he is ‘talking like that’ and whether he has ‘a *problem* or Asperger’s, maybe?’. Similarly, in ‘Will Gets a Girlfriend’, Jay cluelessly attempts to court the attractive Charlotte with an excruciatingly 24-second-long impression of the once popular *Crazy Frog* ringtone. Needless to say, he is unsuccessful in charming her. The official *The Inbetweeners* YouTube channel has uploaded both these scenes in full and comments here may again provide a suggestion of the most common audience reactions: commenters describe Will’s Yoda impression as ‘Cringy af [as fuck]’ (Atte Kangas 2016), declaring it ‘one of the moments [they] just can’t watch – so fucking awkward’ (TheExtremeLead 2016), while reporting that it makes them ‘retch and laugh at the same time lol’ (Hans Landa 2016). Similarly, a commenter on Jay’s rendition of *Crazy Frog* proclaims to have ‘cringed so much I am now a raisin’ (MyBean 2017).

Compensating for its severe lack of psychological distance, *The Inbetweeners* in turn uniquely mitigates many of its cringiest moments by letting its characters *themselves* cope with their embarrassments through humour. In ‘First Day’, Will is forced as a new student to wear a badge that says ‘My name is Will. Stop me and say hello’. Additionally, his mom has equipped him with a briefcase instead of a backpack in which to carry his supplies. These two seemingly innocuous violations of social norms single him out as an object of public ridicule. As he walks through the halls of the school, he is consequently mocked by the students passing him by. However, Will counters every single verbal attack with sarcasm:

KID A: Ooh, I'm Will.

WILL: Yep, thanks very much.

KID B: Ooh, hello Will.

WILL: Yes, that's very nice, thank you.

KID C: Nice badge, dickhead.

WILL: Lovely, fantastic. You must be what, Year 8?

KID E: Biefcase wanker.

WILL: The baggage-themed insult. Thanks Mum, thanks a bunch (as transcribed in Beesley and Morris 2012, 14)

In this way, Will handles the embarrassing situation by using humour to deflect his ridicule. This requires construing the situation abstractly in order to see the violations of his personal dignity as somehow benign in the large scheme of things. Shifting to the play mode of humour in stressful situations like during public embarrassment has indeed been shown to be a successful coping mechanism, at least some of the time (Morreall 2009, 66-7). Not only does it decrease physiological strain and discomfort (66), it also allows the embarrassed individual to flaunt their own capacity for humour, thereby potentially *improving* their social reputation. After all, Will eventually half-loses his virginity to Charlotte exactly because she is attracted to his self-deprecating humour and wit ('Will Gets a Girlfriend').

Similarly, what bonds characters in *The Inbetweeners* is their ability to find humour in their shared embarrassments. In 'Exam Time', Will consumes so many energy drinks while prepping for his final exam that he ends up soiling himself while taking it. Even though he is understandably not able to see the funny side of the situation immediately, a voiceover features a temporally distant Will making light of it: 'In term of low points, this was it: literally the bottom'. Similarly, in Will's very next scene he has already turned the incident into a funny anecdote that he self-deprecatingly tells to his friends' amusement. When Jay warns him that 'people will take the piss, mate', Will shrugs it off, saying 'just to reiterate, I loudly shit myself in front of the school. There's no point trying to hide it. Life doesn't get much more embarrassing than that'. Unable to change the situation, Will has instead chosen to suspend the personal, practical concerns that lead to negative emotions (Moreall 2009, 66-7), allowing him to construe it abstractly and thus utilize its humorous potential as a benign violation. This in turn allows for the group-bonding play of humour to ensue, and the episode consequently ends with the gang driving off together and laughingly making up new punny nicknames for Will centered around his accident, e.g., 'Bumdog Millionaire', 'Wayne Pooney', 'Take Shat', 'Vladimir Pootin', and 'The Lion, The Witch, and The Speccy Kid Who Shit Himself'.

The Inbetweeners thus compensates for its overall lack of psychological distance and circumvents the empathy 'problem' of embarrassment humour by allowing its audience to literally

laugh *with* its characters instead of exclusively *at* them. Its characters are neither especially distant socially, hypothetically, nor spatially, but through their laughter they provide their own play signal indicating the ultimate benignity of their embarrassing violations. This does not stop the cringe from occurring, but it does stop it from taking on a cruel character or veering into tragedy like *The Office* does towards its finale. As a cringe comedy, the embarrassing violations of *The Inbetweeners* thus carefully straddle the line between threat and benignity. The question, however, remains: if embarrassment is such an aversive experience that we need coping mechanisms to deal with it, why would so many people willingly expose themselves to cringe comedies explicitly aimed at evoking this emotion vicariously?

Benign Masochism and the Paradox of Cringe

For millennia now, literary scholars have sought to understand the paradoxical attraction of aversive fictions. The paradox of of cringe, after all, is no more puzzling than those of tragedy or horror, all art forms explicitly aimed at evoking negative emotions in their audiences. In *Poetics*, Aristotle proposed tragic pleasure to be the purgation of cooped up pity and fear (1895, 23). 2352 years later, however, we find ourselves with little to no scientific support for this theory of emotions (Bloom 2010, 192). In order to illuminate the appeal of cringe, we may therefore have to rely on more recent inquiries.

Comparing it to the enjoyment many derive from the ‘burn’ of hot chilies or the nauseating swirls of roller coasters, evolutionary psychologists like Paul Bloom and Steven Pinker have discussed the pleasure of aversive fiction as a commonly shared kind of benign masochism (Pinker 1997, 540; Bloom 2010, 194-5). Originally developed in the 1980s by psychologists Rozin and Schiller to account for the appeal of painfully spicy foods, the concept of benign masochism describes the ‘enjoyment of negative bodily reactions and feelings in the context of feeling safe’ (Rozin et al. 2013, 469). Under controlled circumstances and in manageable doses, benign masochism predicts that we are disposed to confront ourselves with what would normally be considered woes (Pinker 1997, 540). In a sense, then, it can be seen as a natural inclination towards experiences that allow for ‘safe practice’ with pain and negative emotions (Bloom 2010, 193). Aversive fictions like cringe comedies fit the bill: though their evoked embarrassment is real enough, viewers suffer it risk-free and with an ever-present choice of simply shutting off their TV sets should the cringe reach an insurmountable level. Our penchant for cringe comedies, then, can be seen as a product of a uniquely human proclivity to ‘exercise our psyches for when life goes to hell’ (193).

As such, cringe comedies may actually serve a beneficial and preparatory function. By immersively simulating social worst-case scenarios, they prepare us for the cringe of our own lives, better equip us to avoid it, and even provide us with strategies to pursue once it occurs. If, as Gervais

supposes, we all like David want to be loved, respected, and thought interesting (2016), then watching *The Office* provides us with salient examples of how not to achieve this. By violating all the unspoken social norms of the office environment, David makes them salient and allows us to vicariously experience the intense embarrassment that comes with disregarding them. *The Inbetweeners* goes even further, providing us with a viable strategy for when the violation has already occurred and we find ourselves squirming with embarrassment, our hard-earned social reputation tarnished. Here, it advises us to step back, construe the situation abstractly, realize our violation's ultimate benignity, and 'laugh it off'. Having cringed with the characters from *The Office* and *The Inbetweeners*, we are thus left better equipped to cope with the cringe of our own lives.

This leaves us with the curious notion that we may enjoy cringe comedies because they are, in at least one sense, good for us. Whereas a farce like *Fawlty Towers* allows us to laugh at the embarrassments of its characters, cringe comedies allow us to acquaint ourselves with the emotion of embarrassment as we are laughing. By decreasing psychological distance, they complicate the humorous experience and render their most amusing scenes intensely uncomfortable and almost physically straining to sit through. Yet should we persevere, we may in turn emerge on the other side strengthened, bolstered, and emboldened by the experience. As benign masochists, we thus better ourselves one buttocks-clenching, toe-curling, eye-squinting cringefest at a time.

Conclusion

As with many other puzzling aspects of human behaviour, an evolutionary perspective thus allows unique insight when attempting to make sense of the paradox of cringe comedy. Drawing on Warren and McGraw, I have argued that humour is an evolved response to benign violations and that embarrassment humour specifically relies on embarrassing violations being rendered benign through psychological distance. In *Fawlty Towers*, hypothetical, spatial, and social distance thus render its embarrassing violations thoroughly benign and thereby singularly conducive to amusement. Cringe comedies like *The Office* and *The Inbetweeners* differ from such traditional embarrassment humour by comparatively decreasing these variables of psychological distance in order also to evoke high levels of vicarious embarrassment. The pleasure audiences counterintuitively seem to derive from such cringe may in turn be a testament to their own benignly masochistic nature, a commonly shared disposition to seek out and enjoy experiences that allow for safe practice with controlled doses of pain and negative emotion. By simulating humorous yet agonizing social worst-case scenarios, cringe comedies may then even serve a preparatory function. From a biocultural perspective, the paradoxical appeal of cringe comedy can thus be accounted for in terms of two distinct kinds of pleasure: the direct pleasure of humorous amusement and the benignly masochistic pleasure of cringing itself.

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