

**CURBING THE LAUGHTER: EXPLORING THE
MANIFESTATIONS OF DARK HUMOUR IN “CURB YOUR
ENTHUSIASM”**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the current state of dark humour in sociological discourse through an exploration of the humour found in television sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (*Curb*). After analyzing the current literature on humour, this thesis proceeds on the premise that some perspectives on dark humour are much more heavily emphasized than others, and those interpretations of dark humour that project a positive, therapeutic image of the world are favoured. Proceeding with a three-stage analysis – social/historical contextualization, formal content analysis, and concept reinterpretation – the thesis carries out case studies of three episodes of *Curb*, which provide the empirical source for key themes within humour studies. Extracting and discussing these themes from *Curb* allow the thesis to argue that there are under appreciated aspects of dark humour that are too often taken for granted in humour studies; specific aspects of humour studies explored are: humour’s relationship to social transgression, the effect of laughter on interpretation, and a presupposition of ‘happy endings’ in comic media. As a consequence of these three aspects, the thesis concludes that the state of humour studies requires ongoing reappraisal to ensure that a greater variety of perspectives are utilized when researching humorous phenomena.

Keywords: Humour; Comedy; Sitcom; *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; Cultural Studies

From the moment I picked your book up until I laid it down, I was convulsed with laughter. Someday I intend reading it. – Groucho Marx

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1: A SERIOUS LOOK AT HUMOUR

1.1 An Introduction to Dark Humour: “A Baby Seal Walks into a Club...”

In contemporary debates regarding humour there is a marked divide between seriousness and frivolity, between a ‘good spirit’ and a ‘heart of darkness.’ To many people, one of the most effective ‘weapons’ against life’s tedium, anguish, and interpersonal turmoil is humour. Looking at the contemporary western sensibilities, there are few qualities so highly revered as a good sense of humour, and given the typical definitions of humour, for instance, “a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement,” (Humour: Dictionary.com, 2010) it is no wonder that most people do not worry about the role of humour much beyond this simple, common sense, definition. Why ruin an ostensibly good thing like humour? This question ought to be kept in the back of our minds for the duration of this thesis, as I aim to take these common sense notions of humour and explore how humour exists beyond these viewpoints. First, however, the aim of this chapter will be to summarize sociological perspectives on humour and illuminate the ways humour is being discussed in regards to dark humour and its close relative, socionegative humour, and lastly discuss how an appreciation of humour’s literature frames the ways in which humour is analyzed in this thesis.

With each attempt I make to engage the intricacies of humour, I consistently return to a thought by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1967) found in *Will to Power*. “Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs,” wrote Nietzsche, “he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter” (1967, p. 91).¹ This quote exemplifies some key thoughts that are central to understanding the social role of humour. Crucially, it recognizes the dialectic at work between joviality and suffering, which is mirrored, to be

¹ Despite the truth of this claim – that humans alone laugh – is now disputed (cf. Douglas, 2004), the sentiment remains untainted: laughter and humour beguiles pain and suffering, and people look to humour to cover ugly truths. However, for the sake of the quotation, perhaps more accurate would be “...that he had to *invent* humour.”

certain, by the relationship between frivolity and seriousness. To understand humour, therefore, each antithesis must be considered. Further, the quote reminds us that humour is fundamentally and necessarily a social phenomenon that cannot exist outside of discourse;² it must be ‘invented,’ and therefore also interpreted. Humour is always found in ‘something,’ it is always a characteristic of ‘something.’ This in itself is particularly significant. How we come to attribute the characteristic of being ‘humorous’ to something is worthwhile to investigate, as is how that humour is then said to be understood and interpreted. In effect, when exploring humour the task always involves negotiating what John Thompson (1988) calls a *pre-interpreted domain*. In this regard, the scope of this chapter will be to outline how the concept of humour is circulated in sociological discourse, discuss where these discourses fail to adequately address the notion of dark humour’s close relative, socionegative humour, and to locate how these empty spaces open up an opportunity for novel readings in humour theory itself through exploring the example of a TV sitcom, *Curb Your Enthusiasm (Curb)*.

1.2 A Brief History of Humour: “Did you hear the one about...”

To begin a discussion of humour, it is useful to define some key terms to avoid confusion as the thesis progresses. Most importantly, we must distinguish between laughter, jokes, humour, and comedy; terms that are often erroneously understood and used as synonyms. However, a critical look at these terms will pay great dividends in nuancing the findings of this thesis in the analysis stage. Definition of the terms is based upon a variety of sociological theorists who standardized them in the way that I intend to use them (e.g., Berger, 1993; Palmer, 1994; Kuipers, 2006). For instance, laughter refers simply to a physical action that we are all familiar with, and which can signify a range of motions from joy to nervousness to distress. There is nothing inherently humorous in laughter; however, it is often (mis)used as a convenient synecdoche for all things humorous. This is a mistake, as I will later demonstrate, that has significant consequences. Alternatively, a joke can best be thought of as a base unit of humour; it is

² An appropriate analogy to this sentiment – that humour has to be a social phenomenon felt by the individual, and not vice versa – is the roadblock one encounters when you try to tickle your own foot. Just as it is impossible to evoke laughter by tickling your own foot, it is equally impossible to discuss humour purely as it relates to the individual.

a single specific instance that can be isolated, for instance a pun or a punch line. This is markedly different from humour, which can be best characterized as akin to a climate or environment that people may inhabit, for instance, a lively party where jokes flow freely and often. Lastly, comedy exists simply as an offshoot of humour. Humour can occur in day-to-day interactions, whereas comedy is an intentional media construction, such as a play, novel, or television show. Humour and comedy often work synonymously in academia that deals with both (e.g., Putterman, 1995; Lockyer and Pickering, 2006), perhaps because they work at a similar level of abstraction. In any case, given the near synonymous usages of humour and comedy, it is best to keep this distinction in the back of one's mind without becoming overly pedantic about specific usage.

Also worth noting are the related terms of irony, satire, and parody, as all three are elements of humour that will be drawn upon in the analysis. Irony is a rhetorical technique that uses stark juxtapositions and incongruity, often producing an effect that is completely opposite to the initial intent (Knox, 1972). According to H.W. Fowler (2009), irony is an utterance that assumes two audiences: one audience that will hear the utterance and not understand, and a second audience recognizes that there is more than the superficial meaning in irony and also recognizes that the first audience does not perceive this dual meaning, thus creating an insider/outsider dichotomy (p. 295). The use of irony is an essential part of satire, which is more directed and poignant than the broad term irony. As defined by Encyclopædia Britannica (2010), satire is an “artistic form in which human or individual vices, folly, abuses, or shortcomings are held up to censure by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, or other methods, sometimes with an intent to bring about improvement.” In this sense, satire has a normative undertone, as it works to chasten an individual or society into line with a specific stance or attitude. Lastly, parody shares many of the same features that satire does, in that it imitates and mocks an original work or style. Unlike satire, however, parody does not necessarily operate at the expense of the inspiration, thus parody loses a lot of the normative tone that satire has, as it is generally understood to precipitate social change. Moreover, parody is always meant to be humorous in its tone, and while this is often true for satire as well, it is not always the case and certainly not a given (Denith, 2000; Knox, 1972). Each of these terms will

be used in the broader discussion of dark humour and will be referred to throughout the analysis.

Shifting focus to the social theory of humour, the roots of humour theory are rich, and the task of how best to view humour has been debated since the beginning of western philosophy. Today, there are three main paradigms of humour in sociological thought, although breaking them into discrete categories happened relatively recently and can be first seen in the work of D.H. Monro (1963). Since the categorization of the three main paradigms of humour – superiority, relief, and incongruity – Monro’s classification has remained the standard benchmark that all other sociological paradigms of humour use as a reference point. A brief caveat should be made that many other fields – in particular communications, psychology, and literary criticism – have much to say about humour as well, although each field has its own focus and disciplinary outlook. That in mind, there is undoubtedly significant cross-fertilization between the disciplines. For the purposes of this thesis, the perspective used is primarily a sociological one because it principally considers the ways that humour shapes patterns of understanding society. In this vein, contemporary sociological literature focusing on the sociological aspects of humour overwhelmingly suggest that these three theories represent the main schools of thought regarding humour, and subsequent theories represent variations and changes within these three main paradigms (Morreall, 1983; Berger, 1993; Palmer, 1994). Throughout this section, I will present a brief overview of each of these three schools of thought, particularly highlighting the analytical tone that is evident in their analysis.

1.2.1 The Superiority Paradigm

As with much western social theory, the roots of humour theory are found with the ancient Greeks. Concerned with how best to be a virtuous member of society, Aristotle saw moderation as the key to leading a virtuous and happy life and he worried that with humour (and consequently, laughter), individuals would over-indulge in frivolity and shirk their responsibilities, “[the comic] is the slave of his sense of humour, and spares neither himself nor others if he can raise a laugh, and says things none of

which a man of refinement would say” (2009, Book IV Section 8, ¶ 1).³ Aristotle cultivates a skeptical tone towards humour, and although he does not wholeheartedly disavow the notion that humour can raise spirits and be exceptionally enjoyable, he nonetheless wonders what impact humour entails beyond its initial appearance of a light hearted diversion. This is a crucial place to begin, as it is a tradition that emphasizes humour as a matter of interpretation.

The propensity to view humour skeptically and as a potentially disruptive social influence resonated with Thomas Hobbes, *de facto* originator of the superiority theory. Hobbes, who spent much of his life focused on how to avoid a barbaric state of human nature, was suspicious of humour in the way that it ridiculed others, the target of laughter and the expense of humour. For Hobbes (1999), “the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (p. 54-5). This distressed Hobbes, for he theorized that laughter was a basic element of the human emotion range, and unless controlled, always included feelings of superiority for the person laughing and debased the social connections between individuals. Fundamentally, the fear of appearing and/or feeling superior to others is still the sentiment that characterizes how the superiority paradigm is used today.

1.2.2 The Incongruity Paradigm

The most prevalent paradigm (both in academic and everyday discourse) is the incongruity theory, which focuses on the sociological aspects of what we find as humorous and why it is humorous. In its simplest terms, the incongruity theory is a rather innocuous way to look at humour because it gives a notion of humour without consequences, which is to say that the reasons behind why we laugh are initially inconsequential in this paradigm. It is only secondarily that the purpose, drive, or function of humour is examined, which is significantly different from both the superiority

³ It is worthwhile to distinguish between joking, humour, and laughter. A joke is best thought of as single, isolated event. Alternatively, humour is best thought of as a type of environment a person resides within, it extends past a mere transitory moment. Laughter differs from both, where it is physical reaction to stimuli, and can demonstrate a range of emotion from pure joy to absolute sorrow, although the former is heavily favoured in most cases.

and relief theories. Nonetheless, the incongruity theory is a powerful paradigm to grasp the ‘flow’ of humour and how humour operates. The theory – briefly discussed by both Immanuel Kant (2001) and Arthur Schopenhauer (1966) in indirect ways – was first seriously formalized by Henri Bergson (1911) in his book *Laughter*. The crux of the incongruity theory, as provided by Kant (2001), is as follows: “In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd [...] Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (p. 54).

Immediately, it is worth noting that this is remarkably similar to the definition of humour given in the opening section, the one most typically given when pushed for a description of humour. It was Bergson (1911), however, who truly explicated incongruity theory, claiming that while culture, habits and norms are predictable, mechanical and math like, human intelligences, in contrast, are unpredictable and tend to challenge patterns. For Bergson (1911), humour is a social event that could not take place without mild mocking of the boundaries it transgressed, which he deemed “a momentary anaesthesia of the heart” (p. 3).⁴ If we were to pull one final key element from this theory, it would be its social aspect; the incongruity theory suggests that humour is a social experience, and not, as the other theories suggest, an individual experience to social conditions, indeed “laughter is in need of an echo” (Bergson, 1911, p. 4).

1.1.1. The Relief Paradigm

Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud, the notable early proponents of the relief paradigm of humour, provide us with an alternative view of the role of humour in society. As both a biologist and sociologist, Spencer (2001) aimed to link the two disciplines and explain the causes of laughter. He posited that humour played a vital role in easing the pressures and tensions of day-to-day life, hence the metaphor of ‘letting off some steam.’⁵ To Spencer, humour was not much more than an equilibrium adjuster, and although it could address complicated and serious issues (for instance, political satire), it

⁴ This insinuation should not be understood in the sense that by virtue of mocking, all humour is bad or vicious in nature. On the contrary, humour can be seen as positive social dynamic – like the mocking sting of political satire – or even as gentle, since mocking a social construct is not inherently malicious.

⁵ While this sort of assessment has been elevated to common sense and good advice for those feeling the stresses of modern society, one striking criticism of this theory is that often those people most in need of a “good laugh” are also the people least able to conjure one (Smuts, 2006).

nonetheless was aimed to ensure that individuals let cooler heads and a smoother interpersonal interaction prevail.

Yet, while humour was a wholly conscious process for Spencer, Freud, the leading early figure in psychoanalysis, looked to explain how humour operates on an unconscious level, although he also shared the belief that humour aimed to circumvent some of the immense pressure that accumulated by navigating society. An avid fan of jokes, Freud (1960) recalls one of his personal favourites as a means to work through how humour – which he deemed *joke-work* – mitigates individuals feeling the pressures of society: “Two Jews met in the neighbourhood bath-house. ‘Have you taken a bath?’ asked one of them. ‘What?’ asked the other in return, ‘Is there one missing?’” (p. 55). In the process of analyzing this joke, Freud posited a few noteworthy ideas about humour. Firstly, he made the rather banal observation that humour can be either light-hearted or dark-spirited. Although Freud was not the first to comment that humour could be either one or the other, he distinguished the two by deeming the latter *tendentious* (as compared to the former, deemed innocent jokes), which aims to be culturally poignant and subversive, and often obscene. Tendentious jokes work to sidestep cultural constraints that normally restrict certain types of speech, claiming tendentious jokes “evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (Freud, 1960, p. 147). To make sense of this claim, Freud unpacks the notion of humour more critically, expanding the notion of joke-work, which refers to the form, rather than the content, of humour. In this way, scholars distinguish between the shape or form a joke takes – for example, a knock-knock joke or pun – and the content that it addresses, for instance, the cultural stereotypes prompted by expectations of what Jews typically are like in Freud’s joke. Since the forms can be separated, people ‘enjoying’ a tendentious form of humour can separate the mean-spirited aspects away from the joke and merely focus on the joke-work instead, thereby downplaying the maliciousness of a joke that is perhaps at someone else’s expense.

It is common to hear this sort of joke-work rhetoric in practice. For instance, ‘lighten up, it’s only a joke,’ is a common evasive manoeuvre using joke-work. This led Freud to hypothesize that tendentious jokes are the most enjoyable, as they evade cultural restrictions and allow people access to a source of pleasure, the culturally taboo, that

innocent jokes never could have.⁶ To conclude his assessment of humour, Freud's final point is perhaps his most contentious and analytically valuable because it opens up a greater sphere of interpretation to continue humour studies. In his final observation, Freud claimed that the joke-work of humour, on the surface, is more highly valued than the content of the joke; this means that the 'goodness' of a joke is maintained while the malicious basis and intent are sublimated. Consistent with the rest of Freud's (1960) work which suggests that in humour we keep our true motives hidden – especially from ourselves – humour becomes, in tendentious occasions, something where we do not even recognize 'what' we are laughing at (p. 147). This, according to Freud, is the psychoanalytic feature of relief found in humour. What is critical in Freud's work is the ambition to unravel the various interpretations of humour that can simultaneously exist (although, with at least one deeply repressed in comparison to the other).

1.3 Thinking About Humour with the Influence of Michael Billig

Although there are numerous academics that have examined and commented on the classifications of humour (e.g., Monro 1963; Berger, 1993; Palmer, 1994), the cornerstone of this thesis is the work of Michael Billig. Each scholar who looks at humour has their own particular outlook and, furthermore, uses their work to their own particular ends. What makes Billig compelling compared to other researchers, however, is his emphasis on tracing the dark, less celebrated aspects of humour within the context of ideological positivism, which Billig argues is a serious mistake because therapeutic elements tend to be more highly valued than its socially critical ones. In his book *Laughter and Ridicule*, Billig (2005) completes a historical assessment of humour theories, and following this assessment, argues that contemporary humour theories lack many of the negative, harsh elements found in the historical record. So while Billig certainly is not the only influential writer on humour today, nor will he be the only writer relied on, it is worth stressing that he plays a significant role in framing this upcoming inquiry into humour. Billig sets the tone for analysis by stressing that humour always

⁶ Freud's hypothesis has since been supported in more contemporary research, where recent psychological studies have confirmed his sociological insight that tendentious humour provokes more mirth and laughter than the innocent variety (cf., Dundes, 1987; Herzog and Karafa, 1998).

involves a dialectic between the lighter side of humour and its darker side, even if the latter tends to be ‘pushed aside.’ Therefore, this thesis picks up Billig’s train of thought to examine what exactly has been ‘pushed aside’ in dark humour.

Part of this thesis’ theoretical progression is the to co-opting of some vocabulary and attitudes towards humour from Billig. In particular, Billig utilizes the notion of sociopositive and socionegative humour. Although these terms will be discussed in greater detail further into the thesis, the two terms loosely refer to the ability of humour to bring people together, sociopositive, or tear at the social bonds that bind them, socionegative (p. 23). Following a careful analysis of a variety of disciplines that deal with humour, Billig constructs an argument that demonstrates how an emphasis on the positive aspects of humour came to dominate contemporary humour theory. First, Billig notes the tendency in the literature to disregard humour that is disparaging and socionegative as not ‘genuine’ humour. Billig draws our attention to an exemplar of this trend, Herbert Lefcourt (2000), who claims that the distinction between sociopositive and socionegative humour is that the former is the only true variety of humour and the latter, although perhaps provoking laughter, *is not properly considered humorous* (p. 72). It is worth keeping this sentiment at the forefront of our minds for the duration of this thesis, for a returning theme will be what is ‘properly considered humorous and how sociopositive humour has become the *de facto* ‘true’ form of humour. Beyond being a classifying category – sociological, psychological, literary, or otherwise – this trend towards to sociopositive seems to be a moral judgment; which in this case, makes it difficult to properly analyze humour on its own terms (Billig 2005, p. 23).⁷ Conceptually, there should be no reason why ‘genuine’ humour cannot be both socionegative and humorous as well.

In an extension to Billig’s claims, it is crucial to include another point noting that the language of socionegative humour has been eliminated from the language of theory and thought. Billig (2005) provides this overall sense about the situation,

The argument will be that an ideological pattern can be detected across these [social science and humanities] genres [...] The less pleasant faces

⁷ This is not to say that humour cannot have a moral aspect or judgment involved; rather, presupposing one severely constrains the types of theorizing possible.

of humour – its so called negatives – tend to be pushed aside. In some cases, this neglect is so striking one might even talk of textual repression. (Billig, 2005, p. 10)

It might be a stretch – although only a small one – to call this recent insight from Billig a watershed moment for humour theorists, returning to what was written about, and subsequently generally forgotten about and ignored, regarding sociological humour theory.

Admittedly, the upcoming discussion heavily relies on Billig to contextualize the literature. Perhaps this is because, relative to ‘serious’ inquiry, humour may not receive as much attention as it might deserve and needs to progress since Billig pursued his initial line of thought. And while we want to be careful not to suggest that a lack of discussion on humour’s socionegative contexts are proof positive of Billig’s claims, the lack of varied literature is consistent with his assertion that, “The less pleasant faces of humour [...] tend to be pushed aside” (p. 10). Which is not to say that work is not being produced to now further explore dark, socionegative humour, just that it proceeds tentatively and against the staunchly held beliefs of what humour ‘ought’ to be. So, the tides, to put it in slightly trite terms, are turning to recognize Billig’s sentiments, and although not much work in this area is currently being published, the need to do so is recognized by other notable researchers in the field. For instance, Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering (2008) have referenced Billig’s work to assert that within media studies there needs to be a concerted effort to remedy this lack of attention,

Challenging the notion of humour as an absolute good means that humour cannot be taken as a form of discourse or performance that is isolated from other discourses or from wider configurations of sociality and social relations. Humour may at times provide distraction or diversion from the serious sides of life or from entrenched social problems, but it is not separate or separable from the broad spectrum of communicative forms and processes or from the manifold issues surrounding social encounter and interaction in a multicultural society. (p. 818)

Consequently, the lack of engagement with humour’s so-called negative aspects cannot be accounted for by mere coincidence or the inability of theorists. To explain this textual repression, therefore, it is imperative to explore the societal lens that projects the

world in this way. As such, because the guiding perspective on how to classify humour theories of this thesis can be attributed to Billig, it will come as no surprise that the subsequent insights on humour will rely heavily on the assumption that humour is too often synonymous with therapy and generating positive emotions, does not often enough deal with the critical, dark social elements in humour.

1.4 Defining the Limits: “Always Look on the Bright-Side of Life”

It is slightly ironic that if it were not such an ostensibly pleasant experience, the state of humour theory would appear slightly woeful. Perhaps this is why the darker faces of humour theory are rarely unearthed in contemporary discussion; why ruin a good thing? Consider a famous example from British sitcom and film pioneers, Monty Python, as an example of how particular interpretations of humour are sublimated in favour of softer, more socially accepted ones. Famously, in Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* (1999), the group satirizes faith, taking to task those who the Pythons believed took religion too fanatically. In the final scene one sees Brian, who has been mistaken for Jesus, on the cross, presumably dying a slow and painful death. Fortunately (or not) for Brian, a neighbour, who is also being crucified, reminds him to “always look on the bright side of life” (Monty Python, 1999). In essence, the Pythons are reminding audiences that it is foolhardy to try and take life too seriously, and that one should always look to see the best of all possibilities in their surroundings. Humour, as it is being used, is a tool to make the best out of a bad situation, to combat a litany of poor circumstances. In the words made famous by Monty Python, “Life's a piece of shit, when you look at it. Life's a laugh and death's a joke, it's true. You'll see it's all a show, keep 'em laughing as you go!” (1999). Admittedly, there is a deep-rooted sense of irony embedded in this satire; the Python’s are making the point that *not* everything is as it should be, and humour helps point this out. Nevertheless, the important aspect of this example is how humour is shown as a tool to wash over these troubles, to be an undoubtedly positive influence on those it affects. Further, the message is still particularly relevant for discussion because it symbolizes something far more profound and worthy of exploration, the supposed desire to take something negative and, through humour, make the best of it. It is as though humour becomes a social filter, as though once an event passes through humour, it

becomes, at least partially, reified and ‘positive’ in temperament. Described in the preceding section, Billig helps us see this sentiment clearly shown in the state of humour research today. In an overwhelming number of studies, humour is only looked at when ‘the bright side’ can be explored. Simply put, it’s more fun that way.

So, consider this sentiment: humour is a positive social force. Most people who claim any degree of expertise in humour will object to this sort of analysis, and rightly so. What about the broad categories of dark humour, the ‘nasty’ humour that makes audiences recoil? Surely we as social critics can see where humour is not, in this circumstance, a positive social force? To more fully consider these questions, it will help to initially distinguish between light and dark humour, and then to discuss how these do not align closely enough with the topic at hand, despite being generally treated as adequate. Light humour, on one hand, is buoyant, joyful, and created so as to not develop any hard feelings or intentionally cross any social boundaries; as a rule it is not meant to be taken seriously. For instance, the popular trope of mocking the poor quality of airline food falls in the category of light humour. Light humour does not usually involve any explicit othering or objectifying, nor does it need to negotiate the laughing at/with dichotomy. Dark humour (also known as black comedy, gallows humour, blue humour, among other names), on the other hand, creates an ominous feeling, “It presents violent or traumatic events and questions the values and perceptions of its readers [or audience] as it represents, simultaneously, the horrifying and the humorous” (Colletta, 2003, p. 2). In doing so, dark humour confronts what are often taboo, albeit also often important, topics that intend to provoke both thought and amusement, and in some cases, even mobilize movement on a particular issue (Friedman, 1965). Fundamentally, however, light and dark humour are literary terms and although many media analysts have adopted them, they are most useful for distinguishing between genres and distinguishing genre expectations. The terms are perhaps ill-fitted, or at the very least, insufficient, for sustained sociological critique as they do not comment necessarily on the effects of humour, simply its outward appearance (and to a lesser degree, intention). Dark humour is essentially a literary and media tool, so it becomes necessary to complement the term with a homologous notion in a sociological context.

As mentioned earlier in the section on Billig, sociopositive and socionegative are key terms in this thesis for exploring humour. Although the terms ‘sociopositive’ and ‘socionegative’ cannot replace light and dark humour, respectively, they can compliment our appreciation of a variety of types of humour by adding a more sociologically driven perspective. According to Berger, there is a significant qualitative difference between humour that brings people together, sociopositive, and that which drives individuals apart, socionegative. For Berger (1997), sociopositive results can heal and atone, whereas socionegative is unhealthy and unforgiving (p. 59). After much consideration, I intend to use the terms sociopositive and socionegative in a simpler and less emotionally charged manner than Berger, in part to keep with a more reasonably fulfilled sociological inquiry. In this way, I mean sociopositive to entail those instances of humour that do not incite noticeable societal backlash and is generally in-line with the notion that humour can bring people together in a pleasant state of affairs (whatever nebulous shape this may take). Alternatively, I use socionegative to mean humour which divides audiences into separate camps: one camp which revels in laughter and another camp that goes beyond saying that an event is merely unfunny, but extends this to mean that it damages some sense of a ‘social contract’ and ought to be repressed, rearticulated, or simply ignored. So, in this way, dark humour can be sociopositive; it most often is. The distinction between sociopositive/socionegative is only partially based on the context of humour, be it dark or light in nature, but is mostly to do with the way that it is interpreted and used in sociological discourse. Therefore, the sociopositive/negative division is not clearly divided between a non-taboo/taboo dichotomy, as it has less to do with what topics are approached, but rather, how humour is understood to play a role in the articulation of messages and ideas after the fact. Thusly, socionegative is to be understood as those interpretations of humour that many individuals want to repress and ignore completely, as though they do not exist at all.

Since this cross-referencing between light/dark humour and sociopositive/negative humour has seemingly lacked attention, I have chosen to formulate my own mapping of dark/light humour and socionegative/sociopositive humour as roughly mirroring the Cartesian coordinate system, whereby the former pair rests on one axis and the latter pair on the other. In doing so, we have a powerful map

whereby we can comment on both intention and expectations (dark versus light) while distinguishing between what type of societal outcomes it creates (sociopositive versus socionegative) without conflating the two seemingly similar concepts.⁸ The consequences for delineating light/dark from sociopositive/negative humour cannot be underappreciated, for it will provide insight and examples of the capacity to interpret humour at a sociological level. In theory, it allows us to look at the intent or outward appearance of dark humour without precluding a sort of pre-established interpretation that inherently follows; or in other words, how humour ‘ought’ to be received and researched. It gives a face to the trend identified in the preceding section, of a marked avoidance of socionegative humour in contemporary sociological theory.

1.4.1 The Positive View of Humour

One way to explain the tendency to view humour in terms of an uplifting worldview is ideological positivism. In this outlook, a worldview is adopted that is consistent with the sentiment of Monty Python’s (1999) maxim to “always look on the bright side of life,” and the general theoretical – and practical – approach is to put a positive spin on the misfortunes encountered in our daily lives. One of the most relevant thinkers on ideological positivism is Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School. In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse argues that, in advanced industrial societies, mass media operates to eliminate critique and opposition of the dominant ideologies, creating what he deems a ‘one-dimensional’ universe where critical thought begins to wither. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse (1955) challenged those who consistently and exclusively emphasized positive outlooks on life and ignored aspects that critical theory had to produce tangible and much needed social change. This tendency to emphasize the positive over the critical, in principle, still applies in much of humour theory today. This begs the obvious question, why fix something that isn’t broken? Alternatively, in our case, why critique humour when it is ostensibly such a good thing?

It is a bold move, perhaps, to try and reify humour with a more socionegative perspective; why rain on the parade? When looking at resolving this tension, we might

⁸ It is a matter of debate as to whether or not there exists light/socionegative humour. Although perhaps interesting, this is best left for another discussion.

consider those moments of the stifled laugh, when something strikes us as ‘humorous’ (if only momentarily and with a sensitivity that one ought not be laughing) only to feel or sense that laughter is not funny, and in describing the event assert it was surely ‘not really funny’ and nothing but a knee-jerk reaction. Is this not, in simple terms, what Émile Durkheim deemed a social fact, that humour ought not to work towards breaking the congenial bonds between people, lest it vilify the sanctity of humour? Starting the research process I hypothesize that humour, even very dark or perverted humour, is permissible only to the degree by which it can be atoned to sociopositive ends. To this end, those messages *not* contained within the framework of positivity are often overlooked. In this spirit, the ‘goodness of humour,’ as Freud (1960) posited, can shield even heinous social insinuations by invoking an evasive manoeuvre, ‘don’t take it so seriously, it’s only a joke.’ This, of course, is largely a contextualized matter of interpretation. But that stifled laugh can indicate something else as well; there are reasons that the socionegative laugh is stifled, even if those reasons are largely unexplored. The crux of studying socionegative humour is to explore what those stifled laughs cover up and, in doing so, in every exploration of socionegative humour the question of what social order is trying to be maintained is raised.

1.5 The Humour of Today’s Sociologists

So far, the discussion of humour theory in this chapter has revolved around how humour has traditionally been discussed sociologically and continues to be classified within the three broad categories. As is becoming apparent, the question of ‘what is the best paradigm to view humour in?’ becomes increasingly silly under scrutiny. The paradigms all strike at slightly different aspects of sociological theory, and moreover, are themselves open to continual adjustment and refinement. In the previous sections, it was shown that the three main theories deal with different aspects of humour, none of which would fully capture or explain all of the aspects of an inquiry into humour. For instance, superiority theories look largely at regulatory effects of humour and how people can demonstrate dominant social positions through humour. Incongruity theorists look at the object of humour first, determine where it draws its humour from (its incongruity, inevitably), and then relates it back, secondarily, to the individuals and the society that

find it humorous. Lastly, relief theories are often taken up within a social-psychological position that looks to evaluate how individuals deal with the pressures of social life by utilizing humour. In essence, each paradigm values a particular emphasis of analysis, and although they are not equivalent, they cannot be said to be competing either (Smuts, 2006). Therefore, a more fruitful path, rather than asking which is most relevant or best, is to attune ourselves to the ways in which they are discussed in contemporary discourse, as this will begin to uncover gaps in the discourse and formulate this thesis' problematic.

One way to discuss the discourse of sociological humour theory is to depict its limits. One popular witticism, generally attributed to American humorist Will Rogers, celebrates the transgressions of humour: 'Everything is funny as long as it happens to someone else.' However, given any cultural astuteness, one wonders at the actual accuracy of this sentiment in practice. Likely, many people would take issue with the notion that laughing at others is acceptable (although, of course, one might still partake), and that rather than 'laughing at someone,' polite society generally promotes the slightly softer maxim of 'laughing with someone.' Pausing to reflect, however, tends to suggest that below the surface, this gentler 'laughing with someone' seems a rhetorical construction with an exceptionally muddy grey-area. What does the maxim of 'laughing with someone' have to do with the ways in which humour can be interpreted in society today, and how does this affect the types of research currently being undertaken? What is required, rather than simply pseudo a priori discussions on humour, is a teasing out of how the 'laughing with – not at – someone' maxim influences the contemporary discourse on what is occurring in present humour theory and research.

When humour is pursued in contemporary sociological research – particularly when humour is examined as a prominent feature of a given phenomenon, rather than the more philosophical question of humour *qua* humour, i.e. 'what is it to be humorous?' – there is a noticeable trend that shies away from the dark and troubling aspects of superiority and relief paradigms towards the incongruity paradigm. As famed sociologist Peter Berger (1997) noted, "there is widespread agreement that a sense of humour above all leads to a perception of *incongruence* or *incongruity*" (p. 208, emphasis in original). Noting the title and tone of his book, *Redeeming Laughter*, Berger is an example of important theorists discussing how humour can be utilized by putting laughter and

humour to positive social uses, especially when the instances of incongruity can be viewed in the context of rebuilding social relations.⁹

While the supposed ‘agreement’ that the incongruity theory is the reigning sovereign of humour theory tends to be the case when viewing humour *qua* humour in contemporary debate, within research that considers humour as a descriptive feature (i.e., in that a cultural object, like the sitcom, can be said to be humorous) we see traces of the other paradigms. For instance, in studies which implicitly use superiority theories, such as research that looks at easing tensions between those in dominant positions and those in subordinate positions, the fear and malice found in Hobbes is absent, so too is the sublimated malevolence in Freud’s relief paradigm (for contemporary examples of this tendency, see Du Pré, 1998; Kuipers, 2006; Wanzer et al., 2006). Overwhelmingly, the potential malice of humour previously explored in the paradigms is absent from research. Renowned philosopher Robert Solomon (2002), in a salient example, defended laughing at others (and simultaneously, harshly critiqued the superiority theory) by looking at the ethics of television sitcom icons *The Three Stooges*. In his assessment, Solomon purposed an ‘inferiority theory’ of humour – an obvious allusion to the superiority theory – to explain how individuals laugh at others,

It is the sympathetic laughter we enjoy at the Stoooge’s alleged expense that makes us aware of our own best and least pretentious emotions. Pride, envy, and anger all disappear. That sense of status that defines so much of our self-image dissolves. (p. 182)

While this may occur in some instances, it undoubtedly sounds hollow to those who often must repeat the mantra ‘sticks and stones...’ and ignore the taunts of others, which may be, in some regard, humorous. In other examples of discussing humour, the distinguishing feature of study seems to be deft usage of semantics, which shield humour from criticism. Similarly, Berger (1997) also notes that humour itself is never a negative, but rather, it is the laughter that accompanies it that makes it so. While arbitrary, the sentiment guiding these perspectives is the important element that needs to be further troubled: is humour an incorruptible ‘good?’

⁹ An analogy to the breaking of a bone might help with Berger’s analysis of humour. After a bone, for instance, a leg, is broken, it repairs itself stronger than before. Left here, the analogy is a positive one; unless one remembers that a bone must be properly set to properly heal.

As might be expected, the sentiment regarding not ‘laughing at others’ has taken hold in regards to more empirical research as well. This is both evident in specifics, for instance, particular studies that rely on humour as a concept, as well as more general theses on the topic. In a more focused case, Giseline Kuipers (2006), has done exceptional work in discussing how different types of jokes are preferred in different social classes, which she deems a matter of taste. Although this certainly appears to reflect the superiority theory, Kuipers defers from a hard assessment of who is superior and prefers to resort to relativism, ignoring the clear differences that humour could ostensibly play in diminishing these classes, and instead chooses to equate them as mere differences that can placate individuals and tensions. In Kuipers’ (2006) estimation,

Jokes are – as all humour is – meant to amuse, to make people laugh. Ever since antiquity, many superior and inferior thinkers have reflected on humor, and there is but one thing upon which they all agree: humour is a pleasant experience [...] Humor can fulfil a great number of functions, but the first goal of the joke is to provoke mirth, amusement, and preferable laughter. (p. 4)

Beyond this being simply untrue – clearly not all thinkers have thought humour pleasant or that there is such a thing as ‘preferable laughter’ – it speaks to a trend that suggests humour should first and foremost demonstrate positive social consequences. Kuipers, it would seem, would do well to reflect upon the thoughts of Freud and reconsider the difference between tendentious and innocent humour, as well as ensuring that she does not continue to consider the joke-work presupposing the actual content of a joke. Kuipers, however, is not alone in this view on humour. It is in this vein that even the bite of mocking has softened, whereby humour is seen as social lubricant that takes the sting out of mockery. Conoley et al. (2007) provide a notable study on how joke-work is put into practical use in moderating the disruptive elements of mockery, “the hypothesis suggests that the target can react in-kind to the positive humorous message while ignoring the *hostile humor*, thus constructing a more friendly interaction” (p. 29). It is worth noting that implied in these studies and perspectives, the target of humorous ridicule is meant to take the ‘hostile humour,’ internalize it, and siphon away all harmful elements of the humour, thereby protecting the ‘goodness’ of humour as a shared experience for everyone else.

Undoubtedly, as one continues to research specific cases where humour has been adopted as a prominent feature of a given phenomenon, we find an abundance of studies that maintain a position of continually ignoring the negative aspects of humour as though they do not exist, and emphasizing those which exude positivity and goodwill (e.g., Du Pré, 1998; Wanzer et al., 2006; Zarubina, 2008).

1.6 Exploring the ‘Joke-Work’ of Contemporary Humour Theory

Let your humour always be good-humour, in the double sense of the phrase: if it comes from a bad humour, it is almost sure to be bad humour. ~ Augustus William Hare and Julius Charles Hare (1827, p. 214)

The last section ended with an underlying question: why critique humour when it is ostensibly such a good thing? This section will answer that question as a means of transitioning into the methodological chapter. While there is certainly much within sociological humour studies to consider, there is one overarching theoretical sentiment that should be distilled and considered more deeply: despite being equipped with the theoretical perspectives to conceptualize humour both as a sociopositive and socionegative force, the interpretations that privilege (or even allow) socionegative perspectives are by-in-large absent or stifled. Why not let those socionegative perspectives be exposed and explored? Billig (2005) addresses this question quite poetically, “there is a cloud in the blue skies of the positive world. Not all the positives in the world may be in alignment. Some negatives may possibly have positive outcomes and vice versa. It is unrealistically optimistic to presume otherwise” (p. 22-23). Although this may seem initially an oxymoron, there is a productive dialectic at play. Exploring cultural phenomena that tear at the bonds between people is just as valuable as its antithesis is, despite being cruel and ignoring the ‘do not laugh at others’ golden rule. It would be in error to overlook the principles of socionegative humour that can illuminate and instruct insights into our cultural milieu that are otherwise inaccessible. It has long been asserted that humour allows a type of insight into society that is otherwise not easily found. And yet, these insights seem hobbled, moving with a one-legged gait, operating only as sociopositive humour (e.g., Conoley et al. 2007; Berger 1997; Palmer

1994.) Imagine the possible variety of societal interpretations and insights that become available when the gait is corrected. However, this is only possible if we afford humour the opportunity to be interpreted in a variety of ways that does not preclude socionegative aspects.

Throughout this chapter, I have outlined the general scope of sociological humour theory. In doing so, it became clear that an overwhelming emphasis was placed on putting a ‘positive spin’ on humour in sociological discourse, so much so that Billig spoke of ‘textual repression’ of socionegative interpretations. Following this assertion, I have presented the case, originally and most explicitly drawn from arguments made by Lockyer and Pickering (2008), that humour needs to be challenged as an “absolute good” and the key to doing so is by avoiding the theoretical mistake of excluding some interpretations of humour by always reflecting on sociopositive humour. In the upcoming chapter, I will outline the interpretative process whereby dark humour is interpreted through a socionegative lens by analyzing a cultural product, the TV sitcom *Curb*.

2: METHODS

2.1 A ‘Very Special Episode’

The 1990’s saw the height of a ubiquitous and now, over ten years later, much maligned television trope. This trope is best known as the ‘Very Special Episode,’ an episode that looks at more serious issues of society (Nussbaum, 2003). In these ‘special’ episodes – which were acutely present in sitcoms in the last twenty years¹⁰ – the usual light-hearted tone of a program is briefly suspended and the narrative takes a dark turn to deal with an issue not common for the typically light-hearted sitcom prime time line-up, which generally means addressing a contentious social issue (Tropiano, 2002, p. 232). Examples of this trope were (and in some cases, still are) abound and many are routinely cited in amusing ‘top ten’ styled lists as notable incongruities in series that generally focused on non-problematic ‘good-natured’ humour (e.g., Silverman 2008; Jensen 2009; Doty 2009). A pattern arises when looking at sitcoms, which gives us a taste of the trope: in one episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, “You’ve Got To Be A Football Hero” (Boulware, 1993), lead character Will learns the perils of drunk driving when trying to impress a potential love interest by getting caught in a graveyard; “What a Drag” (Sims & Shoenmen, 1998), from the series *Home Improvement*, details the fall from grace the oldest son Brad feels when his hidden stash of marijuana is found; *8 Simple Rules* dealt with the sudden death of star John Ritter by filming two episodes, “Goodbye: Part 1” (Weiss & Flebotte, 2003) and “Goodbye: Part 2” (Kallman & Gamble, 2003), where the family reels with the death of the family patriarch. What is notable about these episodes is not that they are particularly entertaining episodes – in fact, most episodes featured in the lists are critically panned – but rather that they momentarily break with the expectations of humour in a series and signal to the audience that something worth

¹⁰ The “very special episode” was acutely present in sitcoms because they marked a significant tonal change relative to some other fiction genres. For instance, many drama programs like *Degrassi High* or *Grey’s Anatomy* are produced each week harbouring the issues of a “very special episode.” So it follows that it is the break in genre expectations – a removal of humour and an insertion of seriousness – and not the specific content that is important.

‘serious attention’ is ahead, the essence of a ‘very special episode.’ For instance, ‘very special episodes’ often drop laugh tracks entirely, strip away common plot devices and gags that otherwise would be series regulars, and, perhaps most importantly, are advertised as “much watch TV” (TV Tropes, 2010). In doing so, ‘very special episodes’ by design open themselves up for more consideration, debate, and insight: that’s the point.¹¹

While it is not my intention to dwell on ‘very special episodes,’ they are worthwhile to consider because they set the precedent of a dichotomy between seriousness and humour that is indicative of how sitcoms are explored for cultural significance. The existence of a ‘very special episode’ carries with it an insinuation that, for the vast majority of sitcom episodes, there is little depth to be found in the genre because it is premised on humour. Furthermore, it fallaciously suggests that humour somehow beguiles or takes away from critical academic inquiry. Given the argument in the previous chapter regarding humour theory, this sentiment seems consistent with the proclivity of many sociologists who want to separate humour from serious criticism or fear that appreciable topics are undermined by humorous treatment. The appearance of separating humorous phenomena like the sitcom from critical thought is highlighted by the tagline of arguably the most successful – critically and commercially – sitcom of all-time, *Seinfeld*. *Seinfeld* was famously ‘a show about nothing.’ The implication being, of course, that you cannot find something of analytical value if it is not there in the first place. Attesting to this sentiment, journalist Lisa Schwarzbaum (in Lavery & Dunne, 2006) remarks,

The philosophy of *Seinfeld*, as articulated by its star [Jerry Seinfeld] and its anhedonic executive producer and cocreator [sic], Larry David, is, ‘No hugging. No learning.’ Which means Seinfeld and his TV pals are not about to learn or teach any important life lessons, and there will not be any ‘Very Special Episodes.’ (p. 41)

¹¹ However, this is not to say that the episodes achieve the goal of frank discussion or insightful commentary very well. There is very little, if anything, in the literature that suggests that “very special episodes” have any significant effect on the focused upon social issues. Rather, it is to say that “very special episodes” aim to give an appearance of depth not usually present in a series and that this is rare in the larger narrative arc of the series.

Thus, on the surface it may seem that the humour in sitcom is difficult, if not impossible to study effectively because it is the antithesis of serious topics. Likewise, Mills (2005) signals this issue when he discusses how the sitcom is not often used in ‘serious’ academic inquiry because its model is entangled with the notion of an uplifting yet frivolous concept of humour:

Critics such as Grote (1983) and Marc (1989) see this as precisely the point [that sitcom is difficult to analyze]; the genre's prioritization of entertainment over the social role of comedy demonstrates the commercial and industrial strategies which have neutered the anarchic and subversive power of humour, particularly as sitcom is the widest reaching comedy form. (p. 135)

In this quote, Mills refers to the significant lack in humour studies at present: humour has lost its critical edge and most studies on sitcom have only reinforced this position. Consequently, of utmost importance is utilizing methodological tools that do not simply reproduce and reinforce previous findings on humour that, as Mills laments, have become “neutered” (p. 135).

In this chapter I intend to avoid the trap of conflating humour with analytic shallowness by outlining a methodological approach that will elucidate the polysemy of dark, socionegative humour in sociological theory through analyzing the sitcom *Curb*, to ensure that we do not fall into the trap of thinking that the humour is ‘about nothing.’ To do so, the methodological framework must approach dark humour from a variety of interrelated perspectives. For this reason, the focus of this chapter is to detail Thompson’s (1988) depth-hermeneutics approach as a framework to negotiate the particular challenges in studying humour. Depth-hermeneutics looks at cultural phenomena in three steps by using a social-historical element, a formal analysis of narrative structure, and lastly an interpretive stage that creates meaning. Each of these steps will be detailed and an explanation of how they will be specifically used in the context of this thesis will be documented. In effect, this chapter will outline the ways that humour can be explored so it too is ‘very special,’ at least in an insightful, analytic sense.

2.2 A Framework for Analysis: Depth-Hermeneutics

Given the nature of humour, in particular its ambiguous meanings and role as a communicative tool and cultural product (e.g., the sitcom), research focusing on humour must be attuned to ways a critical analysis of humour differs from the more popular, common sense notions of humour. Importantly, research must recognize that meaning is not simply one-dimensional or towards merely one particular end. Consequently, the process of this thesis will work on two interconnected but distinct levels: an analytical framework that details the goals of specific stages of analysis, and then specific methodological techniques to accomplish these goals. The best approach is not any one method of analysis, *per se*, but rather a model of analysis that delineates aspects within the field of cultural inquiry to provide room for alternative readings on humour. In this vein, this thesis will adopt Thompson's (1988) model of depth hermeneutics, which privileges interpretation in analyzing cultural forms by treating them as multifaceted constructions that require a form of triangulation to even begin to accurately encapsulate them. As an analytic framework, depth hermeneutics is developed in three stages that ought not be regarded as distinct phases of a sequential analysis, but as 'analytically distinct dimensions of a complex interpretive process' (p. 367). These stages – social-historical analysis, formal-discursive analysis, and interpretation/re-interpretation – meld to form the basic framework of analysis. However, Thompson warns that his framework does not constitute specific research methods, but rather indicates stages of analysis where more refined methods must be put into practice to facilitate each stage. Now, the task at hand is to describe how Thompson conceptualizes these stages and further outlines how these stages will be adopted for this thesis, which will result in a strong sense of researchability for formulating new interpretations of humour.

The decision to make use of Thompson's model ensures that there is a certain thought process of how to continually contextualize and integrate the specific methodological findings within a larger sphere of meaning. An analogy of sorts involves the subject matter of this very task, whereby in a TV sitcom, each episode has its own particular setting, plot, and narrative elements; however, although internally in each episode there are unique elements, they are brought under the umbrella of a larger, more

expansive series framework that assumes that viewers both can recall a certain continuity and history that will affect the expectations and interpretations of the show. The goal, therefore, is to utilize specific methodological tools to discover insights, and then fit them into a larger framework that promotes meaningful analysis. Using the depth-hermeneutics framework, Thompson's approach has been used in ways that are similar to the goals of this present thesis, although in different contexts. For instance, Andrew Painter (1994) has utilized Thompson's models to understand how our common medium, television, is appropriated into Japanese culture. Alternatively, Tony Watkins (2004) has demonstrated how Thompson's model can be fruitfully implemented to produce alternative readings of children literature. Similarly to these two studies, this thesis strives to take a cultural phenomenon and isolate it in such a way that it becomes possible to provide interpretations not previously offered.

2.3 First stage: Social-historical reconstruction

The first stage of Thompson's (1988) model, social-historical analysis, works to place whatever the cultural object may be – in this case the dark humour in the sitcom *Curb* – within a meaningful social field and social-historical context. According to Thompson (1988), “The task of the first phase of cultural analysis is to reconstruct this context and to examine the social relations and institutions, the distribution of power and resources, by virtue of which this context forms a differentiated social field” (p. 368). Continuing, Thompson notes that this can be further specified, delineated, and approached in ways that most appropriately and specifically addresses the topic in question. During this stage the aim is “to reconstruct the social and historical conditions of the production, circulation and reception of symbolic forms” (Thompson, 1990, p. 282). In the case of this research, therefore, the context that is in obvious need of analysis is the ways humour and comedic presence are constituted within the sitcom form and genre. As identified earlier, Mills (2005) notes that the sitcom is, and has been for some time, one of the most prolific and pronounced comedic forms in North America's media culture. Further, beyond being simply a ‘funny TV show,’ there are very specific genre characteristics that constitute the sitcom and establish certain expectations for what the genre entails.

So then, the purpose of this first stage of analysis is to frame *Curb* in the historical context of genre from which it has arisen. Within this first stage of analysis, there will be two main areas of focus by which *Curb* is examined in reference to its social-historical position – genre and humour. The first aspect will examine the role that production techniques have in the context of genre expectations, for instance, the ways in which filming and editing techniques contribute to the construction and understanding of genre. More specifically, a detailing of the aspects of traditional sitcom production will be contrasted with the emerging category of *comedy vérité*, whereby Mills (2003) and Thompson (2007) look at the ways in which these popular genre constructions – and expectations – are mutating, to which Thompson claims there is “an emerging mode of production that is being adopted for its efficiency, visual complexity, and semiotic clout” (p. 63). Secondly, I will explore how Jason Mittell (2006) contends that the sitcom is gaining a renewed narrative complexity (p. 33), which will allow for a more nuanced investigation of how the various forms of humour operate therein. In this vein, it is pertinent to explore how these changes allow for the second aspect of social-historical analysis, the changing of traditional narrative structure in sitcom, particularly on how humour is utilized in the diegesis in dark and negative formulations.

In short, the social-historical analysis component aspires to ‘set the stage,’ so to speak, for further analysis by demonstrating, through production and narrative analysis of the sitcom genre, how the parameters of genre – and, consequently, its relationship to types and varieties of humour – are socially and historically contextualized.

2.4 Second stage: Formal Narrative Analysis

Based on the first stage of analysis, the second stage of formal-discursive analysis builds on the historical and social positioning of *Curb* to more thoroughly explore the types of humorous messages that are displayed in the program itself. Therefore, if it was the task of the first stage to explore the ways in which humour is constructed through genre, the second stage explicitly intends to pull out specific instances of such humour in a close reading of *Curb* itself. For this, Thompson’s (1988) analytical framework provides a broad outline for the second stage. Firstly, the intention of this stage is to explicate the relationships of meaningful cultural objects; in other words, outline an

easily followed narrative of each episode that links the various humorous incidents into a comprehensible whole for analysis. Secondly, Thompson's framework recognizes that these are complex symbolic constructions that are structured in various ways that correspond to assorted schemata. In this regard, the close reading in this section of analysis is designed to trace the dark themes in *Curb* through the diegesis of the episodes as working examples of sociopositive/negative humour in context.

The specifics as to how particular examples from *Curb* will be chosen will be explained in greater depth further in this and the upcoming chapter. However, for the moment it will suffice to explain how, methodologically speaking, this stage of analysis will occur without too many difficulties and without relying on the specific episodic references by focusing on the research techniques. The second formal analytic section will look at dark humour in regards to its narrative structure, building on the contextualization of the social-historical analysis. To do so, Butler's (2007) method of narrative television analysis will be useful, given a few necessary provisos are instituted. Butler likens the television series to a cake, where on the surface it appears to be a consistent whole, but is actually pieced together in highly constructed recipe. In Butler's 'recipe,' it is possible to trace dark humour throughout the narrative as it develops through the exposition, motivation, problematic, cause-and-effect chain, and climax (p. 34). In this regard, the recipe that we aim to create is one that highlights the dark humour involved in each episode.

While it is always the case that upon hearing a narrative we make our own interpretations of it, it is paramount here that we make this interpretive effect explicit in our study of the humour found in *Curb*. Therefore, following the second stage of analysis for each episode, the third stage, re/interpretation, will more closely consider the themes that are selected.

2.5 Third Phase of Analysis: Re/Interpretation

The final stage of Thompson's analytic model, interpretation/re-interpretation, is indebted to the first two phases: "it draws upon the insights yielded by these analyses employing them as elements in a creative, constructive interpretation" (1988, p. 368).

This section envisions the re/interpretation process in two parts: in the first part, we locate the themes of dark humour that are commonly understood as sociopositive and explain how they are understood as such; the second part, given a proclivity to challenge the commonly understood assumptions of sociopositive humour, is to further consider and manipulate these interpretations to explore how they relate to socionegative humour. So, the process looks to go beyond what could be considered a more typical, sociopositive, perspective on humour and challenge the way humour is thought of as a sociological concept. Discussing the process more generally, Thompson aptly notes,

In explicating what is represented or said, the process of interpretation transcends the closure of the symbolic construction; it projects a possible meaning, puts forward an account which is risky and open to dispute. Symbolic constructions are representations *of* something, discourse says something *about* something, and it is this transcending character that must be grasped. (p. 369, emphasis in original)

The principle behind this stage is then a relatively candid one; it is to take a fairly stable, sociopositive interpretation of humour and say something slightly more ‘risky and open to dispute’ about it. Therefore, in our case this translates into saying something about the theme at hand in the context of socionegative humour in hopes of uprooting some of the more commonly glossed-over aspects absent in much of the thinking on dark humour.

3: SOCIAL & HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF *CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM*

3.1 Sitcoms: The ‘Shows About Nothing’

“Basically sitcom is light, family entertainment, which aims to amuse and divert viewers, not to disturb and upset them” - David Lodge (1995, p. 56)

Laurence Passmore is the scriptwriter for a popular and upbeat TV sitcom, but because of a recent mid-life crisis, Laurence yearns to express his personal turmoil through his writing in a more morose way and with greater emotional depth. Unfortunately for Laurence, the fictional protagonist in Lodge’s (1995) novel *Therapy*, the producers want nothing to do with a depressing sitcom, commenting that that sort of thing goes against the very spirit of the genre, “This is the sitcom we’re talking about, not fucking Ibsen” (p. 171).¹² In this spirit, immediately visible is a certain affinity towards *Therapy*’s conception of the sitcom and this thesis’ ambition to disrupt the traditional views of humour through an analysis thereof. In this chapter, the focus will be exploring sitcom as a social/historical phenomenon, which has become a metonym for a comical and sunny disposition, so as to situate it as a site that can be used to comment on the state of humour theory as a whole. To begin, a brief history of the sitcom will be presented as a way to get at this chapter’s primary focus, contextualizing the contemporary sitcom *Curb* in the discussion of sitcom genre, and most crucially, what this means for various interpretations of humour.

¹² There is a subtle double entendre in Lodge’s novel title, *Therapy*. In one way, it refers to the therapy the protagonist Laurence goes through during his mid-life crisis. Alternatively, it comments on the supposed therapeutic elements of the sitcom itself, as it is often referred to as a cultural opiate whose humour dulls the pains of the daily grind. What better way to gain some sort of relief from your abhorrent boss at work than to watch a fictionalized version make an ass of himself during prime time TV? Unless, that is, your boss is the person producing those very sitcoms.

There are multitudes of ways in which the sitcom can be discussed and for the purposes of this thesis, the focus is narrowed. As such, the elements of sitcom discussed have been selected to serve particular ends. More specifically, the historical component of analysis will emphasize how the sitcom became one of the leading comedy mediums during the mid-twentieth century and how evolving during this time period set expectations of what the sitcom should look like which have a significant impact on humour in sitcoms is viewed. In particular, the case will be presented that a recent restyling of the sitcom – in what is called *comedy vérité* – changes the way that audiences watch the sitcom, and in this shift I argue that new ways of investigating humour emerge. Therefore, the elements of sitcom of production techniques like filming and canned laughter – are selectively chosen because they represent features that are most significantly altered in comedy vérité, not because they represent the most common discourses about sitcom television.

The historical discussion is foundational for what needs to be considered in both the data collection and the subsequent analysis; the conventions discussed are done so because they provide greater insight when looking at the humour found in the study sample. The production techniques of canned laughter and camera positioning, for instance, change the experience of watching a sitcom and, subsequently, alter how the humour is communicated. Consequently, when the notion of sitcom genre is discussed, it is done selectively and to provide a commentary on how its humour is ‘expected’ to be understood. Foreshadowed in the title, and considered at great length in the thesis, is the ironic claim that humour sitcom is about ‘nothing.’ Of course, the ‘nothingness’ of humour in this case is tongue-in-cheek. It should be understood that, just as in humour more broadly, the humour of the sitcom is ambiguous and needs to be carefully considered as a complex negotiation of meaning. So, while co-opting the common tagline from the series *Seinfeld*, ‘a show about nothing,’ the interpretation through this thesis of the humour in *Curb* should be read in a similar spirit as David Pierson’s (2000) commentary: “*Seinfeld*, through its comical concerns with social manners and customs, seems to assert not the decline of civility but rather its preponderance in American society” (p. 54). Continuing, Pierson notes that this decline or lack of engagement – the ‘nothingness’ of the show – is really not as it initially seems, “Jerry [Seinfeld] and his

friends continue to remind us that *civility is actually an ongoing daily process involving such seemingly trivial matters* as the cultural value of holding onto a prime parking space” (p. 54, emphasis added).

The case will be made in the analysis of the research that ‘seemingly trivial matters’ hold significant research potential, and if explored with due diligence, can be exceptionally meaningful. This, however, has not always been the standard interpretation of sitcom and its humour. It is often correctly noted that sitcom humour touches on some of the key issues in society in many of society’s most common settings, for instance, domestic life at home, racial harmony in modern America, and work life (cf., Lavery and Dunne, 2006; Hartley, 2008). Accordingly, transitioning through successful sitcom series throughout history – like *I Love Lucy*, *The Cosby Show*, *Cheers*, or *The Office* – one can find some important concepts for social critique in each of the program themes and narratives which indicates; “a remarkable parallel between the themes of successful situation comedies and the social history of modern society” (Paterson, 1998, p. 66). All the opportunity in the world, however, does not ensure that sitcoms will do much more than reflect the conditions of the day or that these positions are thereby used in analytically useful ways simply because they exist in the public sphere. According to Mills (2005), dissecting the themes, social structures, and humour in the sitcom is not effective (or often) accomplished:

sitcom’s domestic focus means that, on the whole, it has responded to the politics of the family and, with a few exceptions, rarely explicitly explores either macro social structures or the domestic and the individual has been one of the reasons for the criticism of sitcom’s failure to comically interrogate and undermine dominant ideologies. *Sitcom has been a reflection of social changes, rather than an intervention into them.* (p. 45, emphasis added)

With Mills above quote in mind, one must concede that it is not possible to completely change perceptions of sitcom humour all at one time, never mind in the span of this thesis. Looking at the shifting historical and social aspects of the sitcom in specific contexts, however, will demonstrate how the sitcom (and its humour) is changing and consequently offering new ways analyze the medium and the comedy found in it in sociological relevant ways.

3.2 The Back-Story of the TV Sitcom

The television situational comedy – called sitcom since a 1964 *Life* magazine article (Marc, 2005, p. 16) – sifted itself out of the ether of radio broadcasting, and followed the strong corporate push towards producing entertainment that appealed to as many people as possible in the post-war period (Jones, 1992). Understandably, the post-war period lent itself well to frivolous, upbeat comedy that presented not only ‘uplifting and positive’ messages, but also ones that could effectively reach as many potential viewers as possible.¹³ The sitcom follows the story laid out by broadcasting in general, seen first through the inception of radio and then through TV (and one could argue, now into cyberspace, particularly YouTube and other video hosting sites). As David Marc (2005) rightly notes,

The introduction of a mass communication medium normally occurs when an economically viable commercial application is found for a new technology [...] Such was the case in the rise of the television sitcom from the ashes of network radio (p. 15).

In the beginning days of TV sitcom, during the 1950’s, the sitcom was modelled after the most already successful comedians of the day, which predominantly meant that the programming relied on a lot of gags and one-liners adopted from vaudeville¹⁴ and stand-up acts, producers trying to fill the airspace of the new and uncharted medium. However, as broadcasting evolved and opened the way for the audience to follow a particular program beyond one show – as was rarely, if ever, the case in live theatre – the jokes evolved to fit the new mediums’ potential for longer, more developed narratives. Consequently, audiences were rewarded for tuning in each week because as a familiarity

¹³It is here, in the blooming broadcasting era of the post-war period, do we really see what has since ubiquitously been called a “dumbing down” (e.g., Adorno, 2001) of media to a lowest common denominator, a criticism that has stuck with sitcom today and hinders contemporary research: if something is “dumb,” how can it be (effectively) academically transformed into something worthwhile or insightful?

¹⁴Vaudeville, as many will correctly note, made little attempt to be politically correct. In vaudeville acts, for instance, we see the prominent use of “blackface,” which would now be considered a tremendous racial *faux pas*. However, consistent with what Marcuse deemed ideological positivism, as entertainment became increasingly more commodified – i.e., broadcasting the sitcom to a nation rather than a one-off stage show – the messages and themes therein became increasingly more benign and sociopositive in nature to reach a broad audience. The dark edge, by all accounts, was greatly diminished.

with a particular program increased, so too did the potential to appreciate running-gags. In this case, it is important to observe that the sitcom has been evolving ever since its inception, its first move being away from the traditional vaudeville and music hall narrative origins (Mills, 2005).

Yet even though the narrative structure of the sitcom evolved away from the traditional theatre, it did not wholly escape its ancestral roots. Importantly, as Medhurst and Tuck (1982) argue, there are lingering elements of sitcom's music hall origins that have heavily persisted until much more recently. Most importantly, sitcom producers attempted to recreate the experience of a live audience in the theatre; only in the sitcom's case, this is an imagined audience experienced within the comfort of one's own home. For example, as an obvious visual cue, the TV sitcom was supposed to appear as if it were a stage show with enhanced aesthetics. Often referred to as the 'three-headed monster,' the sitcom utilized three cameras: one camera to have a wider-angle, like sitting in the audience, and the other two to zoom in on the facial expressions of any two characters in dialogue. The former, clearly, was used to mimic the theatre experience, while the latter was meant to compliment the experience by utilizing the versatility of the medium. The reverence for the theatre experience was only further reinforced by sitcom's traditionally heavy usage of the laugh track (often placed over the laughs of an in-studio audience), deemed by Medhurst and Tuck as "the electronic substitute for collective experience" (p. 45). The laugh track (which also operates under the alias of 'canned laughter') has two significant features that will be mentioned now and discussed in greater detail as the analysis progresses. Firstly, the laugh track attempts to simulate an audience that incorporates those watching at home into a sense that they are in a theatre; secondly, it precludes any 'necessary' reflection about what constitutes humour within a program. The suggestion about whether or not something is supposed to be taken humorously is an integral part of the production process actively working to reduce alternative interpretations other than the producers' intended ones.

The quintessential example of early TV sitcom is perhaps *I Love Lucy*, which not only prominently displayed the dominant sitcom characteristics, but also in fact played a significant role in institutionalizing them within genre. The three-camera setup, for instance, was developed to capture the unique facial features of the program's star,

Lucille Ball. And as Ball was broadcast into the ‘hearth’ of North American homes as the top watched sitcom during the 1950’s, *I Love Lucy* solidified the way sitcom ‘ought’ to be produced, and moreover, it enacted a particular and intentional *feeling* associated with watching the sitcom. Following what Gerard Jones (1992) rightly concluded, the traditional sitcom was steeped in conservative normative values; it ‘taught’ viewers how to act in family and work scenarios (the two main staples of sitcom setting) by showing how not to act (unless one wants to endure the trying, albeit comedic, predicaments of the characters portrayed in sitcoms, in which case the characters would be ideal models). Sitcom’s roots in music halls and theatres meant that the type of humour that it produced was supposed to be experienced *as if* there was a mass audience laughing right along side you, further instilling these values and judgments. Indeed, it is possible to say that sitcom’s heritage is an accurate representation of the concept of sociopositive humour; the early sitcom is the exemplary illustration of how humour can strive to enhance feelings of solidarity between people, even if in practice that means sitting in front of the TV alone.

3.3 A Horizon of Expectations

Examining the historical dawn of sitcom only provides a part of the picture, framing it for examination today. Contemporary culture ought to be properly understood in context of its past, and in this way, contemporary aspects are certainly framed by the cultural interpretations of preceding eras. In the case of television, the physical ‘frame’ we view sitcom in could not be clearer. The cultural frame, however, tells us that the programs watched in generations past are not simple relics that can be explored for insights of its period, but a map that depicts how we see things in the present. Partly, knowing how deeply entrenched some production techniques in the sitcom are will prove valuable in demonstrating how the sitcom functions today, and how it has particular pedigree against which it is always referenced back.

A particularly apt metaphor for genre is described by Robert Jauss, who describes the genre as a “horizon of expectation” (quoted in Neale, 2008, p. 3). For our purposes, genre helps break up the vast amount of TV into manageable, meaningful segments that explain a lot about any given program, and in turn, how it explicates a program as a

cultural form that works within the societal matrix of cultural signs, interpretations, and meanings (Turner, 2008, p. 4). Not only does genre include production techniques, but also stylistic, narrative, and interpretive categories as well: it is a holistic way of viewing a text that recognizes texts are both singular examples to be examined, as well as always constituted within a larger, cultural context. A poignant discussion on genre is found in Daniel Chandler's (2001) work:

How we define a genre depends on our purposes; the adequacy of our definition in terms of social science at least must surely be related to the light that the exploration sheds on the phenomenon [...] if we are studying the way in which genre frames the reader's interpretation of a text then we would do well to focus on how readers identify genres rather than on theoretical distinctions. Defining genres may be problematic, but even if theorists were to abandon the concept, in everyday life people would continue to categorize texts.

What is pertinent in Chandler's passage, perhaps, is his focus on how to reinterpret humour: in order to reinterpret the sociological role of humour, the first step would be to demonstrate how it is expected to manifest itself in sitcom, most visibly by having a sound understanding of genre.

3.4 Exploring Contemporary Sitcom Genre Conventions

Above all other considerations, the sitcom has one fundamental genre feature that is indispensable: it is supposed to be humorous. And while various other components have become nearly as established in the genre (for example, happy endings, laugh tracks, a 30 minute timeslot), humour is above all the lynchpin of our understanding the sitcom. Of course, this is of the utmost importance for our inquiry, as the ways that genre defines the parameters of how something is humorous is tantamount to exploring how humour is understood as a sociological concept in broader terms. Therefore, whereas Billig (2005) wondered why humour is overwhelmingly seen in a socially positive light *en masse* in social thought today, examining how this is demonstrated in a more specified, concrete example like the sitcom genre is a way to directly address this question.

Given the standard definition of the sitcom, provided by Larry Mintz (1985), we can see the sunny-side up attitude in full display,

Each week we encounter essentially the same people in essentially the same setting [...] The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premise undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored [...] This faculty for the ‘happy ending’ is, of course, one of the staples of comedy, according to most comic theory. (p. 115)

Implicit in Mintz’s insights – in which he is not unique – is that he unproblematically adopts a sociopositive account of humour, the ‘happy ending,’ and inserts this back into his assessment of the genre. As will become an ongoing theme, this conflation does not intrinsically need to be so; we need not simply assume that humour is founded upon a ‘happy ending’ and then base all further insights on this premise. Nevertheless, this sort of thinking has permeated the heart of sitcom genre, thereby creating an obstacle to resolve. That obstacle is the question of how to remove the typical genre characteristics that exist in the sitcom that resonate with the ‘happy ending’ of sociopositive humour. In this process, it is the intention to remove the ‘normalcy’ (and, it is worth mentioning, compliancy) Mintz speaks of in what constitutes the sitcom and work towards a genre interpretation that does not preclude those socionegative interpretations of humour that are strikingly absent. In this ethos, engaging the genre characteristics of *Curb* serves as a starting point to dismantle some commonly held beliefs about the sitcom, and ultimately, call into question the sociopositive premises of humour it is built upon.

One way of beginning to reconceptualize the sitcom genre – at least academically speaking – is presently being undertaken by Mills (2003) and Thompson (2007) in their descriptions of *comedy vérité*, of which *Curb* is an ideal example. Derived from the related concept of *cinéma vérité*, *comedy vérité* utilizes techniques that are supposed to be more realistic,¹⁵ emulating observational documentary film styles. Both argue that this shift in style now creates opportunity for a more critical and fruitful critique of sitcoms

¹⁵ Constructed “reality” in TV genres is a well-developed and heavily debated topic in its own right. A brief summary can be understood in broad strokes. Traditional sitcoms (of the non-*vérité* variety) are discussed in relation to how “real” they are, that is, how can fiction inform accurate insights beyond the screen in a societal context. In contrast, reality television is nearly always discussed in relation to how “fake” it is. While *comedy vérité* will undoubtedly again shift this discussion, suffice to say that the shift itself opens up an open space where new insights can be made about society by looking at TV.

on a sociological level, however this has yet to be undertaken and the debates seem to have taken up merely in spirit of film and televisual genre discussion in the strictest and most insulated sense. Nonetheless, Mills (2004) remarks that comedy vérité changes the way in which sitcom can be used to discuss sociological questions in the future,

As television has replaced 'live' entertainment as the social arena in which societies and cultures talk to and about themselves, so it has become necessary for sitcom, to maintain its social role, to adopt the characteristics of that social medium. In so doing, the sitcom has not only ceased resembling its previous self, it has also begun to interrogate and break down the very characteristics of the medium whose forms it is finally beginning to embrace. (p. 78)

What is significant for our purposes about comedy vérité is not simply that it employs new production techniques for sitcom TV but rather that it alters the very notion of genre in the sitcom enough to make unconventional insights about humour not previously availed.

Continuing with changing genre characteristics, replacing the sitcom's 'three-headed monster' style of filming, *Curb* uses what would most commonly be associated with the genre of reality television, in particular the docu-soap sub-genre. Docu-soap, a style of reality television that integrates narrative structure into prime-time reality programming, has its roots in documentaries, particularly in 'fly-on-the-wall' filming practices (Hill, 2005, p. 17). In many ways, the filming feels as though it follows just as an observer's eye would, emphasizing the close proximity of the camera to the subject rather than a conventional sitcom performance, which mimics watching a play from a distanced, seated position. Upon watching *Curb*, it is clear that there are only two cameras filming, one that follows Larry exclusively, and one that travels within the scene capturing everything else. Further, a significant feature during the actual action of *Curb* is that the camera never pulls back, never giving a more expansive, omniscient shot. In traditional sitcom, pulling away from the close up to a totalizing shot works to establish a superior perspective for the viewer, as if the viewer can get a bigger perspective of the situation – both figuratively and literally – than the people depicted in the scene. Alternatively, Ethan Thompson (2007) describes the techniques in comedy vérité: "That claim [of the superior perspective] is rewritten in the sitcom to suggest that you are not

watching comedy but are observing the comic as it unfolds before the handheld cameras. Whether the comic is improvised or carefully scripted, it *looks* like it just happened” (p. 71).

It makes sense that as a genre becomes more complex – for instance, in the production techniques of comedy vérité – it also sites for more complex investigations. The increasing possibility for narrative complexity in television, as described by Mittell, seems to be a key element especially in the ways that it can affect the very nature of sitcoms (Mittell, 2006). In the case of *Curb*, an increasingly complex narrative allows for a shift away from jokes, per se, and towards a more nuanced and complex form of comedy that refrains from quick ‘one-liners.’ Traditionally, in humour theory a joke has taken the form of set-up and punch line, for example, ‘A clergyman walks into a bar...’ is a common framework. Of course, the set-up and punch line or pay-off does not have to be so straightforward, and can be extended over a period of time. Mills (2005) argues that the vast majority of sitcoms rely on a momentary pause of narrative to insert a joke, not a complex narrative that is, in itself humorous, and that this has become a genre defining characteristic (p. 35). To further explain, Mills brings up the example of *Friends* to demonstrate this point. The immensely popular sitcom *Friends*, according to Mills’, requires a dual reading; one that follows serious narrative structure revolving around serious issues and does not require laughter – Rachel and Phoebe’s pregnancies, for example – and exaggerated comedic moments that ‘break the realism’ that the more serious narrative has constructed, asking the audience to momentarily try “suspending disbelief for pleasure” (p. 36). In essence, Mills argues that there are two effects going on in most sitcoms, a more ‘realistic’ narrative that is supposed to be taken seriously, and a comedic element that interjects this serious narrative that audiences are supposed to overlook, in terms of their realism. When the comedy of the 1990’s sitcom titan *Friends* is compared to *Curb*, the contrast between types of humour used in each is quite stark. Specifically, there are very few puns or traditional jokes in *Curb*. The overall narrative complexity of *Curb* is what creates the humour, in contrast to *Friends*’ punch line driven jests. Most importantly, we can suggest that this is tantamount to a shift by *Curb* away from the sitcom pattern of breaks in realism.

In looking at how comedy vérité opens up new ways of thinking about humour, let us look at the effect of canned laughter in the sitcom. As a remnant of theatrical and dancehall roots of sitcom TV, canned laughter was invented by Charles R. Douglass and used in *I Love Lucy* during the early 1950's (Žižek 2003). According to Mills (2005), there are two main functions that canned laughter plays within the sitcom: 1) it prompts the audience as to when to laugh, to ensure that the audience does not need to think too deeply if a situation is funny, they are directly told that it is so; and 2) canned laughter works to effectively shut down all other alternative interpretations of the scene, thereby eliminating any possibility that the scene was meant to be serious (p. 51). It is worth noting, however, that here Mills presents the contemporary and typical understanding of humour, in that if it can be provoked (with or without production techniques like canned laughter) there is a cleansing and positive social reinforcement found in humour. We only need to refer to Mills' second point to see that he assumes that humour negates seriousness. In other words, humour hinders the capacity for critical thought and canned laughter makes a characterization of shallowness nearly a foregone conclusion. *Curb*, like many of its contemporaries in the last decade, has shed canned laughter and, in some ways, opened up new avenues for thinking about humour and sitcom, which will be further explored in later analysis.

The lesson to be taken from the previous section is that the sitcom genre utilized in *Curb*¹⁶ is a marked departure from more traditionally rigid genre characterizations, exemplified in *Seinfeld* but also in others like *I Love Lucy*, *The Cosby Show*, and the current popular program *The Big Bang Theory*. Whether this shift indicates a permanent movement away from its more traditional roots or rather a larger horizon of expectations in regards to the sitcom is debatable; however, this debate is ultimately not the point at hand. What is the point is this: *Curb* looks different. It sounds different. It feels different. *Curb* differs from traditional sitcom, and part of the changing van guard. *Curb*'s appropriation of comedy vérité techniques means that a documentary film style removes the look of being in front of an audience; it means that the laughter that the

¹⁶ Again, it is worth noting that *Curb* is not alone in this stylistic change, comedy vérité, but merely a prime example of such. Other examples, such as *The Office*, *The Trailer Park Boys*, or *Arrested Development*, also use similar techniques, which suggests that there is, in particular shows, a tonal shift in sitcom that *Curb* is itself a part of.

viewer makes sounds more hollow than when complimented with canned-laughter. Fundamentally, it feels different because there is a darker, sinister streak in its humour.

3.5 The Research Site: *Curb Your Enthusiasm*

Before discussing specific episodes of *Curb*, it is important to first contextualize the series itself. In this section, I detail the basic premise of the sitcom *Curb*, further situate why it has been selected as the prolonged site of research, and lastly, show how the specific episode selections within *Curb* are rationalized.

Curb focuses on the fictionalized life of Larry David and his famous friends in the Los Angeles suburb of Pacific Palisades.¹⁷ Larry is moulded in the neurotic likeness of Woody Allen (rooted, to be sure, in their shared Jewish-New Yorker heritage)¹⁸; life's little things, like small talk, are often overly difficult for Larry. He simply misses the common courtesies and unwritten rules most people tend to take for granted. Often Larry's real life friends act as guest stars in fictionalized versions of themselves; for instance, comic Richard Lewis and TV star Ted Danson both have reoccurring roles playing themselves.

Larry, co-creator of *Seinfeld* and later sole creator and star of *Curb*, is the antithesis of the sunny-side up attitude found in the vast majority of humour in traditional

¹⁷ One of the most prolific areas of debate within TV studies is with respect to how well (or, poorly) TV reflects an accurate representation of "reality." Without needlessly detailing the deep ontological debates, two major themes exist in the discussion of reality and sitcom TV. Sitcom analysis takes for granted that the plots, et cetera, are fictional and debates occur not whether the shows are "real" or not, but rather how "real" they are. Conversely, reality TV debates address the opposite question, that is, how "fake" is reality television? The blending of the two in comedy vérité, if nothing else, opens up a new-line of discussion, not only to the entrenched debate of what constitutes reality, but also to debates of humour that need a fresh arena for interpretation to avoid the pitfalls of previous, pedantic literature.

¹⁸ Given the inclination, one possible way to pursue a study of *Curb* would be to look at Jewish humour. There are many aspects that of Jewish humour that the series demonstrates, but most obviously Larry adopts the neurotic self-hatred and uneasy relationship with cultural assimilation that typifies Jewish humour (although this is not only to do with Larry's religious belief, as he is only a weak cultural Jew, but in other areas as well; says Larry: Hey, I may loathe myself, but it has nothing to do with the fact that I'm Jewish [David, 2001]) (cf., Weinstein, 2008; Berger 2001). Interestingly, one of the key components of Jewish humour, claims Joseph Telushkin (1992) is that it "is concerned with the down side [...] with what happens when the glorified relationship becomes too intense" (p. 29). Interestingly, this provides some insight into the motivations Larry has to put himself into awkward situations; he often tries to avoid 'glorified relationships' that end in comedy. Jewish humour, however, is still found within the larger context of humour theory, and although this would provide an interesting study, it is too specific for this thesis, which aims to comment on dark humour as a whole.

sitcom. In fact, Larry's onscreen persona is precisely the reverse of the traditional sitcom definition; he embodies a figurative 'car wreck' nearly every time he enters a room. The consummate misanthrope, Larry appears never to be at ease in social situations and epitomizes the neurotic personality of someone who attempts – despite his or her general dislike of etiquette and people in general – to be well intentioned, only to fail miserably.¹⁹ And so, a tautology appears: while Larry becomes increasingly jaded with people because he clashes with the social graces of day-to-day life, he works harder (most of the time) to be better intentioned and reverse the trend, only increasing the inevitable angst when the cycle repeats itself. Perhaps, in describing Larry, it is clear that intentions do not always make up for underlying character faults. Dierdre Dolan (2006) paints a portrait of David in her series companion, *Curb Your Enthusiasm: The Book*:

It's a version of himself America fell in love with once before, through his alter-ego, George Costanza, on *Seinfeld*. But where shallowness, cowardice, and self-indulgence were easy to find lovable in a well-polished, joke-filled sitcom, in *Curb Your Enthusiasm* it's a little less easy. Where *Seinfeld* let us off the hook, *Curb* leaves us hanging. (p. 9)

So where does this 'hanging' leave us in the context of the show as a whole? Dolan's characterization points to a few key considerations that are worth further thought in the context of the scope of this thesis. Firstly, Dolan notes that there are relatively few 'jokes' in *Curb*. Instead of being given a structured time to 'appropriately' laugh at the misfortunes of others (jokes, *par excellence*), this gives us the contextual grey area to provide more than a straightforward, 'laughter is the best medicine,' styled interpretation. Further, the 'unease' that Dolan points to is an apt indicator where one can defer to the interpretation model outlined in the previous section. This speaks directly to the suitability and desirability of creating interpretations that negotiate socionegative humour. In certain respects, this is the metaphoric 'hook' of *Curb* that leaves the responsibility of the interpretations to the viewer. Additionally, there are a few other reasons *Curb* is an exceptional choice to conduct this research. In particular, *Curb* accurately fits the model of the newly evolving comedy vérité genre, which is noted for

¹⁹ This type of scenario has entered pop culture's lexicon as the "Larry David Moment," which can be found on *Urban Dictionary*: "When a person says, or does something offensive to someone else, without intentionally doing so" (Urban Dictionary, 2008). One might wish to add, perhaps, that this usually works towards comical ends – at least from those observing from the outside.

providing new opportunities for analysis. Additionally, *Curb* is useful as an example of a show that utilizes narrative complexity (Mittell, 2006), which means that the plots found in the show become enriched as the series and characters develop and progress. This characteristic is significant, as it influences how episodes within the series are selected for further analysis.

3.6 ‘Writing’ About Sitcoms

In this chapter it has been the intention to build the case that the sitcom, the comic site of this thesis’ investigation into humour, is changing in regards to its genre characteristics and that *Curb* is an apt place to start exploring. The idea, in essence, is that as the fabric of genre loosens, so too do the overly pedantic interpretations of humour found within it. Consequently, the changing dynamics of the sitcom are parallel to the changing dynamics in humour theory, which is to say that when there is a shift in style there is an opportunity for new insights to be put forth. Sitcom’s past is not often lauded as a strong site of societal insight or criticism; as Mills (2005) so aptly comments, “The conservative nature of sitcom content, then, can be seen to go hand in hand with, and be upheld by, the stable form of the genre,” but yet, he continues, “[recently] sitcom has begun to develop and mutate, and is doing so in a manner which requires a reappraisal of the accepted understandings of sitcom form” (p. 65).

Whereas Mills (2005) rightly contends that the evolving nature of the sitcom “requires a reappraisal” (p. 65), I suggest that the same can be said about humour theory as well. Moreover, given a different emphasis and focus, the same type of empirical examples can be used to discuss both, sitcom and humour. So, where the shifting sands of sitcom research look to examples like laugh tracks and happy endings as examples of how the genre is changing, the same points of interest can be utilized to explore dark humour because they represent points of discontinuity open for interpretation and debate on humour, more broadly than sitcom itself. This ability to discuss humour by exploiting points of interest in sitcom analysis arises because the sitcom is inevitably intertwined with a discussion on humour. Sitcom without humour is simply not sitcom.

In this chapter, I have worked to develop the social/historical context of the sitcom and the humour therein. Importantly, this step has been more than simply providing some history on sitcom and its humour. Of particular note is the sustained effort that has to be put forth to make humour successful. Humour rarely – if ever – arises from ‘nothing;’ humour arises within complex genre expectations and narrative ‘recipes’ that are vital in their appreciation if we want to fruitfully discuss humour. Moreover, it is no coincidence that humour arose in an especially gentrified form at the same time that sitcoms became the quintessential mode of comedy on the emerging medium of television broadcasting. As broadcast comedy hit millions of houses that held varied sensibilities about what constituted humour (or what was permissible in humour), humour changed. Furthermore, these changes, which take place in the context of genre and narrative construction, have a lasting effect on how we view humour today. This is an important background to develop as we begin to understand the recently detailed research site, *Curb*, and understand how humour theory begins to unravel under some scrutiny.

However, as in any account there is always something left unsaid. This chapter is also not meant as evidence that the process of describing the social context of sitcom and humour is straightforward or easy. One strikingly apparent commentary that arises when trying to summarize the narrative component of sitcoms is that it is exceedingly difficult to ‘transcribe’ and write about a medium like sitcom. Beyond the well-documented difficulties of trying to encapsulate a highly visual medium predominantly in words (cf., Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), another consideration becomes increasingly apparent. If nothing else, going through the task of summarizing a narrative – debating if it is important to describe a nod or wink, for instance – is a nod to the process of meaning making and its difficulty in the sea of polysemy (cf., Butler, 2007). One has to be extremely selective in what gets included in summarizing a sitcom episode (or for that matter, any visual media), and it warrants the admission that this occurs in the process of simply watching the show as well. In this regard, the couch potato ‘vegging out’ and the academic writing about a program are not all that different, except in the sense about how explicit the latter makes his or her effort (and perhaps how long this effort continues on for). The point at hand is that meanings, of course, are not simply a given that can be

accurately or wholly transcribed – at some point meaning has to be ‘made’ and, to various degrees, disseminated.²⁰ With this in mind, the analysis now moves to the meaning making of re/interpretation, looking at some interpretations of humour in this process of cultural meaning making.

Of course, if meanings in humour are polysemous and sitcoms are difficult to ‘write out,’ the problem of deciding what themes to discuss is a difficult task. In the preceding chapters I noted that there is the potential to discuss dark humour by exploiting points of contention already in the medium of the sitcom. In doing so, it becomes possible to reflect on how humour is understood more broadly (in the sociological sense, rather than merely as an element of sitcom), beyond discussions of genre. I have found it useful to conceptualize this process by working through characterizations of sitcom that bring up many salient considerations on humour itself. To this end, Jones (1992) gives a valuable caricature of the sitcom, found in his much larger critique of the genre and its neoliberal basis,

[In the sitcom d]omestic harmony is threatened when a character develops a desire that runs counter to the group’s welfare, or misunderstands a situation because of poor communication, or contacts a disruptive outside element. The voice of the group – usually the voice of the father or equivalent [...] – tries to restore harmony but fails. The dissenter grabs at an easy, often unilateral solution. The solution fails, and the dissenter must surrender to the group for rescue. The problem turns out to be not very serious after all, and once everyone remembers to communicate and surrender his or her selfish goals, the wisdom of the group and its executive is proved. *Everyone, including the dissenter, is happier at the outset.* (p. 4, emphasis added)

In the preceding passage – and the rest of his book – Jones contends that the sitcom provides a very skewed picture of ‘reality’ and inaccurately portrays messages that are too often adopted as neoliberal lessons for viewers. What Jones also does in this passage – albeit inadvertently – is effectively outline some of the key considerations of dark, yet sociopositive, humour. Most importantly, Jones’ passage underlines a notion of dark, yet sociopositive humour that crosses boundaries and initiates conflict, relies on the wisdom

²⁰ One cannot help but think of Roland Barthes when a commentary of “meaning-making” in a sea of polysemy arises. Barthes’ (1972) magnum opus, his book *Mythologies*, is an apt place to begin and look at these discussions.

of ‘commonsense’ feel-good utilitarianism to overcome these conflicts, and produces collective well-being, a ‘happy ending.’ Interestingly, these themes fit the notion of sociopositive dark humour *par excellence*. Here we have a loose formula on how humour can be dark in tone on one hand and, on the other hand, sociopositive in its interpretative scope. Moreover, the passage provides further support to the trend of viewing humour as a static element of sociopositivity found in many mediums (including the sitcom).

The purpose of the next chapter, therefore, is to use the analysis of sitcom to uncover interpretive insights into what this tendency towards positivity can obscure, especially when it comes to dark humour. As will be shown, as the genre boundaries shift, cracks and fissures in the ways we understand the forms of humour associated with them will become more evident. It is through these fissures that new light can be shone on dark humour.

4: ‘CURB’ YOUR ANALYSIS: EXPLORING THE JOKE- WORK OF *CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM*

“Common sense and a sense of humour are the same thing, moving at different speeds. A sense of humour is just common sense, dancing” - William James (in Singh, 2007, p. 114).

“Humor is reason gone mad.” - Groucho Marx

The challenge in understanding ‘what’ humour means in any given set of circumstances is that humour does not work on linear logic, but rather, on incongruity and personal interpretation. This condition of humour means that humour always works on multiple levels, and it is the objective of this thesis to pull apart the concept of dark humour in sociology to explore some of those multiple interpretations. Indeed, while we can broadly talk about humour in a common sense manner, we can also dispute these common sense notions if we so choose. Thus, this chapter aims to do both by combining the second and third stages of Thompson’s (1988) framework, formal analysis and re/interpretation. As such, each subsection of this chapter will provide a more traditional reading of each episode and its dark humour themes and, then, consider revisionist readings that stress its relevance to the notion of dark humour.

Therefore, I intend here to discuss three major themes in dark humour that become evident by exploring the instability of the sitcom genre and do so in the context of exploring the concept of dark humour. The themes of dark humour to be further discussed in this chapter are: a) the iconoclastic (in)ability of dark humour to discuss social issues; b) the role of laughter in framing dark humour; and c) the notion of happy endings troubling socionegative perspectives. Specific episodes of *Curb* season seven, “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a), “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b), and “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), respectively, will be used to show these themes in dark humour. Each theme will then be discussed following Thompson’s (1988) methodological framework

which involves detailing each episode's narrative and then providing an interpretation of the narrative that expounds a predominantly sociopositive reading of its humour. While there is variability in interpretation of understanding and humour in any episode, the initial interpretation provided generally matches the spirit of good-natured humour. So, for each episode I will provide a reading of humour in a sociopositive sense and then secondarily move into a discussion of these themes by considering its effect on dark, socionegative humour.

This thesis is based on the seventh season of Home Box Office's (HBO) *Curb*, which is the most recent season of the series and ran from September 20, 2009 till November 22, 2009, and consisted of ten episodes.²¹ To begin this season, Larry – who was last seen in season six having marital problems with his estranged wife, Cheryl – is determined to win her back. As a condition, however, Larry must return to work (the only way his estranged wife will take him back is if he is 'out of her hair and house,' spending most of his time at work). Begrudgingly, Larry sets out in the seventh season to reunite the cast of his former hit show, *Seinfeld*. As it always happens, the season consists of "Larry finding himself embroiled in the usual cauldron of self-made crises" (HBO Canada, 2009).

As seen in the light of narrative complexity, choosing this season allows the thesis to be focused on a manageable number of episodes, while providing substantive material for richness of analysis. Therefore, although certain elements will be analyzed within the seventh season, when relevant details for particular jokes are salient from previous seasons they can be used as secondary sources to enrich the quality of research.²² As well, another consideration is certainly being involved with the zeitgeist of popular culture, and that said, using the most recent sites of interest is beneficial to riding that zeitgeist. In this way, each of Larry's humorous mistrials during this season offers opportunities to discuss how our understanding of dark humour might change. Each

²¹ Each episode runs approximately thirty minutes in length, with the exception of the season finale, which ran an extended forty minutes.

²² For instance, in an earlier season, season two, Larry tried to work with *Seinfeld* cast members Julia Louis-Dreyfus and Jason Alexander to create new sitcoms with predictably dismal outcomes, which is important for a nuanced analysis of season 7 as it signals the self-deprecating cycle of failure for Larry.

mistrial serves as an example of angst driven deviance which Larry displays and is underlined by a storyline that itself is a running commentary on humour.

Although existing research on *Curb* is relatively thin, what we do see in the small body of work is telling.²³ In the context of humour, there is small body of work that deals directly with *Curb* that is helpful. For our purposes, perhaps Lee Siegel (2007), who criticized Larry David's style of humour in the show, has written some of the more apposite commentary. Siegel's criticism revolves heavily around the style and consequences of the humour. At the beginning of Larry's comedy career (outside the constraints of *Curb*), Larry considerably struggled with the pressures of the crowd and his own insecurities. Often, if Larry did not like how the show was progressing, he would look at the crowd, deadpanned, and say "fuck you" and walk off the stage; claims Siegel, "it was as if David was trying to tune out and trying to tune the rooms' conscious to its subconscious by hitting the low note of his own impulses. He was speaking down to them, but from below" (p. 75). Siegel seems to admire this aspect of Larry's comedy, as if the downtrodden persona made the dark content of his jokes more relevant and genuine. As Larry's social position started to change, however, Siegel argues that his humour – the humour in *Curb*, Larry's most recent work – is tainted because he now is talking down to the audience, he is now on a 'high horse,' so to speak. This change in social position, argues Siegel, makes Larry more like a bully, as his comedy no longer represents the workings of the disenfranchised, but rather just a comic that aims to be divisive and mean. As such, Siegel makes an interesting, but unarticulated, argument for a sociopositive perspective on humour that is made only to build social unity, not denigrate it. This position would be a different matter entirely if Siegel claimed that this was simply an inappropriate style of humour; this, however, is not Siegel's position. Siegel's position is that *Curb's* humour *is not properly funny and not genuinely humorous*. In effect, Siegel does not present a case that looks at all the nuances of

²³ There are a few ways to characterize the academic work done on *Curb*, but I think the most useful distinction is between *Curb* as a primary focus of study and *Curb* as a secondary example within a larger context. Of the latter variety, there is considerable work (e.g., Mills, 2003; Thompson, 2007) that generally talks about *Curb* as an example of production techniques or a trend towards comedy vérité and its style of humour. The former variety that looks at *Curb* as the primary focus of research, however, is much less developed. Fortunately, the benefit of this former variety is that it offers more of a review or commentary on the humour within the program and this will be a focus in this thesis.

humour; rather, he looks to redefine the humour in *Curb* from a very specific, sociopositive, approach.

Alternatively, David Lavery (2008), takes a different position on the humour of *Curb*, arguing that while often Larry picks on the ‘little guy,’ he also picks on those who genuinely could cause harm in Larry’s life, like his wife, Cheryl, friends, television executives, police officers, et cetera. Lavery argues that humour in *Curb* is far more ambiguous and not, as Siegel claimed, ill-intentioned; Lavery asserts that the humour in *Curb*, because it affects everyone in the show, should cause audiences disregard any negative feelings or associations that it might bring up. All things being equal, if humour offends equally, if it can bring people together in its mockery, than *Curb*, Lavery feels, should not be criticized, “it is easy to overlook the ‘egalitarian’ nature of [Larry] David’s cantankerous character” (p. 209). Both Lavery and Siegel provide interesting, articulate, and compelling insights into the program; however, both tend to take a narrow view of the limits of humour and how they can be altered. In this sense, it will be possible to provide a fresh perspective on the series by reassessing the concept of humour. As the work on *Curb* has so far clearly demonstrated, how we come to understand the humour is significant in regards to the types of claims we can make about the program, and further, what sort of implications these have as social commentary.

While using the complete seventh season as the backdrop for narrative analysis in the thesis (as well as intermittent references to earlier seasons when necessary), selection of the most conspicuous and relevant examples of humour is paramount. In this regard, I have sifted out the most densely packed episodes and scenes for analysis, as a matter of economy, to promote depth and breadth of analysis. Progressing in this way means that this is not an exercise of random or arbitrary sampling; rather, the choices of specific texts within the season are the most representative of the discourse as a whole and hold the most relevance for the study, as well as being the most theoretically potent (Cynthia Patton, personal communication, September 30, 2009). Looking ahead, the analysis will now progress by instituting Thompson’s framework for analysis to unearth varied interpretations of humour as a highly nuanced sociological concept.

4.1 ‘Covering Up’ the Inappropriate. The Episode “The Bare Midriff” (Originally aired October 25, 2009)

4.1.1 Episode Summary

“Larry and Jerry Seinfeld consider incorporating Larry's latest real-life experience - involving a bare-midriff assistant and a crying Jesus - into the reunion show.” - Episode summary, HBO Canada (2009).

Hard at work in their office, Larry and Jerry start the episode, “The Bare Midriff,” (David, 2009a) drafting the reunion special of their earlier sitcom hit, *Seinfeld*. During a short break in writing, Larry reveals another one of his enigmatic character flaws when he leaves to take a washroom break. Apparently, one of his new medications is making him urinate with incredible force – sometimes spraying nearby objects, like the bathroom wall – which leads Jerry to comment, “What have you got, Seabiscuit in there?” Sharing a quick laugh about Larry’s predicament, the two are interrupted by their mutual secretary, Maureen, who passes on a few messages and fixes an overhead fan and incidentally flashes her midriff in the process. Maureen is more than competent in her duties as a secretary, but Jerry and Larry overlook this because they are both perturbed by her lack of decorum in the office, particularly at her tendency to wear ‘belly-shirts’ to work. Larry is given the task of asking Maureen to dress more appropriately at work, which puts her on the defensive (with Maureen making claims of sexism and attacks against the women’s movement) and she subsequently quits. Initially, Larry is pleased – he did not really like Maureen in the first place – until Julia, who plays the character “Elaine” in *Seinfeld*, reminds Larry that they hired Maureen as a personal favour to her and Larry is reluctantly forced to go and apologize. Larry goes to Maureen’s house and is successful in his apology, convincing her to return to work. However, when Larry makes a trip to the bathroom before he leaves, his medically (pill-popping) enhanced urine splashed a portrait of Jesus Christ hanging on the wall, making it appear as though Jesus is shedding a tear. After Larry leaves the house, Maureen and her mother find the portrait and assume it must be a miracle, deciding it is now their calling to take the portrait on the road. Larry is again pleased, as he is to be rid of Maureen as long as he co-signs a loan for a tour bus needed to take the portrait on the road. However, as he

waits to sign the documents for Maureen who is running late, Larry needs to pee badly. So, he urinates behind some bushes. Maureen and her mother catch Larry and hear the splash of his urine, and putting two and two together, realize the tear on their portrait was actually urine. Distraught, Maureen's mother intends to jump off a building only to have Larry talk her down and save her. Unfortunately, Larry slips in the process and begins to fall off the roof himself. In the final frames of the episode, Larry manages to escape certain injury by grabbing the only thing he can to maintain a good grip – Maureen's flabby and exposed bare midriff.²⁴

4.1.2 The Theme of Transgression Through Humour in “The Bare Midriff”

There are no subtle metaphors at the end of “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a). Both literally and figuratively, Larry is left hanging as the episode cuts and the audience is left wondering about an absent denouement in what is classic dark comedy. In the mind of the audience there are at minimum two obvious questions that demand answering: the first, of course, is the question of what happens to Larry; does he fall and suffer serious injury? The second, more interesting question, is one of hubris; is the humour caused at Larry's expense a commentary on his social transgressions?²⁵ The second question can be put another way: how does a conventional appreciation of dark humour colour our perception of the episode? The first question is likely the easiest to answer given any cultural attunement to how most TV series proceed. It is very unlikely that the star of a comedy series is so terribly injured that he or she loses the capacity to fulfil that role, and it is doubtful that many viewers seriously considered the possibility that Larry was in grave physical danger that could render him missing for the remainder of the series. The second question, however, is not so straightforward.

Within the logic of a standard, sociopositive humour interpretation that emphasizes incongruity and conflict as the basis of analysis, we might understand the episode and its dark humour as follows: Larry, despite having an understandable grievance with Maureen, finds that when his criticisms of her attire are put in the context

²⁴ For a more in depth episode summary, see Appendix A.

²⁵ These, of course, are not the only questions that can be raised but rather the most important ones for our purposes. At a different time, one might wonder, for example, how this affected Maureen's plan to tour the country or how Maureen's mother recovered from her emotional turmoil.

of the women's movement and sexism, he is far astride cultural sensitivity and political correctness. Unfortunately, after attempting to fix this first transgression half-heartedly and insincerely, Larry commits an even larger *faux pas* by urinating on Jesus, but decides to do nothing about it out of laziness except cover up and deny any wrongdoing when approached about it directly. Larry senses no moral obligation to fix his wrongs – even when it becomes clear that Maureen is going to live her life based on Larry's urinating indiscretion and tour with her 'miracle' painting – mostly because it benefits Larry directly to have her out of his hair. At the end of the day, a simple appreciation of sociopositive sitcom humour – one where wisdom of the group is proven (Jones, 1992) – suggests that Larry's ineptitude creates some predictable conditions of conflict that will end (as viewed by the majority of the audience) in a humorous backlash against him that reminds us not to make similar mistakes. This, of course, resonates with Jones (1992) and his thoughts on humour in sitcom, where he notes, "once everyone remembers to communicate and surrender his or her selfish goals, the wisdom of the group and its executive is proved" (p. 4). Larry, who is literally screaming for dear life, knows he could have avoided this whole mess, if he had just told the truth in the first place. In the end, although the humour is dark and wrestles with some social taboos, it is nonetheless in the name of humour and 'not all that serious.'

Larry is in quite the spot by the end of the episode, and there is the insinuation that maybe this is partly (some might say almost completely) of his own doing. One has to wonder, however, if this final scene does not offer some small insinuation of atonement for Larry. Which is to say, there seems to be a degree of redemption for Larry in the final scene that comes with the laughter at his predicament. Consistent with an understanding of the relief paradigm of humour, particularly Freud's (1960) emphasis on joke-work, the transgressive acts that Larry has committed can be partially forgotten and forgiven as not as serious as they might have been without the context of humour.²⁶ Opines John Morreall (1983), founder of the *International Society for Humor Studies* (ISHS), "To joke with others is to put aside practical considerations for the moment, and

²⁶ Without a doubt, this reading is a momentary strawman argument that is admittedly oversimplified. However, for the purposes of a sociopositive reading of humour it signals the spirit of the argument enough to be more carefully and accurately appreciated further into the discussion.

do this tends to make everyone relax. Sharing humour is in this respect like sharing an “enjoyable meal” (p. 115, emphasis added). Again, this redemptive non-practical quality, found in most of sitcom (Jones, 1992), lends credibility to the earlier suggestion that Larry likely ended up not seriously injured (which, following the series narrative, turns out to be accurate). Thus, one reading of the humour in the episode might suggest something like, “even if dark boundaries are crossed, not all is lost if it reinforces some sort of positive lesson to be learned.” In Larry’s case, this might be something like: be attuned to social mores and political correctness, otherwise you risk being ‘left hanging’ in some uncomfortable positions. But, in some obvious ways, this is a gentle, humorous message, despite its dark exterior. It reminds us that, as Mark Twain (2005) once said, “Humor is the great thing, the saving thing. The minute it crops up, all our irritation and resentments slip away, and a sunny spirit takes their place” (quoted in Singh, p. 164). And this sentiment is, of course, predicated on the insistence that one does not take the episode or humour *too* seriously, because, after all, it is a sitcom and comedy is not popularly understood to cause lasting harm.

In the end, the episode engages with dark or transgressive issues (sexism in the context of the work place decorum and anti-religious feelings) and brings them to light for possible debate, but does so without the explicit effect of harm or real stinging criticism. In the following section, I intend to look at how dark humour in some ways straddles the fence, looking at pugnacious issues without *really* grappling with exposure of the issues. Instead, what comes across in the episode is not so much social criticism, but rather humour for the sake of laughter. In this episode specifically, and in humour theory more generally, it seems dark humour can address issues *without really* addressing them. Why is it the case that dark humour often can touch on such transgressive topics but do so only in a seemingly superficial way?

4.1.3 Re/interpretation: Humour, Its Limits, and the ‘Rules of Engagement’

The question left at the end of the last section – why does dark humour work in a seemingly superficial manner? – is a leading one meant to provoke discussion of the episode. I phrased the question as ‘seemingly superficial’ specifically to suggest that the ways in which humour appears superficial are anything but. There is, I contend, much

more going on than simple, good-natured fun. This is because humour has the capacity to be read in various ways, even though this is sometimes not recognized. In the previous section, details of how the dark humour could be spun in a positive light were presented. In this section, the priority will be to take the most incendiary incident in “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a), Larry urinating on a portrait of Jesus, and explore what can be said of dark humour’s capacity to make such brazen, dark moves hit their transgressive mark.

Few cultural matters raise the collective ire of a group like religion. One can safely speculate that this is in no small part due to the predominant role religion can play in organizing a person’s identity or how it strongly influences the values of an individual. Without resorting to the unnecessary tedium of qualitatively ranking what constitutes people’s identities, suffice it to say that religion ranks among the more pervasive ways to distinguish identity, alongside political affiliation, class, et cetera. It ought to come as no surprise, then, that an iconoclastic Larry urinating on an image of Jesus Christ created a tremendous dialogue that reverberated beyond the community who generally watch the program. The obvious criticisms one might expect were certainly present: how could such a program defame a holy image? Why are Christians subjected to such intolerance when humour at the expense of Jews or Muslims is treated with the utmost sensitivity?²⁷ How could anyone find something so potentially divisive and hurtful as this humorous? It is this last question that is paramount. In answering this question, unearthing the rhetorical stances necessary to protect the ‘goodness’ of humour, as Lockyer and Pickering (2008) tend to phrase it, will help clarify how social theorists use humour to discuss contentious issues.

The ‘goodness’ in humour that Lockyer and Pickering (2008) refer to should be understood in a way similar to how we understand sociopositive humour. In this sense, ‘goodness’ in humour looks to reduce interpersonal conflict, promote happiness, and

²⁷ This concern, that Muslims are treated with a greater degree of sensitivity when treated as the brunt of a joke, is contentious and not well researched. However, it would be remiss not to mention the recent uproar surrounding Comedy Central’s perennial favourite South Park. In the series’ 200th episode (Parker, 2010), the program depicts the prophet Muhammad in a mascot bear costume (Yusaf, 2010). This, of course, is *South Park* nodding its figurative hat at the Muhammad cartoons controversy, which began after editorial cartoons that depicted the Islamic prophet Muhammad were published in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005.

most importantly, encourage viewers to kick back without too much thought and simply enjoy what the humour has to offer. Looking more closely, the criticism levelled at “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a) directly after its airing tells us a lot about how dark humour is implicitly understood to operate, rightly or wrongly, towards these ‘good,’ sociopositive ends. Looking at the episode’s fallout, the underlying complaint is the obvious one: urinating on a picture of Jesus is sacrosanct for Christians, and fodder for those who crusade for ‘good taste’ and ‘moral decency.’ How to lodge this complaint while still negotiating the fact that the episode is primarily humorous, however, is not something that can be accomplished easily or directly. This is largely because the scene is supposed to be taken humorously, and, as such, any notion of humour (in a sociopositive sense) needs to be dealt with and eschewed before going any further. Take, for example, the widely publicized denunciation of the episode by writer Deal Hudson, as reported by Fox News (2009), who keeps it very short and simple, “I don't think it's funny, [...] Why is it that people are allowed to publicly show that level of disrespect for Christian symbols?” In the same article, Bill Donohue, president and spokesperson of the Catholic League, implicitly suggested that humour should never be spiteful and always in ‘good taste,’ as he opined, “Was Larry David always this crude? Would he think it's comedic if someone urinated on a picture of his mother?” The insinuation is, of course, that if an attempt at humour causes harm – either directly or indirectly – it fails in its initial ambition altogether.

It is worth considering this last implication, however, because it is not clear why humour is expected to follow some sort of hypothetical Hippocratic oath. Specifically, what was not primarily debated was the relevancy of any satire in the episode to some larger political or religious debate; the debate hinged on whether or not humour that held a bellicose nature was genuine or ‘valid’ and if the humour in the episode should be characterized as such. Given the background literature on ‘good-natured humour’ in section 1.4.2, the expectation of helpful, good-natured humour is not new or unexpected. However, what is worth attention in the response to the episode was not how much critics

pushed back against the content of the episode and its messages,²⁸ what is significant is how the criticism directed at the episode focused heavily on the style of humour portrayed. Following the logic of the criticism against the episode, the most troubling aspect of the episode was not that the episode chastised religion *per se*, but rather, that the episode did so in the guise of good-natured humour. Unsurprisingly, then, the harsh voices of criticism against the episode, like Hudson (Fox News, 2009), took a similar stance to that of Lefcourt (2000),²⁹ who argues that socionegative style humour is not a genuine form of humour (p. 72), as though the satire in the episode used humour like an illegal move on a chessboard.

HBO's response to the criticism against the episode provides the opposite side of the same coin; that is to say, HBO's response to the criticism looked to deflect condemnation not by claiming that the episode had any real damning underlying motivation against Christians, but rather, that the episode was simply a joke and that since humour is inherently benevolent no harm was meant: "Anyone who follows *Curb Your Enthusiasm* knows that the show is full of parody and satire," the statement read. "Larry David makes fun of everyone, most especially himself. The humor is always playful and certainly never malicious" (Foxnews.com, 2009). There are two things worth consideration in HBO's response to *Curb's* critics: firstly, we see a commentary on how parody and satire 'ought' to be understood, with HBO claiming that the two imply 'playfulness' and no 'malicious' intent; secondly, we see a continuation of the sentiment that suggests defending humour as good natured always involved a downplaying in the seriousness of the topics addressed and, in doing so, a certain aspect of indirect censorship against socionegative humour is invoked. It is worth being skeptical, however, that either side has the authority to decide how humour ought to be received and understood. Instead, it became about whether the satire was 'properly' funny or not.

²⁸ It would be foolhardy to suggest that there was not a rebuttal against the themes found in the "The Bare Midriff" (David, 2009a) that accompanied the criticism of *Curb's* humour. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that in comparison to a more traditional academic or journalistic addressing of the issue much more effort was focused on presentation style, on the limits of what humour is 'allowed' to do.

²⁹ Similarly, *The Life of Brian*, which was earlier discussed, faced the same sort of criticism when it too was released. From these events one might hypothesize that a relatively non-humorous attack on religion (e.g., the Darwinist critique of Richard Dawkins) is in some ways more easily handled by religious support than a humorous one, which could be dangerous in its ambiguity and polysemy if certain connections are made.

What is lost when this debate takes this rhetorical turn is a focus on the socionegative aspects that the episode portrays, and any stinging criticisms found within the episode that could disrupt the calm and provoke a divisive debate on religion (or otherwise) are left largely unexplored. It is not that these socionegative contexts do not exist – they certainly do – it is simply that much of their potency is put on the backburner when the debate becomes about what is ‘properly’ humorous, one way of maintaining a sociopositive stranglehold on the issues dark humour addresses.

Looking at the fallout of “The Bare Midriff” episode, there are two central considerations to make about dark humour. The first hearkens back to Freud’s (1960) notion of tendentious jokes and the idea that humour can work around particularly sensitive issues because humour takes a unique communicative form that emphasizes the form of communication over the content. In his theory, Freud posits that humour can be especially transgressive in nature because, if successfully carried out, humour draws attention away from the content of joke – e.g., racism, sexism, or in this case, religious defamation – and towards the cleverness of joke form, as seen in the punchline or climax. Freud deemed cleverness of the joke form joke-work, and in this episode we see the joke-work operate in an intricate narrative that all comes together at the end of the episode.³⁰ For Freud, this process had everything to do with releasing pent up nervous energy in those who created the humour, a way of getting around the political correctness of society. What was not as well established, perhaps, is how the notion of joke-work affected the content in the larger discourse. In particular, it seems clear that the reception of dark humour by audiences can also be heavily influenced by joke-work. Take, for example, the discussion provoked on religion and how heavily it emphasized whether or not the episode was ‘properly’ humorous. The idea that one can win a debate about whether or not something is funny is preposterous; it is pointless to try to convince someone that they *actually did not* find something humorous and somehow overrule their own opinion. But perhaps this pointlessness in debating what is humorous is a point to make about understanding dark humour sociologically. One thing that becomes clear is

³⁰ This is not to claim that the only humorous part of the episode is at the climax, far from it. However, it does mean that the climax of the episode, Larry hanging on for dear life because he tried to cover up his Jesus splash, ties everything together and ultimately allows the whole episode to make sense.

that when pursuing whether something is funny or not, part of the larger issue is lost. For instance, lost in the debate surrounding the episode was a prolific debate on religion itself; the content was deflected away from criticism of religion and instead towards how one may make these criticisms, especially in regards to humour. This is a serious limitation to the power of dark satire. By implying humour must be sociopositive in tone – as the response to the episode did – part of the satire is missed; how does one use humour to really address a social issue when it is always bracketed in an idea of humour that is invariably pleasant?

While there is nothing to say that you must look at humour in a sociopositive sense, there is perhaps a strong inclination to do so. Dark humour is not foreign to notions of power, in that it has a strong normative element to it. There is a conservative bias to keeping humour sociopositive, as sociopositivity can be a tool to undermine the criticism often found in humour. Specifically, if dark humour with a critical edge can be portrayed as in ‘poor taste,’ there seems to be the potential to deflect some, if not most, of the initial complaint to the wayside. Certainly this aspect of humour can cut both ways. Lockyer and Pickering (2008) make a similar point about humour’s difficulty in making its barbs stick in the context of racism and sexism,

For when a joke is critically evaluated as sexist or racist, by definition, the joke fails and becomes severely devalued as comic discourse. Why humour is sometimes found offensive, what social functions offensive humour performs, and how the ethical limits of humour can be negotiated are the sorts of questions raised by its failure. (p. 811)

One way to understand this passage is to appreciate its underlying implication: for the darkest, most offensive humour to be understood as ‘comic discourse,’ emphasis often has to be deflected away from some of the content that makes it dark in the first place. Humour is a way to test how much and in what ways those limits can be manipulated, and in doing so, provides commentary on dark topics that might not normally get so openly discussed. That is, of course, unless the humour goes *too far*. Yet, what is *too far* for some is not the case for others, which creates the conditions for debate on what those limits of humour are, as opposed to the content itself. A similar consideration has been made by Mills, who noted, “the kinds of activities which audiences are invited to

empathize with are indicative of comedy as a passive form, functioning as nothing more than entertainment” (p. 22). The corollary of this sentiment is that when humour ceases to be entertaining – particularly in cases when humour causes offence – it is always possible to cry foul; in this sense, Philip Auslander claims that humour loses something, “comedy seems to have given up on the possibility that it could function as a significant critical discourse” (quoted in Mills, 2005, p. 23). Of course, this loss is on full display in the backlash to “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a). And while this loss of a function as critical discourse is an interesting display of rhetoric, it can ignore the issues at hand, indirectly censoring the kernel of transgression that started it all.

Summarizing this section of re/interpretation, we can see that there is the paradigmatic influence of ideological positivism in this episode. The necessary point to make is that not all dark, offensive humour is inherently worth censorship. On the contrary, some of the most important issues worth criticism are likely to offend and this is necessarily the case. So, while it is not my intent to perpetuate racist jokes – not all offensive limits are equally legitimate in their crossing – most, if not all, worthwhile topics of social criticism are likely to affront the common societal boundaries we face. That’s the point. Is this not the case with much of religious satire? And, perhaps, to a similar degree, is it not the case that political satire has the ability to offend and enrage? From this discussion, we begin to understand that dark humour is not always utilized to its fullest potential because of the form it is assumed to take (joke-work), and this has connotations about what ends it can and cannot be directed towards. In this regard, humour’s greatest attribute – its ability to circumvent taboo topics through its rhetorical form – is also a weakness because its rhetorical form, rather than its content, becomes the topic for debate. This endangers humour as a tool for significant social critique. Any debate becomes hampered when humour is merely understood to be an uplifting sociopositive force because it prematurely allows those offended to yell the battle cry for those offended – ‘that’s not funny!’ – before the essence of the content is addressed. Indeed, we see this rhetorical move at play in “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a) as much of the darker, inner core of criticism is ignored when the whole form is put into question. So, like pulling out the whole tooth to destroy the ‘rotten’ abscess, destroying

humour's socionegative side might feel good in the short term but, in the long run, it robs us of its critical sociological bite.

4.2 Adele David: Mother of Larry, an Asshole and Swan Killer. The Episode "The Black Swan" (Original aired November 1, 2009)

4.2.1 Episode Summary

"Larry twice encounters bad luck on the same golf hole." - Episode summary, HBO Canada (2009).

"The Black Swan" (David, 2009b) begins with a scene of Larry, Larry's father Nat, and Larry's cousin Andy all convening at the grave of Adele David, Larry's deceased mother. Much to Larry's dismay, he finds that to save money (each letter on the tombstone costs \$50) Nat has spelled "passed" (as in "passed away") as "past." Upset, Larry vows to fix the mistake, but his indignation soon passes when Nat goes home and Larry's friends Jeff and Marty join Larry and Andy at the nearby clubhouse for a round of golf. However, because of Andy's poor breakfast choice, crispy onions that take too long to prepare, the group is stuck behind another group containing a notoriously slow golfer, Norm. The slow play of Norm ends up being too much for Larry to stand, so partway through the round Larry ignores the compass of social graces and screams rudely at Norm to hurry up, creating a curse-filled shouting match between the two. Shortly after, back at the clubhouse, one of Norm's playing partners confronts Larry: Norm, a chronic sufferer of high blood pressure, has had a heart attack and now Larry is being blamed for his subsequent death. Although Larry becomes agitated that he is being pointed out as the person of blame, he is not really that upset at Norm's death. Norm's indignant playing partner asks, "Did you even like him, at all?" to which Larry responds, "No, I thought he was a prick" (David, 2009b). Already in a bad mood, nothing is going smoothly for Larry; he gets in a fight with the stone mason over Larry's beloved baseball team, the Yankees, and the golf club owner, Mr. Takahashi, is mad at Larry for using his cell phone in the clubhouse, which is against the rules. To make matters worse, when golfing the very next day – on the very same hole where Larry screamed at Norm – Larry is attacked by Mr. Takahashi's prized black swan, which Larry frantically kills in self-

defence. The rest of Larry's golfing party – Andy, Marty, and Jeff – promise to keep the killing a secret (to preserve their club membership), although Andy fears that he will let it slip to his wife because they have a very open relationship. Larry is worried since Andy's wife hates him and seeks vengeance, which is understandable given Larry's character traits and his laundry list of unmannerly affronts.

Later, Larry attends a very hostile memorial for Norm at the club where everyone is mad at him, which Larry only attends to try and save his golf membership. Friends and family of Norm despise Larry for obvious reasons, and although he has no proof, Mr. Takahashi suspects Larry murdered his swan and is quite bitter. However, to save his skin Larry concocts a brilliant scheme and tries to convince everyone that the swan was a menace (which is true enough) and that the swan attacked Norm and caused the heart attack. The lie seems barely convincing for Mr. Takahashi and Norm's family but it is easier for them to swallow that the swan, rather than Larry, is a 'murderer,' so the lie clears Larry's name of the charges. Yet just as it seems Larry has gotten away with it and everyone believes his lies, they walk pass Adele's now 'fixed' headstone, which as it happens is near Norm's burial plot. This is where it all comes crashing down for Larry; evidently Andy could not hold a secret and his wife had been in touch with the stonemason. Adele's headstone now reads, much to Larry's chagrin, "Adele David: Mother of Larry, an asshole and swan killer."³¹

4.2.2 Laughter as a Rhetorical Device for Dark Humour in "The Black Swan"

Throughout this episode, Larry comes off as less than sympathetic. It is not that he is necessarily malicious *per se* but Larry appears callous and ethically willing to take the low road. Granted, much of what happens is largely circumstance and outside of Larry's immediate control, but some of it could be forgiven if he was just nicer to those around him more often. Nonetheless, given the opportunity to make amends for his wrongs, Larry tends to take the easy way out and does not often learn from his

³¹ For a more in-depth episode summary, see Appendix B.

mistakes.³² For example, instead of confessing to killing Mr. Takahashi's black swan, Larry instead decides to make an elaborate cover up story and try to avoid the blame. Similarly, instead of simply allowing Norm's family to grieve without his interference, Larry opts to try to mislead them about the true cause of Norm's death and save his golf membership.

As "The Black Swan" (David, 2009b) progresses, the episode adheres to the typical sitcom narrative development of sitcom development whereby the protagonist attempts a unilateral solution to personal problems that goes against the general wellbeing of the collective (Jones, 1992). Specifically, Larry lies about the swan's death, shows no remorse for his role – however incidental – in Norm's death, and then tries to link the two unrelated events in order to sidestep his own blame and save face. Given some basic genre literacy, viewers likely predict that the web of lies that Larry has spun will unravel – ultimately, this prediction proves true – and that he will face the wrath of the group to his detriment (Creeber, 2008; Jones, 1992). Where the humour lies, taking a relatively straightforward approach to the analysis, is in the incongruity of how the whole episode reveals itself, which is to say that each of Larry's misgivings coalesce into a shaming that is perhaps more than the sum of its parts. Therefore, what is funny is how the whole plot ties together to backfire against Larry in the end: the stonemason manages to betray Larry's secret about the swan and simultaneously destroy the cover up story about Norm's death, ultimately humiliating Larry (with his mother's headstone, no less) all in one fell swoop.

So how do all these events produce such a well-received episode, despite its dark themes?³³ Perhaps one way of addressing this question is by considering the role laughter has to play with dark humour. Sentiments like 'laughter is the best medicine' ostensibly suggest that laughter is a good thing, and by association, that which causes humour is also a positive thing. Perhaps this is an overly obvious reason that humour

³² This is a common feature for sitcom analysis; the protagonist makes the same mistakes over and over again for humour's sake (much to the audience's pleasure) while viewers learn not to do the same (Jones, 1992).

³³ For example, based on 122 votes on the episode page of "The Black Swan" on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), viewers gave the episode 8.2/10 (IMDb, 2010). While not without bias, the poll does nonetheless give a very relative indication that in many circles the episode was quite well received.

seems to be portrayed in a positive way. Yet this connection deserves some more insightful consideration. Successful humour is judged as such precisely because it evokes laughter. On the surface, there seems to be a significant element of relief from laughter in humour that has the capacity to shift how it is subsequently received. So, during “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b), everything goes wrong yet still becomes a circumstance worthy of attention because the episode suggests that there is a transformative aspect to laughter. For that reason, we will now turn our attention to the theme of laughter in the context of dark humour. Accordingly, the question begs to be asked: what can looking at laughter tell us about dark humour?

An interjection should be made at point, however, concerning the use of a soundtrack instead of a laugh track in *Curb*. *Curb* utilizes orchestrated classical music for all its scene transitions and is a noticeable replacement in the absence of a laugh track (Thompson, 2007), which is conspicuous because it contrasts the gloomy atmosphere of Larry’s misadventures. Decidedly whimsical, the music creates an ironic undertone to the events of the show. Perhaps, one might claim, that adding the upbeat classical music to the show is a concession, a necessary element that is used to prime the audience for humour’s sake, much in the same way that a laugh track is used. While this is partially true, I believe that there is more going on with the music than simply acting as a laugh track fill in. The music, in its ironic way, is a substitution for the laugh track; however, the music is considerably more ambiguous in how it produces emotion than the laugh track. Undoubtedly, the ironic music used is there to produce an incongruity between what is happening on screen and the audience’s interpretation. Yet while the music is certainly there to signal humour, it is not as emotionally prescriptive as canned laughter, which I have argued erroneously conflates laughter with humour. The music, in this regard, could be thought as an ironic interpretive opening that alarms the audience and makes them more deeply consider what is going on, where as a laugh track does the exact opposite, it works to provide only one possible interpretation: collectively shared laughter. In the upcoming section, the discussion will focus on what happens when this shared laughter is take away.

4.2.3 Re/interpretation: Light Laughter and Dark Humour.

There is nothing inherently humorous in laughter; however, it is often (mis)used as a convenient synecdoche for all things humorous. Laughter, it is worth reiterating, is different than humour. Laughter is more basic, more physiological. In its first and simplest definition, “the action or sound of laughing” (Laughter: Dictionary.com, 2010), suggests no prescriptive element towards any specific social state of affairs. It is not heavily laden with any emotional undertones; it does not give a formula for how to interpret laughter. Humour, in contrast, always has a social context and implies a social ‘situation,’ “a comic, absurd, or incongruous quality causing amusement: the humo[u]r of a situation” (Humour: Dictionary.com, 2010). Nonetheless, more often than not, the two are used reasonably interchangeably. Yet if we take the two to mean the same, difficulties and restrictions arise in the ways we are able to speak about humour because we lose some of the nuanced potential each term has, humour being particularly afflicted. Worth significant attention are the ways the concept of humour is constricted by its close relation to laughter.

Undoubtedly, humour and laughter are related. Yet while humour is meant to provoke laughter, it cannot be said that laughter’s well-documented positive psychological features³⁴ are then automatically transferable to humour. In the previous section, I ended by asking about the role of laughter in understanding dark humour. In this section, “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b) will be rethought in the context of its laughter, specifically considering how it frames our understanding of dark humour. More specifically, it is the intention of this section to make an underlying point about dark humour’s relation to laughter: instead of being a harbinger of positivity and good-will – as it usually is construed – the case will be made that laughter can act as a misleading veil that shrouds a socionegative perspective on humour.

³⁴ In recent years there is no shortage of academic work that praises the benefits of laughter in various contexts. For instance, some areas that have received prolonged attention are the workplace (e.g., Beckman, Regier & Young, 2007; Holmes, 2006; Kangasharju & Nikko, 2009), intimate relationships (e.g., Lefcourt, 2001; Young & Bippus, 2001), and health (e.g., Wanzer, M. Booth-Butterfield & S. Booth-Butterfield, 2005; Du Pré, 1998). Further, these are only three examples areas humour research is involved, of which there are certainly more.

“The Black Swan” (David, 2009b) is immersed in the theme of death, not a theme that is generally up beat or positively received. Yet death is a common trope for dark humour, as humour presents an opportunity to bring some levity to what can be one of the most sobering aspects of life, death. In a common sense notion of humour, whereby humour and laughter are synonymous, we have the humour in “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b) provoking laughter from three deaths: Norm, the swan, and Larry’s mother, Adele David. For many, the humour in the episode can be understood as a way to approach the theme of death in a manner that, although dark in content, provides the lighter psychological effects of humour. This approach has been applied before; for instance, Lefcourt (2000), Berger (1997), and Solomon (2002) each praise the broad social benefits of humour. More aligned with the theme from “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b), there is a nearly inexhaustible list of examples that can provide evidence of humour predicated on death and mortality. In effect, claims Neil Elgee, “[individuals] are laughing at death, but also playing with it – they are revived and renewed. They are laughing at play-death, pretending death is not real” (p. 303, emphasis in original). The point is that those laughing at death are not so misled that they simply ignore the reality of death, but rather, they position themselves uniquely to the gravity of death by selectively interpreting humour. Importantly, I suggest that this has a great deal to do with the concept of humour co-opting the positive feelings associated with laughter.

This feature of laughing at death emerges when looking at “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b), which utilizes the notion of ‘laughing at play-death.’ During the opening scene of the “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b) we begin to see some ways humour can position death. In the opening scene, Larry, Larry’s father Nat, and cousin Andy approach the grave of Larry’s deceased mother, Adele. Here Larry and Andy find that, much to their dismay, in an attempt to save a bit of money Nat has spelled “passed” (as in “passed away”) as “past.” Both Larry and Andy admonish Nat, but their reactions certainly differ in how they do so. On one hand, Larry is obviously outraged and in a state of disbelief. Larry chastises Nat, claiming that he would have gladly paid the extra money to make sure that headstone was done properly, and that this was a despicable way to honour his mother. Andy, on the other hand, while sharing Larry’s feelings, also

uncomfortably laughs while the scene plays out. So while they both chide Nat for his cheapness, Andy cannot do so without letting out a slight chuckle to lighten the mood.

Comparing the two reactions of Larry and Andy helps us appreciate how laughter affects our understanding of dark humour. For the benefit of this point, briefly construct a thought experiment that removes Andy from the scene entirely, and with his removal, imagine that the nervous laughter that he receives is also removed. The scene without Andy's laughter is more like a drama that highlights the emotional distress Larry is feeling over the loss of his mother than it is a comedy. What we have, without Andy, is a disquieting scene where Larry is distraught – and rightly so – that his mother is being disrespected in death. However, this dynamic completely shifts when Andy is placed back into the scene. While the setting and context is unchanged, having Andy's laughter present in the scene certainly alters our reception of it. Andy's laughter seems to create the effect celebrated in the relief theory of humour (e.g., Spencer 2001), whereby laughter 'let's off steam' accumulated by the stress of living in a conflicted sphere of social relations. Significantly, the laughter in the scene does not change the fact that Adele has died and is being poorly commemorated, but it does alter our interpretation of the emotionally charged event. More precisely, the laughter in the scene has the effect of making us feel better about the gravity of the situation, prompting a sociopositive reading of the scene.³⁵ By laughing at death, humour can co-opt the positive psychological elements of laughter.

Reflecting on the "The Black Swan" (David, 2009b), the lighter perspective seems to suggest that by finding humour in the various deaths in the episode, there is a redemptive quality that is enjoyed by those who laugh and, in essence, we have an exceptionally sociopositive account of how beating a swan to a bloody pulp is a 'good thing.' Yes, we should expect laughter to accompany humour. Most do.³⁶ This is the

³⁵ As a way of demonstrating this point, during various presentations I have made a habit of showing a specific YouTube clip, "Silence of the Lambs – Inappropriate Laughter" (youtoobmember, 2008), as a stellar example of how laughter can radically shift perceived meaning. In this clip, a portion of the film *Silence of the Lambs* has been edited with a laugh track during a particularly intense scene. Anecdotally, this clip has provoked a significant response from audiences who note laughter significantly changes our perception of scene.

³⁶ For a more in-depth commentary on this subject, refer to section 1.3, "The Humour of Today's Sociologists."

logic presented by Berger (1997) when he speaks about the notion of ‘redeeming laughter,’ in that laughter can often cleanse some of the impurities found in the humour that creates it. Says Berger (1997) about laughter’s ability to cleanse the palate,

[The comic] is, above all, an abstraction from the tragic dimension of human existence. There are exceptions to this, for example, in so-called black humor, though even there the painful realities dealt with are somehow neutralized as they are translated into comic terms. [... T]he clown’s laughing performance through all these tribulations [e.g., becoming the object of ridicule] is only possible because of this imputed painlessness. (p. 210)

Note Berger’s use of laughter as the distinguishing characteristic of humour, as though they are one and the same. Berger’s sentiment is uplifting, granted, but is it wholly accurate? His sociopositive perspective obscures an alternative position; that humour can work in a socionegative sense that distinguishes between psychological benefits and social critiques. In essence, just because humour feels ‘good’ does not imply that its social dimensions are as one-dimensional. Therefore, this co-opting of laughter comes at a price and it is the second, more negative laughter that deserves a rebuttal. So, far from the purely sunny disposition that a sociopositive perspective suggests, laughter can offer a warning that all is not as right as it seems or act as a release valve in a tense circumstance.

Although it may only start as a gut feeling, *Curb* often provides hints of negotiated humour, which for sake of ease, we’ll call cringe comedy. To find a moment of cringe comedy in “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b) we can refer to the scene when Norm’s furious friend confronts Larry about Norm’s death on the golf course. There is undoubtedly some uncertainty about how far someone ought to go when laughing about death, there is some trepidation about how far ‘the line’ of appropriateness may extend. We see this in the uneasy feeling we get when Norm’s unnamed friend angrily admonishes Larry,

Norm’s friend: ‘Did you even know [Norm]?’
Larry: ‘I knew him, somewhat.’
Friend: ‘Did you even like him at all?’
Larry: ‘No, I thought he was a prick.’ (David, 2009b)

In this exchange there are numerous feelings expressed, but for this discussion there are two worth attention: relief and recoil. Relief, as suggested in the earlier synopsis of the episode, is a typical backdrop for discussing humour. In this case, relief comes with the outward expression of laughter, an assessment that would have resonated with Spencer (2001) and Freud (1960). Yet, we know that humour's meaning is not a one-way street, and that there are potentially other less pleasant avenues to explore. Therefore, in contrast to the laugh, what can be said of the cringe can be equally telling about humour.

So, while certain enjoyment/relief is achieved by laughing at Norm's death (and Larry's subsequent callous reaction), the laugh comes with the recognition that this humour has the potential to socially isolate the laugher due to the moral and social implications of others witnessing the laughter. Consistent with his tendency to drag out the awkwardness and self-consciousness of his scenes, this point is strengthened as the scene continues. Larry, fuming at the audacity of Norm's friend, consults Andy, Jeff, and Marty for some support. They offer none. Says Jeff, "You're getting quite a reputation here at the club." Larry, getting increasingly upset, yells back, "What? I didn't do anything!" To which Marty casually quips back, "Look, it may have been an accident, but you're a murderer" (David, 2009b). Already feeling defensive about the situation, Larry struggles to make sense of the whole state of affairs and how he is causally (and in his warped sense of the word, ethically) implicated. Similarly, I suggest that those struggling with the polysemy of humour have a parallel process. This is where the cringe aspect of humour becomes apparent. As one laughs outwardly, he or she also physically and emotionally pulls back, as if to say: "although I laugh, I want no ownership of that laughter." There is an analogy to be made with dark humour; the focus need not always be on the positive feelings of the laugh, but rather, how the context for the cringe signals the unresolved socionegative messages.

The cringe is certainly the less celebrated aspect of much of dark humour. One hypothesis might suggest that this is partly due to humour's tendency to be almost inseparably linked to laughter. Perhaps the reasoning behind this is that the laugh is considerably more outwardly directed, while the cringe is inwardly directed. Maybe the reasoning has to do with the notion of ideological positivism, discussed earlier in section 1.4.2., "The Positive View of Humour." Likely it is a combination of both. Whatever the

cause, laughter is much more highly considered in humour studies than is the cringe. This, however, does not make the cringe difficult to locate. Without doubt, there are aspects that we can easily see might cause us to cringe in Larry's banter with Norm's friend. The cringe suggests that perhaps the humour touches something raw or socially reprehensible. In the case of "The Black Swan" (David, 2009b), one might suggest that the cringe represents the inability to face the harsh realities of death or the taboo of speaking ill of those who have died or to make light of such an emotionally charged topic. In other contexts – for instance, political or religious satire – the cringe could represent the acute awareness that the content of humour is personally resonant, yet socially discordant. This is not to say, however, that these perspectives are not useful or relevant - far from it. Alternatively, it suggests that laughter becomes a veil that shrouds and conceals various perspectives based on its outward psychological effects.

Understanding dark humour is difficult because it has the potential to produce emotions contrary to the various ways in which it can later be reflected upon and interpreted. In "The Black Swan" (David, 2009b), a sociopositive interpretation would claim that humour in the episode suggests working through emotions with a release through laughter and an opportunity for those who partake to alleviate the stresses of death and mortality in positive feelings. While this is perhaps partially true, there is an alternative hypothesis that says the tendency to "claim happiness" (Marcuse, 1955) obscures another perspective: that the humour does not completely or sufficiently work through these issues. Rather, a cringe only works to show that the issues are unresolved and more persuasive and damaging than laughter perhaps can completely deflect. Humour, in this sense, is not best thought of as 'cure' to what ails us, but rather, as a litmus test to what social limits we struggle with. While pushing boundaries and testing cultural taboos define dark humour, this does not mean that humour therefore critically examines these positions or makes them somehow more tangible for critique. Perhaps the most that can be said is that dark humour explores these boundaries. Humour, therefore, does not 'redeem' through laughter, but rather, it offers another discourse that can get at our insecurities indirectly. For those interested in delving deeper, whether we choose to laugh off those insecurities or explore the cringes is of the utmost importance.

The principle claim of this section is that dark, socionegative humour is obscured by humour's more general connection to laughter. While dark humour may provoke laughter – which feels good and light-hearted – these good feelings should not be confused with the content of the humour itself. This was one of the principal findings of Freud's (1960) work on humour, that tendentious humour “will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides with us without any very close interpretation” (p. 123). Likewise, laughter operates as a sort of ‘sirens song,’ beckoning those who hear it to stray from careful consideration and simply enjoy the laughter; socionegative humour struggles to avoid this song.

4.3 All's Well That Ends Well? The Episode “Seinfeld” (Originally aired November 22, 2009)

4.3.1 Episode Summary

“A returned favor costs Larry quality time with Cheryl.” - Episode summary, HBO Canada (2009).

Everything seems to be going Larry's way. The *Seinfeld* reunion show is coming together beautifully – thanks in no small part to the turmoil Larry's life provided in the form of script fodder – and better yet for Larry is that his ex-wife, Cheryl, seems to be warming to his advances. Cheryl is playing the role of Amanda – in the logic of *Seinfeld*'s narrative, George's ex-wife – and the cast is getting along great. Jason, who portrays George, has written a fictional book, *Acting Without Acting*, and is celebrating with a launch party at cast member Julia's house. Jerry and Larry crack jokes and in the process trivialize Jason's book title, noting that “everything is without,” and furthermore, people are beginning to use another annoying phrase, “having said that.” Both comment that this is really an insincere way to make a point; the proviso of “having said that” is just a softer way to broach what you really want to say, no matter how rude it might be. However, the conversation is cut short when Julia confronts Larry, she was tipped-off that he was the one who left a drink on an antique table, causing a ring stain.

Larry, who vehemently denies that he is the one who left the stain (Larry always, he claims, holds his drink in his right-hand in social situations so as not to have to shake hands), soon gets to the bottom of the accusation. The accuser, Mocha Joe, has ulterior motives because he feels slighted for not receiving a tip from Larry and wants retribution. Now Larry has three goals: first, prove that he didn't leave the ring stain and clear his name; second, appease Mocha Joe, who makes the best (and only) coffee on the studio lot; and thirdly – and most importantly to Larry – continue on his quest to win back Cheryl. So when Cheryl asks him to review lines together privately, Larry is thrilled. Yet beforehand he has to drive across town and repay a favour to Mocha Joe to settle the missed tip. Unfortunately for Larry, the job takes a lot longer than expected due to traffic, and Cheryl instead reviews lines with Jason, fanning the flames of jealousy and suspicion in Larry. To avoid what seems to be a budding chemistry between Cheryl and Jason, Larry suddenly changes the direction of the script to destroy the romance. While the cast objects – they loved the original script – Jason eventually quits, effectively ruining the show. After Larry tries to step in and act in place of Jason and fails horrendously, Larry quits the show entirely.

With Larry quitting the show, Jason rejoins the cast and the show continues without Larry and using the original script. Larry, at his seemingly lowest point, begins to watch the broadcast premiere of the reunion show when the doorbell rings. When he answers the door, Cheryl stands there to greet him. Despite his obnoxious behaviour, she realizes that she really misses him and wants to rekindle their relationship. She has quit the program as well and conceded her dream role to another actress. Together they watch the show – which they both love – and seem to be well on the road to reconciliation. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, Larry spies a ring stain, leading him to conclude it was Cheryl all along who left the stain on Julia's coffee table. The scene – and the season – ends with a glum looking Cheryl being pestered by Larry to call Julia and admit her sins, surely wondering if her decision to rejoin Larry was really that well-thought out after all.³⁷

³⁷ For a more in-depth episode summary, see Appendix C.

4.3.2 The Happy Ending Theme of “Seinfeld”

In the last episode of the season all appears to be lost: Larry lost his interest in the *Seinfeld* reunion, had been bastardized (for the umpteenth time) by his close friends, his attempts at being a good (or at least equitable) friend to Mocha Joe were rebuked, and he looked to be at his bleakest point yet. The whole episode, rightly considered a comedy of manners, demonstrates how social mores can dictate immense amounts of pain for those who run amok, regardless of the good or bad intentions of the protagonist. This holds through to the last scene where we laugh a sigh of relief because all the tension washes away and we find that Cheryl is perhaps nearly as neurotic as Larry, or at least neurotic enough to take someone like Larry back into her life.

So, despite all of the turmoil and grief that has followed Larry throughout the season, and even though every one of his plans to get Cheryl back went awry, and paying heed to the fact that Larry has not drastically changed his character for the better (or, for that matter, made himself more likable), in the last episode everything seems to work out for Larry. A sense of balance is restored and the uneasy laughter throughout the season dissipates because ‘all’s well that ends well.’ What better an indicator of a happy ending, one might wonder, than a hearty belly laugh? This sentiment, I argue, is something that needs to be dispelled.

There were numerous reasons to choose the final episode of *Curb*’s season seven, “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), for analysis. Most obviously, perhaps, is that there is something satisfying about coinciding the last episode of a season with the last section of sustained critique; it seems fitting and a way to bring closure on both the sitcom series and the analysis of the series. In subtle ways, this final episode seems more benign than the previous two, which dealt with debasing religion and ‘mocking’ death, respectively. In this way, the final episode does not ostensibly deal with any of the more taboo topics that humour may address. Nevertheless, there is a strong case to be made that this episode is the most revealing in the analysis because of what it represents of humour more broadly. More specifically of interest, the episode carries with the theme of happy endings.

In the final scene of the episode “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), Cheryl takes Larry back into her life, despite all of his apparent shortcomings. Yet immediately as Cheryl takes Larry back – something that thrills him – we see a look of concern wash across her face. Larry seems to quickly revert to his annoying ways by pestering Cheryl, this time to try to convince her to confess to Julia that she was the one who left the stain on the coffee table. The audience is left with the impression that no sooner than she decides to take Larry back into her life does she begin to have worries. There is the sense in the episode, as there is in much of comedy, that the humour should strike us as bitter and sweet, even though the latter is heavily emphasized. No better way to conceptualize this feeling than the sentiment of the ‘happy ending,’ which suggests that despite all the issues one might encounter; it is the final outcome that matters. The ending provided by the dark humour in “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c) is not necessarily a perfect ending, but rather, a happy one.

4.3.3 Re/Interpretation: The Myth of the Happy Ending and the Indecision of Uneasy Beginnings

As soon as the assumption of painlessness is left behind, the comedy turns into tragedy: the clown may still pretend to laugh, but we know that he is really weeping, and his performance is no longer funny. Generally, any comedy turns into tragedy as soon as real suffering, real pain is allowed to enter it. –Peter L. Berger (1997, p. 210)

“Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), the last episode of *Curb*’s seventh season, seems to end on a satisfying note for the character of Larry. Having reconciled with his wife, Cheryl, Larry appears to have succeeded in achieving a happy ending, despite what seemed like his best efforts to (inadvertently) thwart himself. But this ought to come as no surprise, because, as it is often understood, “This faculty for the ‘happy ending’ is, of course, one of the staples of comedy” (Mintz, 1985, p. 115). So regardless of what early insights about dark, socionegative humour might have been made previously, it becomes difficult (or perhaps, unconvincing) to really pursue socionegative positions if everything, on balance, always comes out for the better in humour. In its final display of incongruity,

dark humour seems to walk a contradictory line between presenting taboo-breaking irreverence with a comforting reassurance that if it is done in ‘good humour’ everything will be ‘all right.’ In the “Seinfeld” episode, Larry too walks this line, as he struggles to maintain his own happy ending with Cheryl while continuing with his boorish social graces. This section of analysis looks for a way to broaden understanding of how a ‘happy ending’ is not always what it seems in regards to the roots of socionegative humour and to see how humour is not always what it appears to be.

I opened this section with a quote from Peter Berger (1997), who contends that it is a certain “assumption of painlessness” (p. 210) that allows us to partake in comedy and laugh at the clown without reverting to tragedy. Illustrative of this sentiment is the character of Larry. Near the beginning of the episode, Larry has convinced Cheryl to meet with him to rehearse lines, which he believes to be a step towards their reconciliation. Discussing his elation with friend Jeff, Larry cannot help but hope for a happy ending. Says Jeff, “You realize all your dreams are coming true, that all your plans are coming to fruition” (David, 2009c). Of course, this moment of foreshadowing leads to the predictable chain of events where Larry nearly ruins everything with his pesky ring stain sleuthing, inept favour running, and neurotic ‘Constanza-esque’ jealousy. According to Berger’s sentiments, we continue to laugh at these seemingly tragic foibles because of an implicit recognition that there is an “assumption of painlessness” that avoids tragedy in humour. One has to wonder about the seeming incongruity between dark humour and a happy ending, however, and the “assumption of painlessness” by virtue of a happy ending.

Before extending the views on dark humour and the happy ending, it is prudent to consider one of the most persuasive accounts – of which there are remarkably few – of why humour is invariably linked to the notion of a happy ending. One of the most compelling thinkers on the social effects of humour and the notion of the happy ending is Berger who, after a long career in sociology looking at the social constructions of reality, focused his attention on what he saw as the most difficult and under researched area of his discipline, humour (cf., 1997, p. xii-xvii). Moreover, Berger looked at the ways humour could be put to use in easing social tensions and bringing about positive effects. For Berger, the world of humour is in a sense not real, and that is what allows humour to

portray the bright side of life despite utilizing some unsavoury, dark contexts. Says Berger (1997) about the artificial nature of humour: “Comedy is fundamentally counterfactual; tragedy reveals the hard facticity of the human condition” (p. 210). So humour, for Berger, can take the darkest of themes and realities of life and spin them ‘counterfactually,’ that is, with a positive outlook.

The counterfactual spin resonates in the episode “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c). In obvious ways, “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c) appears to carry some revisionist catharsis for Larry in two forms, both as the character and the writer/director. In a moment of art imitating life, in 2007 Larry’s actual wife of fourteen years, Laurie David, filed for divorce.³⁸ Seemingly, the dichotomy of comedy and tragedy holds true in this circumstance, even in dark humour of *Curb*. A pervasive adage about laughter and humour is ‘laughter is the best medicine.’ So it makes sense that Larry would use his own personal turmoil for humour, hoping to medicate the pain he might feel. For instance, not one to pass up an opportunity for a laugh, Larry said of his real-life divorce from Laurie, an environmental activist, “Well, after the divorce, I went home and turned all the lights on!” (in Finn, 2007). Nor was Larry willing to walk away from the potential to turn his life into a comedic storyline of *Curb* when in season six Cheryl leaves him and in season seven he pursues her. Yet there is an obvious and significant difference between Larry’s onscreen and off screen lives. While Larry remains divorced off screen, the end of season brings reconciliation for onscreen Larry.³⁹ In the final minutes of the episode, we see Cheryl, after watching a reconciliation on TV, coo to Larry that they too were meant to be together in the end. The salient point, perhaps, is not that in the episode Larry and Cheryl unite. Rather it is that, tied into the dark humour ending, there has to be an underlying avoidance of pain, a dodging of tragedy. Predictably, this informs what messages are derived from the episode.

Understanding what we do about humour, we can posit reasons why Larry achieves a happy ending, despite the tone of the series being generally dark and the small

³⁸ As is the case with nearly everyone in *Curb*, Larry’s on screen wife, Cheryl, is heavily based on Larry’s off-screen relationships. For instance, both Laurie and Cheryl are environmentalists who worked in the entertainment industry before marrying Larry.

³⁹ Incidentally, the character of George also reconciles in the *Seinfeld* reunion with his estranged wife.

things in Larry's life generally going sour. There is a reason that Larry's life splits between real and scripted along the divide of humour, according to Berger, and this is because humour is fundamentally abstract from reality, it is an escape. Further, argues Berger (1997), humour is an escape from the tedium of day-to-day life, and humour's basis is found in a feel-good mentality that breaks away from this tedious reality,⁴⁰ "every instance of the comic is an escape from reality – healthy physically, psychologically, and sociologically, but an escape all the same" (p. 210). So, for Berger, socionegative analytical potential – which goes against the notion of a 'healthy' set of circumstances or a healthy social reality – cannot exist because the grounds for existence are themselves illusionary, they contradict the very nature of humour.

Berger's perspective on humour is indeed an interesting one because, if followed in practice, which is generally the case in humour studies, it means that there is a strongly prescriptive element to the messages in humour and it further gives reason as to why some interpretations of humour are constantly rehashed. Consider the final scene of "Seinfeld" (David, 2009c). In this scene, Cheryl comes back and declares her rekindled love for Larry (is there a better indication of a fairy tale ending?), and he is overjoyed. Of course, knowing his personality, Larry survives no more than a minute before he begins his agitating ways and starts hounding Cheryl about ring stains, just the type of thing that clouded their domestic bliss in years past. Conventional wisdom about dark humour would suggest that the good nature of humour ultimately trumps the negativity in the scene, and despite the easily apparent doubts Cheryl must be having, that a happy ending is nonetheless a forgone conclusion. Alternatively, however, the focus could be shifted to a more socionegative perspective. In fact, the possibilities to read the scene otherwise are certainly there and it is obvious that Cheryl, head in hands, is suffering mixed emotions immediately after the reconciliation (Larry wastes no time blaming the coffee ring stain on her). It is not difficult to argue that there is, at the very minimum, a

⁴⁰ To give credit where it is due, Berger does not end his argument claiming that this fictional quality ends the potential of humour to "mean" something. However, Berger's provision is that humour can become a reality given religious belief, "in the light of faith – *etsi Deus datur* – the assertions of reality and illusion are reversed" (1997, p. 210). Although interesting, this move shifts the focus away from a sociological discussion and into a discussion of theology, which is not directly related to this study's topic at hand.

choice about how we view this scene; it seems, however, that the default position in humour is to assume the best – following Berger’s argument, it is ‘healthier’ that way.

So humour can be viewed in a variety of ways, and importantly, the default position of assuming a happy ending is significant. However, just because humour is always ‘healthy’ for Berger does not suggest that it cannot be dark in tone. What Berger should not be confused as saying is that humour does not ever touch on the darker, more sinister, aspects of life. Specifically, Berger (1997) considers satire at great length, commenting that satire is equivalent to an attack using humour,

[...] in satire, the aggressive intent becomes the central motif of comic expression, all elements of the comic are then, as it were, welded together into the shaping of a weapon. Most often the attack is directed against institutions and their representatives [...] It may also be directed against entire social groups and their cultures – say against the bourgeoisie and its mores. (p. 157)

Curb (and, no doubt, any other satire), given its tone and motifs, fits into Berger’s notion of satire because it draws its humour from challenges to institutions and society’s mores. Recall, it is because Larry ignores the customs of gratitude and gratuities in his interaction with Mocha Joe that his rekindled relationship with Cheryl begins to falter. Larry, who screams at Mocha Joe (and Jerry, who is supporting Joe in the argument), is undoubtedly satirizing and circumventing the frustrating prevailing social codes (Pierson, 2000). Continuing, Berger ends his definition of satire in what appears to be a socionegative construction, claiming, “Its emotional tone is typically malicious, even if the motive for attack is this or that high principle” (p. 157). So, for those looking for some hope in using socionegative humour as sustained critique, even if it is malicious in attitude, Berger’s position seems tenable. If there is a point to be made about the frustrating social constraints to which we are subjected, like Larry’s protest against arbitrary rules of what constitutes a favour, this sort of satire seems particularly apt. In fact, using socionegative humour to make incisive points about society is an ideal to strive for, and in principle, sounds tenable. This is, however, only until Berger concludes his thoughts on satire. He says, “Satire too is, so to speak, epistemologically neutral. Its rhetorical power does not necessarily mean that its portrayal of reality is accurate. Satire, like wit, can distort reality, it can even lie” (1997, p. 172). Expanding his argument,

Berger suggests that humour in its darkest form does not have any basis for critique because its content is fundamentally neutral, it is without the capacity to seriously critique that which it looks at because it is “epistemologically neutral.” Perhaps more accurately, it is not that dark humour cannot critique social institutions or have a socionegative basis, it is just that we can never be sure of this intention. This, we are led by Berger to believe, means that socionegative interpretations of humour are less important and less recognized than the feelings they produce, such as laughter and psychological contentment. Interestingly, what we can read between the lines is this: it is the feeling of a happy ending, not the ‘neutral’ and ambiguous nature of its content, which seem to give humour its character, and this seems to make sociopositive happy endings a foregone conclusion.

Together, there are two key thoughts from Berger that help explain the reception of dark humour in its socionegative conception to be popularly understood as inconsequential. There is the form of humour, which he claims is ontologically unstable, and the content of dark humour, which to his mind is epistemologically untrustworthy. The only thing left for dark humour, therefore, are feelings and the positive emotions that it creates. Thus, we have the conditions to facilitate the ‘happy ending’ of humour and bury the socionegative interpretations with it. If we understand laughter, the byproduct of successful humour, as the only thing stable in humour (even if the two are not equivalent), we can see how the positive benefits associated with laughter work to reinforce this idea that humour leads to a happy ending.

The consequence of the preceding line of thought about humour is that socially critical positions wilt in comparison to the more therapeutic, feel-good ones, and this is certainly troubling. Nonetheless, this train of thought could be expected because it resonates with the earlier discussion of ideological positivism, which posits that therapeutic ends are placed above critical ends and that fixing surface issues has more emphasis than exploring their underlying causes. This position aligns with the thoughts of Marcuse (1955) about social theory removing the critical content from analysis in favour of feel-good interpretations. In the following passage, we can see a clear

connection between ‘happy endings’ in humour and the trend of sociopositive sociology in the 1950’s that Marcuse saw,⁴¹ to which he claimed,

The ‘claim for happiness,’ if truly affirmed, aggravates the conflict with a society which allows only controlled happiness, and the exposure of the moral taboos extends this conflict to an attack on the vital protective layers of society. [...] [Social ideals] are redefined so that they become compatible with the prevailing values, that is to say they are internalized and idealized. (p. 223)

In this sense, Marcuse claims that social theory runs the risk of placing too much of a positive spin on concepts like humour for the sake of therapy while ignoring the world around us in a critical sense. Evidently, for Marcuse it is increasingly the case that given a choice, “the less pleasant faces” of insight, to borrow a phrase from Billig (2005), “tend to be pushed aside” (p. 10). In the context of dark humour and happy endings, we can no doubt see Berger continuing on this note of therapy over criticism found in happy endings, and furthermore, see a repetition of the common, sociopositive notion of humour in sociology.⁴²

4.3.3.1 Rethinking the Happy Ending

In “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), Larry and Jerry, while at Jason’s book launch party, indirectly comment on a type of rhetorical move typical in humour. As earlier detailed, both Larry and Jerry find humour in the insincerity of the phrase “having said that,” and how it is used to slip in backhanded slander while framing it in a nicer way,

Jerry: You know what else is kinda annoying? Have you noticed people are saying ‘having said that’ after everything they say now? Having said that, let me say this.

Larry: Yes. Right, right. You say what you really wanna say, and then you... negate it.

Jerry: So ‘having said that’... so what is that? You win either way!

Larry: So a comedian goes up on stage and says ‘you people are a bunch of morons. Having said that, I’m very happy to be here!’ (David, 2009c)

⁴¹ Although Marcuse never mentions the sitcom or humour, perhaps it should come as no surprise that his criticism and the advent of the TV sitcom chronologically coincide.

⁴² It must be admitted, Berger is heavily relied upon for this type of analysis on humour and the happy ending. However, this is for good reason, as he himself comments that the topics he touches on are woefully understudied (cf., Berger 1997, p. xii & p. 175), and is generally just repeated as common sense knowledge.

As Jerry notes, “you win either way.” In this spirit, there are a few points worth reiterating on the analogous nature of this conversation and of what I suggest is occurring in humour studies today. Firstly, there is a difference between content and reception. The content of a joke, for instance, can have sociopositive and socionegative elements that can be interpreted and these types of statements are not, so to speak, neutral simply because they have the appearance of balance. Secondly, content is different than reception. There is a certain affinity with the oeuvre of Freud, particularly his notions of tendentious humour and the protective deflection provided by joke-work. By profiling these concepts, we emphasize how humour can “evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible” (Freud, 1960, p. 147) within society, and further recognize that there is a mechanism at work to save them, in some regard, with sociopositive interpretations. The point to be made is that in the case of humour, the medium is not the message, a joke is not ‘just a joke.’

The crux of Thompson’s (1988) re/interpretative model of analysis is to offer alternatives to cyclical stories that get told about a given discourse, so re/interpretation “projects a possible meaning, puts forward an account which is risky and open to dispute” (p. 369). Pursuing this goal, one could wonder how the happy ending could be re/interpreted in the context of dark humour. What is not feasible, I think, is to easily or credibly dispute that humour produces positive emotions (in these sense that it “feels good” to laugh). However, what ought to be reconsidered is the way content is introduced in dark humour, and in doing so, begin to stress emphasizing content over feeling. In the last scene of “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), it seems that not *everything* is happy at the end of season. While Larry did achieve his overall goal to reconcile with Cheryl, we see a look of concern wash across her face when he immediately starts to pester her, trying to get her to admit she was the one who left the ring stain on Julia’s table. What I think is valuable to draw from Berger (1997) and Bergson (1911) is that the basis of all humour is incongruity in what we expect and what occurs. What I dispute, however, is that this incongruity is coupled with an inability to properly make sense of the situation; or more precisely, that the sea of polysemy creates a neutral understanding of the humour involved, i.e., this incongruity is ‘just a joke.’

What I suggest as an alternative to dark humour's neutrality (and thus, the relatively inconsequential nature of socionegative humour) is not all that radical. It is found in the adage made popular by Homer (of *The Simpsons*, not Greek, variety), "It's funny because it's true" (Pepoon, 1991). Or, at least, we can say dark humour often has elements of 'truth' found in it.⁴³ What should always be kept in mind is that *humour is neither* inherently sociopositive nor socionegative. Partly this is because of the anthropological appreciation many people have made that meanings vary between different times and places, "[we] came to the scarcely startling conclusion that humorous meaning (among others) is localized" (Palmer, 1994, p. 178). Yet even more vital is the appreciation that because humour is based on incongruity, meaning has to be actively made by those interpreting it, and this can range between sociopositive and socionegative poles. The important consideration is how these elements of 'truth' are portrayed (or more often than not, downplayed) when they are examined in socionegative terms.

At present, there exists an abundance of humour that appears to be viewed as socionegative,⁴⁴ but given the distance of academic inquiry and the filter of social good graces, it is atoned and is put to sociopositive ends (e.g., Conoley et al. 2007; Du Pré, 1998, LaRoche, 1998). Why do socionegative topics become veiled in humour, so we can shrewdly believe them positive, uplifting, and inconsequential, when they indeed could be potentially accurate? One potential answer to this question leads us to think about the logic of deception by means of the truth; or, as the old joke about two travellers meeting on the street goes: "One character shouts breathlessly, 'Yes, why do you lie to me saying you're going to Cracow so I should believe you're going to Lemberg, when in reality you *are* going to Cracow?'" (Žižek, 1992, p. 73). So, it is possible that we have a moment of what Slavoj Žižek explains as the cultural logic of the "non-duped err," whereby socionegative humour is protected by its very exposure. He says: "The final deception is the social appearance is deceitful: in social-symbolic reality things are ultimately what they pretend to be" (Žižek, 1992, p. 74). When jokes "pretend" to be

⁴³ In very simple terms, I use truth here in the weak sense that it has some resonance and relevance to explaining the world around us but is not wholly determining. This should not be confused with a more positivist notion of truth whereby there is one definitive "Truth" out there to be uncovered; i.e., humour is not constrained by only one possible interpretation.

⁴⁴ When I say "appears" socionegative, it "appears to be so" in the sense that the basis of the humour deals with taboo, dark humour topics, and on the surface appears to be fairly divisive.

socionegative for the sake of humour (but are nonetheless, given a sociopositive spin), we often miss the point staring directly back at us: humour masks the fact that the happy ending is not the only thing that we should be looking for and the dark basis in much of humour is socionegative, just as it ‘pretends’ to be.

Where does this leave about the examination of the ‘happy ending’ and dark humour? Certainly not claiming that they do not, or cannot, ever co-exist. The salient points are that happy endings are an overused characterization of humour that has its roots emphasizing therapeutic attitudes over critical ones. Further, even though something feels good – as though it seems to have a happy ending – this does not create a monopoly over the types of critical insights that can be made. In this respect, the vital nature of appreciating dark humour in sociological terms is not what emotional effect it might have, even if it is a ‘happy ending.’ Rather, when we are struck unexpectedly by the incongruity of humour, we must interpret why it struck us as such and use this moment of incongruity to establish what rifts in society allowed for our surprise. This can, and often must be, a moment of contemplation, not an ending point, even if this means seeing humour in a socionegative light.

5: SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: WHAT'S MISSING IN HUMOUR THEORY?

In the title of this section a question is asked: what's missing in humour theory? This question is answerable, I think, in two ways, and I will address the question by way of offering a few concluding thoughts on this entire thesis. To begin, the first way to approach this question is in terms of the scope of humour theory. From the outset, the focus of this thesis was to consider the ways dark humour could be understood as a sociological concept. Further, the conceit of this study has been that a variety of dark humour, socionegative humour, is underrepresented in academic thought and could benefit from sustained inquiry because it offers a side of humour that is rarely examined. What is curious, at least in the Sherlock Holmesian sense of the word, is that although the potential to make progress in dark humour theory analysis is abundant, it is nonetheless frequently overlooked.

Offering an analogy to the way we often view humour, particularly of the dark socionegative variety, one recalls the character of Holmes investigating a murder of in "Silver Blaze." Holmes wonders about the curious circumstances of the murder while being questioned by a Scotland Yard detective:

'Is there any point to which you would wish to draw my attention?' 'To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time.'

'The dog did nothing in the night-time.'

'That was the curious incident,' remarked Sherlock Holmes.
(Doyle 2005, p. 334)

At the end of watching and considering the case studies of *Curb*, and examining a variety of interpretative positions on the ways in which dark humour operates in each, one might conclude that the concept of socionegative humour used in sociology is like the dog in the night-time. It can be puzzling as to why we are not exploring the significance of the

‘dog’ – *dark socionegative humour* – and why it is seemingly doing ‘nothing’ towards gaining critical insights into humour.

Yet this lack of consideration into dark socionegative humour is not merely a consequence of having nothing to work with. In light of considering the three episodes of *Curb*, opportunities abound, in empirical sites but also in the theoretical viability. These opportunities suggest it is possible to use dark humour in a way that makes the more sinister sides of socionegative humour a place to carefully examine and produce informed, apposite critiques about the world around us – as should be the task of all social scientists regardless of their empirical site or focus. Recalling some of the issues found in *Curb*’s episodes that fit this criteria is easy: “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009) tests the limits of humour and its capacity to criticize volatile issues like religion and sexism; “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b) has moments that make us wonder and reconsider how the communicative aspects of humour and laughter obscure the basis of its comedy; “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c) begs us to ask if we are correct in seeing the world in a positive light when we laugh. Thematically, I conceptualized these areas as transgression, relief through humour, and negotiated denouements. So, in the first sense, what is missing in our understandings of humour as a sociological concept is not the theoretical tools or empirical sites *per se*, but rather the inclination to look at humour outside the dominant contemporary paradigm, sociopositivity.

So in another sense, there is nothing conspicuously missing from the sociological perspective on humour. From various theoretical perspectives, the tools required to do serious analytical work with dark humour in a sociological context already exist. The history of humour studies is rife with examples of thinkers who have recognized the variability of interpretation when it comes to humour. Hobbes (1999) was prone to call humour ‘satanic,’ his fervent way of suggesting that humour can bring out the worst in people, making a person feel superior over others. Freud (1960) thought that the joke-work of humour circumvented the boundaries society imposed. Or perhaps Bergson (1911) was most compelling when he argued that humour is fundamentally characterized by incongruity and in this incongruity, the shortcomings of the society that produced them are exposed,

[Laughter] indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life. It instantly adopts the changing forms of the disturbance. It, also, is afroth [sic] with a saline base. Like froth, it sparkles. It is gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty, and the after-taste bitter. (p. 63)

Although perhaps slightly bitter, socionegative humour does not warrant avoidance. Further, the perspectives of earlier authors on humour are not so prescriptive or antiquated that they are immutable to the considerations and contexts of present day considerations. While socionegative inclined researchers are scarce in comparison to other academics, there exists a small subsection of researchers who are adapting perspectives on socionegative humour to today's contexts and sensibilities. As noted, academics like Billig (2001; 2005) look at the ways socionegative humour fosters instances of norm acquisition in humorous ridicule from a social-psychology perspective; Lockyer and Pickering (2001; 2008) continue to consider the ethical limits and boundaries that socionegative humour faces in sociological discourse, and even media theorists like Thompson (2007) and Mills (2005) are starting to recognize the polysemy humour must have in their own fields of inquiry.

Yet despite being able to reference excellent pieces of work regarding dark, socionegative humour, it is important not to overstate how far these studies go. In some ways, the fact that such specific instances of humour research can be isolated and identified is akin to having the exception prove the rule; that is, so few examples that appreciate a more nuanced understanding of humour exist in comparison to the total body of work available such that suspicions should be raised about this lack of appreciation for socionegative humour. To various degrees, one thing that all studies looking at humour wrestle with is the general perception of what and how humour *ought* to operate – as if humour has an implicit moral code that it consciously follows – instead of exploring how humour *does* work on a sociological stage. In this capacity, scholars who want to look at humorous empirical sites in a socionegative light – as opposed to humour *qua* humour – often have all of the legwork ahead of them. These researchers have to do significant work to clarify what humour means in a sociological context (against the common sense notions of humour, mind you) and then proceed with their actual research question(s). This goes beyond the standard practice of defining one's terms, as it involves

reconceptualizing one of the most engrained and celebrated concepts in society today, the ‘sense of humour.’ The steps to counteracting this problem are not straightforward, nor will they be accomplished with one study or piece of work. However, consistent effort that continually redresses the underdeveloped notion of socionegative humour can help, perhaps, to turn the tide, and it is in this vein that this thesis has made progress.

Importantly, looking at the ways sociopositive humour has become so prevalent in humour studies will do double duty, it will also make it glaringly obvious that its opposite is being overly ignored. While the overarching study of dark humour is certainly not complete, each foray into dark, socionegative humour research ought to challenge the common sense notions of a sunny picture of humour. As such, I think there is a sort of poetic sentiment in looking at humour using *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, because just as the title refers to Larry and his myopic personality, it is equally applicable for the ways we discuss humour. When it comes to looking at all the sunny, fun, positive aspects of humour, it is important that we too ‘curb our enthusiasm’ and look at humour from all angles.

In conclusion, the process of redressing the notion of humour in sociology is limited by our ability to critically and insightfully examine various sites, engage in critical thought and analysis and add commentary to the literature. In such a way, we need to develop a more diverse ‘language’ of humour that includes a multitude of perspectives on what sociological features humour might hold. So, we will finish with a joke often told by Žižek, who comments often about how social scientists have all the tools and knowledge necessary to make insights, except often the critical language. Considering this old joke from the extinct German Democratic Republic, what we now need to develop for socionegative humour is its language so it too can function in more explicit ways, as the ‘red ink,’

[A] German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by censors, he tells his friends: ‘Let’s establish a code: if the letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink, it’s true; if it’s written in red ink, it’s false.’ After a month, his friends get a letter, written in blue ink: ‘Everything is wonderful here: the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are large and properly heated, cinemas show films from the west, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair – the only thing is you can’t get red ink.’ (2002, p. 1)

APPENDICES

Appendix A: The Bare Midriff (Originally aired October 24, 2009)

This episode, “The Bare Midriff” (David, 2009a), opens with a cut scene to the office of Jerry and Larry, where together they are working on the *Seinfeld* reunion show. “Geeze,” wonders Jerry aloud, “what are you doing in there?” as we hear what approximates a garden hose spraying in the adjacent washroom, “What have you got, Seabiscuit in there?” Larry chuckles as he comes out of the washroom, explaining that since he began taking some new pills (the specifics of which are left to the imagination) he has been urinating in a way that “isn’t human” and with such force that Larry comments with tongue in cheek, “you have to be careful of the back splash.” After the brief laughter subsides, the two continue to get on with their work for the reunion show, until they are interrupted by their mutual secretary, Maureen, who reminds them that they have a lunch appointment, as well as fixing the offices’ broken ceiling fan. However, Jerry and Larry are both slightly perturbed by Maureen despite the fact that she does her job quite well, all things considered. In particular, they are both bothered by her attire, or perhaps more appropriately, the lack thereof. Larry and Jerry lament that even though neither of them can stomach Maureen's habitually bare midriff, neither of them feel comfortable addressing the issue directly with her because a mutual friend and colleague, Julia, recommended her. Nevertheless, after some brief bickering and a school-yard variety of “odds and evens,”⁴⁵ Larry is delegated the task of bringing up the sensitive attire issue with Maureen, and despite his reluctance to bring up such a personal issue, the boiling point of “good taste” has been reached.

And so, Larry resignedly confronts Maureen about the short shirts she wears in the office, which Maureen takes as exceptionally offensive, and further contends that this is an overt show of sexism in the workplace and an attack against her larger body image, which she herself is comfortable with. Maureen angrily retorts, “Okay, so you want me

⁴⁵ For those unfamiliar, “odds and evens” resembles the game rock-paper-scissors.

to wear, like, a burka?" The passionate disagreement continues, Maureen becoming increasingly upset as Larry tries to gently negotiate the delicate situation. Yet just as it seems Larry is sliding down a dangerous path, flailing and failing to defend himself against the charge of sexism, he is given a reprieve as Maureen reaches her breaking point and quits, storming out of the office. Although this was not Larry's intention, the scene ends with an upbeat Larry prancing out of the office, pleased that the issue is resolved, even if it has been done in haphazard fashion.

Unfortunately, Larry's midriff victory, as one might expect, is short lived. Consistent with the perspective of dark/sociopositive humour, even though Larry's humour so far had tarried with the taboo subject of sexism (at least taboo in the sense that it is heavily frowned upon to be characterized as sexist, and certainly dark natured to try to make a joke out of being sexist), the dark elements become supplemented by a redemptive quality after effect. Julia, the actor who plays Elaine on *Seinfeld* and procured the job for Maureen, berates Larry for even suggesting something so sexist, "You can't go up to a woman and tell her that shirt is inappropriate or distracting to you or whatever the hell you said. It's sexist!" After much moralizing and pontificating on the part of Julia, Larry, much to his chagrin, travels back to Maureen's house and apologizes. After what is a terse, forced apology, Larry convinces Maureen to return to work, in his mind worse off than when he began because he has resigned himself to allowing Maureen's disquieting attire.

Homeostasis is momentarily returned to the episode, and having "learned his lesson," Larry excuses himself to use the washroom. However, the delicate balance of comfort is short lived. Reminiscent of the first scene, we see Larry grimace as a stream of poorly controlled urine hits the toilette bowl, a side effect of the pills Larry has recently been taking. Unable to effectively contain the spray, splashes of urine splash up into the air, with one splashing up on a painting beside the toilette. Upon closer inspection, the picture is a portrait of Jesus, and a drop of urine has hit the painting right underneath his eye, resembling a teardrop. Unsure of what to do, Larry looks panicked, and not wanting to further deal with the issue, he resorts to hurriedly rushing out of the house, past Maureen and her mother, and on with the rest of the day. Predictably, Maureen and her mother find the painting, and ignoring Occam's razor, declare this an

obvious sign of a divine miracle. Convinced this is a calling to serve God, the next day Maureen quits her job with the intention to go on tour cross-country on a tour bus with the painting and spread the word of Christ. Utterly pleased, Larry and Jerry facetiously let Maureen resign and even agree to co-sign a loan for the bus to get her out of the office, then chuckle about the true origins of the tear after she leaves the room.

With only one hurdle to get Maureen out his life, Larry meets up with Maureen and her mother at the office, only to find that he has locked himself out of the office and desperately needs to urinate again. Sneaking behind some bushes, Larry tries to go before the other two arrive, but he is too late. Hearing the splashing in the bushes and then investigating, Maureen is horrified when she comes to the correct conclusion that there was no tear on the painting, only urine. Scandalized, Maureen's mother rushes to the roof, presumably to jump to her death. Larry rushes to pull her from the edge, but in the process, slips and begins to fall of the roof himself. Falling, he is left to grab whatever he can to save himself, taking full hold of Maureen's bare midriff. The scene and episode ends with Larry hanging from Maureen's belly fat over the two-story office building. The episode ends with Larry, in an ironic sense, hoisted by is own petard, hanging off the side of the building.

Appendix B: “The Black Swan” (Original aired November 1, 2009)

Death remains one of the stalwart dark humour motifs. Even to reference one of dark humour’s alternative aliases, gallows humour, is to recognize the deep embeddedness that death has in the hierarchy of dark humour. Without prematurely diving too deep into analysis, it suffices to say that at the heart of death based humour is a dialectic; how do individuals negotiate the tricky terrain and social conventions of death using the tools given by the ostensibly pleasant face of humour?

This dialectic is the spirit in which the seventh episode of the seventh season of *Curb*, “The Black Swan” (David, 2009b), proceeds. The episode begins with Larry, Larry’s father Nat, and Larry’s cousin Andy, visiting the grave of Larry’s deceased mother. Larry is dismayed to find that because his father is so cheap, he has spelled “passed” as “past” on her gravestone to save the money the extra two letters would cost. Gently admonishing Nat, Larry and Andy claim that this no way to properly commemorate a loved mother – or any deceased person, for that matter – and Larry vows to fix the headstone to adequately honor his mother.⁴⁶ Quickly becoming disinterested, however, the three move along to get on with their day.

The episode then cuts to the golf club, where Nat has left the two and has been replaced by Larry’s childhood friend, Marty Funkhouser, and Larry’s manager, Jeff Green. The four sit and laugh about the audacity of Nat’s attempt to save money on the tombstone, as well as discussing their mutual desire to get out on the course before Norm, a fellow golf club member and a notoriously slow golfer. Yet despite their best efforts, Andy acts as a foil and orders an inordinately slow breakfast and the foursome ends up behind Norm’s group, much to Larry’s dismay. As he so often does, Larry continues by trying to right a small social transgression as if it were an especially egregious one, only to have the outcome completely backfire on him. Larry, tired of waiting for Norm, decides to yell at Norm to move more quickly. Larry, in many ways is being annoyed in

⁴⁶ Earlier in *Curb*’s season three’s episode “The Special Section,” Nat fails to phone Larry to inform him that his mother has passed away because he did not want to disrupt his acting gig in New York. Subsequently, Larry misses the funeral and comes back to a coy Nat, who does not want to reveal the truth of his wife’s death. In the progression of the series, there remains an underlying tension about the death, a festering sore that comes up in various plot lines and narratives, “The Black Swan” included.

a way that most people can be sympathetic towards. Who likes, for example, to wait at the end of a coffee line, for instance, while the person at the front “hums and haws,” evidently ignoring the above-head menu until they arrive at the front? Nonetheless, in a situation of modest annoyance most would bite their tongue; however, Larry seems foreign to the notions of gentle diplomacy. And so, Larry screams obscenities at Norm to play more quickly until he clearly reaches his breaking point, and storms off in his cart to the next hole.

Later, back in the clubhouse, Larry is confronted by one of Norm’s friends. Norm, who suffered from high blood pressure (previously unbeknownst to Larry), suffered a heart attack on the course and died immediately following his confrontation with Larry. Apparently the screaming match provided more excitement than his heart could take. Suddenly, Larry, who merely wanted Norm to abide by the rules of the golf course, is being blamed for Norm’s death. So quips Larry’s friend and playing partner, Marty Funkhouser, “Look, it may have been an accident, but you’re a murderer” (David, 2009b).

Any remorse Larry might of have had, however, appears short lived as we find that he is back at the course the next day, in the same foursome no less, playing another round. It is with certain smugness and hubris that the group comment what a beautiful day for golf it is. However, they also note that this was likely a consequence of no other club members wanting to play out of respect for the recently deceased Norm. As expected, the “common courtesy” of most escapes Larry, and he has convinced the others to play eighteen holes with him. In a reassuring bit of kismet, Larry shanks his next golf shot right next to the pond. Off the fairway, Larry is about to take his next shot when over a hill comes down towards him a black swan. Set to Edvard Grieg’s frantic piece, “In the Hall of the Mountain King,” the swan charges at Larry, and unsure of what to do, he takes his club and wildly swings it in front of himself as protection, ultimately killing the bird. Soon joined by the rest of the group, who wanted to see what the commotion was all about, they conclude that this swan was actually the owner’s favorite pet – so revered that it adorns the club’s crest. After much dissent and debate (which included, among other things, whether or not to tell the wives) the four decide that it would be best

to try to keep the killing a secret from everyone else, and bury the bird somewhere inconspicuous off the side of the course.

Yet as one might imagine, the stresses that come with the swan killing, and subsequent cover-up, do not immediately subside and there is considerable anxiety as the four sit during their post-round lunch. As if on cue (and due, no doubt, to a shoddy job cleaning up the aftermath), course staff finds the swan and the men are brought in for an intense round of questioning by the club owner. However, since there is a lack of any significant or hard evidence link Larry to the death, the four are released without further reprimand. The four, however, come out the meeting understandably shaken and wanting to make amends, so they decide to attend the club's memorial ceremony for Norm and smooth over the appearance of being disruptive, undesirable members. As expected, the club is a buzz with the news of two deaths in as many days, Norm and then the swan. Noticing an opportunity to shift the blame, Larry makes a devious plan to try and convince others that the two deaths are not unrelated, hypothesizing (despite knowing better from personal experience) that the swan startled Norm on the course, thus causing the heart attack, and whomever killed the swan was therefore really a hero. Although not wholly convincing perhaps to the TV audience, by reading of the faces those at the memorial it appears that Larry has at least done enough to cast the seeds of doubt necessary to get him off the hook in the eyes of many at the club.

So, again there is a moment of restored equilibrium to the episode; it seems as though Larry is going to escape the escapades of the previous few days relatively unscathed, at least in the sense that he will not be saddled with the brunt of responsibility for either of the two deaths. Given two choices, it would seem that most of the members of the club would prefer to attribute Norm's death to the lesser of two evils (at least in terms of human malice), a deadly swan attack. Even the decidedly suspicious club owner has come around, apologizing to Larry for blaming him for any wrongdoing. Together the two walk in the direction of the newly fashioned tombstone of Larry's mother. As they arrive, they see a stonemason walking away, wearing a ridiculous hat presumably made by Andy's wife, with whom Larry had been recently arguing over an unrelated incident (unsurprisingly). Taking a step back, the audience pieces a few things together: first, Andy broke the pact and told his wife; second, the wife, in an act of revenge told the

stonemason while selling him a hat; and third, that Adele David was, to quote the gravestone, “Mother of Larry, an asshole and swan killer.”

Appendix C: “Seinfeld” (Originally aired November 22, 2009)

In a variety of ways, the “Seinfeld” (David, 2009c), episode of the seventh season of *Curb* is the culminating and crucial episode of the season. Of course, there are transparent ways in which the episode embodies this sentiment; obviously, it is the season finale. As such, the final episode takes secondary story lines, which have been building as secondary plots throughout the season, and makes them explicitly the focus, the primary story line for the extended episode. The audience, in many ways, enjoys the episode in two ways, both as a stand alone episode that has its own nuances and humour, as well as the conclusion to the larger narrative, taking pleasure from seeing the full body of work in its finished entirety (assuming, of course, the audience has followed the whole season thus far).

The episode begins with a change in perspective from the typical filming of *Curb*, as the viewer is transported into a *Seinfeld* scene, where Jason, playing George, is in the legendary Monk’s coffee shop with Cheryl, playing George’s ex-wife, during rehearsal for the reunion show. Larry, in full swing and in his element as writer/director, is pleased with progress of the show, noting with others like Jerry that there is real chemistry occurring between the actors, notably Jason and Cheryl, and the episode is shaping up to be exceptionally funny. Even so, Larry is more chuffed with his progress reconnecting with Cheryl, who is seeing Larry in a whole new light because of his on set prowess, which, contrary to his everyday persona, is confident, caring, and competent. He becomes further excited when Cheryl, unsure of herself and feeling self-aware with her role as relative nobody amongst the iconic cast of *Seinfeld*, invites Larry to help her later with lines at her house, a sign Larry takes as intimacy. Larry is ecstatic with what he hopes is the second reunion of sorts.

Reminiscent of a Wilde-esque comedy of manners, the plot becomes riddled with initially seeming unconnected social glitches that end up becoming integral parts into the larger plot. Importantly, Larry enquires offhandedly to Cheryl about Jason’s tinted windows, which Cheryl seems to know a lot about. The conversation is interrupted by “Mocha” Joe, the studio lot’s coffee guy, who Cheryl lavishes with praise for his fantastic vanilla decaf latte, her favorite. But what began as pleasant soon starts to sour slightly

when Larry asks Joe to do him a “favor” and bring some jumper cables to the studio, where Joe was headed anyway on a coffee run, without offering a tip, something Joe has become accustomed to as a barista. Nonetheless, Larry overlooks this slight hiccup with Mocha Joe, getting increasingly excited about a potential reconciliation with Cheryl, (who has invited him study lines together, just the two of them). This excitement over a possible reconciliation continues to be the topic of discussion as Larry attends a book launch for Jason’s fictional book, *Acting Without Acting*, which Larry feels now obligated to go to because they are working on the *Seinfeld* reunion together. Making small talk with Jerry, the two mock the book’s title, (as Jerry remarks, “everything is without. Raise your kids without raising ‘em!”), and continue to moan about other niggling social riddles, in particular the saying “having said that.” Bemoans Larry, “you say what you want to say, and then you negate it [...] So a comedian goes up on stage and says ‘you people are a bunch of morons. Having said that, I’m very happy to be here!’”

On this cue, the episode takes the comedic and narrative divergence that is expected. What has been so far set up as a string of successes for Larry begins to unravel. Firstly, Jerry, at the end of their conversation, softly admonishes Larry for not tipping Mocha Joe, who has complained about how cheap Larry is. Maintaining that the exchange was a favor, which implies no exchange or money, rather than a job, Larry nonetheless becomes slightly rattled, it gets worse when he is blamed for a coffee ring stain on an antique piece of wood furniture owned by Julia, who is hosting the party. Of course, denying the claim, Larry tries to defend himself, albeit unconvincingly. Says Julia, “You say you would never put a wet glass down on an antique wooden table. I believe that. Having said that, I don’t really think I’m buying your line of bullshit.” Thinking that Mocha Joe (who, conveniently, is providing refreshments to the partygoers) “tipped off” Julia about the coffee ring. Larry tries to make amends with the barista, but his attempt simply degrades into a debate about what constitutes the limit of a favour. To appease the situation (but still much to his chagrin), Larry begrudgingly agrees to return the favour by picking up a shipment of coffee beans. And as the old adage goes, when it rains, it pours; Larry takes a misadventure to get some coffee beans for Mocha Joe through heavy Los Angeles, thereby missing his date with Cheryl. To make matters worse, when Larry arrives at the coffee vendor, it is too late and the shop is

closed. Meanwhile, Cheryl decides not to wait for Larry and calls Jason to fill in for Larry's absence, which fills Larry with envy and ill-temper. So, Mocha Joe and Jerry chastise Larry for not providing the promised beans (which would have fulfilled Larry's unfinished favour and Larry is still being pestered by Julia to pay a bill for her damaged coffee table, whose mystery Larry has still not solved. The stresses allow the neurotic Larry to come out, as he begins to fear that Jason and Cheryl are starting a relationship, noticing that Cheryl has now got her windows tinted (with a recommendation from Jason's "tint guy"). Additionally, Larry becomes something of a detective, asking everyone he meets that has coffee stains, "do you respect wood?" and snooping through Jason's car for evidence of a relationship, inadvertently letting Jason's large dogs out of the car who promptly run across the lot and attack Mocha Joe. Having to bribe Mocha Joe not to have the dogs put down (thus avoiding sending Jason spiraling into a pit of despair), despite hating Jason at the time, proves to be too much for Larry, and after a brief foray at trying to replace Jason as George, Larry quits the show.

So moving into the last few minutes of the season, it seems like the whole narrative arc of the season has come crashing down around Larry. Larry sits alone on his couch, about to watch the finished *Seinfeld* reunion, completed without him. Yet when it comes to the part where Cheryl should have come on the screen – another actress has replaced her. Still confused, Larry gets up to answer the doorbell in the background. Opening the door, he finds Cheryl, who has realized that despite his flaws, after seeing him go so neurotic over her, she still loves him and wants to be back in his life after all. With the closing credits about to roll, and Larry in the best shape of the season, something catches his eye: a dripping coffee cup, staining his wood table. Taking the low road, Larry ends the season pestering his newly reconciled wife to take responsibility for the stained table at Julia's. The final shot fades out with Cheryl, consternation written across her face, and Larry putting his newly reconciled relationship in jeopardy only seconds in, trying to get Cheryl to wash away the blame.

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