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David Foster Wallace, comedian: towards an aesthetics of funniness

Abstract

In his much-cited 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, David Foster Wallace suggested that one of his central weaknesses as a writer was a ‘grossly sentimental affection for gags, for stuff that’s nothing but funny, and which I sometimes stick in for no other reason than funniness’. Funniness is one of the essential components of Wallace’s oeuvre. Each of his texts – from the high pastiche of *The Broom of the System* and *Girl With Curious Hair* to the ironic synthesis of technical jargon and gallows humour found in *Oblivion* and *The Pale King* – employ a range of comedic styles and categories. More simply put, each of Wallace’s texts is very funny, and it is impossible to imagine any of them without his signature funniness.

However, scholarly assessments of Wallace’s comedy typically use it to establish the moral or aesthetic seriousness of his work. It is my contention that Wallace’s literary project cannot be properly understood without a closer reading of his use of comedy. As Zadie Smith once put it, Wallace is both as ‘serious as it is possible to be...and a comedian’. This paper analyses the comedic gestures – towards English comic novels, slapstick, stand-up comedy and anti-comedy – offered by Wallace’s texts. This paper performs a close reading of the ‘videophony’ sequence from *Infinite Jest* (2006: 144–151), which presents something of an index of his comic technique, aiming to replace the trope that Wallace is funny with a coherent analytic description of the ways in which he is funny.

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There is no quicker way to empty a joke of its peculiar magic than to try to explain it.
—David Foster Wallace, ‘Some Remarks on Kafka’s Funniness, from Which
Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed’

Introduction

In his essay on the subject of Franz Kafka and humour, delivered first as a speech and later collected in *Consider the Lobster*, David Foster Wallace makes a brief but characteristically dense assessment of the ‘grotesque, gorgeous, and thoroughly modern’ comedy of Kafka’s fiction (2005a: 64). He posits that Kafka’s stories are funny, but that ‘the particular kind of funniness Kafka deploys is deeply alien [...] depend[ing] on some kind of radical literalisation of truths we tend to treat as metaphorical’ (2005a: 63). Wallace establishes this alienness in contrast to what he calls ‘the forms and codes of contemporary U.S. amusement’ (2005a: 62–63), eloquently sketching, in the process, a partial history of American comedy:

There’s no recursive wordplay or verbal stunt-piloting, little in the way of wisecracks or mordant lampoon. There is no body-function humour in Kafka, nor sexual entendre, nor stylised attempts to rebel by offending convention. No Pynchonian slapstick with banana peels or rogue adenoids. No Rothish priapism or Barthish metaparody or Woody Allen-type kvetching. There are none of the ba-bing ba-bang reversals of modern sitcoms; nor are there precocious children or profane grandparents or cynically insurgent coworkers (Wallace 2005a: 62–63).

Even readers only barely familiar with Wallace will recognise the degree to which that taxonomy describes his own work. He is nothing if not a verbal stunt-pilot – a phrase derived from a 1999 interview with Patrick Arden used to describe *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Arden 2012: 98). There are, too, abundant examples of recursive wordplay throughout his oeuvre, from *Infinite Jest*’s Organization of North American Nations (‘O.N.A.N.’) to the emphatic pun of the short story *Adult World*. Likewise, there is plenty of body-function humour in Wallace: for this one only has to look to *Jest*’s early scenes set in the Enfield Tennis Academy changing rooms, replete with fart jokes and analeptic descriptions of a sixteenth-century Martin Luther sitting on the ‘chamber pot [...] awaiting epiphany’ (Wallace 2006: 106). For proof of Wallace’s penchant for sexual entendre – and, indeed, his ironic rereading of that Rothish priapism – we need only to look as far as *Broom*’s impotent male protagonist, Rick Vigorous. Slapstick, too, regularly features, as in, for example, *Jest*’s wheelchair-bound Québécois assassins. But it also figures in his nonfiction: reporting for *Harper’s* from the Illinois State Fair, Wallace is memorably mistaken for ‘some sort of food writer or recipe scout’ from *Harper’s Bazaar* (Wallace 1997a: 87), and plied with desserts to the point of ‘distension and possible rupture of transverse colon’ (Wallace 1997a: 111). Meanwhile, the connections to ‘Barthish metaparody’ couldn’t be clearer, particularly in the early short fiction of *Girl with Curious Hair*, which Wallace famously suggested was ‘written in the margins’ of John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*. This is by no means an exhaustive catalogue, but it does indicate the central place of comedy in Wallace’s corpus. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to this aspect of his work.

1. Information as comedy: detail, digression, distraction

Early in *Infinite Jest*, Wallace breaks down, in minute detail, the rapid consumer uptake of the InterLace TelePuter. This sequence, like many found towards the beginning of the novel, is an interpolation, used to build and contextualise the world of the story. Wallace starts by establishing the scene with a question that can only be rhetorical:

WHY—THOUGH IN THE EARLY DAYS OF INTERLACE’S INTERNETTED TELEPUTERS THAT OPERATED OFF LARGELY THE SAME FIBER-DIGITAL GRID AS THE PHONE COMPANIES, THE ADVENT OF VIDEO TELEPHONING (A.K.A. ‘VIDEOPHONY’) ENJOYED AN INTERVAL OF HUGE CONSUMER POPULARITY—CALLERS THRILLED AT THE IDEA OF PHONE-INTERFACING BOTH AURALLY AND FACIALLY (THE LITTLE FIRST-GENERATION PHONE-VIDEO CAMERAS BEING TOO CRUDE AND NARROW-APERTURED FOR ANYTHING MUCH MORE THAN FACIAL CLOSE-UPS) ON FIRST-GENERATION TELEPUTERS THAT AT THAT TIME WERE LITTLE MORE THAN HIGH-TECH TV SETS [...] (Wallace 2006: 144, capitals in original).

The form of the gag is explanation, but it’s a failed explanation because Wallace cannot help but interrupt himself. ‘WHY—’, he begins, before immediately introducing a long parenthetical clause that provides new and arguably unnecessary detail. In his essay on *The Pale King*, John Jeremiah Sullivan – a contemporary of Wallace’s – describes the ‘typographical tricks [that Wallace] ripped from the eighteenth-century comic novel and recontextualised, [including] the footnotes and sceptical parentheticals, clauses that compulsively double back, feeling for weaknesses in themselves’ (Sullivan 2011). Stephen Burn echoes this sentiment when he suggests that ‘many of the signature elements of Wallace’s fiction’ can be illuminated by reference to eighteenth-century English comic novels:

More superficially, Wallace’s love of adjectivally inflated titles—of which “A Radically Condensed History of Postindustrial Life” is just one example—would also seem to suggest affinities with an eighteenth-century literary tradition that gave us such overly explanatory titles as *Pamela: or, Virtue Rewarded. In a Series of Familiar Letters from a Beautiful Young Damsel, To her Parents. Now first Published In order to cultivate the Principles of Virtue and Religion in the Minds of the YOUTH of BOTH SEXES* (Burn 2012: 24, italics in original).

Of these precursors, Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is perhaps most illustrative, given that it would seem to apotheosise the parenthetical discourse that Sullivan and Burn describe. *Infinite Jest*, like *Tristram Shandy*, maintains a constitutive interest in comedy and, like Sterne’s novel, is ‘in terms of pure plot, nothing more than a massive shaggy-dog story and thus the lowest possible kind of joke’ (North 2008: 178). *Jest*’s elliptical rhetorical structures, whose narrative import is wildly disproportionate to their linguistic construction, find their genetic forbear in *Tristram Shandy*, a novel within a novel (about not writing a novel) that is so metatextually recursive that it would have made James O. Incandenza proud.

Compare, for example, the digressions of the videophony sequence with the following passage from *Tristram Shandy*, an attempt at a (fictive) ‘author’s preface’:

The
Author’s PREFACE

No, I’ll not say a word about it,—here it is;—in publishing it;—I have appealed to the world,—and to the world I leave it;—it must speak for itself. All I know of the matter is,—when I sat down, my intent was to write a good book; and as far as the tenuity of my understanding would hold out,—a wise, aye, and a discreet,—taking care only, as I went along, to put into it all the wit and the judgment (be it more or less) which the great author and bestower of them had thought fit originally to give me,—so that, as your worships see,—’tis just as God pleases (Sterne 1849: 202).

The mode of dissemination here is the same, as dashes punctuate and interrupt the prose and with it obstruct the transmission of information. Similar too is the humour in this passage, as Sterne enjoys the irony of confounding the formal conventions of the preface – a short piece of writing, intended to concisely introduce a text – by inflating it and thus undermining its textual function. When Tristram proclaims that he will ‘say not a word about it’, the promise of concision bears the same irony as when Wallace begins his exposition – another mode usually characterised by brevity and simplicity – only to interrupt with more detail than we actually require.

As in Sterne, the digression is essential to Wallace’s funniness. The parenthetical clauses and capital letters of the videophony sequence are, by virtue of this interruption, humorous – it is as if Wallace is trying to ‘add and qualify and specify far beyond the spatial capacity of the page [...but] these attempts to catch a slippery and complex truth also generate a humour of their own’ (North 2008: 179). It is an epistemological comedy, hinging on the author’s incomplete articulation of reality – joking to seek the limits of the known and knowable. Milan Kundera writes that ‘the poetry of existence, says Sterne’s novel, is in digression [...*Tristram Shandy*] affirms that poetry lies not in action, but there where action stops; there where the bridge between a cause and an effect has collapsed and thought wanders off’ (1988: 163–164). Kundera’s description of an altered causality recalls John Morreall’s characterisation of the fundamental structure of humour, which rests on a ‘cognitive shift [...] a rapid change in our perceptions or thoughts’ in which causal expectations are humorously contradicted (2009: 50). In Kundera’s estimation, the digression equally resembles the ‘deconstructive’ comedy of slapstick, a kind of formal aggression that ‘does violence to the structures that attempt to contain it and within which we try to think it’ (Brunette 1991: 176): as such, in Wallace and Sterne the digression is used as a formal challenge, an attempt to deconstruct the artifice of the text of which they form an integral part.

This digressive mode reaches its fullest rhetorical expression in *Infinite Jest*’s 388 endnotes. The endnote is comic in part by virtue of its bathos: it is a distraction, disrupting the story’s central narrative and sabotaging its climax. As Letzler (2012: 131) writes, many of Wallace’s endnotes are ‘junk text, simultaneously too excessive and too vacuous to be worth anyone’s attention’ that deliver an ‘experience of being over- and under-whelmed by textual data’. Though its ‘unreadability’ is apt to

‘provoke a bemused chuckle’, it is this paradoxical duality of excess and emptiness that constitutes the novel’s ‘characteristic text’. We might then say that Wallace’s digressions are, in his own phrase, ‘stylised attempts to rebel by offending convention’ (Wallace 2005a: 62).

Wallace’s endnotes serve to delay the effects of our understanding, operating within a schema of ‘illogical legibility’ (Gunning 2010: 142), much like the ‘elaborate contraptions’ of Rube Goldberg, machines designed to mock the innovations of high modernity, which ‘accomplished rather minor tasks through complex means’, (Gunning 2010: 141). The experiential effect being that we understand the endnote’s function as a rhetorical device but are amused by its failure to effectively fulfil it.

2. Technology, modernity, anxiety: *Infinite Jest*’s slapstick utopia

The fictive technology of the InterLace videophone marks a similar moment in cultural time – the anxiety of the 1990s projected two decades into the future – to the slapstick modernist worlds of Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd of a century earlier, in which ‘few aspects of modern life evoke[d] such ambivalence as technology’ (Gunning 2010: 149). The United States of the early twentieth century was built on a series of ‘crazy machines’ – automobiles, for example, or locomotives – unpredictable technologies ‘that appear rationally designed to achieve a purpose, but suddenly and comically assert a counter-will of their own, thwarting the purpose of the protagonist (who thereby becomes a comedian)’ (Gunning 2010: 138). Considered in this light, Wallace’s videophone seems the crazy machine *par excellence*. But more significant for our purposes is its later effect, that of a transformation of *Infinite Jest*’s hypermodernity into a ‘comic utopia in which men and machines seem to merge’ (Gunning 2010: 149).

The technology of the videophone encourages its users to modify their behaviour and their bodies. The ‘videophonic stress’ (Wallace 2006: 147) that comes with being perceived in conversation inspires a peculiar anxiety in its users: Wallace tells us that ‘consumers perceived something essentially blurred and moist-looking about their phone-faces, a shiny pallid *indefiniteness* that struck them as not just unflattering but somehow evasive, furtive, untrustworthy, *unlikable*’ (Wallace 2006: 147). It is revealing that Wallace uses the compound ‘phone-face’, and later ‘video-face’, to describe the self-perceptions of the videophone’s users, as if the face and the technology used to broadcast it have become indivisible from one another. It is difficult at this point not to think of another seminal image of postmodernity: that of David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome*, in which the protagonist, Max Penn (James Woods), is absorbed, face-first, into his television screen. The acute indefiniteness that Wallace ascribes to videophone users suggests a similar effect, as if the ontological boundaries of user and interface have become indistinguishably porous; man has merged with machine.

But Wallace does something strange with this image, taking the technological castration of *Videodrome* and inflecting it with social comedy. In the next sentence he proceeds to tell us that

in an early and ominous InterLace/G.T.E. focus-group survey that was all but ignored in a storm of entrepreneurial sci-fi-tech enthusiasm [...] a phenomenally ominous 71% of senior-citizen respondents specifically compar[ed] their video-faces to that of Richard Nixon during the Nixon–Kennedy debates of B.S. 1960 (Wallace 2006: 147).

The fact that this observation concludes the paragraph designates it as this gag’s punch line and, formally speaking, the comedy is assured: highly specific data (‘a phenomenally ominous 71%’) is coupled with an esoteric source (‘an early and ominous InterLace/G.T.E. focus-group survey’). Finally, there is the absurd communal reference to a young Richard Nixon, which – though the comedy seems at first to derive from its arbitrariness – is anything but coincidental; after all, with the 1972 Watergate scandal, Nixon would forever be associated with communication technology’s power to corrupt and destroy.

But it is when videophony’s concomitant ‘vanity,-stress,-and-Nixonian-facial-image problem’ (Wallace 2006: 148) begins to reshape its users’ behaviour that Wallace’s work most clearly bears the influence of Chaplin and Lloyd. To counteract what Wallace terms ‘Video-Physiognomic Dysphoria’, the fictitious O.N.A.N.ite communications industry begins marketing ‘wildly attractive high-def broadcastable composite[s]’ and then ‘actually casting the enhanced facial image in a form-fitting polybutylene-resin mask’ (Wallace 2006: 148). These ‘permanent wearable masks’, are also revealed to be crazy machines, coming to convey

such horrendously skewed and enhanced masked images [...] that enormous psychosocial stress began to result, [leaving] large numbers of phone-users suddenly reluctant to leave home and interface personally with people who, they feared, were now habituated to seeing their far-better-looking masked selves (Wallace 2006: 149).

With the introduction of wearable-mask technology, videophone users fulfil the roles of stooges in a classically modernist slapstick farce, which reaches its apogee in Wallace’s Chaplinesque description of ‘awkward mistaken-identity snafus involving multi-user family or company phones and the hurried selection and attachment of the wrong mask’ (Wallace 2006: 148). The humour of this mechanisation of the self is most famously expressed in Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic, in which ‘the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine’ (Bergson 1911: 79).

3. Social comedy as citizenship: bad habits, dirty words and human funniness

It is against this background of anxious (post)modernity that Wallace inhabits his primary comic mode: that of social observation. Expressed in its most common observational variety, stand-up is ‘arguably the oldest, most universal, basic, and deeply significant form of humorous expression’ (Mintz 1985: 71). *Infinite Jest*’s videophony sequence is built on the same central premise as observational stand-up, namely that human behaviour – especially at its most mundane – is funny. Particularly reminiscent of stand-up is Wallace’s description of users who, ‘while conversing [...] could look around the room, fine-groom, peel tiny bits of dead skin away from [their] cuticles, compose phone-pad haiku, stir things on the stove’ or ‘even carry on a whole

separate additional sign-language-and-exaggerated-facial-expression type of conversation with people right there next to [them]' (Wallace 2006: 142).

Infinite Jest's larger structure is also illuminated by reference to observational comedy. Consider, for example, these introductory sentences, chosen at random from the novel:

Another way fathers impact their sons is that sons, once their voices have changed in puberty, invariably answer the telephone with the same locutions and intonations as their fathers (32).

Doctors tend to enter the arenas of their profession's practice with a brisk good cheer that they have to then stop and try to mute a bit when the arena they're entering is a hospital's fifth floor, where brisk good cheer would amount to a kind of gloating (68).

You can be at certain parties and not really be there (219).

It is significant that the striking similarities with observational stand-up are both rhetorical and structural: though it incorporates a great variety of narrative and rhetorical modes, *Infinite Jest* is primarily narrated in the present tense, in a complexly close third-person perspective that occasionally incorporates an extradiegetic speaking-I. This rhetorical mode informs Wallace's use of time, space and place in several important ways; chiefly, it manifests in his ability to riff, like the stand-up, countenancing empirical information rapidly in brief but acute observations like 'there is something vaguely digestive about the room's odor' (Wallace 2006: 3) or 'the crotch of her leotard looked like a slingshot' (Wallace 2006: 124).

Because of their social basis, the passages from Wallace quoted above serve a similar function to the setup in a stand-up bit. Here, for example, are the opening lines of George Carlin's notorious *Seven Dirty Words* routine:

There are a lot of words you can say whenever you want, you know. 'PNEUMONIA!' [gestures]. Nobody gives you a lotta... all right, you can't yell it in the *hospital* a great deal, but what the hell [audience laughs]. There are words you can say, no problem [shouts suddenly]: TOPOGRAPHY! No one has ever gone to jail for screaming 'TOPOGRAPHY!' (Callner 1978).

In this routine, Carlin takes a cultural behaviour – the use of profanity – and lays out the unspoken rules that govern it. Within the history of mainstream U.S. comedy, it is Carlin who clears the ground for Wallace's brand of social comedy. Carlin's use of multiple linguistic registers – moving immediately from callous and aggressive to nuanced and articulate – is echoed in Wallace's coupling of dialectal speech with the 'jargony argot' (Wallace 2006: 268) of highly specialised disciplines, including philosophy, mathematics and pharmacology.

It is in their concern for spoken language that the resemblance between Wallace and Carlin is most pronounced. Carlin's gags about usage reflect on the role that language plays in American culture, with a particular emphasis on its corruption and perversion. Solecisms, catachreses, malapropisms, oxymorons and redundancies frequently constituted the targets of Carlin's comedy, as in *Words*, from 1976:

The airlines have added a lot of words to the language, one of them being *deplane*. I've never de-boated, I've never de-bussed, but by *God* I've deplaned. [Imitating airline attendant]: 'We'll be deplaning through the *forward* door!' But I'm already on *de plane*? [Beat.] That is what they tell ya: 'Get on the plane!' [Pause.] Nah-uh—I'm getting *in* the plane. Let Evel Knievel get *on* the plane! ('Time for George' 1976).

For both Wallace and Carlin, usage is a moral issue, and it comes to be understood in their work as a matter of 'advanced US citizenship' (Wallace 2005b: 72). Both men are earnest about the sovereignty of language and its maintenance through culture. Carlin exhibits the symptoms of a S.N.O.O.T., Wallace's 'nickname á clef for a really extreme usage fanatic' (Wallace 2005b: 69), as outlined in his major polemic on the subject, 'Authority and American Usage'. In a passage that seems cribbed directly from Carlin's playbook, Wallace defines S.N.O.O.T. – 'Syntax Nudniks of Our Time' – as

that small percentage of American citizens who actually care about the current status of double modals and ergative verbs [...] the sorts of people who feel that special blend of wincing despair and sneering superiority when they see EXPRESS LANE–10 ITEMS OR LESS or hear *dialogue* used as a verb or realize that the founders of the Super 8 Motel chain must surely have been ignorant of the meaning of *suppurate* (Wallace 2005b: 69, emphases in original).

Sullivan formulates this observational impulse in empathetic terms, as he describes Wallace's interest in the breed of 'turn[s] into inattention, into self-absorption' provoked by routine situations, and the way that Wallace 'reverses back through' these moments to find their human quality. 'You're in a room with a bunch of human beings. Each of them, like you, is broken and has healed in some *funny* way' (Sullivan 2011, italics mine). I have of course augmented Sullivan's meaning of 'funny' – he presumably means funny-strange not funny-ha-ha – but my revision only makes explicit an implicit trace in the original text, namely that the essential curiosity of Wallace's fiction is an interest in the comic aspects that everyday life reveals.

However, Wallace does not simply perform as an observational comic, even though certain verbal tropes, by virtue of their parataxis, suggest a resemblance to the aesthetics of that form. His texts exhibit a more complicated relationship with performance. For example, he writes – of Boston Alcoholics Anonymous meetings – that 'it's funny what they'll find funny' (Wallace 2006: 367). He goes on to describe a recently inducted AA speaker who is summoned to the podium to speak but whose performance is 'dreadfully, transparently unfunny: [he's] painfully new but pretending to be at ease, to be an old hand, desperate to amuse' (Wallace 2006: 367). The performer betrays himself with an 'ironic gesture' and a bad joke. He says, 'I'm told I've been given the Gift of Desperation. I'm looking for the exchange window' (Wallace 2006: 367). But the 'signal discomfort' of this performance is the fact that it appears so conspicuously, painfully 'unspontaneous, rehearsed'. 'He's performing', Wallace derisively notes (2006: 367).

Wallace's analysis of the social dynamics of AA also throws into sharp relief several of his own rhetorical tics. This mockery of 'unspontaneous' prepared testimony reveals the extent to which Wallace's poetics rests upon the conflation of authenticity

and spontaneity, valorising what Morreall calls ‘the provenance of the anecdote[...]the relationship between what the speaker is relating [...] and their experience and way of looking at the world’ (2009: 85).

In *Infinite Jest*, it is Wallace’s frequent attempts to emulate the unrehearsed measure of spoken language that most reveals his relationship with stand-up as a form. I do not mean to accuse Wallace of duplicity, merely to suggest that this dialectic of spontaneity/unspontaneity is the founding negotiation of stand-up comedy, the formal qualities of which pervade his work. When we watch a stand-up comic perform, we repress the idea that the performer is doing just that: we do not like to imagine that we are performed to. Stand-up comedy is built on the audience’s wilful – though perhaps unconscious – suspension of our awareness of its rehearsal, and one of its hallmarks ‘as a performative genre [...] is how it tends to be predicated on the *illusion* of intimacy[,] a disregard for the distancing of the stage’ (Brodie 2008: 156).

As John Limon has acutely observed, this dialectical quality means that ‘comedians might, above all other artists and entertainers, hate their audiences [...] because they are not entirely distinct from them’ (Limon 2000: 13). That is to say, audiences decide whether or not a joke becomes a joke by laughing. The relationship between audience and comedian is one of symbiosis, then, ‘as if the comedian had not quite thought or expressed a joke until the audience thinks or expresses it’ (Limon 2000: 13). Therefore the comic – and the form of stand-up comedy as such – absolutely depends on this performance of spontaneous unrehearsedness.

4. Coda: ‘I’m not trying to be funny right now’

Certainly we know that when Andy Kaufman appears on David Letterman’s short-lived morning program – cancelled after one season for being too weird – that he is there to be funny, to elicit laughter, to produce funniness. But on 15 October, 1980, Kaufman instead sits before Letterman’s audience and relates the story of an old relationship. He tells us, the audience, about how he would work nights as a comic in New York while his girlfriend waitressed. When he finally found his break, he says, on ‘Saturday Night Live—’ suddenly, Kaufman starts coughing; the audience finds this hilarious. ‘I’d rather if you don’t, uh, laugh’, he says nervously. ‘Because, um, I’m not trying to be funny right now’ (‘Andy Kaufman on Letterman (October 15 1980)’ 1980). Like all of Kaufman’s characters, we are sure that this persona, which I will call the Nervous Comedian, is just that: a performative affectation. But – and this, surely, is Kaufman’s real purpose – we are not ever *really* sure, either. How are we to accept pleas for sincerity from this most ironic and elusive of comedians?

Of one thing we *can* at least be sure: David Letterman is the antagonist in this scenario. He appears to Kaufman – or at least to Kaufman’s Nervous Comedian – the same way he did to Wallace who, in the early short story *My Appearance*, characterised the host as a kind of antic villain, a ‘bastard [who] feeds off ridiculousness like some enormous Howdy-Doodyesque parasite. The whole show feeds on it; it swells and grows [...] Letterman starts to look gorged, dark, shiny’ (Wallace 1989: 180). In *My Appearance*, it is the character of Edilyn, a middle-aged TV actress, who must struggle – at the behest of her husband Rudy, an NBC

executive – to be ‘seen as making fun of [her]self, but in a self-aware and ironic way [...] in other words, appear the way Letterman appears, on *Letterman*’ (Wallace 1989: 183).

How does one *appear* on Letterman? Is it like Andy Kaufman, telling failed anecdotes to rapturous applause? Edilyn comes away from her appearance with a generous impression of the host. ‘The interview ended in a sort of explosion of good will’, she says. Rudy, however, is more sceptical, telling her, ‘You’re a talented and multifaceted actress [...] you took direction. You kept your head and did us both credit and survived an appearance on an anti-show’ (Wallace 1989: 198). Perhaps this explains the appearance of Kaufman, the anti-comic *par excellence*, on Letterman’s anti-show, his shtick negated by Letterman’s irony, transforming him, to use Edilyn’s phrase, into ‘a sort of anti-guest’ (Wallace 1989: 190).

However we read their respective anti-appearances, Kaufman’s and Wallace’s relationships to Letterman remain the same. In Kaufman and Wallace, Letterman’s studio becomes a site of dialectical negotiation over the exact nature of comedy: Kaufman tells us that he’s not trying to be funny, and yet we laugh; indeed, Kaufman *isn’t* funny, and yet we laugh. Wallace’s funniness exerts itself in the same way. It is everywhere in his poetics and is perhaps, like Kafka’s, ‘actually sort of unsubtle’ (Wallace 2005a: 63), or, as Wallace himself puts it, in a strikingly Kaufmanesque phrase, ‘anti-subtle’.

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