

Van Norris

“Touching Cloth...”

Considering Satire and the Clergy in Popular Contemporary British Animation

Assessing the failings of mechanisms of power through comedy has remained a constant throughout animation. Within the specific arena of ‘the popular’, always a potent area for consideration, adult British network television animation in the early part of the 21st century has maintained a unique relationship with modes of Satire that has enabled writers and performers to explicitly address such concerns. An illustration of this can be located within the animated satire, *Popetown* (2005). This is a useful vehicle by which to not only assess British mainstream animation’s interaction with one of the key social institutions, the Church, but it also serves as a barometer for broader cultural attitudes towards tradition, hierarchy and authority and as well as assessing contemporary definitions of the satiric form itself. *Popetown* has also since become notable for effectively drawing to a close a period of institutional support within British mainstream Television animation, mainly through an inception defined by concession, but also through its failure to fully exploit the freedoms afforded to its form. In actuality it embodies many of the shortcomings now located within contemporary satirical comedy. By placing the show into a broader cultural context what emerges here is how conceptions of nostalgia, rather than any direct interrogation of institutions, now appear to shape the basis of British animated mainstream satire.

Popetown is a show that sets about repeating commonly held views of the Catholic Church circulated within the Global media and using these conceptions as a backdrop to inform the stories. In today’s media culture these prevailing narratives revolve around Catholicism as among the last of all of the major religious systems to adapt to modernity. And that in its many forms it remains amongst the most oppressive functioning within Western society. Debates around the Roman Catholic Church’s views on same-sex marriage, abortion, on Monasticism, towards gender have in effect usurped lay perceptions of the faith. These have been prioritised as the prime cultural narratives over the numerous Latin, Greek, Eastern, Oriental-Orthodox variations. Recent press stories over dialogues of exclusion, power abuse, and corruption have all sat uneasily with the dismantling of the Church’s doctrine of direct Communion with God, and have further reinforced an uncomfortable image of a system bound to the Divine yet endemically in service of Earthly (male) desires and foibles. The Catholic Church’s refusals to engage with popular morality or culture have been further exacerbated in recent years by the gesture of consolidation through the appointment of the more politically fundamentalist Pope Benedict XVI in 2005. This reassertion works to re-highlight the doctrines of Papal infallibility and goes towards appeasing the internal struggles within a Church that had been seen to have been destabilised by liberalism and dissolving under criticism from outside forces.

As a comic incarnation of these ideas *Popetown* is set within a mythical city of the same name which functions as a secure, self-governing haven that suggests obvious parallels with Rome. It exists in an unspecified country (however it is made evident through all of ten episodes that this is *not* Italy or Britain) and it has an airport, a hospital, a shopping centre, parks, libraries and its own media network. This is an area where debates around religious pluralism are never explicitly addressed as ‘Popetown’ never refers to itself as being a specifically Catholic environment. Instead the show makes full use of familiar cultural totems, the kind of iconography defined by Stewart M. Hoover as a “symbolic inventory of archetypes” (2006, p.66) that is now embedded within

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Catholicism's broader media image. The structures of Papalcy, the recognisable hierarchies associated with the religion and the uniforms of the figureheads, vicars, bishops, nuns are all familiar as undeniably Catholic, or at the very least, Christian. To reinforce dialogues of repression complex, ambiguous rituals such as Confessional or Transubstantiation are hitherto ignored in this setting yet outmoded narratives like Exorcism are included - as confirmed in the show's fifth episode, 'Possessed', (Fuhrer and Dubernet, 2005). Affiliation is only made apparent by comparison in the finale of episode three, 'Trapped' (Bachman, 2005) when 'Popetown' is revealed through a string of political machinations to be the laughing stock of opposing media outlets, 'Muslim TV' and 'Buddhism TV'.

The Sum of its Parts

Before any analysis of *Popetown* we have to not only acknowledge the interplay between American and British comic television animation that profoundly informs the show itself. As well as considering the role of recent American animated satire and the British setting for this transplantation we also have to consider how *Popetown* offers an unconscious replaying of traditional literate forms through a postmodern fusion. It undoubtedly exists as an example of how satire, animation and religion come together to make full use of a post-*Simpsons/South Park* transgressive space. For in its pre-broadcast sales hook, in which the makers described the show as: "*Father Ted* meets *South Park*", we are given a solid enough clue to pitch and intent (N/A, 2006, para 2). And although there are links to extant Satiric traditions, this is a piece of work often more concerned with acknowledging the potential of animation to approach risky subjects. What emerges once the dust settles is a picture of a somewhat compromised product.

Originally titled *Popeman* in preliminary casting sessions (early 2001) the show was funded by the BBC as a joint BBC3/Channel X/Moi J'aime production and initial publicity very much traded on the reputations of UK comedy names like Bob Mortimer, Matt Lucas and US ex-pat Ruby Wax. The show was conceived by American Phil Ox, an ex-journalist in collusion with two French writers from comedy sitcom traditions, Eric Fuhrer and Isabelle Dubernet. Their previous collaborations were on the 'live action' Nickelodeon sitcom, *Genie in the House*, an enterprise which manifested Ox's desire to tap into the American market and to serve the international marketplace (N/A, 2006, para 2). As a result *Popetown* offers a hybrid of national flavours yet further muddled by the input from script editors and voice actors Kevin Eldon and McKenzie Crook who guided a small team of British writers. The show's adherence to broad stereotypes and non-culturally specific storylines were the end result of this compromise with the pitch of the show residing in an uneasy blend of British, French and American comic traditions that eventually led to the collapse of the show's (undoubted) ambition. Once Stuart Murphy, then-Controller of BBC3, confirmed that it would not be broadcast on editorial grounds for the planned September 2004 schedule and neither would it be released on DVD in the UK with any consolidation of revenue to be gained from overseas and European DVD sales alone, then the reputation of *Popetown* became retrospectively defined by failure¹. In settling for a tonally uneasy middle ground the show's

¹ Stuart Murphy confirmed that: "After a lot of consideration...and balancing the creative risk with the potential offence to some parts of the audience, we have decided not to transmit the programme. Despite all of the creative energy that has gone into this project and the best efforts of everyone involved, the comic impact of the delivered series does not outweigh the potential offence it will cause. It has been an extremely difficult and complex decision to make. There is a fine judgement line in comedy between the scurrilously funny and the offensive" (NA, September 24th 2004, paras 3-5). This is in itself could be seen as a disingenuous line when one considers the courting of media outrage the BBC were happy to indulge around animated sketch show, *Monkey Dust*, in 2003. The deliberate highlighting of a comedy sketch featuring a paedophile in pre-release material accompanying the show not only put it on the cultural map for a brief period by feeding tabloid discussions of propriety but also this publicity benefitted the launch of new channel BBC3 at that time. However a chastened Alan Marke, (Managing Director of Channel X) and Murphy have since admitted that the political climate did not suit the show but they have both acknowledged that it was conceived, from its earliest days, to be highly contentious. Murphy himself confirmed: "I knew when we developed the series that there was risk involved but

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intent to be a universally recognisable satire saw it fail to strike a profound note of recognition in any market, even after troubled broadcasts in Lithuania, Germany and New Zealand. Gray, Jones & Thompson isolate that Satire actually works at its best when it resonates with a particular time and condition (2009, p.25). It also functions most effectively from the assumption that the reader/audience shares a clear conception of what a ‘civilised’ world is. And thus when diluted to appeal to the broadest possible range of disparate cultures then the message inevitably can’t help but be compromised.

Sadly *Popetown’s* legacy in the animated TV landscape has since become even more profound. If one considers British animation’s relationship with television as defined by ‘waves’ or eras then this text embodies the closure of a particular moment. It is conceivable to consider British television animation in terms of narratives, intent and deployment as operating within a first tentative, somewhat fragmented wave, (right up until Channel Four’s support of independent animators and children’s animation anthologies in the 1980s), that is located in service to children’s broadcasting, programme credits/titles and advertising (Burrows, 1986). Thus TV animation could be seen as mirroring its cinematic counterpart through an industry-led lack of identity and cohesion dictated by disjointed authorship, distribution and promotion contexts. This also continues as a parallel running as an undercurrent alongside the next definable wave.

Certainly in retrospective Channel Four’s relationship with the medium can be seen as ushering in a renaissance built around perception, exhibition and authorship. During this time of great optimism and promise animation was used as a tool to express narratives that had been hitherto ignored or marginalised as well as highlighting aspects of British life in a fashion that moved away from the dominance of American forms and fell more in line with the stylistic freedoms of European paradigms (Kitson, 2009). Although by the time this second epoch had receded in the late 1990s television animation was now less defined by the individualist, auteurist model supported by the channel and it had become tied to sitcom/sketch-show templates in wake of the post-*Simpsons/South Park* landscape.

Again, residual constituent elements prevail alongside this ‘third wave’ of animation production, but it can be quantified here with an identity not forged in ‘independence’ but through ‘incorporation’. This third wave was not a concerted movement either, and neither was it tied to any specific production/broadcasting situation, but the promise of British adult, commercial comedy animation shows like Channel Four’s *Crapston Villas* (1995-1997) and *Pond Life* (1998-2000), BBC 2’s *Stressed Eric* (1998-2000) and ITV’s *Bob and Margaret* (1998-2001), was further intensified by the optimism of BBC3’s arrival and its support of animation and swept along with the likes of ITV’s *2D-TV* (2001-2004) and Channel Four’s *Modern Toss* (2005-2007) which all implied that the medium’s transition to the UK mainstream had finally arrived. However *Popetown’s* ‘third-wave’ failure here can be viewed as one the most potent markers of this era’s disintegration. The show concluded a run of poorly-rated, expensive, high-profile animation investments for the BBC

unfortunately, once we saw the finished series, it became clear that the programme fell on the wrong side of that line” (N/A, 2004). This was reinforced by the condemnation offered by the Catholic Church which continued across Europe as the show became embroiled in the culture of intolerance for religious critique that dominated the media soon after 9/11. The decision to withdraw was welcomed in a statement by The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales whose spokesman, The Right Reverend Crispian Hollis, Bishop of Portsmouth, stated: “I am delighted...It was obviously going to be a controversial programme which would have caused offence, not least among the Catholic community who hold the person of the Holy Father in the highest regard and affection. Any attempt to belittle or diminish his status as the leader of the Catholic Church is totally unacceptable, and not only to Catholics,” (N/A, 2004). But intriguingly *Popetown* had been subject to some 6,000 complaints despite not one frame of the show having ever actually been broadcast in the UK. Ruth Gledhill points out that the show had subsequently become cast on the crucible of the ambitions of traditionalist Archbishop of Birmingham, The Most Rev Vincent Nichols, an ardent supporter of Pope Benedict XVI (2007). As one of the key figures in putting pressure upon the BBC to withdraw *Popetown* his efforts cemented a conservative reformist agenda and his campaigns to improve the way Catholicism is covered by the media, pointedly impressed the hierarchies at Rome. In itself a massive irony considering the show’s narratives concerning political expediency.

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with *Monkey Dust* (2003-5) to *I am Not an Animal* (2005). Thus calling into question the public service corporation's funding policies towards animation and inadvertently playing a role in the revision of the soon-to-be beleaguered BBC3 channel - which makes it exactly the kind of text that perhaps offers little in terms of quality and more as a cultural artefact.

Before we discuss the show in more depth it is necessary to consider how Satire and television animation have become increasingly enmeshed over the last few decades. In many ways Satire has become, like common conceptions around formal schools of art practice like Surrealism and Expressionism, a somewhat degraded term and as a mode that has become over-used and commonplace. This ubiquity is reinforced through a cogent point offered by *Monkey Dust* and *Have I Got News For You* producer/writer, Harry Thompson when he states quite simply in the UK TV landscape that: "Satire is now an industry" (cited by Carpenter, 2000, p.331). Humphrey Carpenter concurs with *TW3* writer, John Bird and taps into the prevalent comedic tastes for post-modern irony when he states that: "Satire's...success or failure is determined by the market. Everything is a branch of comedy now. Everybody is a comedian. Everything is subversive" (cited by Carpenter, 2000, p.332). Previously considered a form of comedy that was reserved for high brow literary models this absorption into mainstream discourse undoubtedly offers quandary. In that through its pervasiveness across Western media Satire's edges may well have been dulled but, perversely, such availability means that it is now afforded a licence hitherto denied.

Shifts in the Landscape

In assessing British animation's ongoing intersections with Satire, Paul Ward notes its pivotal role in early 20th century UK propaganda shorts foregrounding messages promoting "Nation" and "Patriotism" (2003, p.65). Yet it is in contemporary UK televisual terms, through Fluck and Law's puppet show *Spitting Image* (ITV 1984-1996), where undoubtedly Satire and animation became most explicitly conjoined as a conscious humorous dialogue and that has paved the way towards today's examples. Links across the Atlantic also have to be considered here. In that show there grew a discernible emphasis detectable, from the more politicised British 'live action' TV Satire of the 1960s, (such the BBC's 1962/1963 *TW3*) which undoubtedly provided a conceptual platform for the show through to today's models. There has been an undeniable shift from policy to personal, enforced and complemented by recent examples like *Have I Got News for You* (BBC 1990-to date) and eroded by the economic demands of meeting the widest audience possible. Contemporary TV Satire's co-option from an elite base sees that its very nature has been compromised by intersections with the popular, thus reducing its definition.

Spitting Image was forged from an uneasy blend of Countercultural and Establishment values and traded on the freedoms raised by the un-focussed Alternative Comedy address of the late 1970s into the early 1980s which was in actuality less concerned with challenging political issues as it was detonating light entertainment performance modes and gender and race hierarchies. And it's arguably here where the blurring and broadening of social/cultural/political/entertainment imperatives became dominant within British animated Satire. Co-creator Roger Law admitted that too often the show's political intent became sacrificed to investigations of celebrity culture and much of the commentary was reduced to toilet humour. He makes this explicit when citing the reportage on America's bombing of Libya from British airbases in a 1985 skit which featured Margaret Thatcher cast as a dog being requested by an addled Ronald Reagan to "lick his bottom" (cited by Carpenter, 2000, pp.329-330). This dilution has certainly been revealed as a default setting and continuation through the show's direct descendants in the political blankness of

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the Flash-animated 2D-TV (ITV 2001-2004) and in Harry Thompson and Shaun Pye's *Monkey Dust* (BBC 2003-2005) which too settles for sweeping, imprecise anti-New Labour statements from a self-professed, reactionary position².

That Satire has curiously evolved to become not only one of the primary comic dialogues that links both US *and* UK television comedy/animation formats but also as one of the more popular comic modes in television today is undeniably down to the recent freedoms located within American television and the definable shifts in terms of tone and subject matter made available through the network successes of *The Simpsons* (1989-to date) for Fox and, latterly, *South Park* (1998-to date) for Comedy Central. Both of which are fixtures on UK network television. Yet it is ironic though that the very nature of Satire appears to work counter-intuitively to the demands of mainstream television. Gray, Jones & Thompson observe that this recent embrace of Satire in prime-time contexts challenges the long-held industry perception that the form's inherent negativity has made it one of the least attractive propositions for (particularly American) television networks and audiences alike. Companies are keen to undermine the activity of channel surfing if possible and base their programming responses to those who take comfort in the medium's adherence to repetition (2009, p.14). The "viral" nature of US shows like Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* (1996- to date) that parody news media formats handily facilitates market shifts in consumption through cross-media readings and have also deepened this renaissance in divisive political times, with TV Satire now performing a critical function that many perceive the mainstream press as being too timid or compromised to undertake themselves (Grey, Jones and Thompson, 2009, p.4). The strides made by these emblematic shows have benefitted other recent animated television output in enabling them to go towards subjects, like religion, that had been hitherto deemed unsuitable. Certainly Groening's other animated sitcom, *Futurama* (1999-2009), has been afforded a liberty to attack rituals associated with Christianity and Scientology and this in turn has led to the ground to be freed up for deliberately contentious network shows like *God, The Devil and Bob* (2000), MacFarlane's *Family Guy* (1999 to date) and Stamatopoulos' *Moral Orel* (2005-2008).

The prime mover in this area is undoubtedly in *The Simpsons'* use of its own residual counter-cultural dialogues, (alongside *South Park*), via a protective space granted (as M. Keith Booker suggests) from powerful establishment-based critics through its prominence as a Fox Network success and as its status as a cultural institution (2006, p.66). In *The Simpson's* case satire is displayed more through parody and still ultimately defers to an establishment stability (Gray, Jones & Thompson, 2009, p.25). Yet it approaches organised religion by using the Reverend Lovejoy construct across numerous examples such as the 1992 show, *Homer the Heretic*, *Bart Sells his Soul* (1995), *Simpsons Bible Stories* (1999) and *Lisa the Sceptic* (1997), to broach previously sensitive dialogues of disillusionment, expediency, partisanship, cynicism and unthinking devotion across all aspects of the modern Church.

This is has been extended in *South Park's* choice of tactics deploying a more overtly provocative register. Its position as "equal opportunity offender" (Matt Stone cited by Davis, 2009, para 8) has been developed to emphasise contemporary news stories to thus provide a sense of differentiation of their stories of small town moralities from *The Simpsons*. Toni-Johnson Woods' notes in her dissection of the show that dialogues of scepticism are themes endemic to *South Park's* very make-up with the focus around conceptions of Church fixed at that of corporate entity, brain-washing institution or outdated secret society (2007, p.228). Using Parker and Stone's consistent attack on the Mormon faith as an example (in episodes such as the November 2003 show *All*

² Defending against the criticism of a reactionary tone discernible in the BBC sketch show, *Monkey Dust* producer and writer Thompson jokily noted on the DVD commentary of the first series that it was in fact: "...like The Daily Mail with indie music". (2004).

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About the Mormons), Booker again hits on a key point about the show when he states that much of *South Park's* commentary on religion works from a “radically individualist and antiauthoritarian” basis that favours people over systems (Booker, 2006, p.153).

All of this has been achieved through a sense of cultural permission. The critique of cornerstone social institutions found within the animation medium has been allowed through its acceptable distance from live action convention as noted by Paul Wells who states that subversive animation is often cloaked through populist perception and meaning and it can be lost behind the “unambiguous” visceral pleasures often associated with it (1998, p.6). Wells sees that animation’s potential to work around potentially difficult issues through its formal ‘distance’ from recorded reality can permit the author to make deeper, more contentious statements (Ibid). Taking this idea further then, not only does animation have the capability to illustrate complex ideas through design, diagrammatical, impressionistic and symbolological means but whilst doing this the process of critique is protected through the perceptions surrounding the medium of a facile, children’s form that is somehow removed from ‘real life’.

All of the movement made by those afore-mentioned shows has not only facilitated a more explicit degree of critique but has made available open discussions of religion across mainstream settings. This transition has also been enabled in recent years by, as Hoover notes, a larger phenomenon in the fragmentation of the Media itself.

He sees that popular spiritual narratives have become reconceptualised and filtered into a fractured 1990s ‘niche’ landscape. And he considers, more profoundly, that this is reflected in the fact that religion *itself* also is now less the institutional concern it once was and is now become more an individualist one, less about worship and more about “seeking” (2006, p.52). Leaning on Anthony Giddens’ definitions of the fractured nature of the post-Industrial self he states:

“...whereas we once might have looked to a network of social relations in home, school, community, church or family to provide resources necessary to the making of ‘ourselves’, today we think of this as much more our own responsibility...it is all about the self; that it results from self-conscious autonomous action on the part of individuals, and that it is inherently distrustful of received clerical or institutional authority” (2006, p.52).

This process certainly aids the removal of boundaries for satirical purposes and it accounts for the diffusing of authority so commonly associated with the Church. Thus reaction is less all-encompassing. If indeed religious structures are becoming less monolithic then as a result their powers to act accordingly are reduced. With the Church’s reach being now less restrictive it appears then very little can be regarded as a taboo area. *Popetown's* own critiques on organised faith have undoubtedly benefitted from these shifts.

Considering Satire

Popetown actually shares conformity with those previously mentioned standard bearers to Andrew Stott’s useful summation of the satiric form itself. In that they all aim to: “...expose folly and vice and urge ethical and political reform through the subjection of ideas to humorous analysis...(taking) subject matter from the heart of political life or cultural anxiety, re-framing issues at an ironic distance that enables us to visit fundamental questions that have been obscured by rhetoric, personal interests, or realpolitik”(2005, p.109), albeit coming from differing positions that speak entirely of their own industrial/cultural situations. But considering what satire is, or has *become* in this animated context does require some location. Re-figuration is an unavoidable,

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and actually a natural development, very much in line with the fluid nature of Satire's own make-up. But this emphasis on the importance of 'personal space' is a profound marker towards the kinds of satire produced today.

When considering a foundation definition of Satire for this context American forms converge with British voices to provide a panoply of influence that inevitably inform today's animated/live action refractions. Indeed today's US mainstream animation texts inhabit (on the surface) a similar critical territory to the dissertations of Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin and, in particular, Ambrose Bierce's own linguistic treatise, *The Devil's Dictionary* (published in complete book form in 1911) that embodies a consistent American popular discourse on political/hierarchical hypocrisy. That same sense of disgruntlement unites seemingly disparate writers set within earlier British contexts too such as the works of Swift and in Johnson's Juvenalian imitation, *London* (1738) etc. These now-diluted threads of continuity run from poetry to literature into animation. However even those commentators draw from deeper roots. As Dustin Griffin offers the prime model of influence across UK *and* US understandings of the form are the poetics of the Ancient Greeks and Romans.

Built into the very make-up of Satire are continuities of erudition, of a learned perspective, and the central conceit that Murray Davis offers, that Satire should contain "...the moral distinction between the ideal and the real... the distance at which things are from nature, and the contrast between reality and the ideal...the real as imperfection is opposed to the ideal, considered as the highest reality" (1993, p. 101).

Griffin asserts that among the most influential voices on conceptualising this form is that of John Dryden. His part-compendium, part-critical assessment of late Renaissance and Neo-Classical theories considers the nature of a 'perfect' satirical address. In its role in addressing 'the contemporary' Dryden's suggestion that 'evolution' has, and should always be, at Satire's very heart makes a perfect sense. According to Dryden the more playful, bucolic, elegant lyricism located within Horace's *Odes* (35 BC) and exemplified within the template *Qui fit, Maecenas* which proffered a sentimental, ontological essay on the human condition should be fused with the indignant, incisiveness of Juvenal's more specific, more reactionary, hard-edged, urbanised refractions. That was a mode embodied within his late first century works like the *Satire* cycle of poems, that raged against business practices, pollution, environment and general immorality of contemporary Rome (1994, p.20). Humphrey Carpenter clarifies these polarities more directly when he notes that Horacian modes traditionally revolve around "urbane attacks on stupidity" whilst Juvenalian narratives are concerned with "outbursts of malpractice and injustice" (2000, p.92). Although arguably the two forms are rarely mutually exclusive and indeed each mode can contain aspects of both tonal approaches and both form the foundation of latter-day satirical forms.

Yet when considering tone against form then Northrop Frye and Alvin Kernan's conceptions of Menippean satire built on the findings of a Bakhtinian/Rabelasian observation of playful rebellion, also serves us here. Frye sees that Menippea is founded on an ambivalent, less acerbic intent. More prose-based Menippean satire sustains Juvenalian irony through its adherence to conventional storytelling genres and both he and Kernan note that this tradition is derived from Classical Varonian origins. It crosses a range of genre boundaries from "novel" to "romance" to "confessional", as it is a register "written in the third person" and that the attack is "written under cover of a fable" (Kernan cited by Griffin, 1994, p.32). And through its extrovert, often-allegorical dialogue the form posits a more fantastical, open-ended, multi-styled and multilateral narrative voice

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that maintains an Horacian ontological dimension (Griffin, 1994, p.32). And certainly François Rabelais' 1564 *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) both exemplify this mode.

Mennippean satire embraces parody and the notion of the “dialogical” whereby differing perspectives are combined into an unresolved dialogue and it is as Griffin encapsulates, (handily for us to consider within a commercial animation context perhaps), an address that “grows out of the marketplace, not the study” (1994, p.33). This in turn, (not unlike the critical space afforded to the ‘fantastical’ medium of animation), reduces for the reader the bilious sting of the attack. Griffin asserts that this register maintains links with what verse satirists have always done alongside more narrative-based examples in that Satire, in any form, is bound less by rigid structure and more by its moral imperative. Like Dryden's idealised projection he is supportive of the basic tenet that the form should evolve concurrent with society. It should remain nebulous in its formal definitions. And perhaps we also should, as many critics have done since, shy away from offering restrictive definitions and maybe focus more on its deployment within specific contexts.

In terms of commercial television animation's take on Satire this position is useful. The openness of the Menippean tradition adequately allows us to conceptualise Satire within contemporary modes as a hybrid of tonal choices. Aspects of those previous forms prevail with a fantastical, allegorical thread present in our study, *Popetown*, whilst Horacian enlightenment and instruction may appear absent here a Juvenalian invective is discernible within its accounts of institutional corruption. And it is in keeping with traditional limits of Satire in that it offers no real counter-argument tied to any authorial perspective. It presents no restorative or constructive balm to ease societal deficiencies, no solution to institutional incompetence. If Satire is intended, considering Stott's earlier quote, through all of its registers a narrative to provoke change then this fanciful Mennipean/Juvenalian fusion we have highlighted thus sidesteps such a necessity. This fusion may even suggest such a lack of specificity that inevitably promotes ambivalence.

In many ways conversely these continuities can be seen as quotation more than evolution, a summation of what Satire embodies and yet indeed frustratingly repeats the failings of earlier forms. As Swift's cornerstone satirical work *A Modest Proposal* (1729) extols the potential in the selling of poor Irish children for eating as an ironic commentary on the degradations inherent within Irish rule, *Popetown*'s unfocussed attack on any particular incidence or policy suggests a deeper unease that informs this understanding of the boundaries of contemporary satire. *Popetown* often functions through assumption. Thus alongside many other examples of contemporary TV satire, it exists not to expose so much but to merely reaffirm.

Animating Religion

As we consider not only the influence of American animation traditions as well as the roots of Satire but also we have to process the British animation landscape more fully and how that has informed *Popetown*'s arrival. Bearing in mind the fractured production/authorship nature of the UK mainstream animation industry's engagement with religious imagery, perhaps unsurprisingly, has been actually fairly limited. Representations of the clergy tend to be relatively absent and what has emerged fits into two categories.

Religious figures appear predominantly across a multitude of propaganda or educational narratives that are often tied to adaptation or an established literary source and favour an historical bias. As the most prevalent sub-section of animation and religious narrative this is also the most difficult to unpick as information film and adaptation often converge and tone and intent is so varied across a massive range of texts. But prominent examples would be short films like the 1947

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Coming of the Light, directed by Andrew Buchanan to Halas and Batchelor's US funded 1957 film for the Lutheran Church, *The Candlemaker*, shorts like the *Spare a Thought* (1979) cycle by animator Ray Bruce for Oxfam, Christian Aid and Concord Films, Bob Godfrey's *Screen Test* five cartoon series from 1978 and Rashad Alim's *Basics* (1983) which outlines Muslim chants correlating with hand/eye symbolism. We can add to this the Norman Stone live action/animation *Support Your Local Poet* (1975) and *Creation* the 1976 animation "chronological view of the story of The Creation" made by children at Whitby Secondary School (Gifford, 1987, p.264). Adaptation informs Lancelot Speed/E.P. Kinsella's *Old Father William* (1917) which was based on the Lewis Carroll poem and was funded by the Government to promote the National War Savings Committee, definably one of Paul Ward's "national interest" films (2003, p. 70). The 1945 stop motion/puppet film by Sidney Gausden for E. H. W. Productions for Biblical Films, *The Good Samaritan* to the graphic-based and Sue Tee's, *The Vision* (1981), which adapts Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a modern framework for the Church Army veer towards an adherence to more established sources also and this also includes Halas and Batchelor's 1953 *The Owl and the Pussycat* and Edward and Elizabeth Odling's limited animation take on Robert Burns's 1785 poem, *Holy Willie's Prayer* (1961).

Working in tandem with 'live action' examples, it is the second typology that serves us here, that of 'Comedy and Critique' and where *Popetown* conveniently fits. Arguably the early Anson Dyer/Hepworth Production parodies based on Shakespeare texts between 1919-1920, *Romeo and Juliette*, *Ophelia* and 'Amlet' begins this preoccupation which continues through Terry Gilliam's gleefully subversive cut-up animations throughout his *Monty Python's Flying Circus* TV and film career. Gilliam's airborne cardinals and incongruous nun figures culminate in the manifestation of a grumpy God for the 1975 film, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. While this questioning of religious authority extends to more bitter registers through the works of independent animators such as Phil Mulloy it is through the re-emergence of the 'comedy vicar' construct in Nick Park/Aardman's *Wallace and Gromit: The Curse of the Were-Rabbit* (2005) that we are reminded not only of an embedded sense of enquiry as tacit component but also of its status as a perennial across British culture. Indeed this figure too acts a pointer to the kind of critical culture that we function within today. Certainly animator David Hand recognised the capital of 'the foolish cleric' as an essentially 'British' icon when he cast the folk figure, the politically compromised 'Vicar of Bray', in his *Musical Paintbox* series for British Gaumont in 1948, by placing him alongside 'The Henley Regatta' and the playing fields of Eton in a bid to create a definitive picture of Southern England (Gifford, 1987, p.142).

Links between religion, spirituality and irreverence have, as Peter Berger has suggested, flourished continually within Taoism and Zen for centuries and continue within Western indexes. As he offers that a vital part of any search for freedom, wisdom and self-knowledge is the "debunking of all pretensions of grandeur" and that folly, absurdity and aspects of all of these symbolise a coming to terms with the nature of humanities' own weaknesses and inability to conceive of, and attain, divinity (1997, p.43). In British terms critique has often focussed more on the structures of religion rather than faith itself. This is a factor encapsulated by the devious monk morphing into a devil central to Halas and Batchelor's outlining of the discourse between commerce and entertainment in *The History of Cinema* (1956) which actualises a familiar Swiftian satirical discourse of greed and fallibility. And although John Mullan notes that "ludicrous clergymen" (2005, paras 5-19) have thrived across Nineteenth century literature extended from the Simon Martext character in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, responses to orthodoxies are most potently borne from Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of Tub* (1704).

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Swift's responsive piece mediated on the frailties of authority and the Church's lack of connection with society and was expressed through an ironic first person narration. Eugene Korkowski suggests that the officious nature of Swift's "hack" encumbered by an "oscitant and totalitarian bent of mind, incapable of maintaining any complex perspectives" is a persuasive model of pedantry that defined the Church of that period (1975, p.396). As built on a popular tradition of anti-clericalism, this also laid out a template that cemented the notion of clergyman as pragmatic (Bywaters, 1996, p.580). Swift popularised the notion of clergyman as vulgarist, and that what selfish desires lurked beneath the surface was held in check by merely an acknowledgement of propriety. Repressed need is a central comedy mechanism that provokes a response of superiority. James Strachey cites Freud when he offers: "A person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, if he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones" (1973, p.195). Thus the comedy cleric essays unpleasant aspects of our own behaviour in what can be seen as an extension of the comic fool tradition. Maurice Charney reinforces that delusional characters are deemed an essential for comedy. He sees that pretence is to be rewarded with humiliation and exposure in that, "...comedy tends to be deflationary, as the various pretenders are assessed at their true value and put in their place" (1978, p.62). Through focussing on professionals who share "a preoccupation with jargon and technicalities of a profession to the exclusion of its substance" Charney concludes that: "The comic rule is: the more abstract, the more mummified, the better" (p.66) which brings us, (once again), back to a Swiftian dialogue.

In terms of the popular idiom misguided clerics, manipulators and hypocrites have featured prominently in British cinematic comedy up to and beyond the revival found in *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994). Accessing this rich lineage television variants have translated to a range of sitcoms, from satellite figures in *Dad's Army* (1968-1979), to the sketch shows of Dave Allen (1964-1990) and *The Dick Emery Show* (1963-1981) or in more centrally featured within prime-time vehicles like *All Gas and Gaiters*, and its spin off, *Oh Brother*, (1968-1970) to *The Vicar of Dibley* (1994-2007). Although these last examples were essentially deferent towards the Church of England many of them used the workings of monastery/vicarage as a microcosm for the struggles of everyday life. Negotiating the socio/cultural/political shifts of the 1960s these were comic texts that offered a humanising picture of the clergy and cast them as struggling with the same aims as ourselves. (Apart from Allen) rarely did they set about identifying any dialogues of repression, sublimation or indeed critique its role as institution.

However Hat Trick's *Father Ted*, broadcast on UK network Channel 4, is a useful pointer here. As it works from an Irish creative block it discussed the Catholic Church through a more intensely absurdist register and worked on the assumption that repression was open knowledge within Irish culture. For our purposes also the writers Linehan and Matthews also insisted that through the deployment of narrative diversions the show forged links between animation and sitcom. As they highlighted in Ben Thompson's *Sunshine and Putty* a desire to replicate the multiple parallel narratives and structural concerns of NBC's *Seinfeld* (1989-1999) as well as emphasising the role of *The Simpsons* as a major influence (2004, p.193-210). This is revealed through the use of plot diversions or 'cutaways', which are too a feature of Ben Elton, Rik Mayall and Lise Mayer's, *The Young Ones* (BBC 1982). These detours bear little relevance to the central narrative and fulfil an agenda to depart from the theatrical traditions of sitcom. This is made explicit through the digression into the animated child-like interior landscape of Ardal O'Hanlon's character, Father Dougall, in the first episode, *Good Luck, Father Ted* (1995). This is a gesture that marks a breach

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from theatrical traditions and presents an alliance to not only the self-reflexive lineage located within American television comedy but also offers a willingness to cross the boundaries of an on-screen reality habitually dispensed with within animated forms.

A Nostalgic Social Space

It is imperative to consider all of these antecedents before focussing on *Popetown* itself. The titular city is an imaginary place set within the dreamscape of an anonymous schoolboy (played in 'live action' sequences by Rhys Thomas) who, bored by his lesson in an (evidently) Catholic School, is shown in the beginning of each show doodling on his desk. A formal Swiftian quotation is already evident here through the sense of "cognitive dissonance" that Stott notes is a significant formal consideration within *A Modest Proposal* (2005, p.113). That piece is detailed through the mechanism of a third person narrative which compounds an ironic distance and, as a carefully placed conceit, offers Swift's narrator up as the object of derision. This device allows the smuggling of the unacceptable into a seemingly 'sane' register. As blank as he is cast, Swift's narrator does dictate himself as a figure of control but this status is soon discredited by what Charles Kay Smith highlights as a deeper "more powerful covert point of view" (1969, p.144). In keeping with Juvenal's mode of wry detachment a subversion is in operation here in that we the 'civilised' viewer (through our reading of the events within Swift's work and also mirrored within the dealings shown within *Popetown*), undermine the authority of the storyteller with our own (assumed) self-knowledge and informed by our own (more acceptable) moral framework.

As we travel into the drawings at the start of each episode of *Popetown* we are thrust into a caricatured universe which handily refutes the register of direct index. This useful clause adds a buffer of removal from controversy as well as justifying this subjective, impressionistic, child-like fantasy view of Church. This also goes some way to explaining the colourful aesthetic that dominates the show, the pronounced emphasis on scatology as a comic mode and on the shrill humorous register throughout³.

The bland designs of the characters themselves are as unremarkable as to be almost interchangeable in articulation and execution as with any children's television animation seen from over the past twenty years. However like many contemporary animations the embrace of highly detailed three dimensional computer graphics to depict concrete walls, interiors, corridors, outside environs et al is contrasted with a traditional 'squash-and-stretch' approach that is reserved for the two dimensional, cel-animated figures. This is, of course, an aesthetic quantified by Maureen Furniss as being one that not only reflects the physics of weight and gravity and their effects on the human form but also one that effectively conveys an inherently humorous dynamic (1998, p77). However this formal demarcation between continuous and malleable reinforces the larger themes and aids this concept of Church as monolith. The adding of a third dimension is vital in highlighting the prominence of the institution and hints towards the immovable nature of hierarchy, and subsequently the historical transience of the characters. It is authority and power that prevail here. This emphasis on location is complemented by the sweeping pan in each of the credits through the 'Popetown' environs. Narrative segments are linked from 'Gods'-eye' perspective of the town dropping to a ground level which marks the show as not concerned with matters of the Spiritual but more of Earthly issues.

³ That the lessons that this boy is escaping from are led by actor Ben Miller, essaying the comic priest construct note for note, reinforces the notion of postmodern quotation. In that he is over-eager to please, somewhat naive, appears occasionally distracted, self-absorbed and lacks connection, all whilst displaying an awkward relationship to popular culture. This is revealed when thanking children in episode four for his "bling" (Dubernet, 2005) and in episode three urging children in the middle of an unexplained 'chair avalanche' that a sing-song from the controversial band, 'Slipknot', is appropriate (Bachman, 2005).

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Notably what dilutes the show's satiric edge are the ways that social space is fore-grounded. This is demarked through two distinct categories. The first of these is based around ideas of 'expediency'. This is embodied by the tellingly-numbered, rather than named, Cardinals, (Matt Lucas, Kevin Eldon and Simon Greenhall respectively), who organise 'Popetown' and can be seen as a swipe at the type of middle-management structures that in reality provide the *true* power bloc. They see the Church as an engine to feed their own personal gain. In the first episode, 'The Double', the tone is set for the entire series in that they are actively seeking to be involved within the profits to be made from "chemical dumping", to initiate an arms deal with a South American dictator and to manipulate disabled children to serve their aims in image management (Dubernet, Fuhrer and Lucas, 2005). As each *Popetown* instalment presents an almost interchangeable set-up where they are shown attempting to access the 'world's wealthiest' list over names like: 'The Sultan of Brunei', 'Michael Jackson', 'Richard Branson' and the 'Queen Elizabeth 2' among others.

Indeed Cardinal One's statement in the fourth episode 'Trapped': "...we haven't got time for ethics" (Bachman, 2004) could be a mantra for the entire series. This reveals to what extent they are happy to exploit the moral trap door open to them via confessional and also through the institutional and faith-informed protection mechanism of "inclusion" that Graham Spencer defines as being a founding concept within Catholicism (2009, p.59). Forgiveness is an expectation as much as a safety apparatus. This pragmatism also can be seen as a fundamental comic incongruity that informs the show in the conflict of a system that favours dialogues built around imagination and mysticism rather than the unethical 'wordly' dealings that are relentlessly detailed here (2009, p.71).

The second category of social space apparent in the show is that of 'unity'. Linehan and Matthew's *Father Ted* posited that Church is simply a brotherhood of misfits with individual preoccupations connected only by a dog collar. The main thing is that there, (as here), the clergy tended to talk about everything *but* faith. *Popetown* itself is a continuation of this and of the broader sitcom tradition of hierarchy as family, as suppressant and as support mechanism. Indeed the show's ties to Linehan and Matthews are striking as social, career and familial "stasis" profoundly informs their show (Linehan cited by Ben Thompson, 2004, p.196). In its own way this acknowledges another side to this dialogue about 'belonging', that Spencer notes: "...in contrast to the Protestant tendency towards fragmentation, individualisation and separation, Catholicism places theological emphasis on unity as a basis for social action and obligation". Here being a part of something larger than any individual references the all-encompassing divine role of community (2009, p.55).

Father Nicholas' (Bob Mortimer) assistant, Sister Marie is noteworthy here. She is voiced by Morwenna Banks through a messy hybrid of Northern and Southern Irish accents and is depicted formally across each episode as a series of floating circles substituting a feminine shape and is engaged in constant energetic movement. She is not only entirely defined by her position but she appears as somehow inconceivable existing away from *Popetown* in any meaningful fashion. In being emblematic of not only a restrictive patriarchal system, she is also a manifestation of the weight of her role, essaying the sense of "communal responsibility" as detailed Spencer's conceptualisations (2009, p55).

Deepening our understanding of this category of 'unity' are also considerations of 'retreat'. The dysfunctional Papal figure placed in Nicholas' charge is one of several diverging animated depictions that have surfaced recently from the Vatican-sanctioned bio-pic by Jose Luis Lopez-Guardia, *John Paul II: The Friend of All Humanity* (2006), to the corrupted papal figure who indexes the global network of apathy and negligence featured in Hungarian director Áron Gauder's

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Nyócker! (*The District!*) (2004) and Tony Moore and Robert Kirkman's web-based, *Battle Pope* (2008), for Spike TV which is derived from their own 2000 comic strip featuring a womanising, violent, hard-drinking superhero 'Pope'. *This Pope* (Ruby Wax) too is a central figure yet curiously also a marginal one within 'Popetown's' organisation. Devoid of accountability, this is a regressive, amoral, uncontrollable, malevolent, outwardly violent, childlike male maintained in an emotionally and intellectually retarded, fractious state by the Church itself. This is detailed in episode one, 'The Double' (2005) through the manipulations of the PR-savvy Cardinals who seek to maintain a constant, deliberate distance between The Pope and any visitors to 'Popetown'. He is protected as a figurehead who is revealed to the world primarily through inference. He is given no charge other than to merely *exist*. With his adult role diminished his removal from survival or responsibility imperatives he is yet another cartoon creation that functions as an expression of its own unchecked internal desires free of moral/social propriety.


If, as Korkowski suggests, that the very use of the term 'tub' in Swift's *A Tale of Tub* infers containment, then parallels can be drawn in the manner by which the characters are forced to interact within *Popetown*. Swift's satire on Christian fallibility and intransigence continues with a conception of the "shell of the pulpit" providing sanctuary and protection (1975, p.395). Thus, along with the sexual deviant, Father Bosche, the characters here conduct their affairs unchallenged by a system that continues to support them and maintain them. On one level there is a surface, broad critique at work here about the protective space that Catholicism offers, on the other this is still couched in the blandest of terms to serve the projection across televisual markets that arguably could be applied to any major institution. Any engagement with a specific political debate, event or position is through inference than actualisation.

The characters are so removed from secular society that this notion of social space as retreat inevitably suggests here a nostalgic dimension at work. Critics such as Pam Cook have sought to retrieve nostalgia from common perceptions about its regressive, non-progressive nature and highlighting it as a more positive reminder of our emotional, active, subjective connections to history (2005). However this example presents correlations more in line with Frederic Jameson's ideas around the term and this is where the heart of the issue resides. For Jameson Nostalgia works as a 'cure' for modernist metanarratives that he sees as now missing or undermined within our fractured contemporary culture. In replaying aspects of lost modernism this gesture of "nostalgic pathos" acts as a balm to alleviate disconnection and disassociation (1991, p.156). The show is comprised of an amalgam of distant, cross-cultural 'memories' of Catholicism that also brings us back around to Hoover's thoughts on contemporary religion as a component in our fragmented, subjective, revisable post-modern selves set within a landscape no longer dominated by block socio/political concerns. To restore cohesion those unwilling to embrace such a universe of self-determination would no doubt find solace within this repressive system. The certainty of structure that 'Popetown' offers to its inhabitants, (and in turn to its audiences), is a nostalgic ideal defined by 'totality' and 'linearity' that is at once reactionary as it is seemingly irreverent.

Final Thoughts for the Day

It may then not be entirely surprising that retreat defines *Popetown*. It's failings as satire have been repeated throughout much UK TV animation from *Monkey Dust* to *2D-TV* in that too often the specifically 'political' is sacrificed more for the 'personal' and the 'social'. And there also appears to be a missed opportunity in the show's exploitation of the visceral potential of what has been a perpetually misunderstood medium within mainstream settings through its refutation of critique in service to compromise. The balance is tipped more in favour of revelling in The Child/Pope's psychotic behaviour and in mapping out boundaries of social acceptability rather

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than highlighting specific moral or institutional concerns. Whilst the formal alliance with allegorical Mennipean modes and the continuation of a Juvenalian conservative outrage hints towards both American and British satirical traditions palpably it seems that contemporary UK animation too often ignores a Swiftian precision and intent to assume a de-centred, blankly oppositional stance that rarely rises above the childish. *Popetown* lays claims to satire through irreverence and ambiguity. It circumnavigates solutions and avoids the larger questions that are raised around the Church and indeed institutions in general. It merely reiterates that organised religion is self-serving, patriarchal, fiscally-orientated and repressive. In today's current climate this as empty a statement as any unsubstantiated consensual scepticism based around the veracity of news reportage or the untrustworthiness of politicians, hardly in themselves satirical discourses and perhaps here a gesture that reveals the degradation engendered around contemporary readings of the term 'satire'. 

Van Norris has been Senior Lecturer in Film and Media Studies at the School of Creative Art Film and Media, University of Portsmouth, England since 2003. He is currently completing a PhD thesis, *Drawing on the British Tradition: The Mapping of Cultural Attitudes and Identity and the intersection with Comedy Modes employed within British Television Animation*. This paper was presented at *The Persistence of Animation*, the 21st annual SAS conference, held at SCAD Atlanta, 10-12 July, 2009.

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