# Distorted Recognition: On the pleasures of televisual historical caricature

## Introduction

A straitjacketed figure is wheeled on a vertical trolley through a dank corridor lit by flickering fluorescent tubes. A low-angled medium close-up reveals the bottom half of a royal blue skirt, and sensible black high-heeled pumps. After the trolley comes to rest, the porter lifts from the figure a full-face mask, reminiscent of the one worn by Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991). The face revealed is not Hannibal Lecter’s. It is a woman’s. She has a red-lipsticked, downturned mouth, over which a sinister, cool smile plays. Her eyes wear pale blue pastel shadow. Her ears are bejewelled with tasteful pearls. The strawberry blonde hair atop is teased into a tall perm. When she finally speaks, it is in a low, slow voice with a lilting, arhythmical cadence that allows her to emphasise firmly her increasingly bizarre anti-socialist arguments. Any viewer familiar with her image and voice can see that this is supposed to be Margaret Thatcher. And yet, this is not an accurate impression. The makeup and hair are less subtle than the real-life Thatcher’s. The voice’s soft authority is drawn out into a barely comprehensible drawl. The political sentiments voiced in the dialogue constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of Thatcher’s well-known social views. This isn’t an impersonation of Thatcher at all. It is a caricature.

This scene appears in *Psychobitches* (Sky Arts, 2012 – 2014), a British sketch comedy programme whose central conceit is that famous historical or mythical women are offered diagnosis and treatment by a contemporary psychiatrist (Rebecca Front). The structure of sketch comedy demands that characters, whether recurring or one-off, should be instantly recognisable, their characteristics made transparent through costuming, make-up and performance. Think, for example of Vicky Pollard (Matt Lucas) in *Little Britain* (BBC Three/BBC One 2003 – 2007), who is easily identifiable for her pink tracksuit, high ponytail and permanent scowl.  When the characters in question are portrayals of real people, they become caricatures. Notable examples of such televisual caricature include *Spitting Image* (Central Television, 1984 – 1996) and *Dead Ringers* (BBC Two, 2002 – 2007). In these cases, caricature is used to satirical ends, to critique agents of contemporary politics or popular culture. This is in keeping with Judith Wechsler’s argument that ‘no artistic effort is as clearly linked to its time as caricature, and no aspect of caricature is as ephemeral as its humor.’[[1]](#endnote-1) However, this article takes as its focus series, like *Psychobitches*, which engage in caricature of *historical* figures. Along with *Psychobitches*, I will explore the form and function of historical caricature in *Horrible Histories* (CBBC 2009 -), the television adaptation of the popular non-fiction children’s books, and *Drunk History* (Comedy Central UK, 2015 -), a British version of a US format in which comedians and media figures tell stories from history in an intoxicated state, their words lip-synced by costumed actors playing out the scenes they describe.

Televisual caricatures represent an extension of a long history of the pictorial caricature in western culture. Art historian E.H. Gombrich placed caricature prominently amongst other forms of pictorial representation in his seminal work *Art & Illusion*.[[2]](#endnote-2) He theorised the psychological function of caricature for both artist and beholder, arguing that the ‘beholder’s share’, the active contemplation of the viewer, is especially relevant for the caricature. It is crucial that the perceiver possesses a certain basic knowledge to be able to decode the distorted image and understand its critique of its subject. Caricatures work to reveal the vexed relationship between truth and illusion, since they are an anti-mimetic artform that are nevertheless often viewed as a ‘truthful’ representation of its subject. Caricature has posed a similar paradoxical question for experts in the psychology of facial recognition: how can images that are obviously distorted and non-veridical be so readily recognised by the perceiver? The results of these explorations, and the theoretical concerns they raise will be discussed in the first section of this article, and compared with the workings of the moving image (as opposed to pictorial) caricature. They will be considered in relation to British television and cinema’s use of comedy in representations of history as a form of historiographical query.

Televisual caricatures are not performed in a vacuum. Sketch series use a range of paratextual and structural features to aid in the recognition of the figures portrayed and to situate them in the ironic or incongruous contexts that produce comedy. Forms of paratextual framing will be analysed, alongside specific strategies of costuming, make-up, and performance. One of the central pleasures offered by these historical caricatures, I will argue, is that of ‘distorted recognition’; the pleasure of identifying a historical figure from a non-naturalistic, exaggerated version.

The essay will conclude by exploring the role of taste and cultural competence in the pleasures of televisual caricature. The role of pre-existent cultural knowledge – ‘the beholder’s share’ - in the consumption of the caricature suggests that it has an unusual relationship with cultural capital. Because historical caricature combines the relatively high-brow subject matter of historical representation with the more low-brow comedic conventions of exaggeration and grotesquery, it implicitly appeals to tastes which cross the hierarchical cultural divide. Possessors of such taste have been theorised in recent years as ‘cultural omnivores’, as broad-minded yet still discriminating consumers of cultural products across high- and low-brow fields of production. Though the concept is contested, studies of cultural ‘omnivorousness’ have tended to agree that traditional high-brow consumers (that is, social agents who would be considered to possess high levels of cultural capital) apply rarefied, ironic or ‘knowing’ patterns of consumption to the low-brow products they enjoy. The article will explore the ways in which televisual caricature deliberately appeals to this ‘knowing’ gaze, implicating the viewer in a distanced critical relationship to the portrayed subjects. Caricatures, both pictorial and televisual, require of the beholder both the cultural competence to decode the distorted image and the flexible disposition that can appreciate the unruly intentions of this image. The article will attempt to uncover the dissident pleasures of televisual caricature: of instant recognition, of challenging distortion, and of questioning cultural assumptions and historical ‘knowledge’.

## Caricature as representational strategy

What precisely is being described in the word ‘caricature’? How can it be distinguished from other, closely related representational practices such as grotesquery, stereotyping, or portraiture? Portrait caricature tends towards the grotesque, as its focus on distorting apparent ‘weaknesses’ in facial features often results in ghoulish, vulgar or abject images. Caricature and stereotype share the tendency to simplify through exaggeration, and can bear similar implications of such simplification. Both terms are used (sometimes uncritically, as Steve Neale notes of stereotyping) to negatively evaluate portrayals in popular culture that are distanced from the complexities of ‘real’ human lives.[[3]](#endnote-3) This leads to the critique of perceived caricature, especially where it is apparently unintentional. We can see this, for example, in the critical responses to biopics, such as Christian Caryl’s assessment of *The Imitation Game* (Morten Tydlum, 2014)*:*

To anyone trying to turn this story into a movie, the choice seems clear: either you embrace the richness of Turing as a character and trust the audience to follow you there, or you simply capitulate, by reducing him to a caricature of the tortured genius.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The inferences are clear here: caricature is the opposite of richness, and does not flatter the intelligence and agency of the audience. When a performance is described as a ‘caricature’, the term is usually employed to accuse the actor of exaggeration, lack of subtlety or engaging in stereotyping. This assumes that the intention of the performance was one either of mimesis – of accurately portraying this specific historical figure – or of naturalism – of convincing the viewer that this is how that person would or could have acted in a given situation. It presumes that a caricatured performance is less effective, affecting or valuable than a ‘straight’ one. I reject this conception of caricature. Instead, I consider Gillian Rhodes’s definition to be more useful, as it distinguishes caricature from two of its major familial connections:

The essential features of caricature therefore appear to be *exaggeration* and *individuation*: a caricature differs from a *realistic portrait* by its deliberate distortion, and from a *grotesque* by its representation of a known individual.[[5]](#endnote-5)

This specifies the two key pleasures that are under scrutiny here: recognition and distortion.

These features are crucial to the origins of caricature, which E.H. Gombrich traces to late-sixteenth-century Italy, particularly the work of Annibale Carracchi. His cartoon-like line drawings of faces with exaggerated features were described variously as ‘ritratti carrichi’ or ‘caricatura’, the latter meaning ‘charged’. The result of these ‘charged’ likenesses was a comic sensation, where the distortions were used as critiques of the subject, who was ‘unmasked’ by the exaggeration of his weakest features. Gombrich noted that this early iteration of portrait caricature coincided with the growth of the pseudoscience of physiognomy, the belief that human character can be determined from analysis of a person’s physical appearance, particularly their facial features. This contributed to the sense that the antimimetic practice of the deliberately distorted portrait could nevertheless have a privileged relationship with ‘truth’. As Gombrich summarises, ‘caricature, showing more of the essential, is truer than reality itself’. [[6]](#endnote-6) At its beginning, then, one of the central paradoxes of caricature emerges: how is it that a clearly distorted portrait can not only be easily recognisable, but indeed more effective than a mimetic representation?

In a different disciplinary context, Gillian Rhodes explores how cognitive psychology might help account for the distorted recognition paradox. Rhodes applied experimental psychology to the question of the relationship between caricatured images and ‘face space’, the area of the brain associated with recognising familiar (and consequently not recognising unfamiliar) faces. Faces represent a problem in terms of object recognition in that they are all relatively similar to one another in terms of their key features such as shape and size (the ‘homogeneity problem’). Deviation from a norm is therefore helpful for accurate recognition, which Rhodes argues is the key to the effectiveness of caricature, since norm-deviations are precisely what are exaggerated in these images. However, this does not account for the *superiority* of caricature over mimetic representations for recognition, which is Rhodes’s central concern. She raises this intriguing possibility:

Are caricatures easy to recognise simply because of their distinctiveness, or do they match our memory representations of faces in some more specific way? Perhaps those representations code how each face differs from a norm or average face, which is precisely the information exaggerated in a caricature. Perhaps our memory representations are themselves caricatured.[[7]](#endnote-7)

This view is complicated both in Rhodes’s 1996 study, and by subsequent work by Michael B. Lewis.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, the concept that our memory’s store of facial images may tend to distort them is intriguing when broadened out from specific images in the individual mind to the culturally shared images of popular memory. In the case of historical figures this puts particular stress on the circulation of popular images that form the shared ‘mind’s eye’, which itself is always already distorted.

The strongest example of this is Henry VIII, whose striking features render him one of the English monarchs whose image is the most easily accessible. Most representations of the king draw on a limited range of images, the most important being Hans Holbein’s 1540 portrait. The features here – Henry is large and imposing, has a bushy ginger beard, a high hairline, wears a soft feathered hat and a gold chain – are replicated in most portrayals of the King, and certainly inform the performance of this historical character in each of our sketch comedies. In each portrayal, an overweight actor or padding is used to emphasize Henry’s size, the actor wears a false red beard, is clothed in a doublet, tights and furs, outsized jewellery and a feathered hat. The recollection of the Holbein image is crucial to the pleasurable recognition of the distorted version, lending credence to the concept that this is the caricatured image drawn on in the ‘face space’ of cultural memory.

There are a number of sketches in *Psychobitches* which play on the role of the image in the mind’s eye and its distance from ‘reality’: Egyptian Queen Nefertiti (Zawe Ashton) is revealed to be concealing a huge cylindrical head beneath her famous headdress; Whistler’s Mother (Frances Barber) is not the austere figure pictured in his portrait, but wears bright, sexually suggestive clothes underneath her black dress; and the reason we see only one side of the Girl with the Pearl Earring (Alexa Chung) is because her right ear is comically enormous. In each case, recognition of the original image, and acknowledgement of its limitation is drawn on to create the caricature. As Adam Gopnik points out, the fact that we are able to recognise not only the subject of the image but also that it is deliberately exaggerated, despite ‘matching’ the distortions of stored face-space memories, implies that the human mind has ‘knowledge about its own perceptual functioning.’ For Gopnik, this is crucial to the comedy of the caricature:

That’s why we find caricatures *funny*: we recognise that an artist has somehow tapped into the tendency of the mind to exaggerate, generalize and simplify, and has made these tendencies explicit.[[9]](#endnote-9)

While it has not been conclusively proven that the ‘mind’s eye’ stores images in ways that are caricatured, the relationship between perceptual self-awareness and the effectiveness of caricature is clear. This need for mental energy renders the caricature a more sophisticated cultural form than at first glance. It is also central to the satirical function that caricature developed over time.

Judith Weschler notes that when the Italian convention reached England in the eighteenth century it was combined with a repertoire of ‘visual metaphor, personification and allegorical attributes’ that made the goal of caricature explicitly political, ‘using appearance to attack appearances’. [[10]](#endnote-10) Associated with artists like Hogarth and Cruikshank, caricature became a visual complement to the rise of social and political satire at this time. Like satire, the goal of caricature becomes to weaken through ridicule, to use ironic exaggeration to reveal the follies or vices of the rich and powerful. The televisual caricature of aristocrats and monarchs in our examples demonstrate that these intentions have endured, even where the distance in time between subject and portrayal may blunt their effects. Terry Deary, the creator of the *Horrible Histories* brand specifically acknowledges iconoclasm as one of the books’ chief objectives, stating, ‘I set out to demythologise the idea of royalty, and the idea of a king dying on a toilet does that.’[[11]](#endnote-11) Margaret Scanlon equates this desire to subject elites to ridicule with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, the temporary dissolution of conventional cultural boundaries. This description may be extended more broadly to the caricature, in its reduction of the elite to abject corporeal form.

The historical precedents for televisual caricature strongly align it with the dissident intentions of satire. Indeed, satire is primary mode through which televisual caricature has been explored, thanks largely to the influence of *Spitting Image.[[12]](#endnote-12)* However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the satirical work of caricature has been limited to comment on current affairs and contemporary politics, as British moving image culture has a parallel tradition of caricaturing historical figures as part of historical comedies such as *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (Alexander Korda, 1933)or *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983 – 1989). As Barbara Korte and Doris Lechner note, one of the effects of historical comedy is to encourage a critical view of historiography, to offer the audience an opportunity to look askance at hegemonic historical narrative.[[13]](#endnote-13) Marcia Landy describes this as ‘counter-official historicizing’. [[14]](#endnote-14) Not only are alternative (fictional) historical stories being offered, but turning the comedic lens on historical events suggests that the narrativisation of history should be questioned. Historical comedy and caricature, then, share the effect of using ridicule to critique, question or undermine both those in power and the underlying structures that support the wielding of that power.

Korte and Lechner argue that comedic histories on film and television have a formational effect on the public’s memory, and can shape perceptions of historical actors in much the same way as Gombrich argued that caricatures can reshape perception of a caricature’s ‘victim’:

because his picture is linked inseparably in our minds with the caricature we have seen. We have been taught by the artist to see him anew, to see him as a ridiculous creature.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Here, televised caricature can be seen as engaging in the contradictory construction of what Steve Anderson calls ‘popular memory’, the culturally shared sense of history that includes both official and ‘counter-official’ histories.[[16]](#endnote-16) For example, *Horrible Histories*’ Elizabeth I – bad-tempered, spoiled and childlike - borrows extensively from Miranda Richardson’s mercurial Queenie in *Blackadder.* Rather than returning to the ‘official’ historical record of the Queen’s temperament – which the programme explicitly reiterates is unreliable - *Horrible Histories* uses a shorthand intertextual reference to relate the portrayal to the most accessible comedic performance of Elizabeth in popular memory. However, as Jerome de Groot has noted, there is not universal acceptance of the popular memory paradigm within historiographical study. Some historians have viewed the televisual caricature available in *Blackadder* negatively, as it has perpetuated popular myths around certain historical figures such as Field Marshal Haig: ‘The show was being used as evidence in a historiographical debate, demonstrating the increasing influence of popular culture on historiography.’[[17]](#endnote-17) The negative view here is tantamount to an anti-postmodern stance, opposed to the ‘gleefully postmodern’ historical television comedies including *Horrible Histories* and *Psychobitches* on which, as James Leggott notes, *Blackadder* is a clear influence*.[[18]](#endnote-18)*

The televisual caricature, then, belongs to a tradition in art history of the use of the grotesque and exaggerated portrait to undermine its subject, and a tradition in British comedy that looks sceptically at historical figures and asks the viewer to question their own historical knowledge. However, close inspection of the caricatures themselves in the contexts of the sketch comedy series reveals the specific ways in which televisual form and paratexts, costuming and performance enable these caricatures to function.

## Televisual Caricature: Paratexts, Costume, Performance

As Gombrich notes, recognition is a minimal requirement for the effectiveness of the caricature, since it ‘reveals its true sense to us only if we can compare it with the sitter, and thus appreciate the witty play of “like in unlike”.’[[19]](#endnote-19) It stands to reason, then, that the viewer of the televisual caricature must have some awareness of the historical figure, both in terms of their image and key aspects of their biography, in order that jokes at their expense make sense. Paratextual framing devices are utilised to facilitate such recognition in each programme, drawing on television’s specific stylistic possibilities and conventions in order to effectively convey necessary contextualisation for the short sketch.

*Psychobitches* employs two central strategies for contextualising the subjects of the sketches sufficiently that they can be recognised and their biographies understood. The first is the simple use of brief close ups of the psychotherapist’s diary to announce who will be the subject of the ensuing sketch. This is an efficient means of setting up expectations drawn from the cultural associations with the famous subject that are to be undermined or exaggerated in the caricature. The second strategy is tied into the conceit of the programme. The therapy setting of *Psychobitches* suggests that superficial ‘knowledge’ about a subject is inferior to the internal ‘truths’ of a psyche, in a mirror of the role of the caricature of externalising such inner ‘truths’. This endows the therapist with a privileged relation to truth in the programme, since she is able to see clearly facts about her ‘patients’ that they are unable or unwilling to see themselves. Her dialogue is used to provide key details of the ‘patient’s’ biography, usually framed vaguely within a therapeutic discourse that draws attention to their parentage, childhood or traumatic events from their life. This both aids recognition of the caricatured figure and sets up the punchline for jokes, and is particularly useful when the subject is not perhaps especially well known, as in the example of a sketch about Hildegaard von Bingen (Michelle Gomez). The therapist outlines the reasons why the medieval composer, polymath and nun who was passed over by the Catholic church for sainthood for nearly 800 years, may have some unresolved anger. This rather lengthy summary of Bingen’s biography is delivered in a series of shots of the therapist and reverse shots of Bingen, in which she calmly listens to the litany of her achievements in an upright, poised posture. This prepares the punchline, the answer to the question of how she feels about the Church, to which Gomez sings “fuck them” beatifically in the plainsong style of Bingen’s compositions. The dialogue sets the behaviour of the subject as incongruous with the expectations of the historical figure.

*Drunk History*’s structuring joke, that inebriated comedians are in ‘charge’ of the historical story under scrutiny, provides in itself a context in which historical figures are likely to be exaggerated in the narration. The programme therefore begins with a voiceover disclaimer (by comedian Jimmy Carr) that asks the viewer to apply discretion in terms of their acceptance of the historical ‘knowledge’ that will be imparted throughout:

“The following stories are all based on genuine historical events. However, the comedians telling the stories are drunk, so the facts may have been embellished.”

The effect of this disclaimer is not only to discredit the ‘historians’’ voices on the programme, but also to warn that the re-enactments that are displayed should be viewed critically. This draws on and undermines a familiar convention from factual television that in ordinary context is used to gain (or, perhaps, gainsay) the trust of the viewer. Undermining this trust pact in the context of *Drunk History* is a means of enhancing the comedy, as well as demonstrating that the portrayals of real people in the programme should be questioned, and will be exaggerations rather than truthful or mimetic impersonations.

*Horrible Histories* shares with *Drunk History* the use of the on-screen graphic that explicitly confirms or denies the truth claims of the sketches that are being performed. A puppet rat called Rattus Rattus appears on screen during sketches with a sign that tells the viewer that what they see is ‘true’, and occasionally also admits that the performed actions are simply ‘silly’. Rattus Rattus is also used to link different sketches in short segments where he directly addresses the camera, delivering short snippets of factual information like dates or brief descriptions of historical events or people. Like *Psychobitches’s* therapist, Rattus Rattus has a privileged relationship with truth, and is used as the arbiter for the audience between the exaggeration and reality. He remediates the voice of the author in the original children’s books, which encouraged readers to take a sceptical view of historical knowledge and to consider historical subjects with empathy as well as critical distance. The use of a puppet rat to perform this role in the series is significant inasmuch as it reduces the reliance on an omniscient ‘narrator’ or the imposing figure of the (white male) historian.

*Horrible Histories* as a whole media text is predicated on encouraging critical historiographical reading in the child reader:

A noteworthy feature of the series is its recognition of the disputed nature of historical knowledge. Readers are alerted to the fact that the past can be interpreted in different ways – something which historical documentaries often fail to do.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Indeed, often the entire purpose of sketches in the series is to remind the viewer of how certain histories become distorted then privileged through diachronic cultural circulation. In one such skit, the ghost of Richard III (Jim Howick) appears before William Shakespeare (Matthew Baynton) to repudiate the factual inaccuracies through which the play defames him. He begins by disputing the famous physical traits of the Shakespearian king – the limp, hunchback and withered arm. Shakespeare admits to constructing a physiognomical caricature of the king, arguing that these are symbolic and that Richard was ‘evil’. Richard’s ghost wields historic fact against the ‘evidence’ Shakespeare offers to support his characterisation, such as his supposed murder of the Duke of Somerset who died when Richard was three years old. This is supported by onscreen overlaid signs which assure the viewer that ‘The Ghost is Right’. Through sketches like this, the series points to the ways in which historical knowledge can be distorted through fictionalisation and caricature, though stopping short of explicitly acknowledging the irony of this attitude in a programme that does precisely that.

Each programme incorporates textual and paratextual gestures to ensure sufficient information is given the viewer to be able to make sense of the historical figure being portrayed, but the delivery of this information also encourages a sceptical stance in relation to its truth claims. In the most effective caricatures the support of these cues is not entirely necessary, because information about the identity of the portrayed subject is conveyed quickly through costuming, make up and performance.

Costuming for historical figures must balance an attempt at accuracy with the fact that the image of a historical figure is known only through representations, whether verbal descriptions or constructed imagery. Caricatures thus tend to refer to these images in order to convey the identity of the subject quickly, as with the Henry VIII example above. This sometimes entails drawing on pre-existing *popular* cultural representations. The costuming of Cleopatra in both *Horrible Histories* and *Psychobitches* is a useful example here. The interchangability of actors (even within *Horrible Histories,* Cleopatra is portrayed by both Martha Howe-Douglas and Kathryn Drysdale) indicates that the onus is on the costuming to convey ‘Cleopatra-ness’. Though each has minor variations, in each programme the actress wears a large black wig with beaded braids, a snake- figure headdress, gold dress, and black and blue eye-make up to emulate Elizabeth Taylor’s version in *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963). Costuming is therefore a form of intertextuality, and an ironic guarantor of pleasurable recognition, though not veracity. The costumes in each of these programmes deliberately have a look of the dressing-up box to them, even though the *Horrible Histories* costume designer Ros Little is reportedly ‘so scrupulous that she always wants to know the precise year in which a sketch is meant to be set, so as not to introduce an inexact ruff or skirt.’[[21]](#endnote-21) The pleasure of viewing these costumes is in their very *in*authenticity, their play with history. Costuming marks the paradox of the caricature – to be effective it needs to balance mimesis and accuracy with exaggeration and inauthenticity.

Make-up in the televisual caricature can be used to change the face of the actor into a grotesque. The grotesque is ‘an embodiment of the abject’, and so make-up can be used to emphasise facial and bodily features that are socially unacceptable, such as the traces of disease or injury, obesity or ugliness.[[22]](#endnote-22) This performs the physiognomic function of caricature – to use the body as a centre of critique for the character of the person. For instance, in *Horrible Histories* and *Psychobitches*, the make-up for Elizabeth I emphasises her large nose, pockmarked skin and rotten teeth, despite the fact that available portraits of the queen elide these features in their representation of her (and look more like the portrayals in *Drunk History,* where Elizabeth is played by young actors). The use of this grotesque make-up for the queen allows for the caricatures to act as a corrective to the inaccurate representation of the queen through available portraiture. The distance between the reality of the queen’s abject body and its representation is a source of physiognomic critique, implying her vanity and lack of self-awareness. *Horrible Histories* dramatizes this through a sketch in which the queen (Martha Howe-Douglas) rejects any portraits of herself that do not match up to her aggrandized self-image of queenly beauty. She is horrified by the ‘honest’ image of herself she sees in a mirror (which she mistakes for a portrait), yet approves of a flattering portrait which she demands be copied by her portrait artist. The caricature versions of the queen thus act as a variant on the ‘superportrait’ function of the caricature outlined by Rhodes. They may not be more *recognisable* images of the queen than the officially sanctioned versions, but they claim to be more *truthful*.

In *Psychobitches,* Frances Barber portrays Elizabeth as aggressive, masculine and coarse, using sexualised language to intimidate the therapist. As with the representations of other royals, overstated working class accents (Glaswegian in the case of Mary Queen of Scots, Cockney for The Queen Mother and Princess Margaret) are used to subvert the expectations of what British monarchs should sound like. The contrast between the image of the historical figure and their voice creates incongruity, one of the central tenets of comedy theory. National stereotypes can be used to this end in the caricatured performances, particularly when this aspect of the identity of the subject is key to the sketch’s humour. For instance, in *Horrible Histories* Napoleon Bonaparte (Jim Howick) appears on ‘This is Your Reign’, a parody of *This is Your Life* (BBC / ITV, 1955 – 2007), in which his strong, silly Italian accent is used to underline the biographical fact (presented to the viewer as surprising) that Napoleon was not French but Corsican. Vocalisation can also be employed for the sake of ironic juxtaposition, comparing a contemporary archetype with its historical equivalent. So, for example, the infamy of Nell Gwynne (Sarah Hadland) is presented as a precedent for contemporary media celebrity, thus she becomes the subject of a magazine article, and speaks in a baby-like Essex-accented voice that is strongly reminiscent of media personality Katie Price. One of the central pleasures of *Drunk History* is to see representations of historical figures mouthing contemporary slang (Henry VIII describing Anne of Cleves as “proper fit”, for example). Facial performance is crucial here, not just because the words are lipsynced, but because the limited use of sets (dictated by a low budget) means that the medium close up and close up of actors is the most frequent framing used. The ventriloquized voice of the historical figure, particularly its ironic contrast with their portrayed image, is thus one of the televisually specific aspects of these caricatures.

Alongside their vocal performance, the physicality of the actor is important to the creation of caricature in two ways. The actor’s stature can be used to match certain well-known aspects of the body of the historical figure, as in the relatively short actor Jim Howick portraying the famously (and disputably) diminutive Napoleon Bonaparte in *Horrible Histories.* Here the actor’s body helps with the quick recognition of the character, alongside costuming and contextualising dialogue.Alternatively, the actor’s physical appearance may contradict the body of the figure portrayed, as with Katy Brand’s performance of Diana Dors in *Psychobitches.* Brand’s fat body is used to poke fun at Dors’s star image as a British sex symbol particularly in comparison to Marilyn Monroe whom she mistakenly believes herself to be. Here, the actor’s physicality aids the distorting function of caricature.

Nowhere, though, is this use of the actor’s body to create incongruous representations of famous women more apparent than in drag performance. In both *Psychobitches* and *Drunk History*, drag is used in performances which satirize notions of female beauty. In *Psychobitches,* biblical princess Salome is portrayed by overweight comedian Johnny Vegas, who speaks in his gruff Mancunian accent with no apparent concession to the fact that the character is a famed beauty. The comedy is drawn from the distance between Vegas’s image and the mythical seductiveness of Salome. A variation on this joke is made in *Drunk History*, as the story of the famous disjuncture between the portrait of Anne of Cleves and her real appearance is told economically through the choice of an actor who is not conventionally attractive to portray the queen. As Ben Poore notes, drag performance in historical comedy is not simply a matter of cheap laughs, but also more troubling in its implications about the ‘proper’ place for power and influence: ‘Men dressing as Queen Victoria not only assign to the monarch a rough, unladylike machismo, but simultaneously take the monarch down the social scale.’[[23]](#endnote-23) This applies to other famous and influential women as well, such as Emmeline Pankhurst (Ted Robbins), portrayed as a coarse northerner. This caricature of Pankhurst expands on a truth about her – she really did reside in Manchester’s notorious Moss Side area – and creates incongruity between her origins in this part of the city and her historical importance. The crux of the joke suggests an incompatibility between being a feminist and suffragist and being ‘a lady’, and between working class identity and power and influence. Through the use of the actor’s body and voice in this way, caricatures can draw on underlying social stereotypes for a shorthand ironic juxtaposition.

The costuming, make-up, and paratextual contextualisation of these caricatures lend them their televisual specificity. In each case, though, they draw upon (or help to construct) the knowledge of the portrayed historical figure. Whether the culturally circulated knowledge of the figure will be re-asserted or undermined in the caricature depends upon the extent to which the pleasure is drawn from recognition or distortion. But in both cases, the active contemplation of the viewer is relied upon to create the ironic connections between what is known of the ‘real’ figure and their exaggerated portrayal.

The televisual caricature can thus take the form of a brief, allusive intertextual reference, through costuming and make-up that refer reflexively to other portrayals of a historic figure. However, intertextual references are not limited to this recognition function. Often there are further references to contemporary popular culture rather than history interlaced in the representations in these sketch shows. For instance, the Birmingham accent chosen for Helen of Troy (Julia Davis) in *Psychobitches* subtly alludes to the famous tabloid case of Samantha Brick, a woman from the Midlands who won brief infamy in the UK in 2012 for publishing an article in which she complains of her inability to form relationships with other women because they are too envious of her.[[24]](#endnote-24) Sentiments taken directly from this article are remixed into Helen’s dialogue, sometimes verbatim, as in “my pleasing appearance and pretty smile has made their day”. This satirises a perennial idea - that women are irrationally and constitutionally jealous and vain. Drawing on these connections allows for these programmes to comment on their own culture in precisely the manner that Judith Weschler argues is a critical function of the caricature. This is a caricature not only (not really) of Helen of Troy, but of Samantha Brick.

Multilayer intertextual referencing establishes humorous relationships between present and past, granting the ‘levity that gives us the freedom to move backward and forward in time and to transcend barriers between eras’.[[25]](#endnote-25) *Horrible Histories* utilises popular music parody as one means of creating contemporary resonances:the four King Georges’ histories are potted into a boyband ballad, Mary Seacole’s story is told through a pastiche of Beyoncé’s ‘Single Ladies’, or Charles Dickens’s biography is summarized in the style of The Smiths, with Dickens recast as Morrissey. Facts of the difficult early life of Dickens are alluded to in the song, which pastiches ‘Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now’. For a viewer with enough familiarity with the miserablist style of both Dickens and Morrissey, the conflation of these two figures combines pleasurable recognition with irony. Can child viewers in the 2010s reasonably be expected to recognise the style of an artist whose popularity peaked twenty years before they were born and compare it with the output of an author whose writing they are unlikely to have read? Perhaps not, though, of course, *Horrible Histories* is notable for its appeal to adults as well as children – historian Tristram Hunt described it as ‘cartoon content for adults’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Although the executive producer of *Horrible Histories,* Richard Bradley, stated that the writing team ‘realise[d] that it had to be written 100% for children and not have knowing references aimed only at adults’, the choice of some of the parodied texts for the music in the programme suggests otherwise.[[27]](#endnote-27)

## The ‘Knowing’ Audience: Televisual Caricature, Pleasure, Taste

Bradley’s use of the term ‘knowing’ is noteworthy in this context, as it is used somewhat pejoratively to refer to a kind of self-satisfied mode of reception, in which the viewer’s intelligence is flattered by multiple layers of intertextual referencing. Linda Hutcheon uses the term more positively to describe the viewer of media adaptations:

The term “knowing” suggests being savvy and street-smart, as well as knowledgable, and undercuts some of the elitist associations of the other terms [learned or competent] in favor of a more democratizing kind of straightforward awareness of the adaptation’s enriching, palimpsestic doubleness.[[28]](#endnote-28)

She argues that adaptations are experienced differently by knowing and unknowing audiences, that experiencing adaptations *as an adaptation* allows the adapted text to ‘oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing’.[[29]](#endnote-29) Though Hutcheon’s work on adaptations specifically discounts parody and pastiche (and we could say, by extension, caricature), her concept of the ‘knowing’ audience can be used to discuss the intertextual references at play in the historical caricatures under discussion, the difference being the length of engagement with the ‘adapted text’ that is required. Hutcheon’s understandable desire to distance her ‘knowing’ concept from elitist assumptions about the audience is undermined by the fact that analogous ideas are used elsewhere, in the study of cultural capital. It is no accident that in Pierre Bourdieu’s famous formulation of the function of cultural capital, he argues that knowledge (*savoir*) endows possessors with the capacity to ‘see’ (*voir*) the work of art.[[30]](#endnote-30) Is this really so different from Hutcheon’s ‘knowing’ viewer?

It is important not to lose sight of cultural capital’s function as a ‘set of embodied capacities that is acquired as a socially transmitted inheritance.’[[31]](#endnote-31) Research into the concept has continually stressed the literal meaning of ‘capital’, the ability of cultural knowledge and experience to translate into a social commodity.[[32]](#endnote-32) However, in this context, I am more concerned with the relationship between the cultural competences (savoir) that Bourdieu outlines and taste cultures, and how these are reflected in the pleasures of the televisual caricature.

Television has had an ambivalent career in the study of cultural capital. Tony Bennett has noted the conspicuousness of its absence from Bourdieu onward, arguing that the definitive role of television in ‘transforming the relations between practices in the cultural field’ has gone largely unexplored.[[33]](#endnote-33) Television opened up a world of highbrow arts to a much broader audience than had previously been able to enjoy them, disseminating cultural education on an unprecedented scale while simultaneously becoming the dominant form of mass entertainment. Thus, argues Giselinde Kuipers:

Such hierarchical ranking of taste seems to lose much of its validity when confronted with television’s fragmented and eclectic mixture of information, entertainment, art, play and commerce. [[34]](#endnote-34)

This is not to say that television somehow magically disappears taste hierarchies. The relationship between habitus, taste and programme or channel choice is well-known and central to television’s political economy.[[35]](#endnote-35) Indeed, as Kuipers notes, ‘television, more than any other medium, confronts us with the question of what the mechanisms behind taste cultures and hierarchies are.’[[36]](#endnote-36) These mechanisms are particularly transparent in the targeting of specific taste cultures through channel branding. For instance, *Psychobitches* appeared on the Sky Arts Channel, initially as part of its ‘Playhouse Presents’ strand of one-off television plays, then later as a standalone series. This channel succeeded Artsworld, which was bought out in 2005 by Sky with the explicit aim of ‘changing perceptions’ and targeting what the managing director of Sky Networks, Dawn Airey, described as ‘discerning’ audiences.[[37]](#endnote-37) This euphemistic language hints at the strategy to broaden Sky out to middle-class consumers, continued in 2011 with the founding of Sky Atlantic as the home of HBO television in the UK. The aim here was to legitimise the Sky service in the eyes of high cultural capital consumers, a mechanism that suited the commercial ambitions of the broadcaster and the tastes of this audience.

At surface, *Psychobitches* sits rather oddly in the schedules of Sky Arts, which more usually broadcasts theatre, opera, ballet or arts documentary. However, much of its humour is predicated on the traversal of boundaries between high and low culture which mark it as distinctly televisual and apt for an arts channel that is part of a legitimizing mission for a broadcaster that is usually associated with lowbrow pleasures like sports and Hollywood movies. One of the programme’s first sketches portrays Sylvia Plath (Julia Davis) suffering from a split personality. Her morbid, pessimistic poetic style changes dramatically mid-poem into a comedic, sentimental register as she morphs into her new character. Her accent suddenly changes from a transatlantic drawl to an animated West Country accent, imitating Pam Ayres. This sketch explicitly pits Plath’s modernist, difficult style against the more familiar and comfortable Ayres, the comedy derived from the incongruity of association between high and low culture. A similar joke comes at the expense of Simone de Beauvoir (Sharon Horgan), who reveals to the therapist the plot of her next book, a cheap romance with an obvious, repetitive plot. Pleasure can be found in the distortion of feminist existentialism into popular literature, a playful slaughter of an intellectual sacred cow.

Such sketches, ironizing both high and low culture, address a viewer that can appreciate references to both forms, a consumer who has been described as possessing ‘omnivoric’ cultural tastes in recent studies of cultural capital. The originators of the term, Richard Peterson and Roger Kern, were keen to emphasise that this did not mean the cultivation of an indiscriminate taste for everything, merely an openness towards appreciation which was antithetical to the snobbery associated with highbrow consumption ‘based fundamentally on rigid rules of exclusion.’[[38]](#endnote-38) The concept of the cultural omnivore has been disputed for its lack of solid evidentiary grounding, for the use of tautologous inductive methodologies (wherein taste for items pre-coded ‘high’ or ‘low’ is taken as evidence of high or lowbrow taste), and for the theoretical objection ‘that no adequate reasons are given as to why a capacity for genre ‘grazing’ across high/low boundaries should be more highly prized than other principles of variability.’[[39]](#endnote-39) Other terms such as ‘plurivore’ have been suggested, which remove the methodological issue of pre-emptively coding culture high or low and allow for a greater sense of discrimination between cultural tastes. [[40]](#endnote-40) Clearly, the cultural omnivore thesis, as with all theorisations about the relation between class, taste and the cultural field, refers to the range of an individual’s and a social class’s tastes, and tends not to be applied to the analysis of individual programmes or styles. However, in this case I argue that the concept can offer a useful tool to consider the ways these televisual caricatures address their viewers. The presentation in a sketch show format of jokes that require a certain level of historical, literary and cultural knowledge, suggests a pleasure in the traversal of these boundaries and hybridisation of the stylistic form and content of high and low culture.

Some studies of the cultural ‘omnivore’ have argued for a connection with Bourdieu’s concept of the ‘aesthetic disposition’:

…the apprehension and appreciation of the work also depend on the beholder’s intention, which is itself a function of the conventional norms governing the relation to the work of art in a certain historical and social situation and also of the beholder’s capacity to conform to those norms, i.e., his artistic training[[41]](#endnote-41)

For Bourdieu, a sense of detachment from the consumptive process, an ability to separate personal feeling from the ‘correct’ acculturated response is a key marker of the possession of cultural capital. For studies of omnivoric cultural taste, this ability to range over cultural products from high to popular culture but to retain a sense of distinction via the maintenance of the ‘aesthetic disposition’ has allowed traditional possessors of high cultural capital to enjoy taste in ‘low’ cultural products with no net loss to their cultural capital.[[42]](#endnote-42) Bennett gives the example of the ability of young British professionals to express a taste for ‘crap TV’. In their pejorative classification of the programme, they were able to distance themselves from the cultural artefact sufficiently that they would not be socially ‘tainted’ by their taste for it. Annick Prieur and Mike Savage have used the term ‘knowing’ to describe this disposition

In our view, these developments can be better theorised as a kind of self-reflexive appropriation of culture which we will term as ‘knowing’ to capture its self-conscious capacity to range over cultural forms in an ultimately discriminating way.[[43]](#endnote-43)

This self-conscious, ‘knowing’ viewer is clearly compatible with Hutcheon’s savvy reader of adaptations, a person able to ‘get’ the references, and enjoy the incongruous clash between high and low on offer. It mirrors too Gombrich’s concept of the importance of the ‘beholder’s share’ in the decoding of the caricature, but in this context the disposition is also about the attitude and intentions brought with the beholder on the act of consuming cultural artefacts. Finally it adds weight to Gopnik’s idea that the caricature as a form requires a level of perceptual self-awareness for recognition to function.

The ‘knowing’ viewer is addressed in a number of ways in each programme. Sometimes these are structural devices that have become commonplace in postmodern media. In *Drunk History*, the actors lipsyncing the lines of the drunk comedian frequently break the fourth wall, looking to camera and sharing with the viewer a moment of silent judgement of the drunken narrator. A similar device is also used in *Horrible Histories,* where characters will often break from their sketch to comment to camera about what is taking place. The historical caricature figure is also sometimes used to present quiz questions to the viewer, in a form of direct address. This halts any illusion of temporal specificity, fixing the historical figure firmly in the televisual context. In *Psychobitches,* this ‘knowing’ gaze is implicated in a very short sketch in which Princess Diana (Jack Whitehall) arrives at the door to the office of the therapist, her eyes cast downward in the manner made famous in her television interview with Martin Bashir. The therapist looks at her watch, quizzically, then back at Diana, who says only two words: ‘Too soon?’ Of course, this is a metacommentary on the media discourse around Diana; her posthumous sanctification has rendered her an apparently unfit figure for caricature. The sketch depends on knowledge of this historical and medial context for the functioning of the joke, as well as the shared disposition (of sceptical distance) towards the cult of Diana.

Caricature and television share the ability to confound the logic of cultural hierarchisation. Television offers a cultural form of such range and ubiquity as to change the cultural field. Caricature takes delight in pricking the pretentions of the elite, distorting them into grotesque, abjectly corporeal figures, using a ‘low’ form which nevertheless depends upon sophisticated perceptual awareness and knowledge to be effective. Rhodes argues that such ‘expertise’ is not crucial to the cognitive recognition function for caricatures – they are recognisable without deep prior knowledge of the subject. However, she argues that ‘expertise’ is an important component of caricatures becoming ‘superportraits’. The televisual caricature makes no pretence at mimesis; these are not impersonations. Indeed, in their very superficiality, in their exaggeration of the best known elements of the person being portrayed, the caricatures depend on the raft of cultural associations brought to them by the viewer – the ‘beholder’s share’.

## Conclusion – the pleasures of televisual caricature

I began this essay by positing that the central pleasure available in the (televisual) historical caricature is that of ‘distorted recognition’. The essay traces a path that first analyses the form and function of the ‘distortion’, through costuming, performance style, dialogue and other televisual markers, and then considers the broader meaning of the ‘recognition’ function, through a consideration of the role of cultural knowledge and a particular ‘disposition’ addressed by these performed caricatures. The pleasure of recognition, which flatters the historical and cultural knowledge of the (omnivoric) viewer is combined with the dissident action of distortion, which flatters their ‘knowing’ disposition, their delight in ironic or contrapuntal juxtapositions across time and across hierarchical cultural boundaries.

The role of the caricature here is aligned with its historical function of satirising historical elites – Kings, Queens, Aristocrats and the rich and powerful. Andrew Scott reminds us that, ‘for Freud, the pleasure in caricature is derived from its ridiculing of political figures, even when the image itself is unsuccessful, ‘simply because we count rebellion against authority as a merit’.[[44]](#endnote-44) Re-figuring history’s most powerful in the forms of popular culture, exaggerating their physical and psychological weaknesses, and recasting their flaws in contemporary language, each programme offers a form of dis-empowering critique. The historical caricature also acts as a historiographical metacommentary. As Steve Anderson has noted of popular memory, this dis-empowerment extends to the ‘official histories’ sanctioned by historians:

Rather than simply learning new ways to forget, TV viewers may be acquiring a much more specialized and useful ability – to navigate and even remember their own past with creativity and meaning – even if it goes “against the design” of historians.[[45]](#endnote-45)

As distorted portrayals of the figures from the past, televisual caricatures add to the stock of representations of history, and require this navigational ability of their viewers. They demand a ‘knowing’ look, a scepticism about the ways in which history is told, and a delight in rebellion.

Tristram Hunt argued of *Horrible Histories* that there are ‘more sophisticated, populist ways of getting people involved in history than this.’[[46]](#endnote-46) In this essay, I have shown that the performed caricature is a sophisticated, populist method of historical representation on television, one that ironically draws on a vault of historical knowledge from ‘official’ and ‘counter-official’ historiographies (and, of course, the ability to discriminate between them). Although significant cultural competence is required for caricatures to fulfil their pleasurable ‘distorted recognition’, the performances are nevertheless accessible to adults and children alike. This is because the caricature is, at heart, a form of sophisticated simplification. It is little wonder that one of our central examples is a children’s television programme popular with adults. As Gombrich puts it: ‘in the eternal child in all of us lie the true roots of caricature.’[[47]](#endnote-47)

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