

# Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece)

Lauren Berlant

The inaugural shot of *American Hustle* (dir. David O. Russell, 2013) streams an all-news-all-the-time radio broadcast announcing the onset of neoliberalism. Alliances painstakingly forged in the US postwar period are being abandoned, it reports. New York City is bankrupt and losing ground; a child's been deserted by its mother; and police and fire unions threaten strikes against the city, which claims it's too broke to pay decent wages for protecting property and keeping the law. As this is a film about risking property and breaking the law, we are set up to sense that we're observing the end of many collective systems and dreams.

It is 1979, and Atlantic City too seeks to stay afloat by becoming a gambling capital. *American Hustle* narrates the moment when a few people with power there scrambled to extend the city's archaic promise to float all boats by selling off its resources to the highest bidder. Older practices of white crony capitalism and patronage, ritually cleansed by show trial exceptions decrying corruption, became what is now the ordinary of mass austerity and the privatization of publicly held wealth. As of 1979 the surface of postwar city life remained constant, until it didn't.

The radio's aural tableau of the unraveling of the postwar alliance between the state and the aspirational working class fades to noise as the camera moves toward a pasty, big-bellied white man who is approaching,

Thanks so much to my *Critical Inquiry* coeditors, the participants in the *Comedy, an Issue* conference, and, especially, Hank Scotch, Jonathan Flatley, Sianne Ngai, Chicu Reddy, and Roger Rouse.

*Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017)

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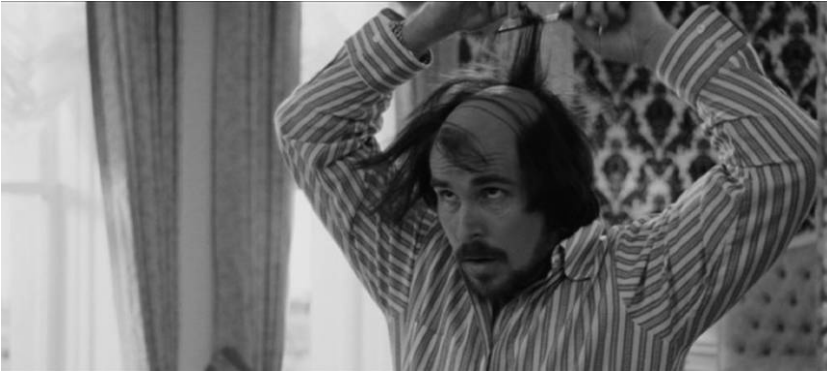


FIGURE 1. *American Hustle* (2013).

open-shirted, a large gilt mirror (Christian Bale, as Irving Rosenfeld) (fig. 1). In this mirror he assembles a massive and architecturally intricate comb-over coiffure. Uneven strands of pitch-black hair move in multiple directions, shooting out and bending across his balding pate. A Brillo-y toupee is glued toward the front with spirit gum, and the rest involves arranging and lacquering the remaining hair on it with aerosol spray, just so. All the while the white man's face is pure gravitas, utterly serious and focused. He is at one with his ambition, honed in on his action. Behind him the room's ornate curtains and furniture look like faded conceptions of what royalty would enjoy in its ordinary life, and the man wears a notably bulbous ring. The atmosphere, in other words, suggests a space where one tries on sovereignty for size.

In the action of the comb-over the world lines up, and everything comes together. It is hard to believe that the project will work; the vast expanse of baldness needs to be filled in and naturalized. But none of that prospect distracts from the intensity of focus around the assembly of hair. The patting, the gluing, the spraying, the interminable forehead, and the man's blank expressionlessness come off at first as comic because he does not appear to get the joke that his idealizing action is a useless fantasy. And, as we know, the person who doesn't get the joke becomes a joke.

But what makes this comedy?

LAUREN BERLANT, a coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*, teaches English at the University of Chicago. She is the author, most recently, of *Cruel Optimism* (2011), *Sex, or the Unbearable* (with Lee Edelman, 2013), and *Desire/Love* (2012).

John Limon would suggest abjection.<sup>1</sup> If so, the abjection that haunts this scene does not point to anyone's radical dissolution, as the term *abjection* would suggest. It doesn't even represent a wretched feeling or posture, necessarily.<sup>2</sup> What abjects this combed-over subject is his refusal to adapt to anything but his own style of adapting to his own fantasy; what makes his appearance comic, when it is, is his insistence on form and, in particular, on inhabiting the form of comedy that, in his view, will allow his imperfect life to appear as a victory over existing.

Motivating this maladjustment thus involves more than the vanity that Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson propose as a key motivating gotcha of the comedic.<sup>3</sup> What makes this opening scene *comedy* is the appearance of a life-glitch plus the tableau of repair it offers that's always teetering on reversal, exposure, and a collapse back into raveling and unraveling at once. This comedy involves not only the incessancy of the protagonist's commitment to his abject striving but also a stark display of the way ambition opens up the ridiculousness of fantasy to a multiplicity of speculative causes and futures.

What makes it *humorless* comedy in an exemplary way is both the person's aspirational thingness and an aesthetics that plays out the searing incongruities of his desire to move toward and away from himself and the world. The painstaking display of reifying ambition and the proliferating microadjustments that preserve his attachment to life—the American hustle—provide a study in an ambivalent style that insists that it is not one.

1. The intention to cover the character's ordinary nakedness, dissembling to delay both his own disintegration and the disassembling of the American Dream, broadcasts "the mimetic degradation" of "the ought" by "the is" that Lisa Trahair sees in the comic (Lisa Trahair, *The Comedy of Philosophy: Sense and Nonsense in Early Cinematic Slapstick* [Albany, N.Y., 2007], p. 11). Reading with and against Julia Kristeva, Limon writes, "When you feel abject, you feel as if there were something miring your life, some skin that cannot be sloughed, some role . . . that has become your only character. Abjection is self-typecasting" (John Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* [Durham, N.C., 2000], p. 4).

2. See Joseph Litvak's analysis of the "fatal humorlessness" of white nationalism in postwar US politics, for example, as it was wielded against the frivolous-abject transgressivity of Jewish-American comedy (Joseph Litvak, *The Un-Americans: Jews, the Blacklist, and Stoolpigeon Culture* [Durham, N. C., 2009], p. 18). His rendition of "American seriousness" and its fear of an abject undoing from "outsiders" provides crucial terms for tracking some affective-aesthetic protocols of American racism; see *ibid.* Zero Mostel's combover could be a relevant shared object.

3. See Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell, (1900; New York, 1914), pp. 172–77, and Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1953–54), 8:25, 195–97. Freud and Bergson have different foci. Freud is most interested in the nonsense joke event and the skewering wit event more than longer narrative forms; Bergson is all over the place in his focus, from laughter, to humor, to particular genres, to kind of object, to kind of subject.

We are all comover subjects; let us put this image at the heart of humorlessness. In its conventional appearance, humorlessness involves the encounter with a fundamental intractability in oneself or in others. In affective terms, it is typically associated with a bracing contraction of relation. Sovereignty is a fantasy of self-ratifying control over a situation or space—a stance that might or might not be sanctioned by norm or law. The sense of relational rigor mortis involved in sovereign-style humorlessness might take on any form representationally, but it is often associated with a tone drained of whatever passes for warmth or openness. This is why humorlessness is associated both with political correctness *and* with the privilege that reproduces inequality as a casual, natural order of things. Humorlessness wedges an encounter in order to control it, creating a buttress of immobility and impasse.

But humorlessness as such is much trickier in its mode of expression than its ordinary American association with one-sided woodenness, flat affect, or severity would predict. Structured by his commitment to a certain mien, the aspirational sovereign can express his humorlessness in many ways: as affectlessness, passive aggression, seriousness, bitter mirth, or any kind of warm emotion, even a smile. What constitutes humorlessness is someone's insistence that *their* version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic; but no particular way of being and sounding confirms its social presence.<sup>4</sup>

In this essay my larger claim is that, whatever else structures it, the comic is motivated by the pressure of humorlessness, with its radical cramping of mobility at the heart of the encounter, whether the encounter is with oneself or with another person, object, or world. The "straight man" of comedy embodies this reduced capacity, but it would be wishful to think that humorlessness is always contained *over there*, in the other person's intractability.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes the straight man is more knowing and capacious than the comic partner, who is caught up and unstable in the machine of his compulsion. Sometimes the straight man is a dope or a fool. Who knows for sure? Humorless comedy depends on the uncertainty of the event's solidity. If comedy always involves a revelation of the mechanistic of being, as Bergson suggests, humorless comedy threatens to expose the ordinariness of a desperately desired, feared, and failed sovereignty machine. But, more than that, humorless comedy is also a

4. On distinguishing between the structure and affective experience of an aesthetic event or encounter, see Lauren Berlant, "Thinking about Feeling Historical," *Emotion, Space, and Society* 1 (Oct. 2008): 4–9.

5. Thanks to Sianne Ngai for inciting this consideration of the straight man's humorlessness.

comedy of confusion about what and where sovereignty is, such that its location and the relation between its inflation and reduction are in crisis and unknowable.

This condisjuncture is a scene where an ambition to be causal without interference meets a radical insecurity about being lonely. It is a scene where the subject experiences a disturbing ambivalence about being known, recognized, attended to, and mattering, an experience of self-incoherence that does not defeat the subject but forever demands microadjustments in the scene of encounter. Humorless comedy offers and threatens the fun of witnessing all that, mixing the pleasure of encountering the awkward, slapstick, incongruous experience of someone else's pathos with the specter of a world-collapse that ropes the spectator into it, a spectator then constituted by the draw of aversion, empathy, identification, disidentification, seasickness, kindness, and a failed kind of numbness, the kind a person feels being jostled in a crowd that's been willingly entered. In this way the comic encounter with the comb-over effect splits from the range of pity-rage affects and cathartic abreaction that might be induced by being pressured to bear someone else's aggressive need; this kind of comedy promises a cushion for identification, the cushion of overdetermination.<sup>6</sup>

These works pull back from being melodramas and tragedies because they conscript identification with *the desire for comedy* that structures the protagonist's action. This might look like an ironic structure, in which the audience discovers before the agent in question does that the fantasy of self-completion is just that, nothing but a wish.<sup>7</sup> Condescension is always in the air in these things—the sour comedy of the *risible*. Yet this comic structure is different from the Hobbesian emperor's-new-clothes paradigm. The emperor's audience can take sheer pleasure in the sovereign's lack of knowledge that he is merely naked, an ordinary wizard.<sup>8</sup> They are

6. Thanks to Chicu Reddy for suggesting attention to the work of noncathartic pleasure and laughter in humorless comedy.

7. Alenka Zupančič explains that central to the comic scene are both the grandiosity of denying one's ordinariness and the spectacle of not admitting the totality of what is in front of one's own eyes, although eyes are not the half of it. This is also where the self-dissociation of subjective disturbance can take on a moral and political charge; see Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), pp. 32, 21. See also Jonathan Lear, *A Case for Irony* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), and Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004), on the ironic activity of affective discernment in its social contexts.

8. See also the countless discussions of Bertrand Russell's phrase, "The present King of France is bald" (Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 14 [Oct. 1905]: 485). Jacques-Alain Miller's analysis of Russell and Jacques Lacan on the bald king proposes a distinction between humor (which comes from the Other) and irony (which comes from the subject); see Jacques-Alain Miller, "A Contribution of the Schizophrenic to the Psychoanalytic Clinic," trans. and ed. Ellie Ragland and Anne Pulis, *The Symptom* 2 (2002): [www.lacan.com/contributionf.htm](http://www.lacan.com/contributionf.htm).

knowing, and he is not; they feel “eminency” in themselves and “infirmity” in him because he is not in on the joke that he is one.<sup>9</sup> He does not know that he has already been humiliated definitively.

In contrast, the combover subject, by revealing to the world some consciousness of the fragility of his power, pushes his spectators to have a morally encumbered relation to him, to see the failed effort in his unfinished success, and to sense the vulnerable and aggressive affect and urges that went into this labor, which is now exposed as failing to be up to code—his own code, which might or might not be theirs. When people choose to protect from shared revelation the tableau of another person’s nonsovereignty they may cycle ambivalently among a cluster of affects, such as distancing, snickering, reluctant feelings of superiority, disgust at physical incongruity, rage at being taken affective hostage (and by a fool), the self-threatening, melting overcloseness of pity or identification, and the tragicomic burden of being forced to lie, whether out of aggression, defense, or care, reluctant or genuine. Usually all of this microadjustment diffuses across the surface of experience, and usually it does not achieve the status of event.

This points to another key set of paradoxes in the scene of humorlessness. The self-amplifying personal style of mimetic sovereignty associated not just with the humorlessness of commitment but with the commitment to humorlessness *requires* a social concession to its claim on the conditions of relation. And like all affects the implications of its appearance are not just singular, defined within a given encounter, but also political, insofar as the privilege to be humorless, to withhold the cushion of generosity, wit, or mutually hashed-out terms of relation is unequally distributed across fields of power, inducing diverse effects and consequences—especially for those identified as bearing threatening or grotesque bodies (women, the sexual, the appetitive, the racialized, proletarians, all associated with “low” comedy, unsurprisingly).<sup>10</sup> As scholars of the Hegelian slave-master dialectic have long argued, the aspirational master’s political location will greatly affect how he is protected from having to suffer the consequences of his sovereign occupation of others’ performance of being knowing. But in all cases the humorless sovereign is

9. Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, in *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic. Part I: Human Nature; Part II: De Corpore Politico, with Three Lives*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (New York, 2008), p. 54. On the different durations of knowing humiliation, I have learned much from Wayne Koestenbaum, *Humiliation* (New York, 2011).

10. On humorlessness and inequality, see Berlant, “Showing up to Withhold: Pope.L’s Deadpan Aesthetic,” in *Pope.L.: Showing up to Withhold*, ed. Karen Reimer and William Pope.L (Chicago, 2014), pp. 107–114.

unsovereign because he depends on the world and others to expedite his sense of the achievement of his fantasy.

In short, the combover is a medium that implies an affectively mixed mode. It redistributes to the scene of encounter the affective pressure of its organizing need, communicating the demand for a shared atmosphere that protects a protagonist from whatever anxiety, insecurity, and drives push him to assemble himself as a thing without holes. This redistribution of humorlessness is no doubt a potential feature of all encounters, insofar as every instance requires managing everyone's aggression—their commitment to a way of appearing and their desire to move a situation in a way that is more bearable and cannot be achieved alone, by will.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, as John Steiner has argued, every encounter with *any* object provides evidence of one's lack of omnipotence in the world, such that one experiences one's very receptivity as a threat *because* one needs the world.<sup>12</sup> (The experience of this structure varies wildly, of course.) There is no getting outside of the situation of managing and testing what to do with one's inevitable, technical openness. This is another way to phrase the concept of defenses.

The point here is that the scene of unyielding self-commitment is humorless. It may or may not be funny ha-ha to the audience for the combover subject to be covering what can't be covered; it may or may not be enjoyable for the audience to feel more knowing than the protagonist; the protagonist's own self-encounter in the scene of organizing his fixities can take on any affect or many, since flooding with shame can be joined by aesthetic pleasure, satisfaction, fantasy and speculation about alternative outcomes, rage at the body or the world, and so on. But as long as the tortured situation of being asked to hold someone's secret and be knowing about it without saying that one induces more gestural adjustment and tact than drama, the modality is comic. The relation between comic and tortured life is bound up in the incessant pressure to defend the combover subject in the scene of survival so as to seem to more than survive it.

For it is not just altruism and the fear of being exposed as cruel in an encounter between subject and subject that motivates keeping the secret of someone else's failed aesthetic or personhood project. There is the need for reciprocity as well. No one wants to deserve to be revealed as too much

11. On the relation among love, aggression, and the ordinary of plotting, see Adam Phillips, "Plotting for Kisses," in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), pp. 93–100.

12. See John Steiner, *Psychic Retreats: Pathological Organizations in Psychotic, Neurotic, and Borderline Patients* (New York, 1993) and *Seeing and Being Seen: Emerging from a Psychic Retreat* (New York, 2011).

of, or the wrong kind of, an event, and that recommends compliance with the injunction to help everyone feel okay in ordinary situations, which is to say, to assist with their not having to *be seen* facing the exposure of humiliation for being unevenly adequate to some norm or other or barred from ever deserving idealization. A fear of countershaming also encourages support for the open secret. In short, the desire to not be in the spotlight of an unavoidably diminishing grotesque amplification usually argues strongly for an immediate, but emotionally complex, concession to the form of good manners. The alternative is an open war of insults (which, indeed, happens in the opening scene of *American Hustle*, when the protagonist meets an enemy who messes up his hair).

Even inauthentic generosity, after all, gives the combover subject a chance to escape with his fantasy of life, which is why some spectators even consider themselves kind and considerate for performing fake inattention to the spectacle of someone else's failed show of adequacy. The affective event of the combover will often be a significantly different thing, therefore, than the aesthetic enjoyment of suffering we call *schadenfreude*.<sup>13</sup> They're distinct when one cannot fully enjoy and support someone else's failed defenses.

Then there is the pressure on speech not to fail. *Schadenfreude* is often accompanied by explicit bodily pleasure, laughter, and taunting—often at the other's loss of humor. But in the combover genre of this kind of encounter, pressure builds from neither telling the truth nor telling the joke about not telling it, which is why people will leak or spray affectively all over the place while they're holding onto such a secret.<sup>14</sup> We have all seen the public pleasure that takes place when what had been an awkward open secret becomes explicit and available for pitiless mirth (see Donald Trump's hair). Usually, though, the mien of the spectators encountering the open zipper or the failed hairstyle of being is pretty solemn.

These very oscillations within the humorless space can also be found in the classic archive of comedy theory and are on offer as the very conditions of the comic, according to the brace of writers from Cicero and Freud to Alenka Zupančič, Joseph Litvak, and Simon Critchley.<sup>15</sup> However, virtually

13. See David Simon, "An Apology for *Schadenfreude*; or, Montaigne's Laughter," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 250–80.

14. Eve Sedgwick discusses this phenomenon of pressured truth telling to the person deemed overweight (who must not know that she is); see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, in Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little Understood Emotion," in *Tendencies* (Durham, N.C., 1994), pp. 215–51.

15. I write here of Bergson's organic/mechanical toggle; Zupančič's shortcut between the comic process and the real; Simon Critchley's belief in the flip between finitude and infinitude; Freud's sense of repression and what escapes it; and Georges Bataille's shift between the



all comedy theorists are structuralists. To them, the comic encounter is defined by who is up and who is down; what's repressed and expressed; known and disavowed; hidden and surprising; free and unfree; functioning and malfunctioning. The comedy door hits you on the way in and on the way out; it collapses distances; it laughs at impasses and other failures of movement; it forces displays of resilience (sometimes positively, as repair—sometimes against better judgment, as in satire). It merges cruelty and the genuine pleasure of being in unison with something—a person, people, or a world.<sup>16</sup>

What makes this essay's opening scenario a specific contribution to comedy theory generally is its location of comedy in the *copresence* of structuration and collapse, and its attention to the multiplier effect of comic disturbance. My interest is in flooding: the way a scene of disturbance lets into the room multiple logics of frame switching, temporal manipulation, status scale shifting, identification, and norm-agitating gestural events. If *only* the world were *x* and its other. If only causes led to effects. If only life produced flow, then blockage, then flow. The combover exemplifies the comedy of unbinding that happens in the face of rigidity but locates the comic in its proliferation of complications, threats, potentials, constraints, and consequences that are never definitively ordered.<sup>17</sup>

*American Hustle's* opening tableau, which figures an economic and social crisis in a balding man's anxiety to be taken in as a successful arrangement of ill-fitting parts, thus represents an exemplary moment of comic humorlessness. You will note that the preceding description does not judge his or anyone's affective overfocus on being a thing that would take down itself and the world rather than give up some ground within the encounter. As it involves the world, humorlessness points to individual pathology and the self-reproductive drive of power, norm, and law. But humorlessness is not all bad. It involves a commitment to principles, after all, to a world and to being reliable, which is to say, to some repetitions. It

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general and the restricted economy, especially as Lisa Trahair applies it; see Trahair, *Comedy of Philosophy*, and Simon Critchley, "Comedy and Finitude: Displacing the Tragic-Heroic Paradigm in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis," *Constellations* 6 (Mar. 1999): 108–22. Stanley Cavell's work on romantic comedy is a slight exception because of his interest in the binding of lovers to a scene of demonstration; romantic-comic love is a test of the conditions of freedom in relation. See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000).

16. On the longer history of comedy as an account of structural power's control over the collective sensorium, see Mary Beard, *Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up* (Berkeley, 2014).

17. I learned this final point, about comedy's insistence on a beyond of finitude, from Critchley's "Comedy and Finitude."

props up the arrangement of personhood we call identity or personality; it is central to any kind of fidelity or obedience in love, politics, and religion; and it can cathect us to habit. It is sneaky and often occupies a space of self-unknowing in people who understand themselves to be responsive, engaged, open, and kind.

So, although having good humor is often considered a virtue and a relief, we would not always want the state of humorlessness to be replaced by whatever appears as the generosity of humor—such as being able to take a joke, or to shrug, to play with words, or to let something pass. The moral question is also an aesthetic question about the genre that communicates rigidified relationality and what proceeds from it. When we encounter the aesthetics of the intractable, how do we know how to distinguish satirical deflation from the melodrama of stuckness and the comedy of it? How do we, how can we, distinguish foolish righteousness from principled commitment? Context is everything. Perspectives vary. So much depends on the style of the subject's or the artwork's *investment* in humorlessness. So much depends on the resources spectators have to process certain styles of defense, their costs and their failures.

Valerie Cherish, the protagonist of Lisa Kudrow's *The Comeback*, calls this variant on the comic a "dramedy": "You know, and that's a um that's a comedy without the laughs."<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere I have called this "um" a "situation tragedy," where the very compulsion of a protagonist or a world to appear to be on an arc of a comic triumph over life reveals them to be a thin membrane away from suffering life as a complete disaster of ordinariness.<sup>19</sup> Often this kind of humorless aesthetic finds its way into catalogues of satirical dark amplification, as in gallows humor or what André Breton names "black humor," glossed elsewhere as "*a superior revolt of the mind*" that's facing "a SENSE . . . of the theatrical (and joyless) pointlessness of everything."<sup>20</sup>

But humorless comedy, as I'll lay out in the three monologues below (Colson Whitehead's "The Comedian," Martin Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* [1982], and Kudrow's *The Comeback* [2005, 2015]), is not just an orientation toward noise-cancelling amplification.<sup>21</sup> It has specific aesthetic features that are worth attending to. Its exempla are not only

18. "Valerie Makes a Pilot," 9 Nov. 2014, *The Comeback*.

19. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, N.C., 2011), pp. 176–77, 290.

20. André Breton, "Lightning Rod" and "Jacques Vaché," in *Anthology of Black Humor*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (San Francisco, 1977), pp. xvi, 297.

21. See Colson Whitehead, "The Comedian," 2009, [www.colsonwhitehead.com/Site/The\\_Comedian.html](http://www.colsonwhitehead.com/Site/The_Comedian.html); hereafter abbreviated "C."

about the work of humorlessness but also about the humorlessness of work, anatomizing specifically the intense physicality of exposure to even the most minor ambitions.<sup>22</sup> Ambition is desire in the lifeworld of capitalism. This mode gives love a makeover, too.<sup>23</sup> Crucially defining what's comic about its "operational aesthetic"<sup>24</sup> is the conventional interrogative toggle between comedy and misery—between the inevitable "where does the comedy come from?" question that is posed to all comedians, and the "where does the misery come from?" question about personhood first posed by Wilhelm Reich to Freud and repurposed for feminism by Jacqueline Rose.<sup>25</sup> Typically, the hope is that comedy repairs misery. In humorless comedy "where does the comedy come from?" and "where does the misery come from?" are the same question: a question about *being humored*, with no repair in sight.

### Monologue 1: "The Comedian"

By its very title, Whitehead's "The Comedian" narrates a person's reduction of himself to a kind of thing; it's in order to save his attachment to life. The narrator contributes to his character's "thingification" by using

22. Humorless characters abound in the history of comedy. The humorless comedy animated by the fixations of protagonist desire has a close association with workplace comedies, from the failed task plot of so much early slapstick to the US and UK contemporary moment. For example, workplace television series from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s (including military, police, tavern, and small business spaces from *Barney Miller* [1974–82], *WKRP in Cincinnati* [1978–82], and *Sanford and Son* [1972–77] to the longer-running *Night Court* [1984–92] and *Cheers* [1982–93]) tended to address the work situation that arises as a prompt for the mechanicity of character to express itself as usual. In contrast, contemporary humorless comedy series like *The Thick of It* (2005–12), *Veep* (2012–), *Enlightened* (2011–13), *The Office* (2005–13), and *Baskets* (2016–) foreground the expressive fragility of personhood in work situations that are saturated by the pressures of structural contingency, management anxiety, and the significant uptick in affective labor demands organized by new modes of workplace collaboration and unstable intimacies elsewhere. There is much more to say about this.

23. The humorlessness of love is the matter of the chapter that follows this one in the longer project. It's worth noting that, in "The Comedian," the couple form appears and fades eventlessly as career comedy absorbs ordinary life; in *The King of Comedy* love is represented by two stalking plots; in *The Comeback* a celebrity stalks a plot, sacrificing her resolutely "normal" and loving homelife to the bitter slapstick of reality TV. As Gilles Deleuze predicts in "Postscript on Control Societies," the enmeshing of work with all of contemporary life produces a 24/7 sensorium stubbornly on the make for value, which is to say, for comedy; see Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," *Negotiations 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York, 1995), pp. 177–82.

24. Quoted in Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," in *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, ed. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (New York, 1995), p. 88.

25. Jacqueline Rose, "Where Does the Misery Come From? Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Event," in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), pp. 25–39.

free indirect discourse to get at him; he is an object to the reader and self-reflexively to himself. His only name in the story is “the comedian,” which obliterates the name of the father, the family, the genealogy, and even the generic casualness of a first name that could be anybody’s. Whitehead even refers to him only in the lower case. The celebrity profession he assumes tries to substitute for all that erasure, but the story plays with the both/and of misery/comedy in its examination of professional comedy’s promise to provide relief from the pressures of ordinariness. Whitehead’s strategy is to wield the dogged literalism one expects to find in proximity to humorless comedy. The story opens with the comedian on a talk show late in his career being asked “why he started telling jokes.” His response is that “he just wanted some attention.”

As a child he’d felt unseen. He was a handsome baby (photographs confirm) but his impression was that no one cooed at him or went cross-eyed to make him smile. Common expressions of affection, such as loving glances, approving grins, and hearty that-a-boys, eluded him. His mother told him “Hush, now,” when he came to her with his needs or questions and he frowned and padded off quietly. He received a measly portion of affirmation from grandparents, elderly neighbors, and wizened aunts who never married, folks who were practically in the affirmation-of-children business. [“C”]

He goes on to say that it was not just the family; the comedian was not even enough of an irritant to be bullied by the more alpha boys. He wanted surplus, more attention than he needed; he did not want to be a nonevent.

So, spontaneously one day at a family affair, he experimented with comedy from below—fart jokes in particular, which become the origin of the revelation of his power. Farts are the essential confirmation that no one is a bodily sovereign and that decay suffuses the ordinary of life. The comedian’s first joke says as much: his cousin Roger’s farts smelled like the “dead rat” whose odor was suffusing the family room (“C”). This riffs on the opening pages of *Native Son*, perhaps, with its tragic slapstick chase of the rat around Bigger Thomas’s family flat;<sup>26</sup> and perhaps on the stinky anality that opens Eddie Murphy’s *Raw* (dir. Robert Townsend, 1987), which locates Murphy’s comic genius in a childhood origin story of entertaining the family with monkey fart comedy. Whitehead’s story may imply African-American racial and working-class location. That any likely structural referents are basically tacit suggests an experiment on Whitehead’s

26. See Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York, 1940), pp. 8–12.

part to see what happens when what goes without saying remains unsaid on behalf of hastening the reparative possibility. This principle of reticence becomes explicit later on in the story and is, of course, central to combover logic.

Whitehead narrates a set of phases the comedian goes through next—stations of the comic, if you will. The story provides a brilliant condensation of the major comedy theories. At first, he

made unlikely connections between seemingly dissimilar objects and phenomena. . . . [Later] he experimented with metaphor and figurative language . . . A familiar situation disrupted by an unexpected and forbidden element produced laughter. The smell of the decomposing mouse was not one Roger fart, but a hundred. Exaggeration was key. Exaggeration was a kind of truth telling and it made people laugh. . . . Looking at it one way, it was a kind of commentary on the comedian's lot—to translate between the world as it is and the world as people perceive it. ["C"]

He practices in front of the mirror. "His bits eventually become routines" ("C"). He learns to imitate others, to steal their jokes while annexing a little supplement of his singularity to hide his unoriginality. On top of this he becomes a character comic, a person in the form of a cartoon, which is to say at once feral, inhuman, injured, and immortal, the combination of a fool and a god. His character called Danny the Dentist spends his bits conversing with patients while fisting their mouths, contrasting his sadistic eloquence to their grunting good manners. His character called the Limo Driver doesn't know he has bad boundaries while in inappropriate conversation with his captive passengers.

In other words, in both personae the comedian's combover medium is at first the conversation in which his persona takes both sides. Inconvenient talkback can never happen in his art; a person can't heckle themselves. This stand-up strategy allows an internal monologue in the form of dialogue to give the audience the feel of participating in his observations without actually being able to impact them. His comedy thus involves both imitating nonrelationality in his personae's actions and miming genuine relationality through insider knowledge shared with his audience. Avoiding and strangling any openness or intimacy as such, he casts stand-up comedy as a game of domination and negation from which the audience is asked to take pleasure. The narrator observes that this mode of comic hostage taking produced a mildly successful career.

But then one day the comedian's body rebels against the machinery of its own compensations. He is in the middle of performing Danny the Dentist interacting with a German tourist. Then:

No one else seemed to notice it, and he thought for a minute that it was another one of his mysterious physical or mental symptoms, but quickly understood that it was more than that. He stopped speaking (his mouth had continued the routine, such was his professionalism) and looked into the audience. They were a hive of faces before him, still and attentive, arranged like hexagonal tile in a bathroom. The comedian said the words that popped into his head: "If I had known what little came from talking to other people, I never would have learned how to speak." The microphone dispatched these words into the sound system and into the void of the auditorium. And then they laughed. They laughed for a nice comfortable while. The comedian resumed his act (poor Danny, poor German tourist), but he knew something had changed. ["C"]

No one notices the comedian's bodily nonsovereignty and the autonomy of his voice; no one notices that his unconscious is playing karaoke with him, as it will. But the comedian survives the shame of his public dissociation and takes on as method the dignity of the kind of simplicity it offers. The comedian becomes eventually "unadorned by the traditional flourishes of comedy. . . . The tools of the trade [such as]—the crooked eyebrows, head wagging, and shrugs. . . . fell away" ("C"). His gestures, the props that urge on laughter, fall away passively; he becomes a thing without his combover character to shield his tenderness from the world.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of its forfeiture, he has room to take the audience into what he calls "his confidence" ("C"). To take beings into your confidence is to release yourself from the humorless isolation of your internal monologue. It collapses the intimate into intimating in a way that subtends the loneliness of carrying a secret that the world might not be able to bear—at least as long as one's interlocutors continue enjoying holding the secret of one's particular truths. For being trusted to bear the secret that was combed over makes the interlocutors feel powerful and special along with being, in some cases, less free from the knowledge. His audience eats it up.

27. In the comedian's shedding of his combover defenses he is the exact opposite of the protagonist of Rick Alverson's astonishing *Entertainment* (2015), who in ordinary life moves recessively through scenes but on stage assumes a deliberately grotesque combover and grating voice, which gives him permission to express honestly his rage and aggression as rage and aggression and to insist that people should appreciate his labor in the fields of "folly." His physical combover is his prop, but his lack of access to its protections is his tragedy.

The secret of the secret the comedian tells his public in confidence builds from two observations: “people are disappointing” and “everything is terrible” (“C”). All the sex and pleasures, he tells them, are mere noise to keep away these truths. There is a third principle, too, which he keeps to himself and metabolizes privately over many years. It turns out that there was nothing special about him, either, no singularizing trauma; it turns out that no one receives enough attention; everyone is neglected. The secreting of this stark truth means that the other hard facts he offers his public are themselves combover protections from bearing the unbearable ordinariness of aloneness.

The audience, says the narrator, comes to see the comedian as the “perfect older brother or sister or parent they’d always been waiting for, the ones who set them straight, told them how to do it, reserving all the mistakes for themselves, sparing us” (“C”). Comedians often talk about dying onstage, which means being there with their jokes and tales hanging in the air with no cushion of laughter to confirm that the comedian and the audience are in it together. (Audience laughter is like the lover’s obligatory “I love you, too.”) But in mid-career the comedian thrives professionally by stripping away a layer of defense in unoriginality and imitative personhood that compensated for feeling nonexistent as a child. He instead distributes the news of the miserable universality of misery; but he preserves comic reparativity by changing the terms of reciprocity, delaminating it from the joke’s surprise and distraction and locating it in the small shock of the mutual confidence that grows from sharing difficult truths.

Taking an audience into his confidence like this creates a singular, intimate public whose terms of reciprocity are also freeing because they’re impersonal, nonmimetic, and nonobligatory. He no longer has to pretend to be in conversation or to imitate listening onstage. By refunctioning the humorless truth into a state of knowing together, the comedian and his public live on jointly enjoying the stripping away of fantasy. “Let’s stop pretending,” he says, defiantly (“C”).

At first there’s a thrill to the comfort of performing peace with the unbearable. It is said that the comedian becomes the only comedian who’s inimitable and the only one never heckled. The implication is that this is because what he says involves no shtick and no reparative gestures while building reasons for trust. But how can comedy be about trust, when it’s also about surprise, an unequal distribution of being knowing and a sucker? His truth telling is comic as long as it’s busting the open secrets that maintain the terrible, ridiculous world.

Even when the comedian’s observations are no longer delightful and new, his public comes to see his live performances out of fidelity to his

fidelity to disenchant sociality. Then slowly, unintentionally, he fades from the professional scene. He adapts to a form of nonpresence in relation, discovering that he's gotten his hoard of misery/comedy off of his chest. So he dwindles as a kind of thing. He becomes okay with the ordinary. At the end of the story he moves into private life in a small town with a woman he likes just fine, among people he'd met in his early career who came to see him because "what we need at the end of a long day, most of all, is a good laugh" ("C").

You can handle the truth, but you don't always need to be handling it, whereas you always need a good laugh. What is "a good laugh," anyway, given that in this final phrase the story's tone fires off both bitterness and sweetness? The narrator picks up comic truth telling where the comedian leaves off.

The end of this story evokes the close of *Sullivan's Travels* (dir. Preston Sturges, 1941), another classic humorless comedy. Here a group of documentary filmmakers dedicated to telling the hard truth about the suffering of inequality encounters inmates at the end of the day having "a good laugh" at a Mickey Mouse cartoon. As Jerry Lewis has said, "you can get most anybody to forget their problems with a good laugh."<sup>28</sup> In this Lewis approximates Bergson's observation that laughter induces "a momentary anesthesia of the heart."<sup>29</sup> He may also resonate with Zupančič's observation that the comic points to the life in the machinic and not just the machinic in life.<sup>30</sup> The freedom from consciousness they all point to is framed as somewhere between a need and a wish under the discipline of life's ontological constraints. If comedy is a genre allowing something of the truth's revelation, it also creates a crisis in genres of the truth by tickling the relation between being knowing and unknowing. In that vision of a nonplace the good laugh is a noninstrumental shakeup that allows for a little coasting relief from the pressure of production ("at the end of a long day") and the scene of judgment, making a space where rest in peace meets rest in life and a brief vacation from the always potential shame at being seen, misrecognized, assessed for value, and ordinary in disgust and desire. The good laugh is thus a generous genre of relief from the humorlessness with which one eats the effects of ordinary absurdity and injury. The story's denouement also confirms that the stripping away of one's gestures can itself become a combover style of authenticity, behind

28. "KING OF COMEDY: JERRY LEWIS," 2 June 2014, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm9C2\\_BwVC4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mm9C2_BwVC4)

29. Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 5. Quite a few comedy theorists associate comedy with nonemotional eruptions followed by the flooding of meaning.

30. See Zupančič, *Odd One In*, pp. 113–19.



which any subject can fade into a nonpresence without anyone much noticing. This is the proposition of ordinary personality, of course; for a performer's relation to its audience, being reliable is something like the affective contract that people pay to trust. The truth teller's observation about misery/comedy's origins in the banality of loneliness blacks out in laughter's brief disinhibiting moment.

### **Monologue 2: *The King of Comedy***

I have suggested that Whitehead's comedian heals himself by finding an audience attached to his ironic version of the hard truth that life and other people will let you down, which is the lite way of affirming that there is no sovereign exception to ordinary not mattering. The disturbance of failed relationality is replaced by an insider knowledge that can be shared with spectator strangers, who in turn derive benefit from the celebrity's way of modeling and enjoying the discomfort of such knowing. Scorsese's *The King of Comedy* is the mirror inversion of Whitehead's work. In the *King of Comedy* knowledge protects no one from anything, ever. Nor does sharing the open secret of life. In this film that open secret is that one is always starting from the bottom even when one has ascended. Every encounter is a new test.

Maybe this is why virtually every man in *The King of Comedy* jokes sadistically to enjoy freedom at the other's expense, for the present they share isn't merely a dead space anticipating later outcomes, or a space of mutual exchange, but a staging ground for ambition. Women in the film are humorless on the outside and the inside. But among the men, comedy is contagious, and everyone in this work is a comedian—professionals, people on the street, lawyers, the police; they can't help but attempt to extract bondage from others as the price of their momentary verbal freedom. If fandom's genuine relief in truth in "The Comedian" refutes the sticky bindings of the combover dynamic as the *necessary* cost of social admission, Scorsese's film is a capitalist parable of mutually insured destruction. It suggests that the postwar social contract that tethered fantasy to an upward mobility verified by proximity to success *requires* complicity in the psychic costs of entrepreneurial subjectivity, resulting in a mass democracy committed to aspirational sociopathy. No one can care about the experience of the other if that caring inconveniences their freedom. The experience economy of comic sociality requires performing a game, a shtick, or a compulsion that might keep one from losing status and face, and might lead to something else. Stand-up stands in for all this. The film takes a morally humorless position with respect to the desperation of the quicksand of the present, but it pities celebrities more than just folks.

The King of Comedy is Rupert Pupkin's (Robert De Niro) heroic self-epithet. The sobriquet is a riff on the phrase *the king of late night*, which is attached to the Johnny Carson-like Jerry Langford, played by Jerry Lewis as a humorless stand-up comedian whose routines involve, whatever else they involve, dryly satiric commentary on the routine of his routines.<sup>31</sup> ("I'm sorry I woke you," he says to his sidekick, Ed Hurlihy, in the opening monologue.) As with Whitehead's comedian early on, for Langford to go through the motions is not to go through the emotions but to be freed from disturbance by them.

This freedom from emotion through routine actually feeds Langford's public and private life into the sovereignty machine; there's no boundary between the dissociation of acting and the aversion to association that organizes his off-stage life. *The King of Comedy* generalizes this synthetic desire (*not* compulsion) to repeat. Late in the film Tony Randall—the actor plays himself—substitutes for Langford, who is Jerry Lewis playing Johnny Carson, but also a version of himself, as Lewis was a famous comedian turned master of ceremonies on the annual muscular dystrophy telethon and various variety shows. Pupkin recounts studying and copying Langford as well, meanwhile trying to dispatch his own body into an absolute predictability—no psychosomatics and no interruption of his intentions on the way to leaping into the lineage.<sup>32</sup> The ambition is to be so predictable aesthetically *in every encounter* that it doesn't matter who stands in the place of the master; at the same time, achieving proximity to the generic singularity of the name King of Comedy promises the gratification of public confirmation.

Pupkin does achieve the status of a bad copy—not so much of Langford, though, but of his own fantasy. In the basement of the house where Pupkin lives with his mother, a talk show replica set dominates the space. Two bigger-than-life black-and-white cardboard cutouts sit in silhouette on each side of an ordinary upholstered wine-red host's chair, a diminished throne from which Pupkin makes pseudoconversation. A cardboard Langford smiles in one guest chair, and Liza Minnelli in the other faces in; once, as his mother yells from upstairs, Pupkin talks to the cutouts and even hugs and kisses them in a predictable stream of flattering and teasing noise, jostling affection, and tender violence.

Later, in a stunning hallucinatory insert, Scorsese shoots Pupkin from behind in the same space playing to a massively blown up black-and-

31. This and all subsequent quotations from the film are from *The King of Comedy*, dir. Martin Scorsese (1982).

32. See Mladen Dolar, "The Comic Mimesis," *Critical Inquiry* 43 (Winter 2017): 570–89.

white image of an audience clapping and laughing overlaid by a recorded soundtrack of clapping and laughter on top of which Pupkin lays a track of his own monologue; but the metaphor of layering is inapposite here, as these are interpenetrating zones of projection and sensual saturation. It is the movement of a body intending to become a machine so perfect that it would be clear whose body is the sovereign king's and whose belongs to the nonsovereign laughers, incited into spontaneity by his jokes.

Comedy karaoke in an echo chamber is the good life reduced to perfection. Scorsese is fittingly heavy-handed here and throughout; the luscious color of the film's everyday scenes contrasts with the black-and-white fantasy world; a slow chamber music soundtrack interpenetrates the tacky crime film style that registers impaired subjectivity through ominous slow motion. This slowed style also marks the film's opening, when Pupkin sees Langford and walks toward him. This style, designating *too much intensity but too little subjectivity*, identifies Pupkin as a stalker and later a sociopath.

But when Langford finally allows Rupert a brief audience—pressed too close into the back seat of a car—Rupert's machine fails, and he gets anxious and overgestural, his arms actually running like pistons as he tries to spit out his rehearsed lines. ("Do you know how many times I've had this conversation in my head, this is beautiful," asks Rupert. "Did it always turn out this way?" asks Langford. "Yeah, it did," says Rupert, snorting.) But that's a lie. In fantasy Pupkin is ready for his big break; in the moment he makes for it, his comportment does not hold him in check, as his affective and bodily disorganization shows.

After a series of humiliating and placating rejections by Langford and his staff, Pupkin joins league with Masha (Sandra Bernhard), another stalker of Langford, who aspires not to replace him professionally but to be his lover. After trying to bond with the star to no avail, the comrades kidnap him. They threaten to kill Langford, but Masha's real desire is to still him enough to animate him with desire.<sup>33</sup> This enables Masha to have a sexy evening with him—Langford wrapped in duct tape, Masha in lingerie—while Pupkin "breaks in" to show business (which involves literally many trespasses).

The film then trots out a panoply of ridiculous authoritarian styles. The stalkers and the stars are not the only humorless pleasure aesthetes. The police too exemplify the law's self-amplifying humorlessness in a register that now reads uncannily; the pair is suspected of being "terrorists" and of "hijacking" the situation. But, like everyone else at the beginning of the

33. On the aspiration to immobilize love's situation, see Renata Salecl, "Love Anxieties," *On Anxiety* (New York, 2004), pp. 72–83.

ascendancy of stand-up as a US way of life, the cops also adopt a seventies style comic hyperbole, compulsively joking, punning, and riffing. Joking is what keeps things going under the pressure of a threatened loss of control over life that everyone seems to feel one way or another.

The feckless aspiration to be an automaton, then, *to become* the “mechanical encrusted on the living,” is everywhere in this film’s image of life.<sup>34</sup> Abjection is not so much what breaks down subjectivity but what pressures the subject to defeat the display of desire’s disturbance, which is another way of talking about the combover. In *The King of Comedy* this relation involves not just mental projections and verbal exchanges. The insistent physicality of De Niro’s performance of Pupkin’s comedic but humorless sociopath—its reliance on paralanguage, the audible flow of speech, gesture and tic—is key to maintaining his sovereign fantasy. Pupkin is always resisting hearing what he has heard, touching his tie, cocking his head, verbally processing bothersome things without changing from their incorporation, and never sympathizing or empathizing with other people’s genres of appearing, treating all resistance as a form of heckling. This exposure to the physically ridiculous keeps him close to the comic; life as pratfall and resilience connects him to the mood-twisted clown exemplified by Lewis’s comedic career, here ghosting his own performance as the stiffened Langford. Their scenes catalog the ways they defend against blockages to their fantasy of the will: Langford by living at a distance from the world, Pupkin by processing everything aloud, denying, agreeing, rephrasing in self-serving ways, admitting he’s lost the battle, refusing to admit it, deciding the other’s right and then insisting on a new version of the bargain as though by being in conversation with him the other person has an obligation to him beyond the dynamic of manners. His bullying intensities embody the extreme need for control we now call microaggression.

So too *The King of Comedy* records the experience of *microadjustment* that sucks up so much of our best creative energy. If microaggression communicates structural privilege through the encounter and the gesture, microadjustment is the cost such sociality extracts. The bodily, verbal, and affective flurries of microadjustment get people through every proximate moment; the percentage of these that involve insults, aggressions, arrogations of privilege, and diminutions of pleasure is a political number. Funneled in the film into what Erving Goffman calls conversational “footing,” Pupkin’s “big break” is the effect of a series of microadjustments

34. Bergson, *Laughter*, p. 37.

in panic and desire.<sup>35</sup> In the absence of the big break flowing from reciprocal action there is the energy of a humorless commitment not to be defeated. In the presence of the big break artificially induced microadjustment tries out different mixes of grandiosity and abjection.

Partly, then, what's comic and painful is the film's painstaking documentation of how Pupkin responds to other people's resistance to him. Every so often—for example, as the police take him to jail on the night of his big break—Pupkin blurts an admission that he can be a lot to handle or even wrong in his expectations about how an encounter will go. Langford's kidnapping is also a sign that something can get through to Pupkin; it happens only after Pupkin recognizes, finally, that they will never have a relationship on his own terms. But disbelief accompanies belief, acceptance, and refusal. During the kidnapping he keeps asking Langford why couldn't he have done *x*, why couldn't he not have done *x*, and whether or not that would have been so hard? Again, in the repetition and variation of this question, Pupkin is not exceptional; that is his problem. The humorless comedy of *The King of Comedy* is a painful slapstick of the demonstration of any subject's desire to be a machine that absorbs difference without becoming different in response to its impact. The force of his humorlessness, its aggressive desperation, just amplifies the ordinary of getting others to line up with one's aim. Nothing in the film better demonstrates this than Pupkin's monologue (fig. 2):

PUPKIN: Good evening ladies and gentleman. Let me introduce myself. My name is Rupert Pupkin. I was born in Clifton, New Jersey, which was not at that time a federal offense. (*Laughter.*) Is there anyone here from Clifton? (*Silence.*) Oh Good. We can all relax now. Now, I'd like to begin by saying that my parents were too poor to afford me a childhood in Clifton. But the fact is you know that nobody is allowed to be really too poor in Clifton because once you fall below a certain level they exile you to Passaic. (*Laughter and clapping.*)

But you know my parents did put down the first two payments on my childhood, don't get me wrong. (*Laughter.*) But they did also return me to the hospital as defective. (*Laughter.*) But, like everyone else I grew up in large part thanks to my mother. If she were only here today I'd say, "Hey, mom. What are you doing here? You've been dead for nine years!" (*Laughter and clapping.*)

But seriously, you should have seen my mother. She was wonderful—blonde, beautiful, intelligent: alcoholic. (*Laughter.*) We used

35. See Erving Goffman, *Forms of Talk* (Philadelphia, 1981), pp. 124–57.



FIGURE 2. *The King of Comedy* (1982).

to drink milk together after school. Mine was homogenized, hers was loaded. (*Laughter.*) Once they picked her up for speeding, they clocked her doing fifty—all right, but in our garage? (*Clapping.*) And you know when they tested her they found that her alcohol had two percent blood! (*Laughter and clapping.*)

Ah, but we used to joke together Mom and me, until the tears would stroll down her face and she would throw up. (*Laughter.*) Yeah! And who would clean it up? Heh, not Dad. He was too busy down at O’Grady’s throwing up on his own. Yeah! In fact, ’til I was sixteen, I thought throwing up was a sign of maturity. (*Laughter.*) You know, while the other kids were off in the woods sneaking cigarettes, heh, I was hiding behind the house with my fingers down my throat. (*Laughter and clapping.*) The only problem was I never *got anywhere*. Until one day my father caught me. And you know just as he was giving me a final kick in the stomach for luck, I managed to *heave* all over his new shoes. “That’s it,” I thought. “I’ve made it. I’m finally a man!” (*Laughter and clapping.*)

But as it turned out, I was wrong. That was the only attention my father ever gave me. (*Awww.*) Yeah, he was usually too busy out in the park playing ball with my sister, Rose. But today, I must say thanks to those many hours of practice, my sister Rose has grown into a fine man. (*Laughter, clapping, and whistling.*)

Now me, I wasn’t especially interested in athletics, the only exercise I ever got was when the other kids picked on me. Yeah, they used

to beat me up once a week, usually Tuesday. (*Laughter.*) And after a while, the school worked it into the curriculum. And if you knocked me out, you got extra credit. (*Laughter.*) Except there was this one kid, poor kid, who was afraid of me, and I used to tell him, "Hit me! Hit me! What's the matter with you? Don't you want to graduate?" (*Laughter, clapping, and whistling.*) As for me, hey I was the youngest kid in the history of the school to graduate in traction. (*Laughter.*)

But you know my only real interest, right from the beginning, was show business. Even as a young man, I began at the very top, collecting autographs. (*Scattered laughter.*)

Now a lot of you are probably wondering why Jerry isn't with us tonight. Well, I'll tell you, the fact is he's tied up—and I'm the one who tied him. (*Laughter and clapping.*) I know you think I'm joking, but that's the only way I could break into show business—by hijacking Jerry Langford. (*Laughter.*) Right now, Jerry is strapped to a chair somewhere in the middle of this city. (*Extended laughter, clapping, and whistling.*) Go ahead laugh, thank you, I appreciate it. But the fact is—I'm here. Now tomorrow you'll know that I wasn't kidding and you'll think I was crazy. But look, I think of it this way: better to be King for a Night than Schmuck for a Lifetime! (*Laughter, clapping, and whistling.*)

As he delivers this monologue, Pupkin's arm movements are mechanical, hinged like a marionette's. As he has practiced his shtick incessantly during the film, this rigidity must itself be practiced. His shoulders are wedged as though he's wearing the suit hanger with the suit. His elbows hinge enough to allow for the laughter-encouraging gestures that, in "The Comedian," we see relinquished; there is no inefficiency in Pupkin's comportment, the inefficiency that allows for genuine relation. So this is not Chaplinesque repetition. Pupkin is not moving through space, juggling time, or establishing pathos and anxiety through the elaboration of difference, including self-difference.<sup>36</sup> In his fantasy segments about how life after stardom will go, Pupkin does enjoy elegance, a flowing bodily grace, but in the liveness of performance he rejects it. He is wearing a red-and-white pattern. He aspires to the regularity of his fabric.

36. On Chaplin's bodily articulation of the vulgar with the mechanical, see Gunning, "Chaplin and the Body of Modernity," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 8 (Aug. 2010): 237–45. Tom Gunning writes of the "body in process, in transformation, an incomplete body able to merge with other bodies—or other things—and create new bodies, grotesques that are part human part something else, exceeding our categories of knowledge and extending our experience. And yet . . . this new body, for all its composite weirdness, strikes us as immediately recognizable rather than entirely alien" (p. 243).

In a previous fantasy scene, Rupert has told Jerry: “I think about my life, see, mainly about the worst parts, all the awful things, and I just try to see them in a funny light. That’s all.” This explains the collapse of sociopathic will and reparative fantasy through which comedy allows its accomplices to misrecognize sovereign relationality as sociability. The filmgoer knows that Pupkin’s version of the misery/comedy toggle hasn’t happened; Mom is not dead; there’s no evident sister Rose. The filmgoer and the television audience know that the performative utterance of the Bar Mitzvah, “Today I am a man!” is laughable because had Pupkin achieved sovereign solidity through abjection or religion he would not be on the stage this very night. But this is not a betrayal. Everyone knows that the monologue doesn’t have to be factually true, just affectively, through bits that tap into the personal without being verifiably the case. The discourse is, again, of confidence, of a shared experience of a risky insight.<sup>37</sup> The stand-up story solicits pity and identification with the observational mind’s disturbance by something in the world, and what Nina Baym long ago called the “melodrama of beset manhood” becomes a *comedy of the survivor who has to keep surviving*.<sup>38</sup> Better the “King for a Night than Shmuck for a Lifetime!” As Jane Gallop once wrote, “phallus/penis: same difference.”<sup>39</sup> This is not a self-cancelling failure, though. It is a comic both/and, and, and. . . .

At the end of the monologue Pupkin does admit that his comedic sovereignty is momentary, an episode. Why does he admit this? One is often forced, in humorless comedy, to keep insisting that one has already achieved the resolution that one is clearly still pursuing. And a core feature of the big-break genre, after all—being discovered in love or in talent—is that life might be relieved of contingency and decision, unfolding instead on a plane of material fantasy in which there would be no negativity, no unremitting trials of self-integratedness or questions about the world’s solidity. This is the wish in *Raging Bull* (dir. Scorsese, 1980), too, the film

37. For a history of the transformation of stand-up from sharable jokes to performative “personal” voicing, see Dotan Oliar and Christopher Jon Sprigman, “There’s No Free Laugh (Anymore): The Emergence of Intellectual Property Norms and the Transformation of Stand-up Comedy,” *Virginia Law Review* 94 (Dec. 2008): 1767–867, and, more anecdotally, Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York, 2009).

38. See Nina Baym, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors,” *American Quarterly* 33 (Summer 1981): 123–39. It’s worth noting that the mother is associated with tears, milk, and vomit, classic abject materials, whereas the father’s relation to alcohol and vomit is associated with the violence of discipline and the work of defense against intimacy, and that’s the formalism of sexual difference to which Rupert aspires.

39. See Jane Gallop, “Phallus/Penis: Same Difference,” in *Men by Women*, ed. Janet Todd (New York 1982), pp. 243–51.



De Niro and Scorsese made right before *The King of Comedy*. In many ways they're the same film. In *The King of Comedy*, the monologue cuts past the tuck and roll of conversation. The five-minute exposure allows the stand-up performer to deliver all his punches, whether or not the audience delivers the laughter-verdict to confirm the fantasy as the real. His admission of his criminality proves to them that once he's reorganized the world and ascended to the throne, he's once and always the king *at some level*. They can laugh or not, but they cannot deny the sovereign event.

Not that they want to! In the film's final shot Pupkin, released from prison, is standing on a wine-red stage wearing a slightly brighter red, as though the red-white pattern in his original performance suit has finally achieved pure consistency. He is waiting to perform without uttering a word, taking in the final moment of self-identity as a pleasure and achievement. An announcer blazons his return grandiosely, much as Randall did, only now the voice is bodiless—Pupkin shares the stage with no one. He takes his time to appear and stands there basking in the audience's clapping and laughing response; he does everything he can to preserve a little longer the hermetic seal on his sovereign deal. At the same time, he is rocking a little, mechanically turning his head this way and that, in the agitation of anticipatory physical microadjustment to the real time dynamics of the stand-up's exposure to an audience that has expectations. The camera pulls in on a close-up and cuts to black as Rupert nods in confirmation of—something.

Pupkin has been sentenced for life to comedy, which is to say to the slapstick of an unpredictable and barely tolerable openness to life. As in the case of "The Comedian," whether or not there's room in this world for Pupkin's humorless attachment to his comedic will depends on whether the audience will seek pleasure in this next phase of his combover fantasy, knowing what it knows. In contrast, in Lisa Kudrow's *The Comeback* audience matters less than in either of the two previous cases. Repeatedly, the very force of life against the comedian's ambitious will, her humorless insistence to appear a certain way, cracks her very self-relation.

### **Monologue 3: *The Comeback***

We begin with the penultimate episode of season one of Lisa Kudrow's HBO series *The Comeback* (2005). A slapstick tableau, with its impact and falter, stands at this episode's peak: a redheaded woman ensconced in a papier-mâché cupcake costume turns swiftly to gut punch the abominable man who has written this role for her. He vomits from the impact; she vomits in counterpoint. Her garish outfit is silver and pink, complete



FIGURE 3. *The Comeback* (2014).

with a large red cherry atop a pink icing hat (fig. 3). The writer has been slouchingly watching her act while wolfing down cheesy pepperoni pizza. The camera cuts to their vomit.

All of this happens before a sitcom's live cameras and is caught additionally by the hand-held lens of the reality TV show *The Comeback*, whose "raw footage" production constitutes the primary show-within-a-show of Kudrow's HBO series of the same name.<sup>40</sup> When the fictive-reality *Comeback* premieres at the episode's end, the punch-and-puke incident is splayed on a loop that just won't stop regurgitating the image. At first, the actress feels humiliated and plots revenge on the network. Then Jay Leno, playing himself on a fictive reenactment of his own talk show, calls the spectacular incident a "rare double vomit" and replays it for comedy,

40. The original title of *The Comeback* HBO series was *Raw Footage*, and every episode's title card places the phrase under the title as though it is the title's postcolonial joke. Adding to the irony is that the toggle between the phrases *raw footage* and *raw sewage* seeps throughout the series as the pipes in Valerie Cherish's house keep bursting and spewing fecal matter all over and at the most inopportune times, which, in reality TV, are all opportune times, insofar as the purpose of the genre is to track the many ways life's infrastructures are always failing, which is the only way one becomes aware of the infrastructure's function, to manage the overwhelming pressures of world making. See Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (Nov.–Dec.1999): 377–91.

distributing to his audience barf bags with the actress's picture on them and staging a mock boxing match in which she dons the same clown gloves she'd been wearing as the cupcake pugilist.<sup>41</sup> This escalation shows respect for her tenacity in the face of comedy's leakage into ordinary life and returns her to bask in a public's welcoming response. Leno shows her how a clown takes a joke—resiliently, by wobbling and righting.

Her punch is the punchline of a “last straw” insult flung by the writer, Paulie G., at Kudrow's character, Valerie Cherish: “What? Does that rod in your back go all the way up your ass?” Cherish had been worried about becoming disabled by a pratfall she had been asked to take while costumed in the cumbersome cupcake because of a scoliosis rod in her back. The fall was to take place during a hallucinatory diet-pill dream sequence in the *other* show within the show, a terrible sitcom called *Room and Bored*. Here, Cherish has been relegated to play Aunt Sassy, an anerotic joke figure whose screechy tagline is, “I don't need to *see that!*”

By season two of *The Comeback* (HBO) Cherish spontaneously utters “I don't need to *see that!*” in response to unscripted life events. While written originally for a cartoonish figure, the line speaks the truth of her own wish to become cartoon, to live through the bruising encounters of life and desire as though nothing dies, wears out, or shows permanent marks; her great resource, after all, is to have been a sitcom heroine, to fail, double take, and dust herself off in an awkward recombinant flourish. *Seeing that* is what's inconvenient about rolling with the punches of life. The double vomit just literalizes the hurdle of surviving the ordinary; it's not exceptional. The fear of disability is a fear of *what has already happened*. The diet-pill story is a bare allegory of the gargantuan appetite she cultivates and represses. (Cherish has her food delivered to her, presumably for portion control purposes, but eats an entire cake while rehearsing the phrase “I don't need to *see that!*” in season 1, episode 1).<sup>42</sup> In life and in art, Cherish plays the multiple rigidities and abjections of desire with tight smiles, fretful speculations, double takes, and brief laughs. So this is more than a sad clown story.

Kudrow's series returns to the contemporary scene of thankless work, suggesting humorlessness as an effect of a structural condition.<sup>43</sup> Cherish

41. This and all subsequent quotations from the episode are from “Valerie Shines under Stress,” 28 Aug. 2005, *The Comeback*.

42. “Pilot,” 5 June 2005, *The Comeback*.

43. During the period between the two seasons of Kudrow's *The Comeback* (HBO)—2005 and 2014—she developed *Web Therapy* (2011–2015), an internet show picked up for four seasons by Showtime. *Web Therapy* offers another humorless workplace comedy focusing on the destructive will of a protagonist insisting that life be the version of comedy she wants—a

is cast as one more self-exploiting victim desiring to achieve traction in fame and by way of a cluster of waning genres (the situation comedy), declining media (film and video, network television), and diminishing sexual attractiveness (ageing). Aspiring pathetically to be a player in the Hollywood system's decline, she is willing to control almost nothing in pursuit of it; her control impulses are always belated, trying to stem bad leakage. Contrast this to Whitehead's comedian, who organizes the live attention of an intimate public, and Scorsese's Pupkin, who seeks that, too, but more than that—mechanical sovereignty over his body, the world, and causality. Her preoccupied fine-tuning contrasts abjectly with Pupkin's commentary flow, whose purpose is to dominate situations. Cherish's will to the comedic involves a sprightly, miserable dedication to a humorless existence in comic drag, like the contestants in RuPaul's "Lip Sync for Your Life!" competition, trying to stay in the game.<sup>44</sup>

Cherish has no fantasy of a big break, of making it, being the best, and then coasting in fame. Instead, her calculative optimism is staged as relentless self-pursuit through the trials of professional and domestic life. Being game shows up as aspirational rigidity in a number of ways, in her fabricated back and her repetitive phrases ("Lesson learned!" "I need to know I'm being heard." "I took myself too seriously."), but the series most diligently focuses on her drive to show up for her face, with its overelastical yet unyielding mouth and smile. Her face is her combover but assembled and assemblaged in real time, on screen, and in the *mise-en-scène*. She lives the double vomit, for example, as a loss of face that follows its becoming object in public: "How am I going to show my face on Leno, how am I going to show my face anywhere?"

Episode after episode, her expression is not permitted to rest in frustration or defeat; her face is like a body suspended midair, distressed and adjusting but to no relief. You have a sense of a person checking, cheering, and choking herself. Thank goodness, then, for the feature of comedy that is famously

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victory over life that isn't death but a hermetically sealed invulnerability to humiliation that nonetheless permits risk and experiment. Kudrow plays Fiona Wallace, a psychotherapist tired of the therapeutic hour who works from home and markets herself as a three-minute internet counselor who just cuts through the noise and gets to the point, which, because this is a comedy, is always a perverse and very wrong point. Wallace brands what she does not a psychoanalytic method but her *modality*, her new way of doing things. Deleuze's "Postscript on Control Societies" uses "modulation" (*modalization*) to describe the demands on the sensorium under neoliberalism, modulation signifies the rise and fall of the subject's response to the doing of the world on the subject, an endless forced receptivity that induces a reencounter with the life worker's ever unfinished contingency; see Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," pp. 178–79.

44. See *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009–2016), [www.logotv.com/shows/rupauls-drag-race](http://www.logotv.com/shows/rupauls-drag-race) /episode-guide. RuPaul actually appears in season 2, episode 1, having lunch with the head of Bravo, Andy Cohen; see "Valerie Makes a Pilot."

*tragedy plus time*. Lips and mouth keep returning to speak, to reason aloud, to discipline her desire, to comment on her actions as they appear, and to create phrase cushions that try to push bad incidents into the past by a sheer volume of soliloquy that reshapes events into the mood she wants to be in and wants a world for. Lesley Stern argues, via Aby Warburg, that cinema creates “a primeval vocabulary of passionate gesticulation.”<sup>45</sup> Here, in the domain of reality TV, seriality transforms gesticulation into a desperate verbal grasping for an event to become an episode, the lower-bar promise of nextness.

“I never thought I wouldn’t work again,” Cherish says, after the network makes her record a promo in which she says the opposite. “I’m a survivor.” Indeed, one of the dark humor highpoints of the series is her discovery of “I Will Survive,” which Mickey, her gay sidekick/hairdresser, has suggested to her as the other *Comeback*’s theme song.<sup>46</sup> Cherish has clearly never heard of Gloria Gaynor’s gay disco anthem. She asks Mickey to forward it to “the part I like”—the refrain, “I will survive, for as long as I know how to love I know I’ll stay alive.” But while rerecording it, her sweet cheer and mechanical dancing suddenly lose to the harsh unhappy will behind them that makes her choke up, stop singing, and comment grim-smilingly that “anger hurts my throat.”

But even then what looks like emergent authenticity wasn’t exactly an affective tapping into anything. The director of the commercial had encouraged Cherish to dramatize the pop song’s anger rather than to make it bland, as is her custom. Imitation method acting, as I have argued elsewhere, is the means by which contemporary service providers gain skills for their affective labor—first fake it, then make it real, make it yours.<sup>47</sup> This desperate attempt to share a skin with the social makes Cherish both singular in her style of pain management and exemplary in her will to collapse all aspects of the reproduction of life into a comic mien.

45. Quoted in Lesley Stern, “Ghosting: The Performance and Migration of Cinematic Gesture, Focusing on Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s *Good Men, Good Women*,” in *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. Carrie Noland and Sally Ann Ness (Minneapolis, 2008), p. 201.

46. Mickey’s plot in season one of *The Comeback* is itself a classic combover comedy. Valerie Cherish’s number one loyalist, Mickey hairstyles the actress into a “natural” iconicity at every moment; he is *her* primary combover enabler. Then, across the arc of season one, he comes out of a closet on reality TV that no one could have thought he was in. In season two, the gay “I Will Survive” tone of season one turns into an “I’m a Survivor” ringtone on Mickey’s phone; he’s in cancer treatment throughout the season, and Cherish’s alternating care of and carelessness with him is one of the show’s active tensions. In the final episode all broken intimacies resolve when she chooses to be with Mickey rather than at the Emmys. Reconciling there with her estranged husband, Mark, she nonetheless leaves Mickey’s hospital room for post-Emmy parties once she’s sure he’s stable.

47. See Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, pp. 215–18 and *The Female Complaint* (Durham, N.C., 2008), p. 226.

Cherish's upbeat life, in short, performs the bruxism of the neoliberal soul.<sup>48</sup> Scene after scene of such aspirational action remains comic to the brink of torture, like a sadistic episode of self-tickling. She will do anything to demonstrate that she has never left the scene, that she'll take a fall for a scene, that she deserves dignity as an actress of indignity, and that she's open to receive the next insult if it allows her to sustain an image of a world for herself to move in.

The monologue that condenses all of this, and more, takes place in the first episode of season two of *The Comeback*, which, like the show itself, takes place nine years after the first season.<sup>49</sup> The second season begins with Cherish staging yet another comeback, this time in a self-financed reality TV pilot she's making for a pitch to the Bravo network. We understand how precarious her relation to the profession now is, as she claims to have a personal relation to Andy Cohen, the network's CEO, just because they have exchanged some phrases on Twitter. We learn too that she and her husband are alienated because he walks in on the video-selfie filming and is surprised. The audience and the crew watch a mediocrity montage that catches up to Cherish's life since 2005. Clips from the decade log her failures, bit parts, and troubled marriage. The story is that although the network picked up *The Comeback* reality TV show in 2005, it was dropped when *Room and Bored* was not extended for another season. Cherish then moves inauspiciously to acting in seven student films (she calls them "independents"); becoming a *Real Housewife of Beverly Hills* until quitting in an on-air tantrum; and appearing as a fake-breasted flop on *Dancing with the Stars*. She also shoots infomercials for a red hair color "naturally" derived from a French cantaloupe: but she "can't give them away." Her "home movies" could be titled *A Star Isn't Born*, as they document the life of an increasingly minor celebrity trying to stave off acknowledging that few want her to show up for "the life" or notice when she does.

Watching her montage, Cherish jokes, "I don't want to *see that!*" But literally she does not know how to stop the streaming image or indeed how to work any computer, camera, telephone, or machine. Yet she does not know how to start them either, in the sense of achieving a self-extending career. She keeps telling the student cameramen to adjust how her body appears on camera to make it seem as though she hasn't aged; she keeps redirecting the shots and second-guessing her own direction, changing

48. *Soul* is a technical term in the contemporary Marxist discussion of alienation and its subjective form; see Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Guiseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles, 2009).

49. The following quotations from the episode are from "Valerie Makes a Pilot."

the lighting, multiplying takes, all the while reperforming for her own camera the fresh-faced frankness she associates with her sitcom popularity. Kudrow and King shoot Cherish exactly as she instructs. The fear and the reality are that she may be her only agent, director, and audience, too.

Still, there are accidents. Phones ring in the middle of scenes. Pipes in the walls of her family home keep bursting at the seams, and shit literally flows everywhere. All figures close in on the literal. Cherish tries to deflect all this and risk more exposure to humiliation because she thinks she needs to learn not to take herself “too seriously.” But even that is a comover gesture. She comments that her problem was that she was not comedic *enough* in the face of the hits her fantasies take, as though she had stood up for her dignity. If she could only take more mocking and derision; if only she could stop defending herself. The camera frames Cherish unforgivingly not forgiving, then forgiving, herself. It is as though Kudrow has written a character whose will to appear as a comedy heroine is so powerful that even the metashow cannot break away from the circuit of abasement and inflation; its reflexivity is that tight.

Cherish actually does shift towards a little more emotional openness during the 2014 season, becoming harsher and kinder in real time as the fictive and the actual world become more enmeshed. But by this second season’s first episode she has not achieved any moral transition. While filming her reality reel Cherish’s former publicist comes over to tell her that HBO is now casting *Seeing Red*, written by Paulie G. His new series confesses his drug addictions during that period but also heaps blame on the ageing actress who’s in denial about her lack of talent, power, and people skills: Valerie Cherish, here written as Mallory Church. When Cherish hears of this or any career prospect, she becomes overwhelmed by multiple incoherent intentions. If she says no to something the scene cuts inevitably to yes. He’s “free to write whatever he wants to write and I’m free to not react, you know?” turns into staying up late commenting on the script; let “the lawyers” handle it and “cease and desist” becomes going straight to HBO and, finally, reading for the part based on herself.

As Cherish shows up at HBO, they are auditioning other actors to play her as Mallory Church. The comedian Chelsea Handler is seen on a monitor playing herself playing Cherish playing Church, declaring, “I don’t want to *see* that!” The suits in the audience receive Handler’s video audition impassively. When Cherish walks into the room they offer her a shot at reading for herself; they say they had always wanted to give her a shot but never heard back from her agent, whose name she doesn’t even know, so far has she fallen below the radar of market desire. Although scolding them and proclaiming “cease and desist!” the offer to play herself, to get

back into the game, is too seductive. She worries aloud that she's terrible at cold readings; they point out that since she's playing a version of herself her reading couldn't possibly be cold.

Valerie puts on her glasses, because she has to, to read. She even jokes that in the future, if she has one on HBO, she can memorize her lines and therefore avoid showing her vision problems. This apology is an admission that she's aged like a human, not an icon. But her glasses are bright blue, as though mere decoration, a prop. They match her outfit's suburban-esque muddle of turquoise-related synthetics and tchotchkes. Meanwhile her face is pursed and wrinkle-focused. Cherish speaks before the audience of HBO suits and Paulie G., her own reality TV crew filming off to one side. It is an understatement to say that the professional and the personal blur in the scene's staging. Here is Cherish's monologue, starting in a harsh close-up:

Okay, okay. (*Clears throat.*) "You think I'm this dried up, middle-aged woman. Look at the jokes you write, look at this tracksuit you make me wear. All saying the same thing; 'I'm old, I'm annoying, I'm unfuckable.' Well, I'm not the joke, okay? You are, Mitch. And instead of spending all your time trying to make *me* the joke, why don't you do your job and *write* me one, huh? A real joke, Mitch. Not you and your boys off in a room making fun of an old woman's pussy. Yeah, I heard you. I heard what you think of me. I heard it. Well, maybe you and everyone in television."

Oh, said it wrong. Okay.

"Well, maybe you and everyone in the television business can't see me as desirable, but there are plenty of men out there who . . . but there are plenty of men out there who would still want to fuck an old lady like me. So fuck you, Mitch. Just fuck you. And *fuck* you."

During Cherish's performance of Paulie G.'s version of her the HBO auditors discharge the broad side-glances, expressionless glares, seat shifting, and fist biting usually associated with comedy or irony. But this scene is more like the ticking down of a bomb; the world they've made is suspended, as they sense that something beyond genre has come to pass. "I don't know what that was," one woman is overheard whispering, "but I've got to have more of it."

The inhale waiting for the laugh to express itself in the scene of comic suspense is replaced by a question about the possibility of breathing. What's left when comedy leaves the comedy room? The humorlessness of the sovereign monologue; the encounter with truths everyone can otherwise disavow; the unmetabolized rage turning against the speaker



and the writer; the confusions about entertainment. Then there's the humorlessness of the sovereign monologue conveyed as the collapse of the difference between being "unfuckable" and the "fuck you." These sound like a repetition, but the curse is the nonreparative partner to the epithet it echoes. The way they hang there together as so many perversities of the possibility of desire stages overdetermination in its raw proliferation. This is the multiplication and copresence of being in control and out of control—of response not as the undoing of prior acts but as the dilution, redirection, and remediation of effects. The abjections and aggressions in the monologue's phrase gestures crowd out for a moment the utility of manners, whose function is to keep things moving in the scene of gate-keeping that is, after all, the audition. The audition stands here as a figure for being in the game of gender and of labor, paid and unpaid, affective and material. It points to what's deeply personal, conventional, and structurally mediated about one's nonsovereignty in any encounter, including with oneself. The combover, one might say, is the everyday ambivalent acknowledgement of the ongoing audition for life. Appearing without it makes it possible for Cherish to be desired as an actor.

Yet she immediately critiques her performance as too "up there" and, using the *namaste* hands she wields to hide the internal whirl of her violence, *thanks* HBO for the opportunity to audition for the part of herself. On leaving the room, she says, "Why'd I do that? So stupid. Cold reading? So stupid!" She understates what was so wrong about the situation, scrolling manically through phrases like a mad animal, looking for an anchor in form to induce her control over what's becoming event.

Comic monologues involve managing frame switches and glitches in expectation while tragedy's plane of overwhelming consistency allows monologues to delay fatality by way of the combover of inflated performance. Both are present in the atmosphere here, which is to say that both become smudged. She can't tell that she's done well, played herself well, and she can't admit or maybe even register that Paulie G. spoke a truth that she possesses but would never have known to say where it could matter. She can't read the scene of reading the scene because, in a stupor of emotion, compulsion, and "momentary anesthesia," she has lost track of who she is in the situation.

What did just happen, though? Paulie G.'s script was a lifeline and an X-ray. Cherish has just thrown herself once again into a dangerous scene out of a desire to be wanted and to make an impact, and to do this she has left herself behind, as usual. To be present to the desire to have been better than competent at playing a version of herself who can be angry in real time, who can say things without fearing losing a world, she has no choice

but to throw herself out there into the cold reading, scoliosis rod or no. The cold reading authorizes for her a new public tone of fearless realism, by way of the comb-over alibi that it's all a fiction.

"The comedian" in Whitehead's story substitutes observational truths for their aesthetic displacements and obtains a nice cushion from the world through it because people respond hungrily to disappointment in small doses if it's cast as comedy, and he fades from the scene when he's ready, a little detached but intact. Rupert Pupkin is dedicated to some truth, too, but he can only tell it mixed with fabulation within the space of the miniature perfect sovereignty that constitutes getting the big break in America, the break from abjection, accommodation, and managing, which is what the monologue is, an opportunity to master the forces of chance including when and how the law bears down. In these work narratives, celebrity labor makes relational worlds, taste publics in which generosity is defined by a collective provision of space in which to enjoy failures of relation elsewhere.

Cherish's aspirational fictionality is a little different, expressing a humorless intensity around the need not for a live audience of strangers but for a *self*-encounter—"Note to self!"—that doesn't end up anywhere in particular on the success ladder because to arrive would be to end, and that's failure. She doesn't have a fixed image of an achieved life; her comb-over is the activity of combing over life itself—reality acting for the stretched-out present, in contrast to the method acting that taps into the survival of prior intensities. The world is much for her and in her, and her face always turns toward the next public or private encounter with a willful openness to the possibility of being found, taken up, appreciated, and gracious, before moving to the next proving ground.

It would be reductive therefore to see Cherish as truest only when a fiction allows her to say what a confident version of her would think because that would locate truth in the explosive expression of repressed rage, as though anger doesn't carry its own conventions and elisions—as though niceness is artificiality. We should remember that the comb-over is not a false front over a true one but an expression of an inconvenient complexity that would still be there generating figurations and social dynamics in the event of developments in relational style. Brutality is not the real; drama that *sounds* like drama isn't more true than drama that sounds rational, detached, or jokey. Her monologue is a set of inconvenient views from within a dynamic relation that also involves desire, ambivalence, and gestural incoherence. Thinking of it as the curtain drawn back requires an aggressive disavowal of what she wants, which is, one might say, aggression plus pillows. (Her bedroom is a bed-and-breakfast fantasy.)

Instead, like Pupkin, Cherish wants what she wants, to mount a good defense when she steps on people while executing her desire to be enjoyable. Her styles of execution derive from the American story of heterofemininity, as her urge to embody normativity on the make collapses the cutting edge of ideal selfhood onto the fear of sticking out as *too much*. Our other two humorless male comedians saw themselves as exceptional, but she, like so many women, is fighting to be just a little extraordinary. *The Comeback* is an exemplary American story of whiteness and wealth as well, insofar as Cherish can imagine any scene as a potentially welcoming world for her body rather than envisioning scenarios in which she is a problem or stain on the sovereign fantasies of others.<sup>50</sup> This will to make and join worlds is evident in her countless trespassing episodes, whose difficulties fluster but never stop her. It takes a lot of will to fuel that imagination machine.

The figural work of humorlessness at the heart of the comic appears here as well. In humorless comedy one experiences the ordinary as at once too much, not enough, and an infinite middle in which any minute could compel a cold reading or other kinds of exhausting microadjustment. The comedian tries to structure within life's ongoing disturbance a monologic being that pretends at relation and distributes surplus contingency, surprise, and troublesome knowledge to the audience who must enjoy it, out of pity, empathy, rage, and/or love.

We have seen that the monologue is the subject's best shot at the comb-over effect's achievement, a sovereign performance that looks like a conversation that is utterly, though never entirely, controlled by the will of the monologist (the predictable humorlessness of contemporary performance art amplifies this structure; the heckler defeats it). We see in the virtuosity of the solo star turn that our case study subjects seek out that even controlling the world by delegating to it the responsibility to hold the secret of one's embarrassment does not solve the problem of the will's puny

50. See, in contrast, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's rendition of universities, to "glimpse the hole in the fence" through which to see historically subordinated fugitive subjects in a world they can never rest in or trust but only use as a base for new lived imaginaries (Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, "The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses," *Social Text*, no. 79 [Summer 2004]: 102). In episode 8 of season 2 of *The Comeback*, Cherish barges into her Middle Eastern neighbor's home to ask for emergency hospitality; she needs to shower before the Emmys (because her home again has become a literal shit show). He forces her to know his name, to have manners. She doesn't care; she imitates interest so she can get what she wants, which is for him to loan her his shower. She won't take no; she's a bully. While her neglect is not specifically racist (she treats everyone instrumentally), it exemplifies a will to unknowing as an unneighborliness that protects the brittle bubble of the white dominant class, which is continually bursting, smearing, being cleaned and patched up by white and brown servants. See "Valerie Gets What She Really Wants," 28 Dec. 2014, *The Comeback*.

effectivity, however forceful its drive.<sup>51</sup> But the fact that all of these careers involve converting grotesque somatic displays—of stubborn baldness, ir-repressible farting, hypochondria, vomiting, and neurotic smiling—into positive social relations also points to what’s comic in the reparative sense about the desire for the appearance of everything at once: the experience of a pure liveness that is never quite disciplined by prior intention. There is something terribly tender in the desire for the combover’s appearance as failure. Humorless comedy holds its breath, and ours, as it lays out the many possible fates of mistaking control over form for a form of life.

51. The longer version of this essay includes reflections on Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street,” as a classic humorless comedy. Bartleby’s radical brevity and the narrator’s prolixity are mirrors of personality as monologic comic form gone mad, and mad in the guise of rationality at work. In its humorless resolution—the revelation of Bartleby’s death and the narrator’s sentencing to the indefinite servitude to literary apostrophe—the risible task compulsions of the juridical workplace produce life as death in multiple ways, with Bartleby’s literal jailhouse demise displaced from the pseudolife of the law’s managerial and political protocols (both protagonists are appointed to and discarded by the patronage system). The narrator’s insistent comic reparativity is a classic combover, handed over to us as the law of labor, literature, and sociality itself: Bartleby’s withdrawal from socializing his submission to form that way leaches life as such from comedy’s torturous ellipsis. This suggests that the combover *is* life. See Herman Melville, *Bartleby the Scrivener* (New York, 2004).