Brexit Irony on *The Last Leg* and *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*:

Critiquing Neoliberalism through Caricature

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"Brexit means Brexit" – Theresa May, 30th June 2016

"Brexit means breakfast" – Nicola Sturgeon, and many others, shortly after 30th June 2016

Journalists and commentators have used the broadly comic trope of irony to discuss aspects of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland's (UK) vote to leave the European Union (EU) in the EU referendum of Thursday 23rd June 2016. These stories take in diverse issues that range from the potential influx of foreign investors post-referendum (White, 2016), looming air traffic control safety issues (Smith, 2017), to more general discussion of the state of the nation (Orr, 2017). This seems to be a condition where remain supporters and their arguments tend to point out irony whereas leave supporters and their arguments do not. This suggests that irony, or the analysis of it, may have a central role to play in either unpacking pro-Brexit discourse (from now on I refer to this simply as Brexit discourse), or in unpacking remain discourse.

This chapter addresses the former and examines Brexit discourse from a sociological perspective with the aim of describing both the populist construction of Brexit discourse and the existence of internal contradictions, ambiguities or incongruities in it that are accurately

characterised as ironies.[1] Because irony is a comic trope, the chapter examines Brexit irony in the context of comedy studies and does so alongside comedic and satiric responses to Brexit irony. Overall, Brexit irony is outlined, an example presented, and then it is shown how comedians respond to this irony, particularly from the starting point of the caricature of the Brexit politician. This involves examining the employment of a number of other comic devices that appear alongside caricature.

The argument presented is that the 'situational irony' of Brexit – one that both presents and hides neoliberal tendencies - is reinforced by the various 'textual' or 'postmodern ironies' of this discourse. Comedians respond to the ironies of Brexit discourse and are predominantly anti-Brexit or highly critical of Brexit politicians. These comedians use satire with the aim of presenting rationality and unmasking absurdity. They attempt to 'speak truth to power'. The argument is premised on the idea that humour and comedy are rhetorical in structure and thus able to convincing communicate particular messages, especially when those messages are constituted by, or address, ambiguity, incongruity, incoherence and/or irony. Thus, Brexit discourse is rhetorically 'worked on' in comedy.

As examples, the chapter focuses on a leave campaign bus that had written on the side of it a claim about the cost of EU membership. Comedic responses to the bus on the British Channel 4 political satire *The Last Leg,* presented by Adam Hills, Alex Brooker and Josh Widdicombe, and the US Home Box Office (HBO) political satire *Last Night Tonight with John Oliver,* presented by John Oliver, are examined. The chapter employs rhetorical discourse analysis as a method of analysis and the sample is purposive.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the central concepts of globalisation and neoliberalism, defines both, and places Brexit as a populist response to aspects of neoliberal

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[1] Any ironies in remain discourse are not discussed here. The scope of this paper is limited and detailing remain ironies is a task for a broader study.

globalisation. British campaigning to leave the EU, and post-EU referendum Brexit discourse, have been discussed extensively in relation to populism, as a protest of the masses against the elites. Racism, in terms of the plausibility that leave supporters are motivated by racist or anti-immigrant sentiment, has been extensively discussed in popular media and has even been dismissed by some as a simplistic or incomplete critique of leave supporters (see for example, O'Neill, 2016; Saul, 2017). Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the 'other' and the 'other's' place in global neoliberalism is mobilised to show that Brexit political discourse that builds populist appeal and a fixation on 'control', and control of borders, is dependent on a pejorative concept of the 'other' but uses a number of tropes - including irony – to significantly confuse critical anti-racist readings of Brexit discourse. This equates to a postmodern or ironic presentation of othering tendencies. In contrast, the majority of comedy about Brexit seeks to ridicule Brexit politicians, supporters and discourse through harsh ridicule and absurdity, particularly with reference to the caricatured depiction of the body and identity of the politician. Significantly, the caricature of the body of Brexit politicians by comedians is provoked by and a direct response to the irony, ambiguity and untruths of some Brexit discourse. It is a method of simplifying, fixing and processing the ambiguity or irony of Brexit. The comic response is evaluated for its potential to act as resistance humour. The use of caricature is described as a technique of individualisation that paradoxically expresses a key theme of neoliberalism in its response to political discourse. Because of this, unless it is coupled with other forms of critique that examine wider socio-political issues, it is limited in its ability to critique the populism of Brexit. Both Brexit irony and comic responses highlight the significance of the comic in public understandings of Brexit, for both leave and remain supporters.

Globalisation, Neoliberalism and Brexit Populism

Zygmunt Bauman illuminates the crises that beset citizens of the globe through a dichotomy of dystopic/utopic images of, and contractive/expansive reactions to, globalisation (Bauman, 2000; Featherstone, 2013). For Bauman, this is a neoliberal globalisation. Kotsko (2017) neatly outlines some of what neoliberals seek to deconstruct:

> [T]he term neoliberalism refers to the collection of policies that aim to dismantle the postwar political-economic settlement… [of] strong government regulations, powerful unions, and high taxes and social spending to create broadly shared prosperity. (Kotsko, 2017: 495)

These are some of the agitators of dystopic visions of globalisation for Bauman. Thus, the problems of globalisation are also the problems of neoliberalism. Although Bauman states that 'ours is a wholly *negative* globalisation: unchecked, unsupplemented and uncompensated for by a 'positive' counterpart…' (Bauman, 2006: 96. Original emphasis), perceptions of it differ and are polarised. There are those that view the expansive nature of globalisation as a utopia – for Bauman these are the rich, the tourists and those behind the gates of the gated community. For the global majority, the view of globalisation is unsettling and dystopic, and leads to the urge to contract, for the process to turn inwards - as Featherstone explains, "[t]here is nowhere for this process to go, but to turn back in on itself" (Featherstone 2013: 71). To link with the ideas of Aronowitz (2000), this is a claustrophobic form of globalisation in which 'exit' through increased social mobility is not an option. Therefore, other forms of (Br)exit need to be sought. Some of these are politically populist. Some are modes of psychologic projection. The have-nots of globalisation – the poor, the migrant and the 'other' become the objects that fear is projected onto and so enact a fantasy of responsibility for the various thefts of the neoliberal, global world (Bauman, 2016; 2016a). This includes the theft

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of 'exit' which is paradoxically viewed in the mobility of the migrant. Bauman outlines this fear:

> On a planet tightly wrapped in the web of human interdependence, there is nothing the *others* do or can do of which we may be sure that it won't affect our prospects, chances and dreams. (Bauman, 2006: 98. Original emphasis)

The 'other' of Brexit is the migrant who both contributes and does not contribute. It is the migrant that works (and steals jobs), does not work (and steals benefits), that uses public services, and contributes to the metamorphoses of communities and culture. The victory for the leave campaigns saw the emic tendency – the urge to reject the 'other' (Bauman, 2000: 101) - translate into a spike of reported incidents of race hate crime directly following the referendum (Lusher, 2016). The xenophobic and racist content of parts of the Brexit discourse are both obvious and a key component of its populism. Moreover, a continuum between racist discourse and violence is evident in this example. This parallels the way in which violence has been described in neoliberalism. Davies argues that,

> What I have characterized as the 'violent threat' of neoliberalism has come to the fore, whereby authority in economic decision making is increasingly predicated upon the claim that 'we' must beat 'them'. (Davies, 2014: 190)

For Davies, neoliberalism presents the perception and experience of unfair competition. This directly connects with sentiment of othering and the view of the migrant as problematic. 'They' are beating 'us' and this leads to a fixation on notions of control.

Brexit discourse and activism have been described as populist (e.g. Thompson, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016) and there are a number of accepted characteristics of populism that are present in Brexit discourse. Taggart (2000) outlines a definition of populism that includes the following characteristics: 1) an ambivalent attitude towards or suspicion of politics as normal; 2) an idealised concept of the people and the territory; 3) an ideology without core values; 4) a sense of crisis; and 5) internal, self-limiting dilemmas (ibid: 2-3).

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The final point is followed-up later in the chapter and linked with the irony present in Brexit discourse that is the focus of the chapter. Populism as a direct response to the inequalities and uncertainties of both globalisation and neoliberalism is well documented (Thompson, 2016; Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Bauman (2016b; 2017) has argued that Brexit populism is a direct expression of the dystopic, contractive and more recently, 'retrotopic' process of globalisation. In this case, Brexit may not explicitly be a demand for a return to the post-war consensus but it is a call for a return to the zeitgeist of that consensus - a society 'decluttered' from the image and presence of the 'other'.

Individualism has regularly been asserted as a condition of neoliberalism. As Tudor explains '[t]he economic structures of neoliberalism encourage rugged individualism, [and] self-reliance…' (2012: 333). This is usually juxtaposed by the assertion that neoliberalism discourages identification along class or group lines. It may be that Brexit is the assertion of the individual and the nation *as* individual, away from the 'other' and collective of Europe. A second point on individualism is important for the chapter because neoliberal individualism has a particular relationship to the body. Tudor explains:

> This neoliberal individualism also reveals itself through the ubiquitous "self-help" and self-transformation culture of beauty and health, which is another way of expressing the postmodern emphasis on youth, desire, and beauty (Tudor, 2012: 334)

The neoliberal body is one of individual self-control and beauty. It is not grotesque, and we know from Norbert Elias (1987) that the grotesque is rarely a significant, positive, respectable characteristic of modernity. This has not changed in the later incarnations of late or post- modernity. Later, I detail caricature as a response to Brexit irony. These, of course, focus on the body of the Brexit politician, but, it is argued, do not significantly address the ironies, ambiguities or incongruities of the discourse under attack. We might say that these are responses that are heavily informed by the style of the neoliberal political sphere, of style

over substance (or deep analysis), and thus are unable to fully render critique at the door of neoliberalism or the Brexit politician.

Rhetorical Discourse Analysis as Methodology

This section outlines the methodological principles employed in the analysis that follows. These are principles drawn from the method of rhetorical analysis, which are influenced by discourse analytic approaches, and applied to humour (see Weaver, 2015, for an extended discussion of the method). The task begins with the acknowledgement of the rhetorical structures of humour and joking – or the acknowledgement of the similarity between the structure of humorous incongruity and the structure of rhetorical devices (Weaver, 2011). From the acknowledgement that humour can form convincing communication, I examine the context in which a joke is told, or the speaker and audience positions involved in, respectively, telling and receiving the humour. This can be achieved through employing Aristotle's rhetorical triangle as an analytic concept (see Richardson [2006] for an earlier critical discourse analysis that uses this method). Aristotle's rhetorical triangle formed by the speaker, the audience, and the content of the message (the message is, in this case, the structure and content of the joke). Each of these elements has a role to play in the creation of successful rhetoric and is the subject of analysis. The approach acknowledges that meaning is never solely controlled by the speaker and all utterances can be subject to polysemy.

Rhetorical analysis is concerned with mapping the 'mode of persuasion' used by the speaker or the way in which the speaker makes successful use of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* (ibid: 160). *Ethos*, or the ethotic argument, is the creation of the character of the speaker (which aims in most cases to be good character), or, the attack on the character of the target of the utterance. The rhetoric of *pathos* is concerned with the emotions provoked by the speaker with regard to their position and the content of the text, Finally, reason, truth or logic

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form the basis of *logos*, which is something that can be used to build trust in the speaker (ibid). The analysis in this paper is principally concerned with the interaction between irony and caricature, which are documented by Berger (1995) as two of a list of 45 rhetorical devices that are present in humour. The sample used in the chapter is purposive. One instance of Brexit irony is drawn upon and two comic responses are examined. These responses employ caricature and other comic tropes. The two sections that follow outline irony and caricature respectively. Other humour tropes mentioned in the chapter are drawn from the detailed list provided by Berger (1995) (see appendix one).

Brexit Irony

Capturing the relationship between the components of Brexit discourse, globalisation and neoliberalism is a complex task that is aided by a consideration of irony. Definitions of irony are multiple but it is commonly understood to be a text or situation that appears to mean one thing but in fact means something else. It can also have, as Brigstocke explains, 'greater complexity, becoming not just an opposition between what is said and what is meant, but a way of saying one thing at the same time as allowing for the possible validity of its contrary' (Brigstocke, 2014: 112). The highlighting of irony in this chapter is focused on a critique of political tricksterism (Weaver and Mora, 2016) but at this stage it is not possible to ascertain if this is sophisticated mobilisation of irony as a strategy in its own right. In general, the different degrees of certainty about an ironic message often govern the label given to the type of irony – as 'modern', 'postmodern' or 'blank' for example (Bennett, 2016).

The irony in the relationship between Brexit populism and neoliberalism that is presented in this chapter is best described as a 'situational irony' that reflects a "state of affairs in the world" (Giora and Attardo, 2014: 397). In this type of irony, the divergent intentionality of

two very different positions are at odds with one another but this remains hidden unless the irony unfolds. Giora and Attardo present an example of situational irony: "a rescuer heroically saving someone from drowning only finds out that the rescued person was his or her worst enemy" (ibid) (this example may also be an appropriate analogy for Brexit). The irony of Brexit is that the discourse of political actors who support it, and mobilise a populism, has a very different relationship to neoliberal, free market economics than that implied or accepted in its populism. The populist message is that leaving of the EU will see a closing down of free market economics and neoliberal globalisation, rather than further deregulation. It is therefore possible to distinguish the political from the populist Brexit discourse. Thus a paradox exists on 'Brexit' because Brexit support is both a call for more and a call for less neoliberalism. It is both political mobilisation from the political right in the direction of deregulation, where EU regulation is encapsulated as a substitute, restrictive state, and it is a populist reaction that wishes for a mass, contractive response to neoliberal globalisation, particularly free movement of labour and capital inside the EU. The utopian vision or end-point of these positions contain many incommensurable parts and thus there exists a central irony, internal contradiction, incongruity or ambiguity in Brexit discourse. Taggart outlines how populisms contain 'fundamental dilemmas' that are 'self-limiting' (2000: 2). This is the same contradiction outlined by Webber (Introduction, this issue) that sees Donald Trump win power through a protectionist, contractive agenda before 'finishing the job of neoliberalism' (Webber, this issue) via the appointment of the usual (neoliberal) suspects to government.

We can describe Brexit as a 'floating signifier' (Hall c1996) that is inscribed with different meanings by different actors. Brexit is therefore ironic in its mode of discursive enactment and neoliberalism exists as a 'trace' (Derrida, 1976) in multiple positions, with a dichotomous, essential, but not fully articulated presence. With Brexit presented as an ironic,

floating signifier in relation to neoliberalism, this chapter outlines some of the individual 'textual ironies' of Brexit discourse and how satirists respond to these ironies. These textual ironies are of a type that resembles what is well known as romantic or postmodern irony. Giora and Attardo explain this concept:

> *Romantic irony* is an author's playful attitude toward his or her text, often related to metafiction. It is similar to *postmodern irony*, which is the destabilizing of the text in the very process of producing it. (Giora and Attardo, 2014: 397)

Colletta (2009) outlines how '[t]he irony of postmodernity denies a difference between what is real and what is appearance, or what is meant and what is said' (856). Although Colletta downplays the significance or effect of this irony, I argue that in the context of Brexit it forms a significant and impactful political strategy connected to the emerging populism. In the analysis that develops, the 'situational irony' of Brexit is shown to be expressed through its various textual or postmodern ironies, with the latter providing sustenance for the former as 'on the ground' political expression. Some of the postmodern ironies 'enjoyed' by leave supporters, when contrasted with the tension between its populist, anti-immigrant stance and the relative success of post-colonial, anti-racist campaigning in highlighting anti-immigrant racism, can be seen as a pleasurable, affective, carnivalesque expressions of revolt. Berlant and Ngai make a comment on 'unlaughter' in a different context that can be used to elaborate the affective dimension of the leave vote. We might see it as,

> …an aggravated sense of having been denied laughter or having had one's pleasure disrespected or devalued. This also explains some of the rage at feminism and other forms of subaltern political correctness that get into the wheelhouse of people's pleasures and spontaneity. (Berlant and Ngai, 2017: 241)

Brexit irony is both a response to the internal contradictions of the Brexit discourse, as free market, neoliberals present the discourse of a populist, constrictive return to 'better times', and a defence mechanism, a mode of communication that positions itself against the

perception of a hegemonic 'political correctness' which is so often condensed into perceptions of remainers (and perhaps the more pejorative 'remoaner' captures this sentiment more fully).

Caricature as Political Satire

This section outlines the second trope of importance to the chapter – caricature. The genre of caricature has a long history as a form of political satire and social commentary. Developing from the masks of Ancient Greece and Medieval society, the history of caricature is one that is connected with both critical satire that 'speaks truth to power' and the mocking of the have-nots. Caricature as satire is said to be able to capture the moral zeitgeist and contribute to discourses of social change (Gatrell, 2006). Klein describes two key historical and influential examples of caricature. These connect caricature with the categories of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, specifically in the work of Rabelais and Rosenkranz:

> We can turn to François Rabelais's book *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532) to see where the concept of the glorification of obscenity took hold in the consciousness of artists and writers, and how it continued throughout the Renaissance and into modern art history. In Karl Rosenkranz's *Aesthetics of Ugliness* (1853), he suggests that caricature is the embodiment of the ugly and repugnant as well as the comic that is created not just through exaggeration but through disproportion. (Klein, 2014)

These examples elaborate the key tropes available to the caricaturist. It is also relevant to highlight the form of media that caricatures are created through. Klein explains caricature as,

> drawings, cartoons, and prints that include images of human faces and physiques that are grossly distorted and exaggerated for the purposes of a satirical or comic effect' (Klein, 2014).

Klein (2014) documents how the caricature uses the techniques of hyperbole, disproportion and hybridisation, and that caricature can be used to 'punch-up' or 'punch-down' through respectively, the carnivalesque motive or through enacting superiority. It has developed a reputation as satire:

> The humor associated with caricature is satire, biting witticism, parody, and sarcasm and whose functions are to influence public perception about public figures or social, economic, and political events and issues. (Klein, 2014)

One important addition to the definition of caricature is that caricatures are transportable – the same caricature of an individual and their body can be used repeatedly in relation to many political events and situations. That said, there are limitations - most political cartoons contain a limited amount of text. It is the relationship between the body and the event that forms ridiculous meaning in caricature. There is evidence that caricatures and cartoons are frequently read differently by different audience groups who use their identity and background to gain understanding (El Refaie 2011). This is true of comedy more generally (Weaver and Bradley, 2016). Cartoons are a complex medium that require multiple literacies (El Refaie, 2009). Moreover, the lack of further explanation by way of text may mean that caricature is not a genre where detailed political satire, in terms of it addressing discourse, debate, ambiguity and incongruity is formed. This may also explain why individual identity markers are paramount in the interpretive process. There is simply a limit on what can be 'said' literally in caricature. Indeed, the term 'caricature' is often a synonym for a pejorative simplification in popular discourse.

There are also potential limitations based on the nature of hyperbole and the grotesque that are ubiquitous in caricature. Baudelaire's distinction between the 'absolute comic' and the 'significative comic' is useful here:

> … I shall refer to the grotesque as the absolute comic, in contrast to the ordinary comic, which I shall call the significative comic. The significative comic speaks a language that is clearer, easier for the common man to understand, and especially easier to analyse, its elements being obviously double: art and the moral idea; but the absolute comic, coming as it does much closer to nature, appears as a unity that must be grasped intuitively. There must be only one proof of the grotesque, which is laughter… (Baudelaire, 2017 [1855]: 206)

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Leaving aside the critical observation that much grotesque caricature does not produce laugher, and the elitism used to describe the caricature of the consumer, there is an important observation in Baudelaire's typology. The grotesque does not rely on clear expression of comic incongruity in the manner of his significative comic. Baudelaire no doubt believed that this was quite noble – yet we can remove the positive emphasis and use this as an analytic point. It suggests that grotesque caricature may leave situational and textual ironies largely unsaid in satire and thus 'intuitively' condensed in the caricature. Although there is evidence that harsh ridicule is effective as a form of comic critique and resistance, that the satire is successful because the brutal nature of the incongruity leaves the audience in little doubt, for example in the ridiculous comedy of Aristophanes (O'Regan, 1992), and in Jonathan Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (2008 [1729] (although these examples were of course 'misread' by some)*,* these notable examples develop text at length, rather than relying more heavily on caricature. It may be that much caricature is too reductive and short of text to form complex critique in and of itself. What is more, and as I previously outlined, the individualising, body-focused construction of caricature creates grotesque images that reassert dominant ideas on the 'good' neoliberal body, do not seek wider discursive or class/group based critique, or get to grips with the detail of the ironies of the discourse. They appear to be a mode of persuasion that is broadly complicit with the object of critique.

On caricature, an additional theoretical intervention is possible through an observation from semiotics. St Louis' (2003: 76) description of the concept of the 'short-circuit sign', from Christian Metz, is useful for elaborating the impact of caricature:

> The short-circuit sign … collapses the distinction between signifier and signified and is an extremely powerful visual image that appears to best represent (social) reality by dispensing with the distinction between primary and secondary orders of communication – an image or sound (signifiers) and its meaning (signifieds). This conflation of image and meaning where signifier and signified 'are nearly the same: what you see is what you get' (Monaco, 2000: 420).

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Although caricatures are of course open to polysemy, as any linguistic sign is, I argue that the caricature acts as a short-circuit sign that is both image and meaning – it circumvents the need for any further explanation. As we have seen, this is, historically, a highly effective form of ridicule of the individual and the body because the image of the body becomes an expression of character – it is at this point that the wider social and political issue is redirected into corporal representation. This is a comic trope that addresses the presence of external incongruity, ambiguity or contradiction at the level of political or populist discourse through 'funnelling' it into a hyperbolic and distorted representation of the individual and their body, rather than through a careful, comedic unpacking of the ambiguities on offer. In addition, the polysemy of the caricature allows some audiences to read complexity in the caricature but this is by no means a didactic form of satire. In the rest of the chapter, this observation will be examined in relation to Brexit discourse and the caricatured responses from satirists and comedians.

In this analysis, I examine both the images of Brexit politicians and the use of the caricature in the verbal comedy of comedians. The relationship between signifier and signified changes in verbal articulations of caricature because emphasis is shifted onto the signified as essential in creating the image of the caricature, which remains internal to the subject. This may lead to a dilution of the image but this remains an almost unverifiable point.

A Big Red Bus and the NHS – Irony meets Caricature in the EU Referendum Campaign

The analysis begins with a controversial Leave Campaign bus and some text on the side of that bus. During the EU referendum campaign the Leave Campaign used a red 'battle' bus with the following text written on the side:

We send the EU £350 million a week

let's fund our NHS instead Vote Leave[2]

Importantly, the claim that this amount could be spent on the NHS post-Brexit was repeated by left and right leaning leave campaigners on several occasions, including Gisela Stuart (Reuben, 2016) and Boris Johnson (Hartley-Parkinson, 2016). The figure has been shown by a number of independent experts to be misleading and was clarified by media outlets including the BBC and ITV news as a part of their fact checking process (ITV News, 2016; Reuben, 2016). Indeed, recent elections, including the EU referendum, have seen an increasing call for rigorous fact checking as a part of public service broadcasting. Most assert that this is a gross figure and that the net figure is much lower. Moreover, any post-Brexit figure available for health service spending will depend on economic conditions at that time, for which there are differing forecasts. There is evidence that the bus advert was effective and that parts of the public believed the message, despite the claim being widely debunked by independent experts (Stone, 2016). In relation to the situational irony of Brexit, what the advert offers is an increase in health service spending that resonates with pre-neoliberal visions of the role of the state. It contains a retrotopic fantasy that decoupling from the 'other' (rather than from neoliberalism) will provide resources for the nation. It is therefore an advert that articulates the situational irony of Brexit discourse, in this case by placing blame for perceived lack of spending on health services at the feet of the EU, rather than elected national governments following a broadly neoliberal, and in more recent times, austerity agenda. The irony is, of course, that leaving the EU will in no way lead to an *a priori* change of direction in relation to neoliberalism and healthcare spending, and could actually signal the reverse, such an advert has none of the 'guarantees' of a manifesto promise, there is no way

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[2] The claim of having an additional £350 million a week to spend on public services, including the NHS, remains on the Vote Leave website long after the referendum (Vote Leave, 2017)

to predict that leaving the EU will create economic resources for healthcare, or that elected governments post-Brexit will share such a priority.

I now examine how the claim is responded to in comedy and political satire. I do this by using examples from the *Last Leg,* broadcast on Channel 4, a UK terrestrial channel, and hosted by Adam Hills, Josh Widdicombe and Alex Brooker, and through the example of British comedian John Oliver who hosts the political satire *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* on the US cable and satellite network HBO. In both cases there is the verbalisation of caricature, which is explained in advance.

"Frog Faced Arse Wipe": Caricatures of Nigel Farage

The UK MEP Nigel Farage, at the time of the EU Referendum, was leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), a right-wing party that are staunchly anti-EU and anti-EU migration. A popular caricature exists on the former UKIP leader that involves comparing his facial features to that of a frog or a toad. Both frog and toad comparisons have been made in popular media. This section describes the example in illustrated form, principally in newspaper cartoons, before looking in detail at one example of its verbal articulation in televised political satire. The use of the caricature in both cartoon and spoken form is evaluated in relation to the ironies of Brexit discourse.

It is unclear when the first depiction of Nigel Farage as a frog/toad appeared[3]. A non-exhaustive search by the author found several examples in UK and international print media. A Dave Brown cartoon from 2012 uses the image of a frog to represent Farage. Brown is a cartoonist for British newspaper *The Independent*. In that example, a caricature of Farage's

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[3] This is also a task that is beyond the scope of this chapter but will be returned to in a larger study.

face is placed on the body of a frog. Former UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, is depicted contemplating kissing the frog in order 'to stay a handsome Prince' (Brown, 2012) – this is about appeasing voters who might move to UKIP. In July 2016, the cartoonist Steve Bell, in *The Guardian,* depicted Farage's post-referendum resignation as leader of UKIP. Here he is a yellow toad with purple spots (the UKIP party colours), lying on the top of a coffin covered with the EU flag. Farage is smoking a cigar (Bell, 2016a). Farage is labelled 'Toady' by Bell and the image is used extensively in caricatures of Farage (see Bell, 2016a; 2016b), although there are also Steve Bell cartoons that depict Farage differently, in a non-amphibious manner. These examples appear in centre and centre-left newspapers. Aside from newspaper cartoons, the caricature has been used to create humour in other forms. In April 2015, the US news and entertainment website BuzzFeed offered a pole to readers on whether Nigel Farage 'looks like a shiny frog' (Jewell and White, 2015). 93% of voters agreed that he did (ibid).

The frog caricature has been used in televised political satire and in a response to the advert on the side of the Vote Leave campaign bus. The example comes from a monologue by comedian Adam Hills, the lead presenter of Channel 4's left-leaning *The Last Leg.* The episode was aired on Friday 24th June 2016, the day after the EU referendum, and although a part of a longer critique of Nigel Farage, the monologue is a sequential and direct response to a clip of Farage being interviewed by Susanna Read on ITV's *Good Morning Britain* that morning. What follows is the interview text as edited on *The Last Leg* and the response from Hills:

> Susanna Read: Can I ask about money? The three hundred and fifty million pounds a week we send to the EU, which we will no longer send to the EU, can you guarantee that's going to go to the NHS?
>
> Nigel Farage: No I can't and I, and I would never have made that claim, and that was one of the mistakes, I think, that the leave campaign made. What I…
>
> S.R.: Hang on a moment, that was one of your adverts.
>
> N.F.: It wasn't one of my adverts, I can assure you.

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S.R.: Well that was one of the leave campaign's adverts,

N.F.: It was…

S.R.: was that that money…

N.F.: it was...

S.R.: was going to go to the NHS.

N.F.: and I think they made a mistake.

S.R.: That's why people, many people have voted.

N.F.: They made a mistake in doing that but what I can tell you is that we have a nice feather bed…

S.R.: You're saying that after 17 million people have voted for leave…

N.F.: Yep…

S.R.: …based, I don't know how many people voted on the basis of that advert but that was a huge part of the propaganda, you're now saying that's a mistake?

N.F.: We have a 10 billon pound a year, 34 million pound a day feather bed, that is going to be free money that we can spend, on the NHS, on schools, or whatever it is.

(Read and Farage, 2016)

The Last Leg then cuts back to Adam Hills in studio:

Oh you lying frog-faced arse wipe [loud applause]. Arrrr. I know, I'm sorry, I know I said I wouldn't get angry but he didn't even wait until 7am before he's admitting the basis of the leave campaign was a steaming pile of [bullshit][4], [bullshit], [bullshit]. Not only has he lowered the level of politic debate in this country to somewhere between Donald Trump and *Mein Kampf*, he didn't even ease us into the lie. If you're gonna fuck us at least use some lube [loud applause]. This is a man who doesn't think climate change is a problem, wants to scrap the limits on power stations and has taken up smoking again because in his words, "I think the doctors have got it wrong on this one". Even if getting out of the EU was the right thing to do, we followed the wrong man there. That's like being lead into Disneyland by Rolf Harris [applause]. You know what I mean? You might have fun while you're there but you don't want him hanging around. (Hills, 2016)

The advert contains the situational irony of Brexit discourse – it situates a call for more public service funding (or less neoliberalism) as a potential outcome of a vote for even more neoliberalism. This is something that is missed in most debate over the accuracy of the bus advert. It is important to note that the advert was created by the Vote Leave Campaign (which included key figures such as Gisela Stuart, Boris Johnson and Michael Gove) of which Nigel

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[4] Adam Hills hits a button on the desk that produces the sound of co-host Alex Booker saying the word 'bullshit'.

Farage was not a part. UKIP, Nigel Farage, and their major funder, Arron Banks, ran a separate campaign called Leave.EU, which had its own controversial posters and campaign messages. It is arguable that in the *Good Morning Britain* interview, Susanna Read conflates Nigel Farage with the claims of the Leave Campaign on NHS funding. This is corrected by Farage. This is not picked up on in Hills' satirical monologue. Hills opens with the use of the caricature of Farage as a frog through calling him 'frog-faced', which is coupled with the pejorative, scatological epithet 'arse-wipe'. This invokes the common caricature of Farage that ridicules his physical appearance and, perhaps for some audience members, connects to a wider critique of his character and thus presents a particular *ethos* on Farage. It is also a satire that implicitly reinforces neoliberal images of the body – that the 'slick' neoliberal, (individualised) politician is of a certain look – that perhaps Cameron and Blair were able to enact. The monologue is not detailed in that it does not discern the Leave Campaign and its members from the Leave.EU campaign and its members – it funnels caricature as a short-circuit sign so that a complexity of issues and ambiguities are represented in insult. Hills adds to the scatological references through the use of the show's 'bullshit' bottom, which first appeared in an interview between Alex Brooker and the then Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg (Higgie, 2017). This technique can also be described as reductive because the scatological trope that combines techniques of the grotesque, insult, ridicule, and repetition (Berger, 1995) does not, in and of itself, help to explain the ambiguities or ironies of the discourse under attack. It does not provide information. It does give an attack on the *ethos,* or the character of the speaker, that will resonate with a receptive audience but it does not explain the situational or textual ironies of Brexit discourse.

The monologue continues with a number of other comic tropes. These are comparison ('somewhere between Donald Trump and *Mein Kampf*'/'That's like being lead into Disneyland by Rolf Harris'), grotesque ('If you're gonna fuck us at least use some lube'),

absurdity and ignorance ('doesn't think climate change is a problem', 'scrap the limits on power stations', 'I think the doctors have got it wrong on this one'). Almost all of the comments in the extract represent insult, which is an additional trope (Berger, 1995). Again, all of the tropes attack the *ethos* of Farage or create a large assemblage of verbal caricatures of his character. Farage as an individual that lacks the values and slick presentation of the (neo)liberal actor is called into question. His views on Brexit are critiqued through alignment with other non-liberal views rather than through an examination of their internal coherence. There is little by way of an unpacking of the political issues – indeed, leaving the EU is not actually called into question – and thus the satire fails to address Brexit irony.

'Ban Bam from the Flintstones': Caricature of Boris Johnson as dishevelled

Boris Johnson, a prominent leave campaigner and Conservative Member of Parliament is regularly caricatured. His physical appearance and hair are the focus of the caricature, as generally scruffy with wild, poorly combed blonde hair. This image is used extensively in political cartoons. A short selection of such caricatures that relate to Brexit follows. Pre-referendum, Oliver Schopf in the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard,* depicts Brexit as an overweight, wild-haired Johnson cutting a hole around the floor on which David Cameron is standing (Schopf, 2016). In October 2016, Ben Jennings' cartoon in *The Guardian* depicts Johnson with hair combed in several directions contemplating his position on the EU referendum. Two cherubs, one whispering in each ear, offer different advice. The 'in' cherub says '…Brexit will be a disaster for Britain!', the 'out' cherub says '…it could be brilliant for Boris…' (Jennings, 2016). This comments on one of the central individual ironies of Brexit. A number of Brexit politicians, including Johnson, moved from remain to leave positions after the referendum was included in the Conservative Party manifesto of 2015. Johnson's

decision was particularly last minute. These examples present an uncertainty or ambiguity at the level of the individual that is in sharp contrast with that is displayed in Brexit discourse. In July 2017, Steve Bell, in *The Guardian,* depicts Johnson as an overweight John Bull with white hair covering his eyes as he 'moons' at a train that has the stars of the EU flag on it. Johnson says 'Go whistle' while standing on the track on which the train is approaching. It is not clear when these caricatures first appeared but they certainly were used to depict Johnson during the referendum campaign.

John Oliver, on the HBO political satire *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver,* uses the caricature of Boris Johnson in a discussion of Brexit just before the referendum, on 20th July 2016. The broadcast of this episode was delayed until after the referendum by Sky Television because it is unbalanced and could have been in contravention of UK broadcast rules in election periods, although HBO did make it available online (Lee, 2016). In the clip, Oliver employs the caricature of Johnson before dissecting the claim that 350 million a week could be used to fund the NHS post Brexit.

> That is former London Mayor, Boris Johnson, a man with both the look and the economic insight of Bam-Bam from *The Flintstones* [shows a caption box with Boris Johnson and Bam-Bam pictured next to each other]. He, he is even being driven around in a giant red bus for the last month with "we send the EU £350 million a week' [caption of the red bus is shown] written on the side. But that number has been thoroughly debunked. It's actually about £190 million a week when you consider a rebate the UK receives and other money the EU sends back [caption with reference to *The New York Times*], on top of which, if Britain does leave the EU, it may have to spend close to that amount, just to access the common market. So, what the bus should really say is "we actually send the EU £190 million a week, which as a proportion of our GDP makes sound fiscal sense. In fact, considering the benefits we reap in return… oh shit, we're running out of bus! Okay, bye-bye!" [caption of bus with alternative text]. (Oliver, 2016a)

John Oliver begins by rightly connecting Boris Johnson, rather than Nigel Farage, with the text on the red bus. This avoids the error of the interview and monologue previously described by connecting it to the Vote Leave campaign, rather than the UKIP led Leave.EU

campaign.[5] The caricature is presented through the comparison, verbally and in pictures, of Boris Johnson and the character Bam, from *The Flintstones*. Bam is a cave-child whose only spoken words are 'Bam'. Oliver overcomes the short circuit of the caricature through the spoken word, as the image comes to represent simplistic economic thinking. Oliver then gives a description of what is wrong with the economic claim of the leave campaign, by listing facts. This does employ comic tropes, specifically it uses literalness and speed (Berger, 1995). Brexit discourse is cut through by straightforward explanation on why the figure is wrong in a fast-paced manner not usual in news reporting but acceptable in comedy. The extract finishes with a rewriting of the claim in a way that does not fit on the side of the bus. This uses tropes of catalogue, comparison, definition, imitation, literalness and speed (Berger, 1995) to make the point that the issues are complex and the Brexit discourse is a simplification. The end result of this is political satire that builds on the limits of caricature and fulfils the often-stated task of 'speaking truth to power'. It employs *logos* to critique the ironies of Brexit discourse. Oliver is presenting an *ethos* or character that is figured on rationality and the debunking of fallacy. The *pathos* created for the receptive audience is one of ridicule and incredulity of the claim presented on the side of the red bus.

Conclusion

It has been argued that Brexit contains a situational irony that is formed by support for the neoliberal political motivation for deregulation and the mobilisation of populism that contains a very different, contractive and dystopic response to neoliberal globalisation. These tendencies are very different and so need to be disguised in Brexit discourse through a number of textual ironies. The 'other' is employed in much Brexit discourse as a simple

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[5] It is not clear if this is a conscious separation because a clip in a later episode does comment on the Farage/Read interview in a less clear manner (Oliver, 2016b)

scapegoat – there is nothing new in this – but this is an 'other' that encompasses both the migrant worker and the other of Europe. One example of a textual irony, the leave campaign's NHS bus claim, is analysed for the way it presents false information, was defended, was not defended and was addressed in comedic responses.

The irony of Brexit can be seen as the ambiguities, tensions, and in some cases, untruths of Brexit discourse. These are responded to by comedians and satirists. The chapter examines two responses that focus on the character, body and thus the caricature of the individual politician. It is argued that this is the individualisation (a key neo-liberal theme) of responses to political discourse and is distinctly neoliberal. Unless coupled with other forms of critique that examine wider socio-political issues, it is limited in its ability to critique the populism of Brexit. Caricature is heavily informed by the style of the neoliberal political actor – of surface style that may be criticised as ugly. It is therefore not necessarily suited to critique the neoliberal or Brexit politician.

We saw that Adam Hills and John Oliver both use different techniques in addition to caricature but that Oliver's focus on unpacking the information provided by the leave campaign has an increased potential to 'speak truth to power'. Overall, both discourses highlight the significance of the comic/ironic in public understandings of Brexit, for both leave and remain supporters, which may have wider implications for understandings of political communication, especially in a political landscape where populisms (with their usual, inbuilt dilemmas, contradictions or ironies) are in ascendance. Specifically for Brexit, if ironies are not called into question the process remains obfuscatory for public understandings of the political. Comedy has a key role to play in preventing that.

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Appendix One

Berger's (1995: 54-5) list of forty-five humour techniques.

Technique	Category	Technique	Category
1. Absurdity	Logic	24. Infantilism	Language
2. Accident	Logic	25. Insults	Language
3. Allusion	Language	26. Irony	Language
4. Analogy	Logic	27. Literalness	Language
5. Before/After	Identity	28. Mimicry	Identity
6. Bombast	Language	29. Mistakes	Logic
7. Burlesque	Identity	30. Misunderstanding	Language
8. Caricature	Identity	31. Parody	Identity
9. Catalogue	Logic	32. Puns, Wordplay	Language
10. Chase Scene	Visual	33. Repartee, Outwitting	Language
11. Coincidence	Logic	34. Repetition, Pattern	Logic
12. Comparison	Logic	35. Reversal	Logic
13. Definition	Language	36. Ridicule	Logic
14. Disappointment	Logic	37. Rigidity	Logic
15. Eccentricity	Identity	38. Sarcasm	Language
16. Embarrassment	Identity	39. Satire	Language
17. Exaggeration	Language	40. Scale, Size	Identity
18. Exposure	Identity	41. Slapstick	Visual
19. Facetiousness	Language	42. Speed	Visual
20. Grotesque	Identity	43. Stereotypes	Identity

21. Ignorance	Logic	44. Theme and Variation	Logic
22. Imitation	Identity	45. Unmasking	Identity
23. Impersonation	Identity		