Conceptual Writing, Experimental Poetry and Humor

Eds.
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Libretos

Introduction - Why so Serious?

Laughter is a physical manifestation or, as Jean-Luc Nancy wrote, it is "the body shaken with no way thought" (2008: 109). In a performance of conceptual poetry you hear as much laughter as in a stand-up comedy performance. However, in the academic world, conceptual writing has been treated mainly as a cerebral and intellectual exercise. Enthusiasts and critics alike often take conceptualist works too seriously.

With the exception of Flarf poetry, research about conceptual writing and related practices have focused on formal aspects and the way in which they interrogate notions related to writing and reading, authorship and text, medium and message, among others. However, studies dedicated to thinking about humor or other discursive and material strategies related to it are scarce.

It is nonetheless undeniable that humor plays a central role in conceptual writing. Interestingly, when humor is at all taken into account, it is mainly to condemn the black humor of some works considered controversial. Critics say, in these cases, that the limits of what is acceptable humor have been exceeded. This is, however, something that often happens in comedy, condemned by society when it touches on taboo topics or raises questions about political correctness. In the case of conceptual literature, it sounds even stranger to delimit the reach of projects and performances that, from the outset and as mentioned above, had not even been considered humorous in the first place.

On the other hand, the playful component of conceptual poetry is often highlighted in the literature on the subject. Is humor, however, just another facet of play? For example, how can we think of playfulness but not humor in a work that consists of appropriating and reorganizing another text in alphabetical order? How not to think of humor with regard to a work that is based on the act of transcribing *ipsis verbis* a given source (textual, sound, web) or reproducing it in the form of a book? And what about texts that mine Google searches or repurpose screenshots or user comments on social networks? How not to think of humor when the artist takes up the job of selling letters, words or blank books (whether they are composed entirely of blank pages or completely in black)? These are works that toy with our expectations regarding what literature should be and the kinds of materials that can generate productive thought. It is often unclear, however, if conceptual authors engage in these practices out of high-minded seriousness or simply because they wish to troll us. Perhaps they are in it just for the lols.

We find something funny when it is incongruous, out of place. Incongruity can be repulsive too, as Noel Carroll (a scholar who has also written extensively about humor) points out in his book about horror. Humorous disjunctiveness, however, is non-threatening. Laughter invades our bodies and our minds and it may even undermine our sense of self, but it is never a life-or-death affair. Humor, unlike horror, is pleasurable through and through. Humor may be dark, embarrassing, didactic, philosophical, uplifting and even poetic. But it is always fun.

That, however, does not mean that it should be taken lightly. After all, as John Bruns argues in *Loopholes*, comedy is not just the name we give to a genre, the opposite of tragedy. Comedy is a specific way of thinking and understanding. It does not play second fiddle to tragedy or philosophy with respect to "things that really matter". Laughter matters a great deal too, just as much, in fact. Humor reveals facets of the world that other modes of perception do not. Thus, we can ask: Does humor, in conceptual writing, have a political dimension? How serious is it?

With this book, we do not wish to take humor too seriously, nor to devalue it. We want to open a space for thinking about humor and its relationship with conceptual writing, in order to understand the implications that humor has on the production, circulation and reception of these works. What are the mechanisms of humor and how are they manifested in conceptual writing? How broad are these mechanisms for rethinking a theory/practice of humor in conceptual writing?

The collection adopts a wide-ranging notion of "conceptual writing", including diachronic perspectives on post-conceptualism, experimental literature, and visual poetry. It also expands the scope in order to include works and authors usually not associated with conceptualism or even humor for that matter. The chapters focus on works written in different languages and from different parts of the world.

In her essay, Elina Siltanen argues that although conceptual writing, because it often recycles or repurposes existing materials to create new texts, has normally been seen as a quintessentially postmodern art form, some conceptual poems use humor in a manner that can be classified as metamodern, since it goes beyond postmodern irony and embraces a kind of ambivalence that oscillates between sarcasm and enthusiasm. Siltanen illustrates this argument by carefully exploring poems from Alexandra Nemerov, Lawrence Giffin, and Marcella Durand. While engaging with "metamodern sensibilities", these works make evident how humor connects to political alternative ways of looking at capitalism through laughter and affect.

Also establishing a connection to metamodernism, Lee Campbell examines how comedy is used across a variety of works (ranging from poetry film to performance art) to explore queer identity from a self-reflexive perspective. Campbell's chapter offers a situated description of his own creative works, curatorial practice and community-led events, arguing that humor and wordplay enable us to see language as a cathartic and transgressive act. This reflection is profusely illustrated with examples of stills

from poetry film works, posters and other visual documentation of screenings and exhibitions, and photos of performances and workshops.

In his essay, Leonardo Villa-Forte surveys conceptual poetry written in the Americas during the last two decades and analyzes the humorous ways in which poets have been responding to the oversaturation of information in today's digital culture. Villa-Forte's mapping is deliberately not exhaustive but is quite impressive nevertheless. Among the various works and geographies mentioned throughout the chapter, there is a particular emphasis on Brazilian and Chilean writers, including analysis of texts by Veronica Stigger, Angélica Freitas, Jorge Miranda and Rogério Bettoni (Brazil), Carlos Soto-Román, Alejandro Zambra and Felipe Cussen (Chile).

Closing the volume, Marzia D'Amico looks at Italian conceptual artist and visual poet Giulia Niccolai. The poet uses irony to undermine the authority of dominant discourses. Niccolai's work, according to D'Amico, essays a feminist politics that is averse to power. Humor plays a key role in her aesthetic and political project, which she fittingly terms "non-poetry". For D'Amico, a poem that does not take itself too seriously, and embraces a lighthearted approach instead, can unlock new possibilities for liberated linguistic and social horizons.

These diverse contributions lead us to conclude that humor is a useful tool through which to think many of the conundrums of the present. Although it provokes in us an immediate reaction (laughter), humor's effects linger and may stir up new ideas.

To conclude, some acknowledgements are due. We would like to express our gratitude to the reviewers for their time and invaluable feedback in assessing each contribution. We also wanted to thank the ILCML for the support in the publishing process. Last but not least, a warm thank you goes to the authors for their generative insights and collaboration.

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Ambivalent Laughter: Conceptual Poetry's Humor and Metamodernism

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Abstract: Conceptual poetry can easily be viewed as a postmodern phenomenon, but in this essay, I argue that the way some conceptual poems relate to humor suggests a metamodern sensibility. Metamodernism operates between tonal ambiguities like "irony and enthusiasm" which are key elements in Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's (2017) definition of the term. I consider poems from three writers, Alexandra Nemerov's "First My Motorola", Lawrence Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics", and Marcella Durand's "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2". These poems can be read as being critical of capitalism through humor. The poems do not merely propose an ironic reading but, instead, can be read as evoking ambivalent laughter as affect (see Hennefeld 2021). These kinds of poems recycle seemingly infinite material from contemporary everyday life and invite the reader to consider this infinite material through ambivalent laughter.

Keywords: conceptual poetry, metamodernism, irony, affect

Resumo: A poesia conceptual pode ser facilmente vista como um fenómeno pós-moderno, mas, neste ensaio, defendo que a forma como alguns poemas conceptuais se relacionam com o humor sugere uma sensibilidade metamoderna. O metamodernismo opera entre ambiguidades tonais como "ironia e entusiasmo", que são elementos-chave na definição do termo de Robin van den Akker e Timotheus Vermeulen (2017). Considero poemas de três escritores: "First My Motorola", de Alexandra Nemerov, "Spinoza's Ethics", de Lawrence Giffin, e "Pastoral" e "Pastoral 2", de Marcella Durand. Estes poemas podem ser lidos como uma crítica ao capitalismo através do humor. Os poemas não se limitam a propor uma leitura irónica, podendo ser lidos enquanto evocação do riso ambivalente como afeto (ver Hennefeld 2021). Este tipo de poemas recicla material aparentemente infinito da vida quotidiana contemporânea e convida o leitor a considerar este material infinito através do riso ambivalente.

Palavras-chave: poesia conceptual, metamodernismo, ironia, afeto

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Elina Siltanen

> *First, my Motorola*
> *Then my Frette*
> *Then my Sonia Rykiel*
> *Then my Bulgari*
> *Then my Asprey*
> *Then my Cartier*
> *Then my Kohler*
> *Then my Brightsmile*
> *(Nemerov 2011: 457)*

Conceptual poetry has often been discussed as a serious exercise that is concerned with how we use language and texts. Alexandra Nemerov's "First My Motorola" illustrates how subtly humor often works in conceptual poetry. The poem is a listing of every product brand that the poet touched during an ordinary day (2011: 457). The very concept is humorous: the idea of listing everything that one touches might elicit a chuckle, as the idea of framing an ordinary day through only brand names is surprising. On the surface, of course, the poem may not seem funny, but the concept is nevertheless incongruous with what would be expected of a poem, and surprise and incongruity are key components in many basic definitions of humor (see e.g. Attardo 2020: 19; Martin 2007: 6). As the poem proceeds, humorous effects ensue from the sudden transitions from one product to another: Motorola reappears throughout the day and toothpaste is followed by fruit brands and an expensive item of clothing or baggage (Nemerov 2011: 457-458). The poem is playful.

Since conceptual writing engages with playful experimentation, recycling, and repurposing, it has easily been viewed as a quintessentially postmodern form of writing (see e.g. Kaufmann 2017: 13). I propose, however, that some conceptual poems engage with humor and laughter through a metamodern sensibility that veers away from postmodern irony towards ambivalent laughter. According to Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen (2017: 11), metamodernism "points to a sensibility that should be situated beyond the postmodern, one that is related to recent metamorphoses or qualitative changes in Western capitalist societies", and it "oscillates [...] between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity" and between the modern and the postmodern. Indeed, metamodernism has been viewed as engaging with the "resurfacing of Modernism" (Kersten/Wilbers 2018: 719) while it is also "beyond the postmodern" (Van den Akker/Vermeulen 2017: 11).

Metamodernism is a complex concept and there is little consensus on its definition (see Kersten/Wilbers 2018: 721) or, indeed, whether it is a useful way to think about what happens after postmodernism. In this essay, I use it in a somewhat restricted way: as a concept that, most centrally, engages with tonal ambiguities like

the distinctions between irony and enthusiasm or sarcasm and sincerity, as mentioned by Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 11). Elsewhere, I have discussed how Dorothea Lasky's "New Sincerity" poetry can be read as a sub-phenomenon of metamodernism (Siltanen 2020a: 981-985), and my focus here is informed by the research done for the earlier article. The tonal ambiguity within metamodernism entails scaling at least partly back from postmodern irony, which is often associated with cynicism (see *idem*: 985). While this is not the only significant aspect of metamodernism, it is what I focus on here. In my earlier article, the emphasis was on sincerity as a performance which cannot entirely ward off irony as seen in the work of a non-conceptual poet (Siltanen 2020a: 983-984), but here I focus on the scaling back of irony as observed through zooming in on humor in conceptual poetry.

Irony, too, is complex to define, but according to linguist Joana Garmendia (2018: 17, 130, 133), it involves "saying something and meaning the opposite", overtones of negativity like mockery, and someone or something at whom the irony is targeted. Irony can be connected to the superiority theory of humor, so that "irony is often funny because irony often expresses a negative attitude that places the speaker in a superior position, and it is this feeling of superiority that creates the humour" (idem: 140). As Garmendia (*idem*: 9-10) notes, the terms irony and sarcasm are frequently used in overlapping ways. For my purposes, the distinction between the two terms itself is less important than the point that metamodernism involves this ambivalence between pervasive irony and sarcastic mockery and more sincere or authentic positions (Van den Akker/Vermeulen 2017: 11).

To be clear, I am not proposing that conceptual poetry itself is a wholly metamodern phenomenon, but that some conceptual poems use humor in a metamodern way. In making this argument, I consider conceptual poems that attempt to do something serious by critiquing capitalism while they might be humorous and elicit laughter. Nemerov's poem, for example, has been read as "a chronicle of product usage as well as a chronicle of information consumption" (Stephens 2013: 764). Given the poem's focus on targeting information consumption, it can be read as having a serious agenda in critiquing capitalism, but the simplicity of the poem's concept means that its mode of doing criticism is primarily humorous and it can also elicit laughter. In addition to Nemerov's "First My Motorola", I discuss how Lawrence Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" (2011) and Marcella Durand's "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2" (2012) engage with consumption as they rely on appropriation, repetition, and recycling of seemingly infinite materials. To make this argument, I first consider the position of irony in metamodernism and how capitalism is related to both. Then, I discuss how laughter can be seen as an ambivalent affective response, and in the last section, I elaborate on this through considering the poems in more detail.

In postmodern literature, prevalent irony was frequently used for criticizing capitalism (Matthews 2023: 808). Moving partly beyond irony often surfaces in

discussions of metamodernism, as evidenced by the inclusion of Lee Konstantinou's (2017: 87) article on what he has termed "postirony" in Van den Akker and Vermeulen's edited book (see also Siltanen 2020a: 982-985). Konstantinou (2017: 87-88) writes about how many recent writers have come to view postmodern irony as a negative phenomenon, "a corrosive practice of symptomatic, sceptical or paranoid reading". Postmodern irony has been discussed as distanced and cynical, and hence inadequate for a criticism of late capitalism, as Edward Matthews (2023: 808, 810) has argued with reference to Brett Easton Ellis's postmodernism and David Foster Wallace's criticism of Ellis's work, where Wallace called for more sincerity. This does not mean completely doing away with irony, but it needs to be kept in check by sincerity (Matthews 2023: 812).

Conceptual poetry has had a bad rap in recent years, not least because of accusations of racism (see e.g. Luger 2020: 50; Chen 2015; Hong 2014). Another point of contention has been conceptual poetry's relation to capitalism. For Amy King, for example, conceptual poets "purport to block capitalism while intentionally employing capitalist techniques [...] to achieve and secure status within the capitalist structure" (2013). Trevor A. Strunk (2018: 195-196) has noted of a work by Vanessa Place that "it ultimately falls short of a poetic break from the market" even though it attempts such a move. Nevertheless, other critics like Heather Milne (2018: 6-7; 9) have viewed conceptual tactics in the work of poets such as Rachel Zolf, Evelyn Reilly and Durand as beneficial in responding to capitalism. I concur with Milne that conceptual poetry, despite its problems, offers possibilities for considering contemporary challenges like capitalism, and one of the ways it can do this is by engaging with metamodern sensibilities.

Metamodernism has also been discussed in relation to capitalism. Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 11-12) associate metamodernism with social and cultural developments in the 2000s, and most relevantly for my purposes, with the rise of digital technologies and financial crises that led to more neoliberalization and ecological challenges (see also Bentley 2018: 741). For Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 4), metamodernism "has become the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies". They discuss, for example, the Occupy movement and Tea Party, both of which "originated in a growing group of people disaffected with neoliberal globalisation, disenfranchised with representative democracy and at ease with the Internet as a means to discuss, cultivate and rally around shared frustrations" (*idem*: 13). Metamodern literature, then, has arguably attempted to respond to similar conditions and challenges as some conceptual poetry through its appropriation and the repurposing of, for instance, internet texts, into poetry. The internet and the Occupy movement have similarly been observed to have a relation to conceptually oriented poetry and its use as "a dynamic space of political engagement" (Milne 2018: 4).

The metamodern breaking away from full-blown irony has frequently been discussed in relation to television. In writing about metamodern sitcoms, Gry C. Rustad and Kai Hanno Schwind (2017: 131-132) argue that "mediatised forms of humour now seem to be more interested in 'laughing with' rather than 'laughing at' the butt of the joke" than for example sitcoms from the 1990s. "Laughing with" refers to a shared experience, which is distinguished from laughing at, for example, jokes directed against other people, or from parody and cynicism (*idem*: 131-132). As examples, Rustad and Hanno Schwind (ibidem) discuss sitcoms like *Community* and *Parks and Recreation* which, as they say, present "a sincere yearning for meaning" which nevertheless does not preclude parody. For Rustad and Hanno Schwind (*idem*: 140), postmodern humor in sitcoms like Seinfeld is "observationally distanced, highly judgmental and very often serves as an end in itself", while to metamodern sitcoms like *Parks and Recreation* they read an "oscillation between naïveté and skepticism" (*idem*: 143). Metamodern works can be said to be seeking a deeper relationship with meaning than mere cynical irony or mockery ("laughing at" someone) on a surface level. This culminates in a tone that "lies in a […] sitcom's address and how it communicates with its viewers" (Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 132).

Address has also been acknowledged as significant to the power dynamics of reading conceptual poetry. These considerations are one of the few occasions when humor and laughter have been highlighted as significant to conceptual poetry's mode of operation. David Kaufmann (2017: 60) discusses how conceptual poetry like Ara Shirinyan's *Your Country Is Great* (2008) that uses appropriated language to recycle superficial views of people writing online might suggest a sense of superiority for its readers. For Eric Rettberg (2014: 60), Shirinyan's work "provokes the reader's laughter amid a series of imagined transnational encounters—encounters that scholars have usually treated as occasions for seriousness". Rettberg (*idem*: 66, 70), like Kaufmann (2017: 62-63), asserts that readers may be tempted to view themselves as superior to the voices of the poem, but such a view is, Rettberg states, too simple as the poems also ask "readers to recognize their own complicity in […] exoticizing assumptions and postcolonial appropriation".[1] The focus here is on deciding who is being made fun of and who gets to feel superior, or to feel they have more "cultural capital" than the internet voices, but ultimately, for example the feeling of superiority might invite the reader to consider their own position (Kaufmann 2017: 59-60, see also Rettberg 2014: 68-70; Siltanen 2020b: 110).

Again, then, we are dealing with the superiority theory of humor, and the possibility of ridicule or mockery (see Garmendia 2018: 140; Attardo 2020: 67). A conceptual poem can propose a sense of superiority for readers and thus address them by calling on them to engage with the text ironically. If we were to read conceptual poetry's humor exclusively through mockery of particular cultural positions, those of others or our own, conceptual poetry would arguably have a postmodern sensibility. In

other words, we would be laughing at rather than laughing *with* someone (see Rustad/ Hanno Schwind 2017: 131). My argument is, however, that in reading some conceptual poems, the humor is more multifaceted. Of course, the point in Kauffmann's and Rettberg's readings, too, is not that conceptual poetry would merely invite mockery of those deemed inferior, but that it invites us to consider what happens if we adopt that position.

My focus here is particularly on *laughing with* conceptual poetry along similar lines as those suggested by Rustad and Hanno Schwind (*ibidem*) about sitcoms. I propose that in some of the most effective conceptual writing, the appropriation of existing text materials allows us to examine "laughing with" contemporary discourse in a way that does not necessitate adopting an ironic attitude, which can have a political payoff in ways that align with metamodern sensibilities. To understand how this might work, we need to, next, turn to examining how humor is connected to the notion of laughter as an affect.

Humor, laughter, and unease

In a simplified definition, Salvatore Attardo (2020: 17) has defined humor as "the cognitive stimulus", while "the emotional effect" of humor can be called mirth, and laughter is "the physical manifestation of the emotion" (see also Martin 2007: 8-9). Attardo (2020: 42, 44) remarks that laughter can exist without humor and vice versa, and that smiling is often a manifestation of humor instead of laughter. He uses the term "mirthful laughter" for laughter that coincides with humor (*idem*: 43). For Attardo (*idem*: 46), "the recognition of an incongruity" can lead to identifying a text as humorous, though he notes that researchers can use triangulation, such as looking at empirical data. My focus is on readings of literary texts, and an example of how humor manifests in incongruities was already briefly identified in the earlier discussion of Nemerov's poem. Laughter is discussed as an associated concept that might occur in the face of incongruities, like humor.

Laughter also has a darker side. Maggie Hennefeld (2021: 111) discusses laughter as an affect and emphasizes its political potential. For Hennefeld, who works with feminist affect theory, laughter as an affect is involved in nuances such as "the rogue insight that tickles you, that flight of fancy that alights in your limbic system and then convulses your diaphragm, and the vanishing interim between spontaneous incitement and explicit recognition". Hennefeld (*idem*: 110) emphasizes the "unfinished, nomadic potentiality of affect—its Spinozan inheritance". She is interested in "disproportionate, off-cue, and unstable instances of laughter, wherein nervous excess consumes the laughing subject and threatens to transform into something else entirely" (*idem*: 112). Laughter, in this sense, is an uneasy experience more than a positive one in uncomplicated ways, and its potential lies in its unfinished

quality, in something that is not yet fully identifiable. Moreover, late capitalism tends to expect people to be happy all the time, which further underlines the dark side of laughter (*idem*: 131).

Based on Hennefeld's approach, laughter can be seen as a physical experience involving moments of recognition that border on turning into something unpredictable.[2] I propose that unpredictable laughter as affect – as something unfinished – can be a useful way to view a potential response to some conceptual poems. Of course, since my focus is on poems that do not specifically mention laughter, or there are no laughing characters as such, the discussion of laughter as affect is premised on the theoretical possibility of laughter being the response to, for example, incongruities. Like Hennefeld (*idem*: 110, 112), I am more interested in what is "unfinished" than what is "already extant". Laughter as affect is evoked between the lines in the poems and ultimately behooves the reader. Laughter can be viewed as an affect that can risk being excessive rather than merely joyful. This is also distinguished from laughter in response to cynical, distanced irony.

As mentioned, Hennefeld (*idem*: 112) writes that "nervous excess consumes the laughing subject". Conceptual poetry has often been discussed in terms of a lack of identity or subjectivity, where copying threatens to consume everything. This issue surfaces for example in discussions of its relationship to racism (see e.g. Kaufmann 2017: 71-76; Siltanen 2020c: 123n3). While racism is not my focus here, referencing this discussion illuminates conceptual poetry's regard of identity and subjectivity. Kaufmann (2017: 74) has discussed Cathy Park Hong's (2014) criticism of conceptual writing's inherent racism and her idea that it regards identity as irrelevant, which cannot work for writers who are racialized or otherwise categorized by their identity. Hong's criticism of the difficulty of being "post-identity" for those whose identity is repeatedly attacked is certainly relevant. Yet, according to Kaufmann, when conceptual poetry's biggest proponent Kenneth Goldsmith writes about identity, he really means subjectivity and the idea that "there is no stable psychological core underwriting his 'I'"; in other words, something different from what Hong means by identity, though Kaufmann (2017: 75) points out that Goldsmith (2009) makes his points in an unclear way. Thus, when conceptual writing foregoes subjectivity in the sense that Goldsmith discusses we are dealing with commonplace "postmodern critique of subjectivity" that does allow for considering how identities are "constructed and experienced" (Kaufmann 2017: 76). In making this argument, Kaufmann also implies that Goldsmith's notion of subjectivity is that of a consumer's, someone whose subjectivity is defined by what he consumes.

Once we consider conceptual writing through the lens of humor, the absence of subjectivity that Kaufmann (ibidem) writes about becomes intriguing when juxtaposed with Hennefeld's (2021: 112) comments on the laughing subject that is consumed. Lack of individual subjectivity in this sense can be observed in Nemerov's

"First My Motorola", which I cited in the beginning of this essay. As is clear, the poem's speaker defines themself through the items that they consume. Ordinariness, generality, and seemingly never-ending repetition punctuate the poem because of its concept, even though the items touched and the order in which they appear are singular. The poem seems to reflect the repetitions of contemporary life. In line with his earlier comments on the lack of subjectivity, Goldsmith (2011: 93) writes in his book *Uncreative Writing* that "Nemerov is a cipher, a shell, a pure robotic consumer". Indeed, the poem does not focus on individual subjectivity or explore the inner world of a subject, even though the products listed are specific.

For Goldsmith, Nemerov's poem seems to operate on the surface level and therefore, it risks being merely ironic. Yet, Nemerov's poem has a speaker, an I who engages with the products encountered. The repetition of the word "my" and of the various products inscribe a subject whose mode of being is to consume potentially infinitely. Many of the brands listed are known as expensive, which gives further indication of the subjectivity encountered in this poem: the poem's speaker defines themself through expensive brands. These considerations can be taken further if we think of readers being invited to see humor in and to laugh with the poem. Readers are likely to feel a sense of recognition in the face of frequent, never-ending encounters with brands, an ordinary experience that is surely familiar to many. This can be seen as commensurate with the recognition and ambivalent unease that Hennefeld (2021: 111-112) identifies as central to laughter as affect. Thus, the reader is invited to "laugh with" the poem rather than merely to adopt an ironic distance towards contemporary consumption and those who consume (see Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 131-132). An ironic reading is perhaps possible, but the straightforward presentation of the text, the fact that it operates on a repetitive concept and gives no indication of tone, suggests an unfinished experience that is vulnerable to ambiguities and uncertainty of how to react (see Kaufmann 2017: 59-60; Siltanen 2020b: 110). Laughter, thus, can be seen as an unfinished response rather than something that is merely mirthful in response to explicit humor. Next, a discussion of further examples of conceptual poetry will clarify further what this means.

Laughing in the face of endless consumption

A similar example of a conceptual poem that targets consumption is Lawrence Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics". The text appropriates language that is familiar from descriptions of female clothing in catalogues (Giffin 2011: 233). This means that the text is sleek, supple, and rich in detail. The poem begins:

> Black stretch velvet of rayon, silk, and spandex (not shown) cropped to let the sequined
> scoopneck sleeveless shell of pure silk georgette peek out beneath the hem of black

stretch silk and cheetah-print, ruffle-detailed fitted spandex of rose and tan French taffeta, beautifully hued russet. (Giffin 2011: 233)

The two-page text consists of a single sentence that launches forward in excruciating attention to the details of the materials of clothes, their colors, shapes, and forms. While it can conceivably seem exhausting from the point of view of the reader, the unexpected attention to detail and the way the poem proceeds in a single sentence are incongruously humorous. For example, the parenthetical additions that instruct the reader to choose their preferred color through phrasings like "(specify *Chocolate* or *Black*)" (Giffin 2011: 234) are unexpected in a literary text, as they place readers in the role of a customer, inviting them to choose. The concept itself and the presentation of the text thus create humorous effects. Seeing language from clothing catalogues in a poetry context, where all its carefully considered detail is reduced to a mass of text, is incongruous, not least because poetic language has traditionally attempted to resist such polished advertising language. Like many conceptual poems, the text presents the sense that there is, at least potentially, an infinite amount of such text available somewhere out there, of which this poem is simply an example. There is even less of a sense of individual subjectivity here than in Nemerov's poem where, at least, the items listed are prefaced with the possessive determiner "my".

Giffin's text resembles Robert Fitterman's *Sprawl*, which consists of online reviews of stores in an American mall. Sprawl has been read as casting a critical eye on the "difficulty of making choices in the neoliberal world where money determines choices" and as inviting readers "to examine our own connections to and implications in such material" (Siltanen 2020b: 109). This, my own earlier reading, is an example of the kinds of serious readings that have often been done of conceptual poetry. Skirting around mentioning humor in readings of conceptual poetry is perhaps indicative of a wish to legitimate such writing because, after all, conceptual writing is easily viewed as "bullshit" which, as Kaufmann (2017: 39) remarks with reference to an essay by Doug Nufer (2011), is an assumption to be reckoned with for people writing about conceptual poetry. In addition, as mentioned, being complicit in capitalism is another accusation often leveled at conceptual writing.

The title of Giffin's poem points to Spinoza's theory of ethics, the point of which is "to demonstrate the way to human happiness in a deterministic world filled with obstacles to our well-being, obstacles to which we are naturally prone to react in not entirely beneficial ways" (Nadler 2006: x). Fully considering how Spinoza's ethics might be related to Giffin's poem is outside the scope of this essay, but a couple of remarks will usefully illuminate the poem's relation to humor. For Dworkin and Goldsmith (2011: 233), who comment on the title of the poem very briefly while introducing Giffin's poem in their *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, a relevant aspect about Spinoza's ethics is a focus on "the relationship between bodies and

intellection", along with a method of arriving at propositions. They describe the poem as "leav[ing] only a sheer concatenation of exchange value, surplus ornament, and striptease distraction" (idem: 233). This seems to suggest that the poem presents a description of interlinked materials which are shot through with their relationship to capitalism, which is evident in the catalogue-style language. Based on Nadler's (2006: x) description of Spinoza's ethics, Giffin's seemingly never-ending description of items of clothing can be described as noise that is an obstacle to our happiness. Yet, the "surplus ornament" (Dworkin/Goldsmith 2011: 233) of the materials in the text can conceivably elicit laughter. The framing of this language as a poem invites readers to interrogate their response rather than merely repeats the capitalism-infused noise.

Since I have chosen to frame my reading of Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" in terms of laughter as affect, considering Spinoza's notion of affect here is hardly a stretch. Spinoza discusses "wills" and "appetites" which the body and mind strive for to achieve their preservation (2017: Part III, PIX). For Spinoza, "[t]he human body can be affected in many ways, whereby its power of activity is increased or diminished" (2017: Part III, PI). Spinoza's discussion of affect includes joy, which in Nadler's words is a "passage to a greater power of acting caused by something outside the individual", which links with pleasure (2006: 203). Pleasantly described items of clothing and their constituents, I propose, can affect such change. Pain and pleasure can also coincide in an object (Spinoza 2017: Part III, PXVII), and arguably the items of clothing described in Giffin's poem can achieve this by evoking both delight and consideration of, for example, the futility of consumption. Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" presents an excessive and oversaturated variety of details, colors, and materials. Like Nemerov's poem, it might be read as presenting an ironic tone towards contemporary consumption, but it can also be read as a description in which one may find pleasure or joy, or painful associations, for example upon consideration of the vacuity of caring for such items. For Spinoza, these kinds of situations are ethical problems when human beings are not in control of their emotions (*idem*: Part IV, Preface) and are distracted from the "true knowledge of good and evil" (*idem*: Part IV, PXV). People are not "acting at all but reacting" and can "fail to act appropriately" (Nadler 2006: 220, 224).

The poem's language is familiar, and it can elicit a sense of delight if it evokes images of clothing that are perceived as pleasant or enticing. The effect created is thus ambivalent, and it is not clear how it should be received: through an ironic reading, through sincere attention to the delightful details, or perhaps something in between. Thus, we can say that the poem operates between the kinds of ambivalent positions described by Van den Akker and Vermeulen (2017: 11) or "between naïveté and skepticism" (Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 143). The poem's tone is ambiguous like in Spinoza's ethical problem. As noted, metamodernism is not about fully denouncing irony, but it goes some way towards acknowledging its limits. The poem can, I propose, generate the kind of "vanishing interim between spontaneous incitement and explicit

recognition" that Hennefeld (2021: 111) identifies as central to laughter as affect. While discussing "hysterical laughter", Hennefeld (*idem*: 119) writes that it can be read as a response "to unsolvable social dilemmas endemic to colonialism, patriarchy, and industrial capitalist modernity". Ambivalent laughter that operates between ironic and more sincere positions risks being excessive (see Hennefeld 2021: 112) in the face of repetitions of ordinary materials.

The unexpected effect of seeing sleek language from clothing catalogues as a poem invites uneasy laughter as an unfinished affect. For Rustad and Hanno Schwind (2017: 145), metamodern sitcoms are populated by "flawed and complex, but ultimately lovable characters". Obviously, none of the poems I focus on here have characters as such. Instead, the presentation of lists of everyday commercial objects like in Nemerov's "First My Motorola" or delightful clothing catalogue language like in Giffin's text place the reader in the position of a flawed but complex persona who lives in the contemporary capitalism-infused world, thus inviting us to laugh with ourselves (see Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 131) instead of adopting a cynical distance.

My third and final example, Marcella Durand's sequence of two poems "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2", also relies on excessive repetition. "Pastoral" begins as follows: "leaf and leaf and leaf and leaf and leaf and branch and leaf" (2012a: 144). In addition to leaves, the items mentioned include a "postcard of greenish sunset", "large bee and bottle of shampoo", "cellphone", potato chips", "yogurt", and "parking lot", among others (2012a: 144). Again, we are faced with a repetitive text that seems to be drawing from an infinite source of items or of text. The list of items is funny with its ceaseless repetition and the incongruous appearances of yogurt and parking lots in the middle of leaves.

In her note that accompanies the publication of the Pastoral poems in the anthology *I'll Drown My Book*, Durand writes that "I wanted to flatten the pastoral, and extract its classicism. To work against any **representation** of nature, instead atomizing and replicating nature's fractals, punctuated by the detritus of the human" (2012b: 146 – original emphasis). Durand implies that traditional pastoral poetry ignores human effects on nature and serves merely as an unreliable representation, and she proceeds to note that "[s]imulacra of nature takes nature's place" (2012b: 146). Her poem invites engagement with its variety of details. "Pastoral" focuses on details instead of impressions and expressions of human emotion that are felt in the face of nature, as in much of pastoral poetry. The poem's repetitions can be read as implying that nature and the environment are viewed from an anthropocentric point of view where nature is more often than not viewed as infinitely available for human use, as capitalism is wont to treat it. Like with Nemerov's and Giffin's poems, readers are invited to laugh with the incongruities of the poem, its endless repetitions of ordinary things like leaves and branches which collide with potato chips and parking lots (Durand 2012a: 144). At the same time, laughter risks becoming excessive and

ambivalent, if the problems with treating nature as non-finite are acknowledged.

Durand's "Pastoral 2" similarly works with repetition. The poem begins "I repeat myself very well then I repeat myself and replant myself" (2012c: 146), in an obvious allusion to Walt Whitman's self-contradictions (Whitman [1892] 2023). The recasting of Whitman's work as ceaseless repetition is the first sign of humor in this poem. Repetition is further viewed as "replanting", an act of rooting oneself, perhaps in nature or in the world on a larger scale. Further on, the text collapses into a stream of what are mostly nouns, punctuated by prepositions and the occasional verb and adjective which seem to be connected more by theme than by the logic of a grammatical sentence. The words mentioned include aluminum, gold and oil, all materials that are sourced by humans from nature and exploited for capitalist gains. Like Nemerov's "First My Motorola", which could conceivably describe all the days of the week, or even of several years, and Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" that relies on a seemingly infinite amount of marketing copy, "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2" appear to draw from a vaster excess, in this case of materials in nature. However, the materials mentioned in "Pastoral 2", such as oil and aluminum, are not infinitely available, even though capitalism treats them as such. Durand's play with repetition could be taken to suggest that the individual all but gets lost amidst constant repetition, but at the same time, the poem points to the notion of "replanting", thus suggesting that focusing on repetition can also be beneficial for one's sense of subjectivity. I maintain that these poems invite laughter as affect: ambivalent, uneasy, something unfinished (see Hennefeld 2021: 111-112; 119-120). Indeed, Hennefeld (*idem*: 136) also discusses forms of comedy that are humorless or "killjoy" and that provoke "affectively volatile laughter". Rife with senseless repetition, the Pastoral poems can evoke "laughter, wherein nervous excess consumes the laughing subject and threatens to transform into something else entirely" (idem: 112).

As I have argued, laughter as an ambivalent affect can be a reaction to Nemerov's "First My Motorola", Giffin's "Spinoza's Ethics" and Durand's "Pastoral" and "Pastoral 2", as they invite the reader to laugh with (see Rustad/Hanno Schwind 2017: 132) poems that present seemingly infinite material from contemporary ordinary life. As they rely on appropriation and repetition, these conceptual poems perform a sense of infinity through their very mode of operation, mimicking forms of capitalist consumption but inviting an ambivalent response that can risk turning into excessive laughter that mirrors the excess represented by the seemingly infinite materials in the poems. These poems do not merely suggest that we ironically laugh at the ills of capitalist consumption but, in a metamodern fashion, operate somewhere between irony and something else (cf. Van den Akker/Vermeulen 2017: 11), culminating in ambivalent laughter. Thus, while conceptual poetry can easily be regarded as a postmodern phenomenon, the way these poems treat humor suggests an ambivalent metamodern sensibility. Hennefeld's argument about laughter as affect was used

to show that laughter can operate as an unfinished affect that has potential due to its unfinishedness (2021: 111). When Hennefeld writes about "killjoys" and "hysterical laughter", she points out that it is precisely ambivalence that allows for their political potential (2021: 133). In these poems, ambivalence which can be construed as metamodern allows the poems to invite reactions against capitalist infinity through humor.

Notes

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[1] Elsewhere I have suggested in a reading of Robert Fitterman's *Sprawl*, with reference to Kaufmann's (2017: 62-63) discussion of the difficulty of reacting to poetry like Shirinyan's, that rather than take a position of superiority or inferiority, readers are "invited to become aware of the affective reactions associated with the banal, yet difficult choices we encounter in everyday life", a reading where humor is not explicitly acknowledged but, instead, banality takes its place, and readers are addressed in an ambivalent way that invites them to awareness (Siltanen 2020b: 111).

[2] While Hennefeld (2021: 125-126, 132) discusses her conception of laughter as affect partly in the context of late 19th and early 20th century cultural products and contexts, the general conception is applicable more widely, and she herself makes a comparison to more contemporary phenomena, like the rise of 20th century capitalist entertainment and Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy".

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Homo Humour: Metamodernist Acts of Secrecy, Homosexual Identity and Humorous Word Play

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Abstract: This chapter demonstrates how I have worked with humour and the mechanisms of comedy in both my practice as a curator and an artist influenced by metamodernist thinking working across visual art, performance, and filmic forms. These examples show how gay men have a specific skill at using humourous word play performatively. The chapter begins with a discussion about my current curatorial moving image project *Homo Humour* (2020 – now) and then highlights my solo poetry performance *Clever at Seeing Without Being* Seen (2021) and several of my own short poetry films. The chapter concludes with discussion about how I have worked creatively with the gay slang language of Polari.

Keywords: metamodernism, queer cinema, queer humour, performance poetry, queer writing

Resumo: Este capítulo demonstra como trabalhei com o humor e os mecanismos da comédia na minha prática enquanto curador e artista influenciado pelo pensamento metamodernista, trabalhando com artes visuais, performance e formas fílmicas. Os exemplos mostram como os homens homossexuais têm uma capacidade específica para utilizar performativamente o jogo de palavras humorístico. O capítulo começa com uma discussão sobre o meu atual projeto de curadoria de imagens em movimento *Homo Humour* (2020 – até ao presente) e, em seguida, destaca a minha performance de poesia a solo *Clever at Seeing Without Being Seen* (2021) e várias das minhas curtas-metragens de poesia. O capítulo conclui com uma discussão sobre a forma como trabalhei criativamente com a linguagem gay chamada de Polari.

Palavras-chave: metamodernismo, cinema queer, humor queer, performance poética, escrita queer

Lee Campbell

INTRODUCTION: Storytelling, Secrecy and Subversion

Fig. 1. *Eye, Eye*, I, I by Lee Campbell, Drawing pins and mixed media on canvas (2000)

In the introduction to the catalogue of the *A Secret Service – Art, Compulsion, Concealment* – exhibition held at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2006 that focused on the construction of private worlds or the exposure of hidden facts, Richard Grayson writes:

> This increased currency of the very idea of the secret, the unknown and the unknowable, and its spread between categories – spiritual, political and social – means that the autonomous areas that we have enjoyed as individuals – personal, subjective and secret – are increasingly interrogated by the social and the politic. (Grayson 2006: 3)

I was intrigued by the exhibition to see how artists from today and the past, ranging from Kurt Schwitters to Tehching Hsieh, Sophie Calle, Susan Hiller, and Mike Nelson, have responded to ideas within Grayson's statement. However, one area that I found missing in the exhibition was the idea of concealing identity by keeping one's sexuality secret and private. In my case, it's my homosexuality. It has become pertinent to my exploration of poetry films and poetry performances and specifically

in terms of how, as a gay man, I often use humorous word play (and specifically slang languages including Polari) within my films and performances to covert what I am saying and potentially address taboo subject matter.

Comedy historically comes from a queer identity defence, when it was harder to be gay in public, to be funny like the British comedian Kenneth Williams who used gay slang Polari (a slang language for gay people when it was illegal to be gay so they had to talk in a coded language) to communicate with other gay men covertly. As a means to express as well as emotionally protect, homosexual men have historically and to this day embraced and used camp, absurdity and a range of comedy forms.

As Elvis Prusic (2023) suggests, queer cinema has been influenced by metamodernism through its exploration of fluid identities, hybrid storytelling techniques, and a nuanced approach to representation.[1] This chapter theorises, articulates and demonstrates through the examples of my practice address how I have worked with humour and the mechanisms of comedy in both my practice as a curator and an artist influenced by metamodernist thinking working across visual art, performance, and filmic forms. These examples show how gay men have a specific skill at using humour performatively and that queer people have to perform and that performance gives one freedom to develop oneself and finding/ demanding your place. The chapter begins with **HOMO HUMOUR: Homosexual Life Through Comedy in Film**, a discussion about my current curatorial moving image project *Homo Humour* (2020 – now) to highlight a selection of contemporary gay male artists and filmmakers who use humour to provoke, entertain and educate. This provides a contextual platform for the next discussion, **COVERT OPERATIONS: Storytelling, Slang and Subversion** highlighting my solo poetry performance *Clever at Seeing Without Being Seen* (2021) and several of my own short poetry films that have featured in the *Homo Humour* showreel which combine both humour, storytelling, covert operations (acts of secrecy) and word play involving various slang languages. Films discussed in this section include *Covert Operation* (2023), *Reclaiming my Voice* (2022) and *The Tale of Benny Harris* (2022). The third and final section, **BONA POLARI: Filth, Flamboyance and Fun in Gay Slang Polari** begins with a socio-historical overview of the gay slang language of Polari which helps frame a discussion around how my films *The Tale of Benny Harris* (2022) and *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023) have been used as catalysts for discussion during a Polari history and creative writing workshop that I have designed and delivered across the U.K since 2022.

HOMO HUMOUR: Homosexual Life Through Comedy in Film

Extending my portfolio of curating exhibitions and events exploring comedy and humour,[2] *Homo Humour* is a two-part project that I have curated since 2020

comprising a one-hour curated programme of short films by gay male artists and filmmakers, from all over the world and its discussion between curator, audience, filmmakers and invited speakers.

Fig. 2. *Homo Humour* promotional poster canvas (2023)

Homo Humour explores the history of comedy as a queer identity defence, a means of expression and storytelling and the subversive and surprising ways that humour can be used on screen. The showreel has been touring internationally for over three years and on each screening, a modified iteration, moving away from the conventional and narrative driven to the more experimental, transgressive and avant-garde in terms of how the films are made. Screenings have taken place throughout the year raising visibility beyond LGBT History and Pride months, countering the idea that we somehow only come out of the closet in February and June. Whilst queer film festivals such as BFI Flare contain programmes of queer humour as part of wider thematic programmes, *Homo Humour* responds to the growing interest in queer folk using film and moving image to tell their stories by focusing purely on humour. To share aspects of homosexual life through comedy. Given the surge in the last ten years of queer film festivals, there is clearly a desire for queer people to get their voices out and let their stories be heard. It could be argued that a lot of queer films are very representational and serious which is why humour in terms of queer representation should be celebrated. *Homo Humour* demonstrates how gay male culture has employed humour and comedy as strategies to challenge, transgress, subvert and rebel, offering compelling ways of using humour as an artistic, disruptive, cathartic and transgressive act. Through its screening and discussion, narratives can

be challenged, opinions changed, and active bystanders and allies created. Telling our stories through film and self-representing ourselves, many of the stories shared in the showreel get away from the view that we as queer people have to present ourselves in a very 'safe' way and not always about celebratory things, it's about struggle – disowned by our families, homophobia, etc. and also discrimination within the gay community itself e.g. gay men body shaming other gay men. In its current iteration *Homo Humour* includes Swiss director Marcel Barelli's *Dans La Nature* (*In Nature*) (2021) about homosexuality amongst animals, Australian director Jake Shannon's *Sammy the Salmon* (2018) n an absurdist comedy about a man who is helped by a talking salmon to come to terms with his sexual identity, British artist Jordan McKenzie's *Monsieur Poo-Pourri Takes a Tour of His Estate* (2010), a short film featuring a hobby horse and the artist dressed up as jockey riding the horse through the estate he lives on in London, American artist Steve Reinke's *Cory* (1994) about a guy writing a letter to his pen pal Cory, a bowling champion, Ernesto Sarezale's *2020: Lockdown Erotica* (2020) about intimacy during lockdown, Hamid Waheed's *I Wanna Write You Love Songs* (2017) on observations in the field of lying down, dying and love, American filmmaker Charlie Steers' *I'm Not Chris Hemsworth* (2022) – a ridiculous comedy fantasia that parodies the mistaken identity trope with a surprise musical twist, British filmmaker Craig Ford's *The Green Eyed Monster* (2022). Also included is American artist Wrik Mead's *How to Clean Your Closet* (2022) which celebrates the sexy dirtiness of the queer closet where glitched clips from adult films are combined with instructions about closet cleanliness brings delightful irony and sensual pleasure to this hidden space. And finally, a changing carousel of my own films (discussed in more depth in the next section) including *Camp-Belle* (2022) – an experimental poetry film based on my alter-ego (Camp-Belle is a word pun of my surname Campbell)[3] and *The Tale of Benny Harris* (2022). Through the language of Polari—historically used by gay men in Britain to communicate covertly—this short film tells a story that subverts masculinity & identity.[4]

The project was first presented in Miami in January 2020 bringing together emerging and established gay male artists and filmmakers for the first time from all over the world. Upon the success of the first screening in Miami, the project then was part of *Sardinia Pride Online* in June 2020 where I invited the showreel filmmakers to take part in Zoom question and answer discussions as lockdown really highlighted feelings of isolation and how much we need each other as a community. Rejuvenating the project in early 2022 was a refreshed showreel of films, moving away from the more conventional, narrative-driven films to the much more experimental. Still raising awareness and visibility of queer issues, the drive towards the experimental was to show issues facing gay men not in a straightforward, linear, or literal kind of way. In the first physical screening since lockdown taking place at METAL, Southend-on-Sea, in February 2022 we spoke about the strange psychology of how laughter works and

the social/group mechanics at work with experiencing comedy/humour. The feeling of watching this refreshed set of films in the physical space after not being able to due to Covid-19 restrictions was quite exhilarating, actually hearing people laugh in the real world. Laughter is infectious, when one person laughs, others feel inclined to laugh with them. An audience member remarked that Steve Reinke's *Cory* (1994) was a reminder that the films within the showreel were not just from different countries but from time periods too (Reinke's film was made in 1994). The film prompted the audience member to recall the dawn of Internet culture and how that has changed relationships. The film reminded her of the weird anonymous relationships that could be had with people over MSN and how these would turn into a pen pal. The audience member commented, 'I wonder what Cory is doing now. Is he still good looking!?'.
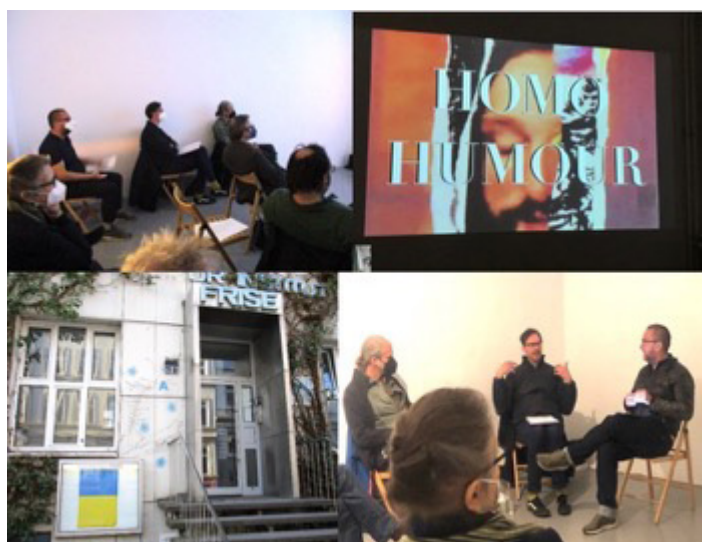

Fig. 3. *Homo Humour* screening and discussion at FRISE, Hamburg, Germany (2022)

In the next screening at FRISE in Hamburg, Germany in March 2022, Stefan Moos led a discussion that encouraged the audience to think about how humour can make a (difficult) situation welcoming, that there's an accessibility with humour and that the showreel does not use (academic) language to exclude some audiences. He suggested that films like that of Jordan McKenzie's included in the showreel demonstrate how humour can break down classist, ableist barriers. Jordan's high camp usage of the hobby horse toy in the film, Stefan suggested, was a gesture of flipping absurdist classist narratives that British society has and turning those on their head and making fun of hierarchies. It was mentioned throughout the discussion that how I work with repetition in my films in the reel underlines how

the more something is repeated, the more different elements can be noticed, and humour can often come through that breaking down. In this sense, I am queering language; if you say something once it goes but say that something again and again and something new emerges. This idea also punched upon a section of the discussion that reflected upon the absurdity in Harold Offeh's film in terms of its duration and that the longer it goes on you start spotting these little details as you cognitively going over what's going on and the film becomes more absurd. The humour in attention. A central theme running through all of this discussion was the relationship between gay people and using humour as a means of survival; as we (LGBTQ+ folk) are growing up, we develop quick humour as a coping mechanism, we shield ourselves against some of the behaviour we receive from people. This theme was also prevalent during the next screening of the showreel at Open Eye gallery in Liverpool in May 2022 where Greg Thorpe led the discussion. Greg encouraged the audience to reflect upon gay humour as a 'trope, as a survival tactic, as a mode of making' going on to suggest:

> Gay men bond through a shared usage of humour in order to survive. We are funny because we have to be. It's very empowering to be funny especially if you are outsider or an ostracised person, you can neutralise conflict and bullying and win people over and charm your way into safety. Your survival is incumbent on you being able to do that.[5]

After the screening in Liverpool, I presented a reflective presentation of the project so far at *Queer Pedagogies* conference in Florence at the end of May 2022. Whilst Professor Benno Gammerl acknowledged my referral of gay humour as a coping mechanism/survival tactic, he highlighted an alternative side of gay humour – the ugly and dangerous side of gay humour. 'I remember being scared of the wits by some members of the gay community in Berlin in the 1990s', he recalled, 'a biting humour, an exclusive humour, a humour that actually ridicules people. I experienced it as very problematic and dangerous. It scared me a lot. I remember that very clearly. That ambivalent and also problematic side of gay humour'. In response, I mentioned that I am also aware of this problematic usage of humour by some gay men and how certain subsets of gay subculture promote themselves as generating inclusive spaces whilst containing aspects that discriminate. I also think that gay humour can have a very nasty side, a cruel form of empathy. I referred to my work as laying myself bare using cultural expressions to talk about queerness as a community and speak of its challenges, pressures, pros and the cons etc. The gay male subcultural milieu needs critique – it creates such stereotypes and needs being ripped into/ ripped apart. I use the mechanisms of comedy and humour to engage, disarm, and highlight the gay male subcultural milieu of how the certain subsets in the gay male community body shame other gay men, including me. The gay male community is

very controlling about what you should look like and how you should behave – why is the community stereotyping itself?

Fig. 4. Lee Campbell, *Spinach and Eggs.* 2021. Promotional poster.

Fig. 5. *BEARS AND CUBS DON'T JUST LIVE IN THE FOREST* (2020) by Lee Campbell
Marker pen on paper 420x594mm

I gave the example of my poetry films *Spinach and Eggs* (2021) and *Bears with Bananas and Bubbles in their Boxers* (2022)[6] which talk about how the gay male community is very controlling about what you should look like and how you should behave and in doing so, use humour to make fun of those who do not fit into its ideals around body image. I read out these lines from *Bears with Bananas and Bubbles in their Boxers*:

> *I remember my first time in The King's Arms pub*
> *Where I soon learnt gay men can be labelled 'bear' or 'cub'*
> *Surely, it's time to turn the tables*
> *on gay male body shaming and this obsession with labels?*
> *Men seeing and being seen. Brother to brother*
> *But their labelling whilst cruising is bruising each other*
> *Burst the bubbles, ease the troubles*
> *Let's build a love for our own bodies out of the rubble*

My film *Spinach and Eggs* (2021) contains repeated use of gay male slang: 'bears'(a hairy plus size man) and 'cubs' (a younger bear) referring to the body shapes and age groups. At the start of the poem, I include the line 'At the Kings Arms pub in London's Soho, I discovered bears and cubs don't just live in the forest'. I also say things in a 'roundabout way' e.g. I substitute saying the word 'anus hole' for 'the hole at the back of the top of my legs' when I talk about a guy who I thought was chatting me up (seducing me) in the Kings Arms pub in Soho years ago but actually was ridiculing and 'intimidating' me:

> *Through his Bacardi and coke and cigarette smoke,*
> *this excuse for a bloke cracked joke after joke.*
> > *(He said)*
> *'Blue eyed boy Lee, I love your dark hairy legs*
> *Shame the rest of your frame is like pie from Greggs*
> *Be more like me, on spinach and eggs*
> *You can't be a cub, you're far too old!*
> *Put those legs out on show if you want to get sold!'*
> *I'm getting quite tripped*
> *on these bodies all ripped*
> *Imagine mine stripped*
> *and everything flipped*
> *Mr Spinach and Eggs,*
> *stick your rules and regs*
> *in the hole*

at the back
of the top of my legs!

Becoming more and more increasingly aware as a gay man of ideals of body image that the gay male community puts on itself (the endless repetitive chants throughout the film: FIT, FAT, FIT, FAT, FIT, FAT). Reminiscent of early guerrilla protest video art from the 1980s, this film employs protest art, repeated obsessive chanting (NO BODY SHAME!, NO BODY SHAME!) within ACT UP and queer movements, of political campaign, including my own drawings of my own body, and visual techniques used throughout Marlon Riggs' *Voices United* (1989). The narrative poetry highlights identity labelling and stereotyping within the gay male community, a subculture that can be very elitist and ends up reproducing the violence that it claims to be escaping. There is so much humour in this work to critique and at times parody; using humour to address really complex issues here related to mental health because of increasing body image demands in the gay community and within society at large. A shadow of my disembodied fist performing moving up and down repeatedly again and again and again and again; the fist is the spoken language of violence (Figure 6) of my anger/frustration.
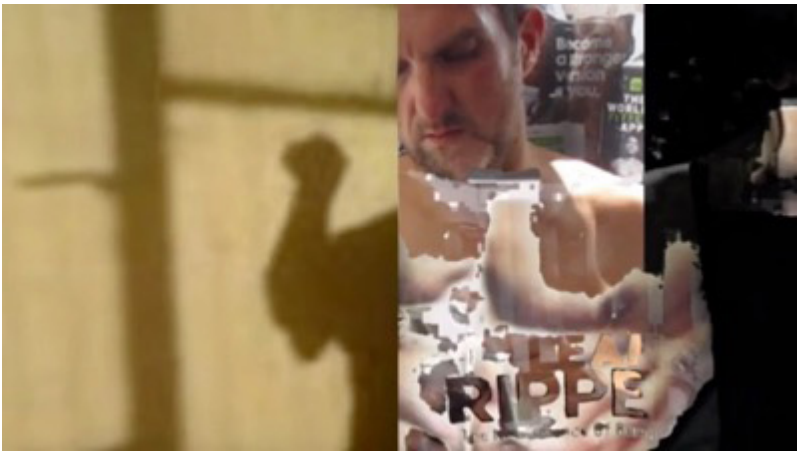
Fig. 6. Lee Campbell (dir.) *Spinach and Eggs* (2021)

In 2023, *Homo Humour* screened in a range of U.K venues including in Folkestone, Balham Library and London Metropolitan University where discussion chair Sebastian Cordoba shared that he felt that he had been on an emotional journey starting with the playfulness with the animals at the beginning then jealousy and loneliness then thinking about different personas, queering the context you are in and the kind of persona you bring in and then the scary sense of the monster alongside the sexiness

and playfulness of that as well as the sense of release at the end with the usage of the graphic and the imagination which for him had a lot of playfulness. One audience member (Brian Tutt) commented:

> What I enjoyed was the range of different forms – films that are entirely dialogue-less, films where visually very little is happening, a couple which are essentially monologues and very verbal. Lee's poetry films are very inventive verbally demonstrating humour can verbal and visual and a combination of both.

Understanding through research how my work situates itself within the historical and contemporary context of gay artists and filmmakers who use humour and comedy in subversive ways within their practices to share their personal stories, I soon learnt by watching a diverse range of work whilst producing a lot of short films myself during mid to late 2019, how the concept of humour can be strategically deployed to help people sort through issues attached to the LGBTQ+ community as an interesting (and vital) thesis and world to explore, Not just for those in film school but those interested in storytelling in general. Then wanting to curate a selection of the films I had seen alongside a selection of my own films in early 2020, I applied this learning to how I approached designing Homo Humour as a project that not only seeks to engage wider groups of artists, academics and students interested in film and/or the study of humour but also seeks to engage health/inclusion/wellbeing practitioners who are interested in how comedic storytelling may encourage people's understanding of LGBTQ+ communities. In the next section of this paper, I discuss how I have also applied this learning to my own practice as a poetry filmmaker.

COVERT OPERATIONS: Storytelling, Slang and Subversion

As an artist/provocateur, I define my artistic practice as playing with the parameters of contemporary art practice by focusing on the performative and the filmic. Underpinning how I use language to create scenarios that explore the poetics and slippages (Derrida 1979) of language is how I skilfully play with language and words in their excessive repetition. Using repetition in excess is to provoke humour by using repetition as a mechanism of comedy. I work with the autoethnographic act of storytelling to subvert and challenge the sophisticated usage of slang, camp, innuendo and double-entendres to speak of personal narratives that are often raw, painful but generous and authentic.

Fig. 7. Lee Campbell, *Clever at Seeing without Being Seen.* 2021. Promotional poster

Clever at Seeing without being Seen (2021) is a live solo performance I perform via Zoom combining performance art, moving imagery, and spoken word poetry.[7] I explore the possibilities of media re-use, feeding-back and looping round of text, and the layering of voices. It is a multi-layered multimedia socio-creative live Zoom performance of a colourful, immersive, textured, organic and disorienting montage of young queer experience told through my autobiography. It is a sharp and poignant evocation of my feelings which are so common to discovering my own sexuality in adolescence. As a teenager, one does not really know who you are. For me too, it was a self-reflection – a journey through identity and a 'this is what it was like' to come to terms with my homosexuality; of me finding somebody attractive (men) but not really knowing what I am. I spoke my personal truth in the performance.

Fig. 8. Lee Campbell, *Clever at Seeing without Being Seen.* 2021.
Live Zoom performance

The performance is an attempt at nailing a specific talent queer people need to acquire, the title. As I state in the performance, LGBT people, including myself as a gay man, across the world, are 'very clever, very clever at seeing, without being seen'. That way, it's an attempt at exploring visuality and the politics of seeing as well not seeing. For example, the double of the term 'tackle' in my poetry performance *Clever at Seeing Without Being Seen* (2021), one meaning of the term 'tackle' is to challenge an opponent and the other meaning in British slang is a man's penis. I state:

> *Football with my dad*
> *Chelsea v Arsenal*
> *Dad watched the match*
> *I watched the players*
> *Dad remembers the midfielder's tackle*
> *I remember the midfielder's tackle*
> *Balls and sports*
> *Men in shorts*
> *Football with Dad, both happy and sad*
> *Dad watching one way, me quite the other*
> *Nothing beats a good tackle when seen undercover*

The humour in my films and the poems is also related to the nostalgia of me looking back to my experiences. It is only now, 30 years later after my teenage experiences that I speak about in my performances and films such as *Clever at Seeing without being Seen* (2021) and *Covert Operations* (2022) in retrospect of my actions of concealing my sexuality. A friend who watched a selection of these films recently suggested to me that the discomfort of observing myself and finding something funny about it is really interesting. His observation was that my work operates between discomfort, humour and seriousness. 'Would it have been really so bad if your parents or friends discovered you were gay? They probably knew anyway!', he said.

I view humour as a tactic to subvert and challenge the issues of homosexual identity and its representation in relation to the themes addressing seeing/not seeing etc. My films, *Covert Operations* (2022), *The Tale of Benny Harris* (2022) and *Reclaiming my Voice* (2022) offer different ways of understanding how gay people have developed 'covert operations' to conceal their identities.[8] I drew upon my own experiences while looking at other's lives. The poetry adds humour and critique to the imagery and sounds the audience sees/hears. I have chosen the first film *Covert Operations* as it specifically talks about homosexual desire in relation to secret acts of viewing, gazing and associated terms for 'seeing'. This film is grounded in personal experience, and whilst factual, does contain elements of fiction, which nevertheless

are based on real-life personal experiences. The second film, *The Tale of Benny Harris* offers a different perspective on secret acts of homosexual desire by focusing upon listening, hearing and verbal communication gay men used to have with each other in the past using gay slang Polari. Rather than focusing on my experience, I focus on the experience of other gay men from a specific period in history when Polari was the only way men could communicate with each other without fear of being arrested. The third film, *Reclaiming my Voice* combines aspects of the first and the second films. It begins with me talking about looking at my friend and realising I found him sexually attractive, but the emphasis of the film is on the voice and how I felt I needed to change my voice so that others would not realise that I was gay. The film ends with self-acceptance of my voice as a form of both emancipation and self-reclamation.

Fig. 9. Lee Campbell, *Covert Operations* (2022). Promotional poster

Covert Operations was made using my drawings, paintings, and sound and moving image spanning more than 25 years. It is about sharing my personal stories as a gay man, and the different ways I have had to navigate my homosexuality through 'covert operations'. It charts difficult and awkward situations at high school. Juxtaposing the politics and practices of cruising and spaces of production, a section of this film also explores some of the complexities involved in men looking for men. Not just about going around looking for men in cruising spots like in the woods or public toilets but also looking for men on the internet and telephone chat lines, and in particular at work. I draw upon my own personal experience of fancying a guy on the train on the London Underground in 1993. A playful reflection on everyday temporary and fleeting pornographic encounters and temporary acts of looking, desiring, and fantasising that are often covert. The constant blowing and bouncing around of a balloon stands in for imagined (homo) sexual adventure. Using the language of consumerism

(*bargain basement, reduced, top value, sale, blue X*) in the film, the character Bobby spends all day cruising gay dating websites. His character refers to how many gay men put themselves 'on sale': the nasty side of cruising: cheapening/ 'reducing' yourself/ selling yourself cheap. The fictional characters were also developed around ideas of how the dynamics of cruising produces and constantly reproduces relations.

Covert Operations explores the ways that many queer people have to learn to covertly hide their sexuality very often before and after they realise they are gay/ lesbian/queer etc. This film shares personal stories from my own experience as a gay man, and the different ways I had to navigate my homosexuality growing up through 'covert operations' and how some men are forced to lead a 'double life', in heterosexual relationships whilst knowing they are gay. Trapped in military like repetitions at work where you see the same people day in day out, everything in these hyper regulated spaces accentuates the desire and need for 'satisfaction'.

Fig. 10. Lee Campbell (dir.) *Covert Operations* (2022)

Customers always want customer satisfaction, guys cruising always want satisfaction. There are two sides to cruising, two sides to 'you've been matched': It's not just about stalking but wanting to be seen – you want to look/be the voyeur and you also want to be seen: the word 'SEE ME' written in a font that looks like old computer writing from the 1980s – on repeat reminds us of this. There is also a certain amount of lying: the cruiser as listener and voyeur and the guys the cruiser is cruising as in listening to or looking at both embellish the truth to make themselves more desirable to each other in a bid to get that all important hook-up/have sex. But cruising, like shopping, is a totally unsatisfying experience: we are never satisfied at any point in the process. This section of the film has the message 'YOU'RE MATCHED, SAY HELLO!' on repeat. What exactly are you 'matched' for? Both Andrew and Mr 'B.J' Bellingham

Jones are closeted homosexuals until B.J (in British slang, BJ stands for 'blow-job', oral sex) is discovered having sex with John. But the most complex character here is Andrew, 'a timid man', who leads a double life. He is married to a woman and has children but enjoys being the submissive 'cub' of an older man, his 'daddy', whenever he is able to. As I suggest in the film:

'He couldn't wait to work late
then come a quarter to eight he was out on his date
With his muscular daddy at the Kings Arms pub
Where Andrew loved being daddy's little boy cub
Spending the hours before, on the draw
Andrew's fantasies of Daddy in pencil drawing
Hoping that as he was doodling, the manager ignoring'

Fig. 11. Lee Campbell (dir.) Various stills from *Covert Operations* (2022)

The penultimate section of this film uses both repetition and humour in visual and sonic ways too, at times, to devastating effect. It starts on a river where the tour guide of a riverboat cruise announces that we can see 'Devil's Hole' – 'hole' taking on a very different meaning (innuendo for 'rectum') when it comes to cruising (Figure 15).The double play on words of the term 'cruise' is one of many humorous double-entendres and double meanings (others include 'ride', 'head', 'hole', 'horn' included and when these terms are presented on repeat again and again – both heard and seen – they highlight the seedier even dangerous side of gay male cruising. Whilst audiences may or may not pick up on all the many references here, it is intended that they will, at base level, have a sensory/elusive view of the work and that this section of the film. The fictional character of Andrew, the timid office worker who has a 'double life' in *Covert Operations*, makes a re-appearance in *The Tale of Benny*

Harris, a poetry film that is an imaginary tale written in Polari – gay slang language. This short film tells the tale of a fictional character whose name is a play on Polari 'bene aris', which translates to '[a man with a] nice bum'. Whilst Polari is commonly associated with 'camp' performers like comedian Kenneth Williams and is as such often considered effeminate. *The Tale of Benny Harris* subverts gender, masculinity and identity, most notably when a 'butch' policeman reveals he is gay by speaking in Polari to Benny.
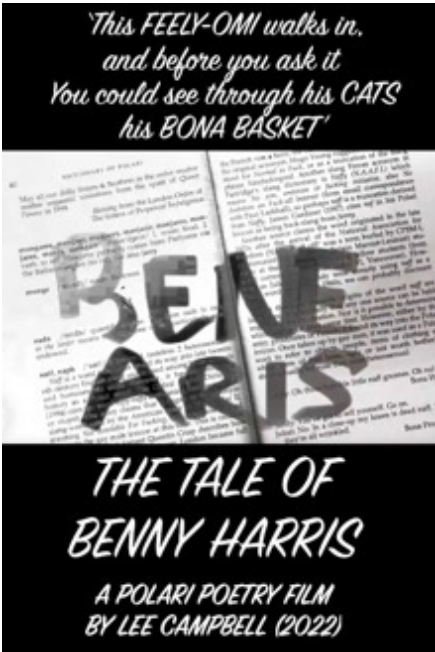
Fig. 12. Lee Campbell, *The Tale of Benny Harris* (2022). Promotional poster

In this section of the film, (before Benny meets the gay policeman) Benny has his eyes on Andrew (referred to as Andy in the film) and the barman gives him some advice. I write:

*Benny's excitement soon ended in **scharda** (disappointment)*
*when the barman took him aside and told him to **nellyarda** (listen)*
*'Benny, mais oui, that number is nice to **vada** (look at)*
*But take it from me, Andy only **tips the brandy** (rims as in 'anal rimming')*
*rather than **charver an aspro-arva** (have sex with a prostitute)*
*Have a shot of **Vera** (Vera Lynn – gin) You'll **vada** (see) things clearer*
***She's** (He's) part time in the life (a part-time homosexual), got **chavvy** (child) and wife*

*Not full time **so** (homosexual), she **parkers the measures** (pays money)*
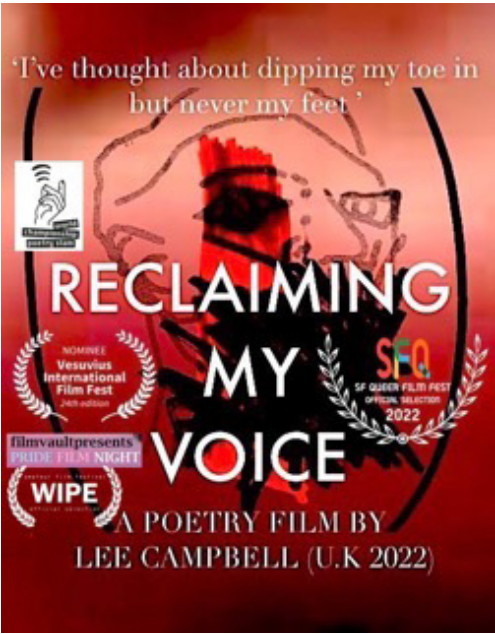*to feel what it's like to have **omee** (homosexual) pleasures*

Fig. 13. Lee Campbell (dir.), *Reclaiming my Voice* (2022). Promotional poster.

Throughout *Reclaiming my Voice* (2022), the chant 'eye-eye' can be heard. Depending on who the subject of the call is, the 'eye-eye' imagery and audio chants can be seen as threatening or flirtatious/provocative in a threatening or flirtatious way. Indeed, one viewer commented that 'The 'eye, eye, eye, eye' sounds like 'oi, oi, oi, oi' on repeat, a tease that becomes a threat!" The film begins with me talking about looking at my friend Danny and realising I found him sexually attractive, but the emphasis of the film is on the voice and how I felt I needed to change my voice so that others would not realise that I was gay. The film ends with self-acceptance of my voice as a form of both emancipation and self-reclamation. The covert operation in this film deals with the difficulty of a teenager gay growing up in a heteronormative environment relates to me trying to disguise. Looking back, I laugh at the ridiculousness and absurdity of me trying to disguise myself in this way:

Sound manly, act the geezer on my Harley
Hide that in my bedroom, I learnt the language of gay Polari
Be the bloke when I spoke

'Alright mate', 'Alright Dad'
I tried to sound more 'lad'
When I opened my mouth to speak

The poetry finishes with sharing how I overcame these difficulties and no longer worry about how I act/behave/fear of sounding camp:

My voice no longer haunts me, it liberates
It's no longer me and them
It's we
And so now I choose to open my mouth
and take pride in its texture when I speak

It is important here to reflect upon the appearance of words in these three previous films discussed. The lettering that appears in *Covert Operations*, *The Tale of Benny Harris* and *Reclaiming my Voice* is generated by me screen recording myself creating words using the pen/pencil on my iPad and then using the recording as a green screen layer within the films. I like the way the words reveal themselves: sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly across the screen. They don't just sit on top of the imagery but often become images within themselves.

Fig. 14. Lee Campbell (dir.), *Reclaiming my Voice* (2022)

Fig. 15. Lee Campbell (dir.), *Reclaiming my Voice* (2022)

Especially so, in terms of the way they bleed into the imagery within *Reclaiming my Voice* during the 'dipping my toe in but never my feet' section. You can see the words 'dipping my toe in' on the screen but only slightly. This corresponds to what I say in the poem, about my straight mate Danny experimenting with his sexuality ('dipping his toe in') but not going as far as being a 'full time full-blown gayboy'. The appearance of the black text on the white background in the following sequence in the film containing the words 'never my feet' underlines Danny's affirmation that he is straight (or so he claims) in black and white. Full stop. Whereas in *Covert Operations*, the double-entendres and word play puns such as '*tackle*' relate to my experience of hiding my sexuality, and in *The Tale of Benny Harris*, coded language is used by gay men to communicate covertly. The innuendo, double-entendres and word play puns are used by Danny who is a heterosexual straight male who can't seem to (possibly through his own discomfort) speak directly about homosexuality or having the same sex desire. The usage of cryptolect (coded language) here is reversed. Some of the cryptolect here is the well-known British working-class slang and in other cases (like 'dipping my toe in'), I have invented for the purposes of the poem:

> *'Don't bother me mate' he said, 'that particular street' (being gay)*
> *But I hope I don't catch it (discover I am homosexual)*
> *Did you get it from something you eat?*
> *It doesn't make me gay, I was just having a peek*
> *at the size of Ben's tackle (penis) whilst he was having a leak*
> *I might listen to Kylie and boogie to Chic*
> *And got a big hard-on (erection) when Ben did a streak*
> *Running stark bollock naked at the footie last week, him running over the pitch when The*
> *Gunners got beat. All of us lads admired the size of his meat (penis)*

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But me, a full time full blown gayboy (a guy who has come out as homosexual)
Sure, I've thought about dipping my toe in but never my feet' (experimenting with
homosexuality, with limits)

BONA POLARI: Filth, Flamboyance and Fun in Gay Slang Polari

'Bona Polari' is gay slang for 'good chat'. Polari is the language of survival. Polari is more than clever plays on words, it is as a political act – 'this is who we are, accept who we are'. In Britain, criminals, prostitutes, and homosexuals all used Polari in different ways. From its earliest origins in the late 1800s to when sex between men was decriminalised in England and Wales in 1967, gay men used Polari in public (mainly in bars and pubs) to communicate things in public that they didn't always want people to know about. Polari hovers between being blunt and not and allows users 'to get away with' being very rude. Historically so, when used in abundance on mainstream radio, for example, by Julian and Sandy, two gay male characters on the BBC radio show Round the Horne (which in its heyday got 20 million listeners) when the majority heteronormative listener would be oblivious to the innuendo they were listening to (and laughing at). Polari was never designed to be politically correct. Polari could be said to be a language of contradiction; the language largely allows its users to say things without being obvious yet a man can still call his male lover his husband. Polari is a language that can be played with and can be used to stretch language to its limit almost. Maybe its simplest covert is substituting 'he' for 'she' when a gay man wanted to talk about a man he liked the look of in public.

This final discussion of this chapter begins by exploring the language's sociohistorical significance and delves into aspects of its etymology. Although a language predominantly used in the past when it was (in Britain) illegal to be gay, the paper will share how aspects of Polari are still adopted by the queer community today. The main body of this discussion speaks about how, since early 2022, I have been delivering workshops across the U.K to encourage participants to engage in Polari and write their own Polari.

Lee Campbell

Fig. 16. Promotional material for Bona Polari workshop at Belfast Pride 2023

Fig. 17. Bona Polari workshop at Liverpool Pride 2023

The workshop begins with a screening of my poetry film *The Tale of Benny Harris* to stimulate discussion around how Polari can be seen as a playful yet sophisticated disruption of language in terms of grammar, syntax and structure. What I really like

about Polari is a language that the oppressed (gay men) came up with to put those that were the oppressor in the position that they didn't understand what was going on – a response to that but when it's flipped it's almost like an aggressive use of language i.e., an exclusionary usage of language.

Melting Pot: Polari's etymology and usage

Polari in its current version started in the 19th century. Its precursors include thieves' cant (a cryptolect used by criminals in the 17th and 18th centuries), lingua franca used by sailors and those in maritime industries, and also words from Romany primarily transmitted through carnivals and festivals because a lot of theatre at the time was involved with carnivals which moved around Britain. The language was a colourful melting pot of all kinds of influences with different versions spread by the sailors. There is also South African equivalent – Gayle, which has a unique way of using women's names to refer to things like 'Aunty Ida' (*AIDS*), 'Amanda' (*amazing*), 'Agnetha' (*acne*) and Diana (*disgusting*). There is an Indian equivalent of Polari – *Ulti Bhasha*, roughly translated means a language upside down. 'Ulti' means, upside-down or reverse or alternate and 'bhasha' means language. Ulti Bhasha is a specifically working class language and has (other) commonalities with Polari as both languages have so many different terms for 'police'. It is still prevalent today in the LGBT community in India as a 'rite of passage'. In London, there were two different versions of Polari; an East End version which emphasised Cockney rhyming slang elements like 'Vera' (from Cockney slang 'Vera Lynn'= gin) and 'brandy' (from Cockney slang 'brandy', brandy rum = bum) and a West End version which was allegedly more classical, drawing more on Italian and lingua franca. Often the East End and West End Polari speaker could not always understand each other as the East End speaker were far more flamboyant and over the top with their language. Amongst a plethora of socially oriented languages and dialects, Polari would have been one amongst several in London including East End etc. Sailors and chimney sweeps had their own language/ occupational slang so Polari may not have stood out as being unusual amongst various people having their own social languages- a marker or gesture of its subcultural origins.

Bona Polari! workshop

I became aware of Polari when I researched different forms of humour in terms of spoken language whilst undertaking a PhD back in 2011 at Loughborough University. After re-discovering my love of the language by writing a poem *The Tale of Benny Harris* with accompanying poetry film in early 2022, I then decided to create my own Polari workshop, similar to the workshop in Manchester but this time using my film as the catalyst for discussion at the start of the workshop. Over the course of approximately 90 minutes, I help participants engage in a creative writing exercise

using Polari at its base and develop skills in sharing their writing in an informal, non-judgemental and fun way.

Fig. 18. Bona Polari workshop at Bristol Pride 2023

The workshop has so far taken place at The Margate School, Margate (Feb 2022) University of the Arts, London (Feb and June 2022), The Transforming Sexuality & Gender Research Centre at the University of Brighton (March 2023), Liverpool Pride (May 2023) Bristol Pride (June 2023), University of Southampton (June 2023), Belfast Pride (July 2023) and London Metropolitan Archives (November 2023). At the start of the workshop, I explain how my interest in Polari started in 2018 when I attended the event *Polari Creative Writing Workshop for Gay & Bi Men* at Islington Mill in Manchester where I was encouraged to write my own Polari phrases by workshop host Adam Lowe. I explain that many people assume Polari is about puns, being flamboyant and camp for the sake of it, and being rude but actually often those speaking Polari are not being rude, it's just that it sounds rude. People often laugh at hearing Polari because there's an implication that it is innuendo. Whilst some Polari might seem pointless i.e., wouldn't it just be easier to say 'car' or say the word directly rather than using a substitute?, I suggest that one of the charms of Polari is that you can say anything and make it sound filthy and that what is so fascinating about Polari is that some words are for things that you can't talk about, and others seem just for fun or play. We watch a short interview with KMTV (local Kent TV) about a screening of my Polari film at The Margate School, Margate in February 2022.

Fig. 19. Lee Campbell (dir.), *Slang Bang* (2023). Promotional poster

Having watched the interview (which many previous workshop participants find quite amusing when I am trying to teach Polari to the Angelina, the interviewer), I then discuss how the workshop acts as an extension to my ongoing interest in LGBT slang languages (e.g. 'bears' and 'cubs') including a screening of my short poetry film *Slangbang* (2023) in which men within gay communities nowadays indicate their presence or signal their identity / that they are there/ that they are available through body labelling 'cub', 'twink, 'fox, 'chaser' etc.[9] This is then followed by a screening of *The Tale of Benny Harris.* After asking participants to share with me what they thought was happening during the film i.e. who were the characters, where were they etc., I distribute prints out of the poem and translate some of the Polari words. Then, having shown a short clip of Round the Horne so that participants can hear Polari spoken long ago by Julian (Kenneth Williams) and Sandy to more recently in a clip of the short film Putting on the Dish by Brian Fairbairn and Karl Eccleston (2015), participants are then given printed out copies of a Polari dictionary which I use as a basis for discussion including identifying Polari words that they may already be using. I encourage participants to notice how words like 'naff' are used in everyday language which makes us question whether these words come from Polari or the other way round. Some of my favourite remarks from previous workshops have been, 'Cod wrap – we've all been to one of those!', 'Be useful to have a reverse dictionary – sorted in English', 'Colin takes on a whole new meaning – not such a boring name!', '*Schwartza* sounds like German for ' gay' – schuwle'.

Fig. 20. Bona Polari workshop at London Metropolitan Archives in October 2023

Participants are then invited to write their own rhyming Polari phrases and poems and then invited to speak their Polari creations out loud for everyone to enjoy.[10] One previous creation which I particularly enjoyed was 'Dish and do a turn ... Aunt nell aunties! Bencove beany Hetty HP Nice dish love to have a turn – admiring their aris, love to have a go on it!' translated into English as 'I was asking my old gay man friend if their friend is (fluid) /bisexual with their sexuality as I would 'love to have a go' on his bum!'. At the end of the workshop, now that participants have been fully immersed in not only hearing Polari language but have written their own Polari, I screen my short film *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023). *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023) is a homoerotic fantasy-filled experimental poetry film written in Polari.[11] Before screening it in the workshop, I announce, 'I won't give you a translation, use your filthy imagination,' and hope that participants will now recognise and understand many of the Polari terms used, having learnt some its words. *Cleaning* depicts the speaker's covert fantasies in various public scenarios. The final section is about the speaker fantasising about a coffee server called Tom.

Fig. 21. Lee Campbell (dir.), *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023). Promotional poster

Fig. 22. Stills selection of Tom and his 'bene aris.
Lee Campbell (dir.), *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023)

A transcript of the section in the film with Tom:

Filiome fairy
Swishing camp coffee
with his blonde haired **blob queen fag hag**
Tom doesn't like gherkins.
Complaining about Chloe
The coffee waste clangs
I think of other bangs
I watch him
Why look at the served when you can look at the server?
Get Tom in the meat locker
Sniff *purple hearts*
Rip off his *schmutter*
Plate his dish
Put on the brandy
Have the full harva
His *box* ready for my gherkin
Harver and charver this aspro arva
Squirt my *Maria*
Tootsie trade but I can be a *manly Alice*
Tonight is our *wedding night*!

FINAL THOUGHTS

This chapter has explored how I have worked with humour as a means of expression within gay male storytelling as both a curator (*Homo Humour*), in my solo practice as an artist, filmmaker and poet, and as workshop leader (*Bona Polari*).

Extending discussion of *Homo Humour* in the first section of this chapter, during a filmmaker discussion led by chair Peter Bond, filmmaker Ilker Cinarel suggested that 'Humour is in our (gay men) blood' whilst Peter described the project as underlining humour as a means to counter/avert awkward situations and ways of coping with situations. As well as being an exposé which demonstrates how the gay scene can be liberating, embodied through what Peter described as the rich texture in the showreel and also praising the beautiful rawness in all the films. Filmmaker Sean Leviashvili spoke about the shame of being in the closet i.e. not 'out' and when you come out of the closet, there are residual effects which last years, even lifetimes and that queer people shouldn't have to pretend to be glamorous or happy all the time. He suggested, 'There are things that need to be worked on. These are discussions which need to happen in academia, in mental health spheres, in artistic

worlds.' The films in *Homo Humour* punch on these points and could be a way to instigate these conversations in the spaces Sean identified. Curating a project where humour is the theme but the approaches and the range of topics, often challenging (dealing with anxiety, confusion, and relationships etc.) are explored in experimental, provocative and exciting ways remind us as a community (the LGBTQ+ community) that we are not a monolith and that we have many different stories and experiences as demonstrated in the diverse range of stores and experiences shared in *Homo Humour* that I highlighted in the first section of this chapter.[12]

In the next discussion in this chapter, I selected examples of my recent poetry film work which demonstrate how gay men have used 'covert operations' or acts of secrecy including humour to hide and shield themselves from others. In my discussion of *Covert Operations*, I gave an account of my teenage years when the acts of 'secrecy' was in the making usage of what was available to me at the time (in pre-Internet times in the early 1990s) and making things 'queer'. It was about how others reacted to making things queer' when I mention when I bought a copy of *Playgirl* (a pornographic magazine of men aimed at a female audience). I extend it into when I finally had the confidence of buying the material that aimed at the gay community. I talk about smuggling copies of the magazine *Gay Times* into my bedroom 'just to see guys like me' and hiding them from my parents. In discussion of *The Tale of Benny Harris*, rather than talking about the viewpoints drawn from my own personal experience, I presented the viewpoints of gay men in history who used the covert language – Polari, to communicate with one another. In my discussion of *Reclaiming my Voice*, I explained how I tried to modify my voice in order to fit in within my straight mates at the time. The most pertinent act of secrecy in this film is from the point of view of Danny, my straight mate, who uses the covert language to hide his internalised homophobia as well as the suggestion that he has in fact engaged in (and probably enjoyed) homosexual desire himself. As the saying goes, however you try and hide something, the more visible or more obvious you actually make it. Indeed, I do laugh at myself (in a funny but slightly painful way) at how I tried to sound less 'camp' to my mate and more 'lad-like' with the irony being that I probably sounded so ridiculous that it made me sound *even more camp.* Despite the playful innuendo and humorous wordplays found in all the films referred to, there is also a menacing quality to them; the continual 'eye, eye, eye' in *Reclaiming* attempts to put the viewer in a mental space which is unsettling where they feel trapped in its obsessive repetition. Repetition as a propulsive force.

In the third and final discussion, I explained how the humorous sounding gay slang language of Polari was used a protective shield at a time when gay relationships were criminalised and suggested that Polari is so clever as it mixes intellect and filth. Speaking about my Polari workshop, I shared how I give visitors chance to discover and play with a language from another era and find their own creative voice

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in Polari. Previous *Bona Polari* participants have remarked upon the musicality of the rhyming within *The Tale of Benny Harris*, including 'nada to vada in the larder' and 'shonks him on his onk'. When the workshop took place in May 2023 as part of Liverpool Pride Poet and printmaker Jeremy Dixon remarked: 'I enjoyed [Lee's] Polari film as it demonstrates Polari's ability to conceal what you are saying in order to exclude and how it's about saying something so other people don't know what you are talking about.' He liked the way that the pages of the Polari glossary flip over at speed during my film. It's like me saying to viewer, 'You have to listen to this, you can't translate. I'm showing you a translation, but you can't read it. You are going to have to listen to this!'.

Engaging participants to learn about, reflect upon and then create their own Polari during my workshops underlines the enormous amount of creativity and joy in a language coming out of oppression at a time when it was harder to be gay in public, to be funny like Kenneth Williams, who used Polari to communicate with other gay men covertly. Williams's humour was audacious, but respectful. What is so fascinating about Polari is that some words are for things that can't be openly talked about, and others seem just for fun or play. The need to be discreet can be seen running through Polari, but so can the joy of rhyming and invention. Polari keeps you sharp, on your toes, trying to understand what's going on. Initially used to maintain secrecy, it is also a means of socializing, acting out camp performances and reconstructing a shared gay identity and world view amongst its speakers. It is certainly quirky that Polari has made its way into the mainstream but without the mainstream realising that they are using it. Polari words angling their way into more general speak. What can be lost by integration? Is that a mainstream slur that Polari has taken on or the other way round? Do we ever really think about the language we are using and its origins? It is certainly fascinating how quickly language spreads today. There are very few subcultures left – languages spread on the Internet and then gets picked on and commercialised. You could be in different parts of town, have different slangs and not understand each other. Either way, Polari remains subversive if its traditional users find some perverse humour in hearing these words repeated by non-members of the gay community.

Fig. 23. *'Cleaning the cage out'.* Lee Campbell (dir.), *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023)
Screening at The Glitch, Waterloo, London, September 2023

Fig. 24. *'Bet he's got a Colin. Tonight up her beef curtains'.*
Lee Campbell (dir.), *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023)
Screening at The Glitch, Waterloo, London, September 2023

Fig. 25. *'His box is ready for my gherkin'.*
Lee Campbell (dir.), *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023)
Screening at The Glitch, Waterloo, London, September 2023

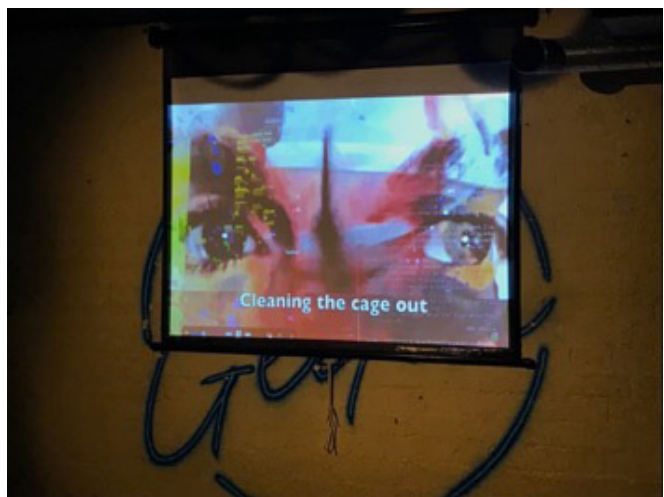**Fig. 26. *'Squirt my Maria'.***
Lee Campbell (dir.), *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023)
Screening at The Glitch, Waterloo, London, September 2023

Notes

* Lee Campbell is an artist, Senior Lecturer at University of the Arts London, and founder of *Homo Humour*, the first of its kind project on contemporary queer male film and moving image practices that explore humour and LGBTQ+ storytelling. Lee had his first solo exhibition in North America of his poetry films, See Me: Performance Poetry Films at Fountain Street, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S.A in July 2022. His research has been published widely in publications including *The International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media, Body Space Technology, Moving Image Artists (MIA) Journal, Paradigm and Performance Research: On Interruptions.*

[1] He also goes on to suggest that Metamodernism as a movement has allowed for a more complex and diverse portrayal of queer experiences, challenging traditional narratives and embracing the liminal spaces between binaries. Metamodernism in relation to queer cinema is characterized by a blending of modernist and postmodernist elements. It embraces both sincerity and irony, oscillating between hope and despair, and blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction. It encourages a multiplicity of perspectives and challenges fixed notions of identity, allowing for a more nuanced and inclusive representation of queer experiences. Metamodernism influences the themes and storytelling in queer cinema by encouraging a more nuanced and complex exploration of queer experiences. It allows for a blending of different narrative styles, perspectives, and emotions, creating a space for the exploration of fluid identities, the questioning of binaries, and a deeper understanding of the complexities of queer lives. Metamodernism also challenges traditional narratives and embraces the liminal spaces between sincerity and irony, hope and despair, creating a more dynamic and inclusive representation of queer stories.

[2] For example, *All for Show* was an internationally touring exhibition I curated between 2005-2007 of short film made by artists which test the acceptable limits of humour in the white cube gallery space. In her review of the exhibition for I-D Magazine, Jessica Lack described the project as 'slapstick theatrics', 'awkward and macabre sense of humour' and 'cringingly funny'; 'these idiosyncratic films succeed in finding surreal quirks in the banalities of everyday life' (Lack 2005: 55).

[3] You can watch *Camp-Belle* (2021) here; https://filmfreeway.com/CAMP-BELLE2021

[4] Previous iterations of *Homo Humour* have included João Dall'Stella's Stalls (2019), a comedic take on the world of gay cruising and glory holes, Sean Leviashvili and Stephen Riscica's *Limp* (2019) which follows Sean, a young gay man with cerebral palsy as he navigates dating with a disability in New York City. The showreel has also included my film *How Can I Get My Partner to be my Finger?* (2019) where in a pitch-black space, a spotlight is shone on my finger. What follows is a conversation ripe with absurdist comedy between a gay couple – one present, one technologically distant – my partner Alex and I. Alex 'speaks through' my finger via a tape-recording. Sometimes I 'speak for' Alex. The big question is: is it Alex speaking or is it me speaking? Operating almost like a marriage guidance film, the film is an insight into human relationships (and not just because the couple here is gay). The constant question of the dog and of marriage is absurd and funny but it does reflect any relationship. Watch this film here: https://filmfreeway.com/HOWCANIGETMYPARTNERBEMYFINGER

⁵ We also spoke about Polari as an amalgamation of linguistic roots, cockney slang, back slang, a very working class dialect. An audience member usefully remarked that gay people still use Polari in situations they don't feel safe. For example, in taxis by saying 'g' for 'gay' where there is a heightened need for self-protection when you do not know who is driving the cab. In such a situation, there is a very serious need for secrecy and harks backs to the 'living a double life' which still applies to many gay people or at least the scars of it are. In this sense, the covert language used could be seen as a form of humorous reclamation. This sense of reclaiming something was also later picked up in a discussion that took place around self-deprecation and humour. Greg suggested, 'Once you've laughed at yourself, you've got the permission to go anywhere'. Using the analogy of the bullied kid who overcomes bullies with wit and humorous prowess, Greg referred to this as 'taking the comedy back. A lot of queer art is about the reclamation of something'. Indeed, being funny is very controlling. At the symposium *Dialogues in Performance I: Collaboration* at Central Saint Martins in 2011, Professor Jane Collins suggested that nothing is *more controlling* than laughter.

⁶ To watch these films, please visit: https://filmfreeway.com/WRONGKINGOFFATTHESNAKEINSIDE 2021VideopoembyLeeCampbell;

https://filmfreeway.com/BEARSWITHBANANASANDBUBBLESINTHEIRBOXERS

⁷ To watch this performance, see: https://filmfreeway.com/CLEVERATSEEINGWITHOUTBEINGSEEN2021

⁸ To watch *Covert Operations*, see https://filmfreeway.com/COVERTOPERATIONS2020

Watch *The Tale of Benny Harris* (2022) here :https://filmfreeway.com/THETALEOFBENNYHARRIS

To watch *Reclaiming my Voice*, see: https://filmfreeway.com/FINDINGMYVOICE476

⁹ Watch *Slangbang* (2023) here: https://filmfreeway.com/SLANGBANG

¹⁰ Watch this TV interview with KMTV (local Kent TV) about Polari workshop and screening of my Polari film in February 2022: https://filmfreeway.com/KMTV800

Click here to listen to a BBC Radio Kent interview about the Polari workshop when held in Margate with Dominic King in February 2022: https://filmfreeway.com/dompol

Click here to listen to a BBC Radio Surrey and Sussex interview about the Polari workshop when held in Brighton with Kathy Caton in February 2023: https://filmfreeway.com/kathy805

¹¹ Watch *Cleaning His Kitchen* (2023) here: https://filmfreeway.com/CLEANINGHISKITCHEN2023

¹² To keep up to date with the project, please visit: https://leecampbellartist.blogspot.com/p/homo-humour-films.html

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Can I Laugh or Should I Cry? Humor and Politics in Some Cases of Contemporary Experimental Writing in Latin America

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Abstract: Starting from the premise of the global impact of technology on the acts of reading and writing, the essay elaborates on the expression of political humor in what I call "second-hand writing" based on characteristics of Latin America. Certain recent fictional and poetic production of an experimental nature, with a focus on Brazil, Chile and Mexico, is analyzed in terms of their recycling and non-originality procedures, and especially their practice of irony, parody and corrosive humor as a tool for reviewing colonial and post-colonial history in terms of state, gender, racial and linguistic violence.

Keywords: Latin American literature, experimental writing, decolonial humor, second hand writing, unoriginal genius

Resumo: Partindo da premissa do impacto global da tecnologia sobre os atos de ler e escrever, o ensaio aborda a expressão do humor político no que chamo de "escrita de segunda mão", com base em características da América Latina. Certa produção ficcional e poética recente de natureza experimental, com foco no Brasil, Chile e México, é analisada quanto aos seus procedimentos de reciclagem e não originalidade e, especialmente, de sua prática de ironia, paródia e humor corrosivo como ferramenta para rever a história colonial e pós-colonial em termos de violência estatal, de gênero, racial e linguística.

Leonardo Villa-Forte

An atmosphere that combines literary appropriation and cultural revision

Between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, a sense of strangeness about reading and writing flourished. The popularization of the digital environment, which was in full swing, was changing the way texts circulated, thereby posing a challenge to people's reading habits. The new need to transfer everything possible to a new (virtual) form of existence called for conversion tools, which called for formatting devices, which in turn called for access mediators, which from update to update multiplied the necessary files, documents, folders, programs, systems, and thus accelerated the pace of production and increased the quantity of everything subject to acceleration and scaling. This vector of change, more or less the same on a global level, met with specific local situations. Concerns resulting from this intersection, in the context of reading and writing, gave rise to a series of critical and creative reactions that called attention to the new situation and set out to give due treatment to such a transformative insertion of sensibilities that was being imposed on our lives. In this vein, throughout the first two decades of the 21st century, in Brazil, Chile, the United States, Canada, Spain, Uruguay, and Argentina, manifestos, studies, and radical poetic productions emerged that affirmed the new atmosphere and showed how it favors the recycling of texts and the revision of historically consolidated content.

In this chapter, we will use some theoretical frameworks as a foundation to elaborate on these changes and relate them to the context of thinking, reading, and writing in Latin America. We will then look at some examples of poetic or fictional productions that we see as both reactions to and symptoms of this contemporary atmosphere, primarily in works by Brazilian, Chilean, and Mexican authors. At the end, we'll propose a conclusion that links the points made throughout the text.

It's worth mentioning a few essays and studies published in the first two decades of the 21st century which, despite their enormous differences, are similar insofar as they point out changes in reading, writing, and literary production based on their relationship with the virtual and digital environment. The "Sampler Literature Manifesto", by Fred Coelho and Mauro Gaspar, and "Unidentified verbal objects", by Flora Süssekind, are examples from Brazil; *Los muertos indóciles: necroescrituras y desapropiación*, by Cristina Rivera-Garza, from Mexico; "*Post-autonomous* literature", by Josefina Ludmer, in Argentina; *Postpoesía: hacía um nuevo paradigma*, by Agustín Fernandez Mallo, in Spain; *Uncreative writing: managing language in the digital age*, by Kenneth Goldsmith, and *Unoriginal Genius: poetry by other means*, by Marjorie Perloff, in the United States, are some examples.

By highlighting the popularization of procedures for displacement and intervention in the text (virtualized by the control c + control v of personal machines), as well as recent literary works that make use of them, these studies point to a questioning of the model of individual authorship and the notion of original creation. According to professor and researcher Lev Manovich, who studied recent new technologies as they emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in *The language of the new medium*, when a certain procedure becomes popular, the way it works is no longer restricted to its original field and it goes on to be applied to the most different areas of life, or to the most different targets. In other words, a certain operating logic, which made specific sense in a given context, spills over into various spheres of life in society: just as all previously existing content has had to undergo a new modulation in order to gain its existence in the digital environment, researchers, poets, writers, artists have also been acting as "filters" of content from both the present and the recent past, either critically or creatively, in order to modulate, renew, transform or unveil it in a new cultural environment. Literary works, anonymous discourse, and official discourse are read today as texts to be cut up, rewritten, and reformulated through different poetic approaches. Writers and artists often seek to intervene in public records, to turn the gesture of (re)writing into building community, to delve into presumed banality to reveal the offensive, the tic, the language vice or the boring everydayness, or even to unveil the artificiality of official and institutional history in order to produce counter-discourses. In this chapter, we will focus on contemporary works by writers and poets mainly from Brazil, Chile and Mexico. These works, taking part in this atmosphere of experimental writing of cultural appropriation and revision, make use of parody, irony, corrosive humor, and exposure to the terrible or the ridiculous, often exploring humor as a political commentary as well.

Veronica Stigger's diagnosis of the new atmosphere and the resulting delusions

Within this field of experimental writing in which appropriation and revision are central elements, sticking to the timeframe of the 21st century, perhaps the first organized diagnosis of the contemporary situation occurred in 2001 with *Neoconceptualism - El Secuestro del Origen*, a manifesto and, at the same time, a collection of poems and narratives published in India by two Chilean writers. "It is forbidden to use any word that arises from the originality of the neoconceptual author," said Carlos Almonte and Allan Meller. They coined neoconceptual writing as that which happens when the text is the result of appropriations of other people's literary texts. In the book, the duo uses Jorge Luis Borges, Conde de Lautréamont, and the Bible, among other sources, a source for every new text-as-reading performance, as someone might call it. Something similar happened in 2007 in Argentina, when writer Pablo Katchadjian published *El Martin Fierro ordenado alfabeticamente* (*El Martin Fierro in alphabetical order*). Shortly after, Brazilian poet Marília Garcia

published a poem that was clearly composed of the alphabetical reordering of all the verses of *A teus pés*, an emblematic book by Ana Cristina Cesar, a poet from the previous generation. These publications express a productive quality in the concerns about changes in sensibility in the act of reading. Poets began to invent new reading protocols. In this context, creation didn't lie exactly in the writing, but in the discovery and proposition of an alternative reading path within original texts.

Unaware of the Chilean manifesto, in 2005, Frederico Coelho, a historian and essayist, and Mauro Gaspar, an editor and researcher, both of whom were still PhD students then and fans of DJ Shadow and Ricardo Piglia, entered a university classroom in Rio de Janeiro with two microphones during a conference of the Faculty of Letters and, standing up like minstrels, they vocalized their "Literature Sampler Manifesto". The text is produced according to the proposal that the two Brazilians went on to defend: a multitude of writing that brings together fragments of literary and artistic writing – an expansion of Almonte and Meller's neo-conceptualism. We find fruitful ideas in the "Literature Sampler Manifesto" ("Manifesto da literatura sampler", as it is called in Portuguese), such as questioning the indiscriminate use of the notion of quotation. After all, when the whole body is made up of pre-existing pieces of skin, the pieces stop being grafts and become the tissue of the body itself. Writing is thus not symbolically, unconsciously, or inevitably related to reading, as Michel Foucault pointed out, but deliberately, explicitly, and materially so. Writing as a collection of read fragments. Writing as the visible record of a unique reading path. A path that transgresses the model and reveals authorship. A journey that results in a collection, which, with its objects handled and manipulated, results in a new discourse.

In 2013, literary critic Flora Sussekind stated that a series of works in Brazilian literature at that time expressed "choral experiences", characterized by

> listening operations, and the constitution of a kind of echo chamber in which resounds the (at first sight unclassifiable) simultaneous rumor of a multiplicity of voices, non-verbal elements, and an overlapping of registers and diverse expressive modes. (Süssekind 2013: I, my translation)

In her precise diagnosis, Flora Süssekind saw in these experiences "a form of simultaneous questioning of both the historical hour and the field of literature itself." Her proposal to think about bringing together not only literary texts but also non-literary materials was the scope I worked on in my research for the book *Escrever sem escrever: literatura e apropriação no século XXI* (*Writing without writing: literature and appropriation in the 21*st *century*). One example studied in the book is *Delírio de Damasco* (*Delirium of Damascus*), in which writer Veronica Stigger presents a collection of phrases heard from acquaintances or strangers organized into three

themes: blood, sex and money. The book ranges from grotesque to surrealist humor and is as much about denouncement as it is pure banter. Its selection criteria are the opposite of those used in Marcel Duchamp's *ready-mades*. Whereas the French artist looked for unattractive objects that even provoked a certain indifference, Stigger captures what catches her eye. They are prehistories, as the author says. Far from a tedious, flowing, cold text, her collector's writing brings together short, absurd texts that can either make you laugh or light the fuse of a dramatic bomb. Let's take a look at some of them:

> Wherever he went
> he took along
> his urine test.

> They're doing very well in the United States:
> she's a call girl,
> he parks cars.

> No wedding.
> But if there were,
> her father already said he won't attend.

> Better
> a murder
> than a suicide.

> Poor Indians!
> They lived in peace.
> Then the humans came and killed them all.
> (Stigger 2012: extracts from pages 17, 27, 33, 35, 44 and 45, my translation)

The humor is derisive, sharp and sometimes cruel. Like other Latin American examples that we will see throughout this chapter, Stigger's work is far removed from that harsher notion of conceptual writing, in which the works establish a relationship of irony and confrontation with the reader (sometimes even a rejection of reading), often producing shock or exhaustion. As employed by Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman in *Notes on conceptualisms* or by Kenneth Goldmisth in "Paragraphs on conceptual writing", among others, the harder and colder notion of conceptual writing seems to me, today, a reference that contributes to thinking about different degrees of radicality in the gesture and readability of each experimental work made through appropriation, without the need for the concept itself to be used radically.

The in-between place of Latin American discourse in Roman Luján and Carlos Soto-Román

What is the specificity of writers based in Latin America? For Brazilian writer and theorist Silviano Santiago, this specificity, which would be as much material and geographical as mental, could be elaborated through the concept of the "*entre-lugar do discurso latino-americano*" (the "in-between place of Latin American discourse"):

> Between sacrifice and play, between imprisonment and transgression, between submission to the code and aggression, between obedience and rebellion, between assimilation and expression – there, in this apparently empty place, its temple and its place of clandestinity, that is where the anthropophagic ritual of Latin American literature takes place. (Santiago 2000: 26, my translation)

The book *Sánafabich*, published in 2019 by Mexican poet Román Luján, seems to reside in this in-between place. Starting with the title of the book, which also gives its name to a poem, Luján proposes the slur "son of a bitch," widely used by Americans, but not how it is spelled in English, but how the expression is heard by a Mexican ear. The incorrect spelling is revenge for the incorrect pronunciation. Luján invades the English language in order to distort it – between submission to the code and aggression, between assimilation and expression, as Santiago says. The alternative spelling of "son of a bitch" is a humorous revolt. Let's read the poem "Sánafabich":

se dice tamal, no t'mali
se dice Colombia, no Columbia
se dice cañón, no canon
se dice Salma, no Selma
se dice Román, no Ramán, no Ramoun, no Romiu
se dice Sacramento, no Sacrmeno
se dice chipotle, no chipote, no chipole
se dice guacamole, no guac, chingada madre
se dice Chile, no chili
se dice Tijuana, no Tiawana
se dice quesadillas, no cuesadiles
se dice dulce de leche, no dolchi di letchi
se dice mole, no mouli
se dice Juárez, no Warés
se dice chorizo, no churitzou
se dice mojito, no mojirou
se dice peyote, no peiori, pendejou
se dice empanada, no impañara

se dice Bolaño, no B'lano
se dice jalapeño, no halapino
se dice García Márquez, no Marqués
se dice enchilada, no onchilara
se dice Juan, no Wan
se dice habanero, no habañerou
se dice Estados Unidos
(Luján 2019: 17)

The task that the voice of the poem sets itself is to point out the error and teach the correct one according to its place of origin, inverting the position of power. Perhaps its most interesting moment, in humorous terms, is when an interlocutor is inserted ("chingada madre"; "pendejou"). This is when the poem allows us to imagine a peculiar character, who is always rebelling against the speakers that distort his language, a perhaps utopian revolt that would lead to a reaction that would turn every kind of conversation into a rebellion and a lesson. The poem points to the incorporation of Spanish into English, maintaining the sound of the English language, as a weapon of discrimination and exclusion, which only simulates an assimilation of Spanish. A simulation of assimilation that must be unmasked for the sake of true cultural and linguistic diversity. The poem ends in a silence that refers to another type of linguistic appropriation, also with political and geographical consequences: the appropriation that takes place when a country symbolically presents itself as an entire continent, "America". If we forget for a second the tragic effects of erasure, such exaggeration and erasure become hilarious.

This gesture of exaggeration and erasure is recalled by the Chilean poet Carlos Soto-Román in work 11. Intervening in official documents of the Chilean dictatorship, the text of the work shows the recurrence of the epithet that the dictatorship itself gave itself: "SUPREMO GOBIERNO". Always in full capital letters. Soto-Román's book is triggered by the date of September 11 in Chile, when in 1973 Augusto Pinochet led a military coup that ousted the elected government of President Salvador Allende and inaugurated a brutal dictatorship that lasted 17 years. On the book's cover, the image of the number 11 is represented by two elongated figures that occupy it vertically, which inevitably reminds us of two tall buildings. In this way, the standard imagination is provoked into inferring that the book is about 9/11, when the attack on the Twin Towers in New York took place. If a country appropriates the name of an entire continent, why not invade the imagination created by the worldwide coverage of September 11 in the USA and, from a Chilean point of view, re-appropriate this date or broaden the references around it? In this sense, Soto-Román plays a trick on unsuspecting readers and dialogues with Román Lujan's poem "Sánafabich". Both exert the expropriation of words (Luján) and images (Soto-Román) and

create humorous effects in the name of reappropriating history, identity and the imagination, in favor of diversifying references for the imagination, so that certain memories (linguistic or historical) are not buried by others.

Laughter in its natural environment: society in Angélica Freitas' googllages

The work of Brazilian poet Angélica Freitas investigates popular language and certain conservative thought patterns. She often resorts to reinterpretations of traditional songs and poems, clichés, and platitudes, as well as the language of advertising, and creates parodies with the effect of contradicting the prejudices ingrained in society. In "poetry is not", the poet lists in verse a series of opinions about poetry, all collected from the Internet after typing the expression "poetry is not" into a search engine:

poetry is not (reloaded)

poetry is not an idiotic thing
poetry is not an option
poetry is not just language
poetry is, not
poetry is not to be understood
poetry is not a hard science
poetry is not a weapon
poetry is not Orpheus's anymore
poetry is not different
poetry is not a marriage
poetry is not a meaning
poetry is not, has never been
poetry is not a choice
poetry is not and does not want to be a commodity
"poetry is not a force of shock.
it is a force of occupation"
but isn't poetry the revelation of reality?
poetry is not the art of the object
poetry is not a mere artifice
poetry is not Castro Alves', as many people think
poetry is not representative anymore
poetry is not a permanent occupation
poetry is not a mirror,
no, poetry is not a contemplative art
poetry is not an idiotic thing

> poetry is not something that can be used as a trumpet
> poetry is not a matter of feelings
> poetry is not made (directly) of ideas but of words (which are the carriers of ideas
> people don't always realize that poetry is
> not mere entertainment, inconsequential literary banter
> but poetry is not.
> (Freitas 2005 *apud* Domeneck 2011: n.p., my translation)

At first glance, it appears to be a poem full of certainties, but by the end the only certainty we are left with is how difficult it is to define poetry. There's a whole lot of humor that accumulates as we go through this sort of catalog of non-definitions of poetry, from the crudest to the most elaborate. All of them, curiously, as bearers of ideas, have their ideas rejected. The only accepted idea is Mallarmé's, that poetry is made up of words, which in turn are, finally, carriers of ideas. The poem puts Paul Valéry, Mallarmé, and the lay, uncompromising internet user on an equal footing – in the collectivity of voices that form it. It contains the medium in which the text was born, the Internet, where there is no hierarchical arrangement of content. Following this view – not a mixture of high and low culture, but an indistinction between the famous and the anonymous, or the practitioner and the amateur – the poem promotes a desacralization of Mallarmé. After the concrete poets had raised Mallarmé to the heavens, Angélica Freitas pulls his leg and brings him down to earth in the middle of a crowded street, occupying the same space as any other person.

What Angélica Freitas' irony leaves open is the meaning of this gesture. Is placing Mallarmé next to anonymous and uncompromising people a criticism of Mallarmé's supposed overestimation? Or is it a criticism of the lack of hierarchical value and the erasure of contexts that reigns on the Internet? Or, in a third interpretation, the gesture could be a compliment to poetry as a democratic space, in which anything can enter, if one knows how. As for the meaning of this foundational gesture of the poem, as something beyond a procedure, but which adds meaning to the text, the message is not final, but ambiguous. For Camila da Silva Alavarce,

> irony, parody, and laughter act in literary texts, in the vast majority of their occurrences, with the aim of suspending censorship and circumventing the prisons of monophonic and consequently authoritarian discourses. This is possible because the modalities in question favor polyphony and the dissonant element, legitimized by the contrast of ideas, a common trait between these three types of discourse. Therefore, these categories, as acts of communication, opt for a certain perspective or stance, which clashes with the other, and this is what guarantees polyphony. (Alavarce 2009: 12, my translation)

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It's interesting to note that the poem draws attention to its restraint and the idea that drives it, but within the poem itself there is a statement that poetry is not made of ideas, but of words. Here the creative procedure and what the verse says clash with one another, and the poem takes on a new dimension of irony, with another enormous force of ambiguity.

In *Um útero é do tamanho de um punho* (*A uterus is the size of a fist*), Freitas consolidated her experimentation, which she called "googllages" ("googlagens," in Portuguese), i.e. collages made with Google. The central theme of the 2012 book is the place of women in contemporary society and the gazes that have historically been cast on them – and by whom. Freitas produces some joke-poems in the style of the anthropophagic modernist Oswald de Andrade and parodies traditional Brazilian songs, as in her criticism of the standardization of female bodies and behavior through the traditional song "One elephant bothers a lot of people / Two elephants bother a lot more". Freitas takes this song and inhabits it with her poem, which says "a fat woman / bothers a lot of people / a fat drunk woman / bothers a lot more". The melody in which there was one childish content now reveals serious social problems, such as sexism and bodily oppression. Thus, the poem also achieves the effect of suggesting that being annoyed with fat, drunk women is extremely childish.

Let's look at a poem from the section "3 poems made with Google's help", "a mulher quer" ("a woman wants"):

the woman wants to be loved
the woman wants a rich guy
the woman wants to conquer a man
the woman wants a man
the woman wants sex
the woman wants sex as much as the man
the woman wants the preparation for sex to happen slowly
the woman wants to be possessed
the woman wants to be led by a male
the woman wants to get married
the woman wants her husband to be her companion
the woman wants a gentleman to take care of her
the woman wants to talk to discuss the relationship
the woman wants to talk and botafogo wants to beat flamengo
the woman just wants you to listen
the woman wants something more than that, she wants love, affection
the woman wants security
the woman wants to mess with you e-mail
the woman wants stability

the woman wants nextel
the woman wants a credit card
the woman wants everything
the women wants to be valued and respected
the women wants to separate
the women want to earn, decide and consume more
the women want to commit suicide
(Freitas 2012: 72, my translation)

The poem makes us laugh at the clichés, which highlight the inferior position in which women have been placed in patriarchal societies for centuries. According to Renata Miguel, the poet

Through laughter and irony, criticizes the sexist discourses that still affect women today. Through the use of humor, Freitas manages to expose these discourses, ridicule and criticize them at the same time as she proposes that they be revised. (Miguel 2017: 215, my translation)

By appropriating discourse published on the Internet, Angélica Freitas performs a kind of archeology of the average thought about women at a certain time, in a certain place. The poem makes the assembled discourse stand in opposition to the originals without modifying them in any substantial way, just expropriating them from their places to take them to another context, in which we see that these thoughts are not those of one recognizable person or other, but, rather, they permeate society as a whole. Beyond the obtuseness of certain ideas, there is a humorous effect that is fulfilled by the way Freitas arranges the verses: the poet creates contrasts between the focus of one verse and the next. When "the woman wants security" is followed by a line like "the woman wants to mess with your e-mail", the comic effect comes from the succession of a universal and traditional theme with a shallow, dated and commonplace one. Freitas' experimental writing thus takes on a strong political air without arriving at a simplistic, pamphleteering outcome; on the contrary, her poems are ingenious, biting, and sarcastic.

Looking at the work of the two poets, we can say that Roman Luján and Angélica Freitas use humor as a weapon to combat the symbolic violence that society regularly exerts on certain bodies, people, and languages. Without a doubt, Latin American humor in general draws from the wellsprings of its pain. As a way of surviving and creating bonds of identification, we laugh at our misfortunes, without forgetting what their roots are and how they are being updated. In this way, the Mexican poet and the Brazilian poet propose laughter as categorized by Bergson:

> To understand laughter, it is necessary to place it in its natural environment, which is society; above all, it is necessary to determine its useful function, which is a social function (...) Laughter must correspond to certain requirements of life in common. Laughter must have a social meaning (Bergson 2007: 6, my translation).

Laughing at ourselves, laughing at what they want to make of us: Bolsonaro's plan for Rogério Bettoni and Jorge Miranda; the educational model according to Alejandro Zambra and the country of poets by Felipe Cussen
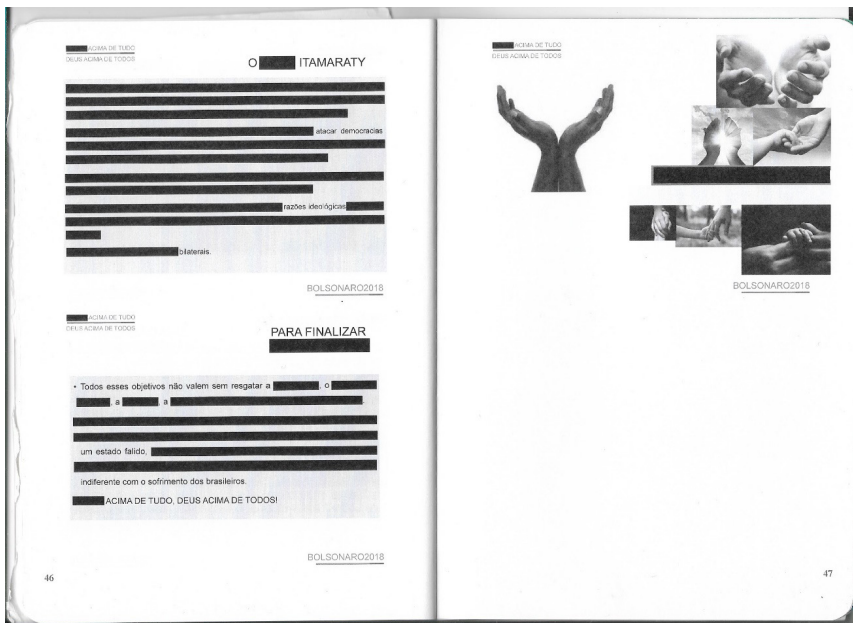
If Román Luján uses humor as a rebellion against false diversity, against the process of homogenization, and Angélica Freitas exposes sexism to ridicule, turning the sexist discourse against itself, we can say that both have as the target of their ferocious humor the one who answers to an Other. In a different approach, some poets and writers have been working with humor in experimental writing as a reflection on their own country, through a gaze that looks not at the one who is seen as Other, but at the one who is seen as the same, from the inside out.

Plano de Governo, by Brazilians Jorge Miranda and Rogério Bettoni, is an operation of suppression – a procedure that subtracts or erases excerpts from the government plan for the 2018 elections of then presidential candidate, Jair Bolsonaro. The deletion ends up revealing a discourse that is more in line with the truth than the official government plan submitted to the electoral authorities. In this way, laughter – nervous, embarrassed, desperate – is elicited by the gesture of revelation. Finally, we are able to clearly see what the former president was preaching when he cited the psalm John 8:32: "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". In the government plan that Bettoni and Miranda have reread and displaced, it is through erasure that the truth is revealed. Jair Bolsonaro's motto finally materializes. Against him. The formality of bureaucratic writing is unmasked as a mere game of appearance, and the candidate's truth emerges transparently. A curious erasure that results not in blockage, but in transparency. *Plano de governo*, the book, strips away the official plan, removes from it everything that it isn't in reality, which makes it truer than the official government plan – revealing the absurdity of the project which part of the Brazilian population elected.

ACIMA DE TUDO
DEUS ACIMA DE TODOS

grave crise
setorial.   decisões
arbitrárias, sucateamento
conflitos de interesses,
ineficiências na geração,
excessivos encargos
tributários e influência
política.

gargalo

problema à solução

(apagões)

UM EXEMPLO: As Pequenas Centrais Hidrelétricas têm
enfrentado barreiras quase intransponíveis no licenciamento
ambiental. Há casos que superam os dez anos. Faremos
com que o licenciamento seja avaliado em um prazo
máximo de três meses.

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PETRÓLEO E GÁS
Desenvolvimento da

corrupção.

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PETRÓLEO E GÁS

Os preços praticados pela Petrobras deverão

sobrecarregar o consumidor brasileiro.

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PETRÓLEO E GÁS

destaque   para   as
emissões de CO$_2$

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TRANSPORTES

a qualidade da
infraestrutura rodoviária piorou

• Os investimentos do governo federal no transporte hidroviário caíram

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PORTOS

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AVIAÇÃO CIVIL

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(Bettoni / Miranda 2019: 42-47. Translations in Appendix I)

This is a rebellious and corrosive humor, whose impulse is revolt, sadness, and irreverence. In *Plano de governo*, the sophistication with which Miranda and Bettoni apply the suppression procedure is remarkable. The duo uses it to produce not just one type of effect, but three: on most pages, the deletion can reveal the violence and backwardness of Jair Bolsonaro's plan, but also, when passages are completely deleted on a page, the complete absence of projects for certain areas of the country is expressed. Finally, as a third effect, the deletion can show the reader the emptiness of Bolsonaro's electoral discourse, the misleading'rhetoric that floats in a vacuum, the emptying of words that in other mouths and other plans could actually sustain some force of meaning, but which, in this case, once the lack of ballast is revealed, appears as gestures of purely performative effect. In a way, a productive sense of incapacity is also at work in the piece. Faced with the sad Impossibility of acting in real life, one acts on paper.

We can notice something similar in *Facsímil*, by Chilean writer Alejandro Zambra. There is a melancholic mood hanging over the work. It doesn't deal with the emptying of words or the absence of projects that emerge, but, on the contrary, it deals with the incentive to speak and express oneself, but without the chance to choose one's own words, without the chance to choose one's own path (in reading, writing, in the city). One must speak only what is correct, read only what is expected, walk where and when one is authorized to do so, say only what, in any

given context, one can say. A successful author of short stories and novels in South America, Zambra never stopped thinking about his country through experimental strategies. His 2014 work is a serious joke about an obsolete and restricted model of education, as well as a poignant review of how the dictatorship inserts itself into everyday life by directing discourse. In *Facsímil* (*Multiple choice*), Zambra raises the problem of the simplification of thought, the restriction of discursive spectra and the encouragement of single answers, answers that only indicate either this or that, especially when the themes are homeland, family, or love. To do this, the author makes use of an official document, the Verbal Aptitude Test, a multiple-choice test for admission to Chilean universities that was used between 1967 and 2002. He then creatively transgresses the text, adulterating the questions, creating new parodic questions, using the model to show polarized thinking, violence, inglorious nationalism, constraints on behavior, and the capitalist restriction on the complexity of thought, in a critique with a sad and mournful undertone, but not without a significant degree of burlesque humor. There is a revolt against the establishment of inexplicable criteria and a rebellion against the flattening of discussions into two options, yes or no, two sides, right or left, this or that. The book is acerbic in its criticism of the control of thought and bodies. By way of irony, the author points the finger at the obtuseness of the language of evaluation, the fascist and dictatorial language – which, unlike the official regime, can endure within democracy. Let's look at excerpts from the English translation of *Facsímil*:

> In exercises 37 through 54, complete the sentence using the appropriate elements. Choose the option that best fits the sentence.
>
> 37. _____ the thousand amendments they've made to it, the Chilean Constitution of 1980 is a piece of shit.
> A) After
> B) Due to
> C) In spite of
> D) Thanks to
> E) Notwithstanding
>
> (Zambra 2016: 25-27)

> [...]

> In exercises 55 through 66, indicate the sentences or paragraphs that can be eliminated because they either do not add information or are unrelated to the rest of the text.

57)

(1) A curfew is a regulation prohibiting free circulation in the public space within a determined area.

(2) It tends to be decreed in times of war or popular uprising.

(3) The dictatorship imposed one in Santiago, Chile, from September 11, 1973, until January 2, 1987.

(4) One summer night my father went out walking with no destination in mind. It grew late, and he had to sleep at a friend's house.

(5) They made love, she got pregnant, I was born.

A) None.
B) 5
C) 1, 2, and 3
D) 4 and 5
E) 2

(Zambra 2016: 35-39)

It's interesting to note that the work of Betttoni and Miranda and that of Zambra, as well as some of those mentioned above, reclaim what, according to Vilém Flusser, turning to etymology, could be precisely the beginning of writing – and which, in a modern context, becomes an experimental gesture:

> """Writing" comes from the Latin word "scriber", which means "to scratch" (ritzen). And the Greek word "graphein" means "to engrav" (graven). Therefore, writing was originally a gesture of making an incision on an object, for which a cuneiform tool (a "stylus") was used. (Flusser 2010: 25, my translation)

Much like the idea of what it means to "write", the notion of "style" has also undergone a transformation. From a first meaning that indicated a physical object, a tool for demarcating and intervening in the materiality of things, it gradually detached itself from its material reality to become a category of artistic practice and thought. In an interview from 2021, Zambra recognizes that, because every young Chilean interested in going to university is obliged to take this exam, spending a whole year or more preparing for it, many of these Chileans are more "prepared" to understand an experimental structure like the one in *Facsímil* than they are to read a poem or a novel (see Cotton 2021). Here, the writer touches on the issue of the non-literary reception of materials that are proposed as literary even though they use non-literary material. It seems entirely possible that a reader who is totally averse to

reading poetry, short stories, and novels will approach this experimental work without any kind of trepidation – from a literary point of view, it sounds strange; from a general culture point of view, there is *a priori* proximity between its model and a certain type of audience. A dialogue with mass culture, through the use of documents or texts that are not literary in origin, holds this different possibility of bringing the work and its readers closer together. In a way, literary experimentation makes the work lose some degrees of specificity, in other words, it stretches its tentacles into fields of life other than the strictly literary. If we think historically, the work is part of the change that took place mainly in the second half of the 20th century – diagnosed, for example, in Josefina Ludmer's "Post-autonomous literature" –, in which art became less literary and more cultural, in an effect of the very gaze that was directed, especially with post-structuralism, towards culture and society as an immense network of texts and discourses.

As previously mentioned, Zambra's gesture is part of a view of the social environment as a web of texts, which create realities, shape the present in order to form the future, and must therefore be questioned or exposed in its artificiality or obtuseness. The writer intervenes and creates parodies, re-readings of comparisons, which suggest another truth, concealed by the official fiction. It's as if a member of the government had gone mad and, in his privileged position as creator of realities, he made the documents into whatever he wanted. Between submission to the code and aggression, between assimilation and expression, as Silviano Santiago says. The in-between place of Latin American discourse is also one created by documents, which always carry with them a certain way of reading people and creating interpretations of reality. In Zambra, Bettoni, and Miranda, we see a commitment to the power of irreverence and causticity. Writing by means of appropriation and adulteration is also, in these cases, a metaphor for the silencing of voices, a common occurrence in authoritarian regimes, which forces the writer to speak from the margins, to speak without being so visible – no longer producing new writing but intervening in the pre-existing text. With new reading protocols, they highlight that which had already been said and which may not have been noticed. They are betting on a jocular wit, without losing punch, in a way that is almost anarchic in its dimension of creation, exercising an experimental writing that makes political use of humor.

As a final example of experimental writing that sees humor as a useful tool for debates and combats in society, we offer a text by Chilean poet and researcher Felipe Cussen. Whereas Zambra, Bettoni, and Miranda looked from the inside out, Cussen's text makes us think about two movements: both the discourse from the inside in and how the discourse from the inside operates in its attempt to project itself outwards. Chile, the poet's country of origin, is proud of its poets, of its inhabitants' relationship with poetry, and projects itself abroad as a country that values its poets, that presents them as great representatives of the nation and sees them as great universal poets.

Pablo Neruda, Nobel Prize winner, is perhaps the most famous example. But Gabriela Mistral, Vicente Huidobro and Nicanor Parra, among others, also contribute to this construction of a national identity tied to its poets. It is this construction that Felipe Cussen calls into question with his poem "Chile: país de poetas" (Chile: country of poets).

> "Mexico, it is said, has been a land of poets. Y sí: ya desde el siglo XVII, Hernán González de Eslava decía que 'hay más poetas que estiércol'." (Julio Hubard)
> "Spain is a country of poets and it's always had hundreds of them, some of whom are very good." (Rafael Gómez Pérez)
> "In a country of poets like Colombia, it's becoming increasingly difficult to find a voice that stands out among all the rhetorical and grandiloquent clutter that we have inherited from the Spanish." (Fabio Martínez)
> "Lithuania could be called a 'land of poets': poetic creation has almost always been more intense and more original there than prose expression." (Biruté Ciplijauskaité)"
> "They say that Nicaragua is a country of poets, because poetry is the only refuge from a history of curses and catastrophes, from difficult living conditions." (Javier Escudero)
> "Portugal is a country of poets, as the history of literature teaches us." (Paulo Bravio)
> "To say that Brazil is a country of poets is more than a tautology." (Aníbal Beça)
> "It's easy to dare and repeat the popular advice, the talent of a spirit surrounded by the primary hypothesis of the irreplaceable self, 'Guayana, land of poets'." (Abraham Salloum Bitar)
> "Why go to Ireland when you can get just as wet in Wales, as drunk in Doncaster and as happy in Honolulu? Let me explain. It is first of all a country of poets." (Alastair Sawday)
> "Somalia, a country of poets and drought." (Kenny Moore)
> "Macedonia is now the country of poets. As it has always been." (Mark O'Conor)
> "Iran has always been a country of poets." (Michele Levieux)
> "Afghanistan is a country of poets." (Peter Conners)
> "China is a country of poets." (Het Andere Oosten)"
> "Greece is a country of poets." (Joseph P. Consoli)
>
> (Cussen 2012: 3, my translation)

By way of collection, accumulation, and consequent comparison, each verse-statement is gradually emptied of the meaning it originally intended to communicate. For it seems that many participants in literary culture see their country as a country of poets.

With this chapter, we aim to understand how the notion of the in-between place of Latino discourse is present and operates in contemporary times, through the direct (or audible) appropriation of imposed discourses – be it that of the Other, or

that of the Same to the Self, or that of the Same to the Outside – in a certain model of experimental writing that seems to us to be both a reaction and a symptom of the way of doing things popularized by the virtual environment and digital machines.

Finally, we think that just as interesting as the fact that some of these experimental writings are more like language curatorships than actual writing is the perception – embedded in their ways of doing things – that literature can influence the direction of society.

Note

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"Insomma, una Beffa". Humour as a Form or Re-writing, Re-engaging, Re-thinking Women. The Experimental Poetry of Giulia Niccolai

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Abstract: The aim of this essay is to present a critical-practical reflection on the use of humour in poetry as a form of subversion of power (Colebrook, 2004). It will be seen in more detail how power is not a useful dimension for the feminist battle (hooks, 1990) and the expression of non male subjects, who rather create a different framework in which they operate (Borghi, 2020). Through a reading that revisits the term empowerment (Naidotti, 1998), a word nowadays expropriated of its political and subversive charge, we can return to reading Giulia Niccolai's poetry, over the course of an entire career, with examples from her earliest and latest production, as a posture in the world made up of sincere and critical irony and conscious stance.

Keywords: concrete poetry, feminist theory, humour

Resumo: O objetivo deste ensaio é apresentar uma reflexão crítico-prática sobre o uso do humor na poesia como forma de subversão do poder (Colebrook, 2004). Veremos em pormenor como o poder não é uma dimensão útil para a batalha feminista (hooks, 1990) e para a expressão de sujeitos não masculinos, visto que criam um enquadramento diferenciado para operar (Borghi, 2020). Através de uma leitura que revisita o termo empowerment (Naidotti, 1998), palavra hoje expropriada da sua carga política e subversiva, podemos voltar a ler a poesia de Giulia Niccolai, ao longo de todo o seu percurso, com exemplos da sua produção

mais antiga e mais recente, como uma postura no mundo feita de ironia sincera e crítica numa posição consciente.

Palavras-chave: poesia concreta, teoria feminista, humor

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to present a critical-practical reflection on the use of humour in poetry as a form of subversion of power. This research develops in the framework of "ironic feminism", aimed at tackling the constraints imposed by dominant language in public and poetic discourses, concerning in particular women and minority groups. In the realm of comedy and satire, irony effectively challenges and undermines the authority of dominant language, often eliciting laughter. This work relies on the wit study and commentary produced by Claire Colebrook (2003).[1]

The contribution shows in detail how power is not a useful dimension for the feminist battle and the expression of non-male subjects, who rather create a different framework in which they operate. More specifically, Naidotti's coining of the word *impoteramento* (*Scrivere al buio*, 1998; a dialogue with bell hooks) and its decolonial application to the world-system in Rachele Borghi's critical reflection (*Decolonialità e privilegio*, 2020) helps us to reflect on the overtly feminist practices of the poetic works of the 1970s and since.

Through this reading that revisits the term empowerment, a word nowadays expropriated of its political and subversive charge, we can return to reading Giulia Niccolai's poetry, over the course of an entire career, with example for her earliest and latest production, as a posture in the world made up of sincere and critical irony and conscious stance.

Ridiculous and ridiculed power dynamics

Humour as a socio-literary element of enormous rhetorical value has been written about extensively (Critchley 2002; Attardo 2017; Westbrook/Chao 2019; Derrin/Burrows 2020), and so has its specific weight in power relations.[2] While being in no position to retrace exactly each of the theoretical and critical stages on the subject, as a matter of relevance as much as of space, it is certainly useful to frame through one of the various possible paths the influence on social relations that the use of humour in literature has had. Moreover, in this paragraph it will be instructive to discuss more precisely what is meant – in fact – by humour as part of the framing for the analysis hereby presented, and to understand its various variants and stylistic stratifications in Western culture.

Humour as a genre is rooted in the human relational capacity and interpretation of reality, combining a laugh or a smile with the reflective faculty of the world's distortions. Not only the motive but also the manner is a strategic resource for humour, a necessary mode of expression for the reader or audience to be taken into participation.

A perfect summary of the use of humour rather than comedy as a political resource is given by Umberto Eco in his *Tra menzogna e ironia*, in which he recalls that "For Hegel, it was essential to the comedian that they who laugh feel so sure of their truth that they can look down on the contradictions of others with superiority. This certainty, which makes us laugh at the misfortune of an inferior, is naturally diabolical" (2020: 65).[3] Eco further reinforces this, again summarising as he was capable of centuries of literary history in witty and pithy observations: "Pirandello sees very clearly that in order to move from the comic to the humorous one must renounce detachment and superiority (classic characteristics of the comedian)" (2020: 71).

Precisely because of this inherent quality of observation and representation of the world, humour has presented itself as a social resource of reflection on the state of things, and therefore capable of transversally accommodating people and thoughts of different backgrounds and origins. In order for this quality to be embraced and expressed in its entirety, one can only agree with Pirandello in establishing a necessity for humour - unlike comedy - to avoid a separation from the world, a detachment dictated by superiority, as much as a need to immerse oneself completely in the reality being described.

However, it is important to state that humour does not stand in inherently critical opposition to power, but has instead begun to accommodate it, including its most ironic, cynical, and subversive qualities that have served power itself and contributed to the *status quo.*

Surreal as it may seem, a similar story to that of the term 'humourist' (as opposed or at least compared to 'comedian') can be found in the historical evolution of the term 'philosopher'; in particular, it is relevant to observe here the variant of the term that was offered to us by Hannah Arendt's rejection of the term philosopher and who rather preferred the definition of political thinker. The choice to distance herself from the category of philosopher – and not of philosophy – lies in the deep-rooted choice to exist in the world in a way that sees thinking and life as inextricably intertwined. Arendt professes an ethical and political necessity of the thinking, through a participation in public life, unlike Plato to whom she imputes various faults.

> [...] nonetheless follow, for the philosopher, even more serious crimes than the sin of naive vanity. The greatest of all, according to Arendt, is that of making himself at home in the

realm of pure thought and of judging the world of human plurality to be superfluous. Universal Man thus comes to eclipse the uniqueness of each human being. The theory expels the politics of plural interaction and replaces it with the rule of the few over the many. In other words, the metaphysical tradition is centered on the category of death - to which Arendt opposes her political conception of action and birth (Cavarero 2000: 128)

Deeply grounded in historical time, Cavarero's relative narratives thinking – impacted by Arendt's enormously, as repeatedly stated by Cavarero herself – takes on a particularly relevant value for the performative exercise of one's identity in public. More specifically, for this case, it is to be observed women's struggle to emancipate themselves from the role of subalterns and gain, to all intents and purposes, *authorial* presence in the public dimension, a matter that takes on a value that is twice as relevant. As per Arendt directly:

By word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take on the bare reality of our original physical appearance. (Arendt 1994: 127)

Regarding the concept of assimilation to a single abstract identity, similarly to what Arendt theorised but with a more distinctly feminist observation reflecting on the concept of the representation of the universal through Man alone, it is useful to turn to the words of the aforementioned political philosopher Adriana Cavarero, who can briefly summarise the reality of a world that tends to simplify identities and the expressions associated with them.

'Man' is a universal that applies to everyone precisely because it is no one. It disincarnates itself from the living singularity of each one, while claiming to substantiate it. It is at once masculine and neuter, a hybrid creature generated by thought, a fantastic universal produced by the mind. It is invisible and intangible, while nevertheless declaring itself to be the only thing 'sayable' in true discourse. It lives on its noetic status, even though it never leaves behind any life-story, and impedes language with the many philosophic progeny of its abstract conception. (Cavarero 2000: 9)

Siamo alle comiche!: the *impoteramento* through humour as a feminist power subversion

Irony, known for its subtle and occasionally humorous twists, has always been a formidable instrument in the feminist discourse toolbox. It functions as a subversive catalyst, disrupting established norms and laying bare the incongruities, contradictions, and injustices ingrained in patriarchal societies. As a literary and

rhetorical device, irony provides feminists with a means to scrutinize, challenge, and stimulate contemplation, all while maintaining a degree of ambiguity and intricacy. In this exploration, we delve into how irony operates as a subversive form within feminisms.

Feminisms encompass diverse perspectives when it comes to addressing social and political issues. The emphasis on the plural form of feminism is crucial, as it challenges the prevailing narrative that has historically centered on the binary gender perspective within a white, middle-class context. "White feminism", as discussed by Chela Sandoval in "Methodology of the Oppressed" (2000), fails to acknowledge the variations within social categories, including race, class, gender, and religion. This approach, rooted in the ideals of women's unity from the second wave of feminism, unintentionally separates the struggles against sexism and racism, as pointed out by bell hooks in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981). Nevertheless, as the dominant narrative predominantly addresses various facets of patriarchal oppression, alternative viewpoints have sought to broaden the binary perspective through approaches like intersectionality, as introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her paper "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" (1991).

> Feminist ironic discourse is of value to rhetorical studies based on how it (re)defines the ways in which women ironists participated in various traditions, the possibilities for their participation, and what it means for them to participate at all. (Graban 2015: 4-5)

One of the most potent applications of irony in feminisms lies in its capacity to unveil the hypocrisy woven into patriarchal conventions and institutions. Irony accentuates the dissonance between society's declarations of gender equality and its actual practices. This subversion of the prevailing narrative prompts readers to question established power structures. Irony fosters critical thinking by presenting ideas in a manner that necessitates active engagement with the text; it beckons readers to challenge assumptions, contemplate alternate perspectives, and decipher concealed meanings (Rainford 2005).

Feminist irony compels readers to confront their own biases and societal conditioning, urging them to reevaluate their viewpoints on gender and power dynamics. It unveils concealed truths, dismantles stereotypes, and empowers marginalized voices, all while involving readers in reflective analysis.

Irony is thus investigated not as a universalist practice but as a linguistic module, a discontinuous line of questioning "that inevitably blows up any attempt to universalise and unify discourse in a neutrality that does not account for the partiality of the thinking subject" (Forcina 1998: 21).

In the ongoing pursuit of gender equality, irony remains a potent weapon in the feminist arsenal, encouraging us to perceive the world from a different vantage point and inspiring transformation through its subtle, thought-provoking, and occasionally humorous subversion of the established order.

Donna Haraway observed the revolutionary and insurgent power of humorous words and the adoption of humour as a rhetorical strategy to destabilise power, perfectly inscribing in the Western question the difficulty of voicing the needs and rights of subaltern groups, among which feminist thinking stands out in its intersectional approach. As precisely stated in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, her best-known publication:

> Writing has a special significance for all colonized groups. Writing has been crucial to the Western myth of the distinction between oral and written cultures, primitive and civilized mentalities, and more recently to the erosion of that distinction in 'postmodernist' theories attacking the phallogocentrism of the West, with its worship of the monotheistic, phallic, authoritative, and singular work, the unique and perfect name. (Haraway 1985: 175)

Through the use of humour, the solidity and propaganda effectiveness of the status quo is undermined, effectively disrupting the entire concept of power. It is once again a great resource to refer to Donna Haraway's position on the use of irony by subaltern groups, and in particular that which is identified as 'feminine', for a (hopefully) socio-political as well as literary clairvoyance.

> Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method, one I would like to see more honoured within socialist-feminism. (Haraway 1985: 150)

A feminist reading such as the lesson of bell hooks allows for reflection not only on strategies but also on the intrinsic value of power and the consequent rejection of it by the organisation of subalterns. Similar to the very use of humour that has sometimes served and still sometimes serves power, in the same way a number of words that have found vigor in the battle against injustice have even been emptied of their revolutionary meaning and ideological bearing. Among them, sadly, mainstream, Anglocentric and white feminism has led to an overuse and disempowerment of the once piercing term empowerment.[4] However, this circumstance has led to an interesting debate on the very principle of the rejection of power, forcing even literary and translation solutions of a certain level of semantic and semiotic reflection. This

is the case with Maria Naidotti's translation of "empowerment" in the dialogue-book *Scrivere al buio* (1998),[5] in which Naidotti coined the term *impoteramento* and most recently adopted by intersectional feminist theorists and practicers to distinguish the said intersectional feminist practice from any form of pseudo-resistence subjugated to institutional and overt power. That's the case of Rachele Borghi.

Following Naidotti's example and expanding its powerful intuition, Rachele Borghi calls *impoteramento* not a simple translation of empowerment – which neo-liberalism has stripped of its revolutionary scope – but rather "a space of creation and not subjugation" (Borghi 2020: 5). For this reason, Borghi acutely reasons how to transform the use of the term from power to potency, deliberately alienating the very concept of power from the rampant overturning of autonomous feminist practices by the cisheteropatriarchal system. In this chapter, we will see how such a space for creation has always been a tool for resisting assimilation, and in particular the role it played in the poetry and poetics of Giulia Niccolai.

Giulia Niccolai

Giulia Niccolai (1934-2021) was one of the most influential poets of her generation and worldwide renown, despite the little attention she received in Italy.

> Niccolai began her career in the early 1950s working as a photographic journalist, carrying out photographic assignments for a wide range of Italian, European and American magazines and newspapers. Very few women were involved in the profession at the time, particularly in Italy where it was often dominated by the antics of the paparazzi and a macho attitude towards the "hunt" for a great photograph. Niccolai's experiences as a photographer were to have a lasting impact on her aesthetics and poetics, and also shaped her first and only novel, *Il grande angolo* (Wide Angle), published by Feltrinelli in 1966. The novel is a fascinating account of a young photographic journalist, Ita, who views the world as though through the lens of a camera and tries to use this way of seeing to come to terms with the suicide of her photographer partner, Domínguez. (Hill 2004: n.p.)

Niccolai's entry into the poetic dimension is exuberant and convincing from the very first moment. In fact, Niccolai's poetic practice encompasses the major experimental theories of her contemporaries, but with a very acute and particular reworking that will make her recognisable thanks above all to the use of irony and a subversive feminist charge. For the purpose of this contribution, we will focus on a few examples from different moments of Niccolai's artistic career, specifically the poetic debut and the conclusive poetic form she invented, unfortunately leaving aside other expressions equally important.

The first plaquette published by Niccolai was edited for Edizioni Geiger (Turin) and it dates to 1969, a year significantly charged with historical and social value as it was on the heels of the workers', student and feminist upheavals that characterised the national and international scene. In the context of committed poetry, in its various meanings and successful practices, Niccolai decided to devote herself entirely to linguistic experimentalism and to the decomposition on the page of the visual results of a minimalist filing and rewriting of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland.*

Giulia Niccolai, speaking of herself in the third person, stated that:

> In the early 1970s she founded the poetry magazine 'Tam Tam' with Spatola. Much of what she learnt about making poetry, she learnt by working alongside him from '68 to '79, first in Rome, then in Mulino di Bazzano (Parma), in the "kitchen" of "Tam Tam"; reading texts, handling correspondence, making packages and critical cards. This is how she began to feel inside literature and this was perhaps the only possible way, given that she had always considered herself to be a basic element and not the summit, for that was never allowed to take shortcuts'. (Piemontese 1989: 238)

We can already discern that Niccolai's work was heavily marked by a contemplation of work inequality within both the public and private spheres in the social context. Although she expressed this concern in a subdued manner, as stated by the author herself elsewhere, she consistently engaged in an examination of gender disparity in both the realm of existence and representation. Additionally, she focused on the same issues that occupied prominent figures in the feminist movement during the revolutionary atmosphere of 1968, such as Carla Lonzi (see Lonzi 1974; 1978). These concerns encompassed topics like unpaid labor that consumed the time and energy of women. In the years of poetic community nurtured by human and intellectual cohabitation at the Mulino, Niccolai chooses to remove herself from the generic power dynamics that mark society by aspiring to a non-reproduction of the same. Despite her awareness of the opportunities offered by the privilege of being white and bourgeois, the author had perhaps not reckoned with how much her being a woman would impact relationships even in a structure that wanted to reinvent itself beyond the social and political structure of the world we inhabit. The decision to move away, later, from the context of the Mulino and from the work that had marked her days is part of that process of *impoteramento*, rather than empowerment, that we contextualised previously: in fact, the very moment Niccolai began working as the person in charge of the care of the place, the objects, and the inhabitants of the community of poets she had founded, she simultaneously made her own the role that those tasks assigned to her, mutating it into an artistic reflection that would find a highly original explosion (above all) in the fundamental text and masterpiece of concretism that is *POEMA & OGGETTO* (Niccolai 1974; 2014).

This dynamic of co-participation in the poetic act will remain a fundamental element of her poetics, reaching even an original structural formula such as the *Frisbees.* As argued by Giammei: "Putting aside the laboratory tools of nonsense and closed the books, the poetry enters personal experience and searches there for sparks of meaning hidden, to be revealed" (2013: 45). Through a practice that collects the external experience, metabolises them by making them one's own and then returns them for others to collect, the form-frisbee is the latest enchanting gift that Niccolai, then a Buddhist nun, created first in the early 1980s and has continued to process and send out into the world, always listening for answers.

> The word has connotations of play, exchange, youth, airiness, even, originally, delicious pie! Giulia has thought about her chosen term, as is seen in some of the Frisbees she wrote that are included in this anthology: "One doesn't play Frisbee with words alone./ It's good to do it also with arms and legs." [...]
> Similarly, these Frisbees are collaborative, in the sense that they are often dedicated to and shared with friends, who in turn make suggestions for new compositions. They are also random in that they depend on the unpredictable nature of everyday experience, which brings to us not only events and encounters but also thoughts, questions, and insights that we cannot plan or predict. In the poet's own words, they are "internal Polaroids," snapshots that originate in observations of the seen, and are then "framed" in the form given them. Giulia's early work as a photographer comes back strongly in these compositions. (West 2013: n.p.)
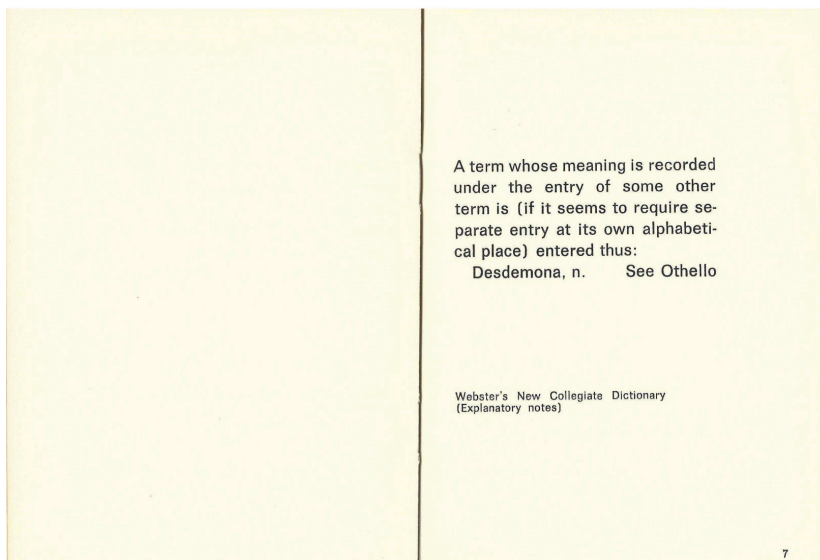
Humpty Dumpty. Visual re-writing to build a home: the decomposition of the master's tool

As already pointed out, this book visually interprets Lewis Carroll's language using the techniques of concrete poetry. What Giulia Niccolai articulates is a revision and rewriting by borrowing the vocabulary of a nonsense master.

> She materialises, if one may say so, hidden meanings: the semantics of her second-grade compositions were already present in the smallest quoted portions of the text, in the microscopic morphology that becomes observable to the naked eye. Her experiments are not aimed at experimentalism per se, as an absolute value, but all tend towards a demonstrative end: they unveil the ganglions that operate the nonsense. (Giammei 2013: 44)

Before delving into the heart of the poetic question, using as a lens for our investigation both humour, a key word in this interpretation, and feminism in its non-mainstream version, which we have recognised in *impoteramento*, it is important to

dwell on the epigraph itself at the opening of this work. Exactly as she proceeded to do from the text of *Alice in Wonderland*, we find in the epigraph a direct quotation from Webster's dictionary: a text that was always dear to the author and would remain on her desk until the last days of her life.

> A term whose meaning is recorded under the entry of some other term is (if it seems to require separate entry at its own alphabetical place) entered thus:
> Desdemona, n.   See Othello
>
> Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary
> (Explanatory notes)
>
> 7

(Photo-reproduction. From *Humpty Dumpty*, p. 7)[6]

It is important to note, first and above all, that the dictionary, in its own concreteness, has a conditional signification; it is, in fact, an element that proposes the cataloguing of knowledge. However, with this responsibility also comes direct regulation of that same knowledge. It seems obvious to say and yet necessary to add that the meaning of words comes from their use and that it is the people who use them who invest them with meaning, but when it comes to certifying the value of words and their importance, one cannot set aside the reflection on who uses, promotes and manages those same words.

Then there is the nominative choice of the example given in the epigraph, namely the relationship of dependence and belonging between Desdemona and Othello. In fact, when looking for the definition of Desdemona's self – feminine, singular – there is nothing singular about her. Her story is completely encapsulated in the reference to the more famous and majestic companion: her murderer, a man whose imposition on her destiny is final. For those who approach the attempt to define Desdemona, there is no alternative but to take Othello's story and peek at what space in it Desdemona occupies, thus never autonomously representative of herself because completely assimilated.[7] There is no independent reading but only a mirroring of herself in his,

Desdemona exists only in the act of looking at Othello; a 'looking at' that is also a subtle order received.

The question of the gaze is fundamental in feminist theories. In this short transposition reduced to little more than two-nouns-and-a-verb, Niccolai brings into play a series of relationships between the protagonists and the readers by playing with a verb as simple as 'to see'. In addition to wondering whether it is possible, therefore, 'to see' Desdemona beyond Othello, and having been instructed to look at Othello – literally, therefore, to change the page of reference and access another story – in order to understand Desdemona, who alone exists (and whose story is known to be built on male gaze and consecutive actions), it is worth wondering how much that apparently simple phrase is also charged with an imposing meaning.

"Desdemona, See Othello!": if read with the intonation of an autonomous sentence, it is possible to perceive the imperative implied by the dictionary on Desdemona. Therefore, not a suggestion but a proper order given to the female subject (objectified in the request) to look to the male, to address its counterpart[8] – so to speak – as demanded by the established order, as imposed by patriarchy, as it has always been. Desdemona, a literary and human archetype of events that have very little to do with humour, right up to the point of *feminicide*, is a relational model in many respects and a cumbersome presence in the literary and social landscape. In a socio-literary dimension in which non-masculine models for non-masculine subjects are still few and far between, the delineation of the "feminine" category according to the dictates of the hetero-patriarchy hardly breaks away from the tradition that sees the female subject as passive, assimilated, marginalised. In fact, subordinate; more precisely, subaltern.

For there to be knowledge, Desdemona must look to Othello and we must too, along with her: this is what the certified text of the dictionary tells us, this is what happens in the dimension of institutional language. And if we do in fact move within the system as we know it, this seems the only way to exist to be recognised (but at what price? Desdemona knows) in the space defined by the master's language (a language that can never really be functional to womxn).

> For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never allow us to bring about genuine change (Lorde 2007: 99)

It is not surprising that an observer and practitioner of the linguistic dimension such as Giulia Niccolai would begin her own work of deconstructing Carroll's vocabulary, a rewriting therefore that reworks sign and meaning through metabolisation and re-appropriation, starting with the word dictionary itself. Through a detailed breakdown that spills onto the page in a sprinkling of the letters

that made up, at first, the word dictionary, we arrive at a constitutive revelation of the same that was previously hidden from the eyes in an anagram, and now is revealed.
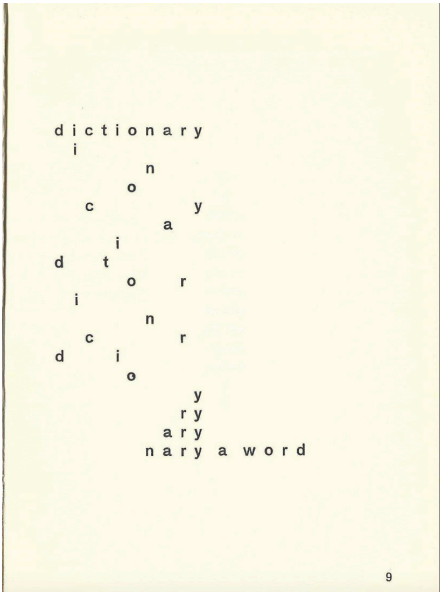
(Photo-reproduction. *Dictionary.* From *Humpty Dumpty,* p. 9)

The deconstruction of the phallogocentric and (thus) institutional system[9] represented by the Dictionary, in Niccolai's work of careful observation and consequent reworking, unleashes its clearest truth: nary a word. Not a single word, in fact, is contained in its true meaning in the non-inclusive language that is that of the master, and since we cannot, as Lorde teaches us, dismantle the master's house with his own tools, we can only dismantle those tools and build new houses. In the same way, with biting humour, Niccolai was able to make since the beginning of her poetic career through a gender awareness that is not silenced but yet quietly enters the artistic dimension, overturning the deepest meaning of the meaning of poetry itself.

Frisbees. A game for those who want to play, a home for the non-poetry of subaltern subjects

The dimension of playfulness always present in Giulia Niccolai's work finds particular encouragement in her own existential experience as a bilingual subject. It is often from bilingual mixture and stumbling that some of her wittiest insights on language and life are developed, and what had cost her marginalisation by her fascist teacher in her youth would later prove to be a generative space for mixing. In fact, her instantaneous bilingualism never finds resolution, but rather one

language enhances the possibility of the other one in a singular and yet accessible hybridisation. An example of a consideration useful to our discourse, which analyses both the formal linguistic aspect as well as its constitutive character of presence in the artistic and social world is a late Frisbees that Niccolai dedicates to her own role. Here, in addition to the proposal to define herself according to her profession, which Niccolai first states is that of translator (already, in itself, an interesting case of putting forward the re-proposal of other people's works rather than her own poetic "*authorial* role"[10]), a grammatical and political oscillation poses a problem. Indeed, there is the problem of naming oneself a poet and not, perhaps, a poetess, an idiom that is grammatically correct but encumbered by various stereotypes and *minorisation* of the output. This is an open and still unresolved issue, because on the one hand the use of poetess is a valid attempt to restore the correct value to the term – once and for all, an equal to the word poet – and its bearing in the way of the marked feminine, and similarly the use of poet as an equal claim through the acquisition of the term as falsely neutral brings about as much political and artistic discussion; on the other hand, as stated by Alma Sabatini at the end of the 1980s in *Il sessismo nella lingua italiana* (*Sexism in the Italian language*) supported by the Italian Prime Minister's Office, a variant of feminine termination markings that leaves the suffix *-essa* in the grammatical historical record could open the way for a decisive revision (the constant use of the feminine article to precede the otherwise identical noun would clarify its revolutionary adoption).

Paraphrasing Judith Butler, Colebrook says:

> The minute we speak or act with others we are already committed to a system or language whose origin we neither constitute nor control. And language must then have the function of a law: of a system that enables us to speak and act, but also precludes us from speaking or acting from some point beyond the system. (Colebrook 2003: 126)

Similarly, the discourse around the appropriation of the term 'poeta' results problematic in the in the literary space of the use of the language and for the communication system, but as a derivation of a certain reading of the casuistry. Specifically, I refer to the fact that Giulia Niccolai is perceived in her identity performance as a woman (even before, one might say, her own identity declaration as such). The reading of her name on paper and her features in the encounter immediately determine her as a filler of otherness with respect to the masculine, neutral and universal, determinant. This is specifically relevant when we analyse the text of the Frisbee together with its intentions.

> Io mi presentavo sempre come
> "traduttrice", se poi mi capitava

> di aggiungere: sono anche poeta,
> immancabilmente l'interlocutore
> mi correggeva: vuoi dire poetessa?
> La volta successiva, con un'altra persona,
> se dicevo: sono anche poetessa,
> venivo comunque corretta con un:
> vuoi dire "poeta"?
> Insomma, una beffa.
> Ora sono monaca[11]
> (Niccolai 2012: 26-27)

In response to each of the options, Niccolai is reprimanded: depending on who is in front of her and perceives her, the alternative is proposed. In particular, it is slyly suggested that the option not chosen by the author is the correct one through the rhetorical question 'Do you mean [to say]?' (literally: *Vuoi dire?*) – which openly questions the authorship over the chosen words of Niccolai.

To this problem, which only arises in Italian and not in English, clearly demonstrating that it is therefore a problem of language and not of its communicative meaning and conveyance, Niccolai – who is poet and not *la poeta* or *poetessa* – responds with an extra-linguistic solution: mockery. Specifically, to the mockery that is this constant questioning of the self by others in the artist's self-determination, Niccolai finds resolution in her being a *monaca*.[12] She not only escapes the semantic field but above all chooses to emphasise being a *monaca* before being a translator, and thus well before being a poet. As Rebecca West had introduced to *Frisbees*:

> Instead, wit, a great sense of humor and of the absurdities of life, and always a deep love of what is genuine in both existence and in artistic creation, fuel her ongoing investigations into thought, perception, language, and spirit. (West 2013: n.p.)

What was interesting to examine on this occasion was a possibility to escape the oppression of language through laughter, even if only the time of the laughter itself; and above all to actively question the authorship still often denied to women by the world. In order to better frame the poetic and trans-poetic power of the Frisbee, it is useful to look at Giammei's definition:

> An autoepic poem of reasoned everyday linguistic epiphanies. The Frisbee is the new literary genre on which Niccolai's genius is measured between 1982 and 1985 (and, as we shall see, even beyond); the metrics and rhythm are irregular - we go from the word-verse to the prose line - the contents too, and no model of the tradition is sufficient to exhaust its definition. The first, very strong novelty with respect to the previous creative process

lies in the raw material: there are no more lexical repertoires or hypotheticals in which to insert the destabilising disturbance of the trope and, except for a few quotations and a few homages, the language is that of the author, without borrowings that are not accorded by her life and her things. (Giammei 2013: 70)

Let's now look at the last of the examples selected for this brief foray into Niccolai's early and late writings. It is a Frisbee from a collection entitled *Favole & Frisbees.*

I Frisbees si chiamano Frisbees
e non poesie. Il loro scopo,
da più di trent'anni, è quello
di raccontare (?), cantare (?)
la libertà conquistata man mano nella vita.
Libertà? Questa sì che è poesia![13]
(Niccolai 2008: 136)

Before continuing with the critical reading of the text, it is very important to determine that this is not linear poetry but rather a performative form of thought that becomes language. The non-poetry that is Frisbees is never reduced to the version that we find in the writing and is not exhausted in its form on the page but is charged with various moments – often traceable in the text as well – such as: how the inspiration takes place, how it materialises on the page, how it reaches those who share it and those who read it. In this self-definition of the "new literary genre", Niccolai presents several keywords useful for our analysis of humour and feminism.

Niccolai states that *frisbees* are what they are and not poems. Their intent is to *raccontare* – recount, to tell – and/or to *cantare* – to sing, to narrate – freedom.

The reported verbs are loaded with literary significance ("Goddess, sing me the anger" says the invocation of Homer's Iliad) and epics in particular, therefore referring to a specific retelling of History rather than stories, a genre of literature that women significantly have long been prevented from practising and have often been denied recognition when they have been brave enough to cross it (D'Amico 2023). In an interrogative and intellectually confrontational manner, Niccolai here declares herself to be able to sing like an epic author immediately after announcing that her work is not poetry. What this Frisbee reveals, in fact, is that after thirty years of poetic activity, Niccolai now says of herself that she is able to make the most courageous choice: to return to her master a new home, made with different tools. A non-poetry made by a subaltern person who no longer needs to recognise herself in the master's system, no longer needs to find validation in the forms and spaces that the cis-patriarchy has elevated too "unattainable" for women. Freedom –

to choose, to act, to write – has been conquered: this is actual poetry, jokes Niccolai in conclusion; by stating everything and its opposite, in this specific tension of conquered belonging, rejection, and reconstitution of an alternative, it is a laughter that buries the ethical problem.

Feminist Killjoy

As per the decomposition of the dictionary revealing its poverty in words, similarly through the decomposition of the given system its poverty is revealed. A poem capable of not taking itself too seriously is a first step in the alteration of the language imposed in the hope, as Haraway also suggests, of a new linguistic and social horizon that redeems its power – to be understood as an expression of *impoteramento*, to quote Naidotti and Borghi – of revolution and liberation.

> For Butler, this is not just an illusion in literature; it has political consequences. The idea of a self before social performance has enslaved us both to notions of the essentially feminine, and allowed us to dismiss certain sexual identities as unnatural. By performing or drawing attention to the structure of gender as performance we will be liberated from a dogmatic politics or a politics that claims to know the real authoritatively. We cannot escape the systems of identity, or the illusion that there is a subject who speaks. But we can perform, repeat or parody all those gestures that create this subject. (Colebrook 2003: 127)

The scholar Sara Ahmed[14] coined a specific terminology for those womxn who continuously react to the injustice of the world: feminist killjoy.[15] Contrary to what may appear, there is no antagonism between the discursive practices of Ahmed and Niccolai. Niccolai's operation of declaring the state of affairs is, in all respects, a "feminist killjoy" practice, with the added value of a stubborn and thoughtful use of irony that conceals a very serious message.

From non-sense to the embodied reality of experience, Niccolai nomadically[16] wanders through poetry and feminism with a smile on her face and putting a smile where it is most bitter.

Notes

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[1] In *Irony. The New Critical Idiom* (2003), Colebrook not only presented an in-depth study but also a bibliographic selection very useful for the hereby discussed topic and for which I am more than grateful.

[2] The contribution focuses on the use of humour specifically in the Western tradition, which on this occasion interests us most for reasons of positioning and canon.

[3] Where not otherwise specified, all translations from Italian into English are mine.

[4] Pun intended.

[5] I understand the irony of using an Italian word that is an intended mistranslation of an English word for a text written in English. But this, too, is part of the practice of re-engaging with power structures and framing the old and new world which are, sadly, still very much alike.

[6] The reproduction of these images is possible thanks to the work of the Maurizio Spatola Archive, a champion of free fruition of culture. No profit-making use is authorised, out of respect for the memory of Maurizio Spatola.

[7] See the previously quoted Cavarero commentary on Man's universality.

[8] See Muraro 1991 and 1994 for the most influential Italian books on the *teoria della differenza*.

[9] This statement can easily be read *à rebour.*

[10] Not authority but authoriality.

[11] I always introduced myself as / "translator", if I then happened / to add: I am also a poet, / inevitably the interlocutor / would correct me: do you mean poetess? / The next time, with another person, / if I said: I am also a poetess, / I was still corrected with a: / do you want to say "poet"? / In short, a mockery. / Now I am a nun (my own translation)

[12] Despite nuns and monks being the correct terms to refer to women and men taking vows, the Eurocentric and Christian reading lens of the world – particularly in Italy – leads to possible under appreciation of women taking Buddhist vows, therefore proving that a vocabulary with a binary tradition and approach, which registers unavoidably sexist variants in its dictionary, the political solution cannot be found by switching language.

[13] "Frisbees are called Frisbees / and not poems. Their aim, / for more than thirty years, is / to tell (?), sing (?) / the freedom they have gradually gained in life. / Freedom? Now that's poetry!" (My own translation)

[14] I hereby express my gratitude for Ahmed's theories and practice on citations as a form of resistance. It is for this reason I have mostly adopted womxn' studies for the investigation presented, and I thank

all of them and the womxn by them cited before for this alternative genealogy of scholarship.
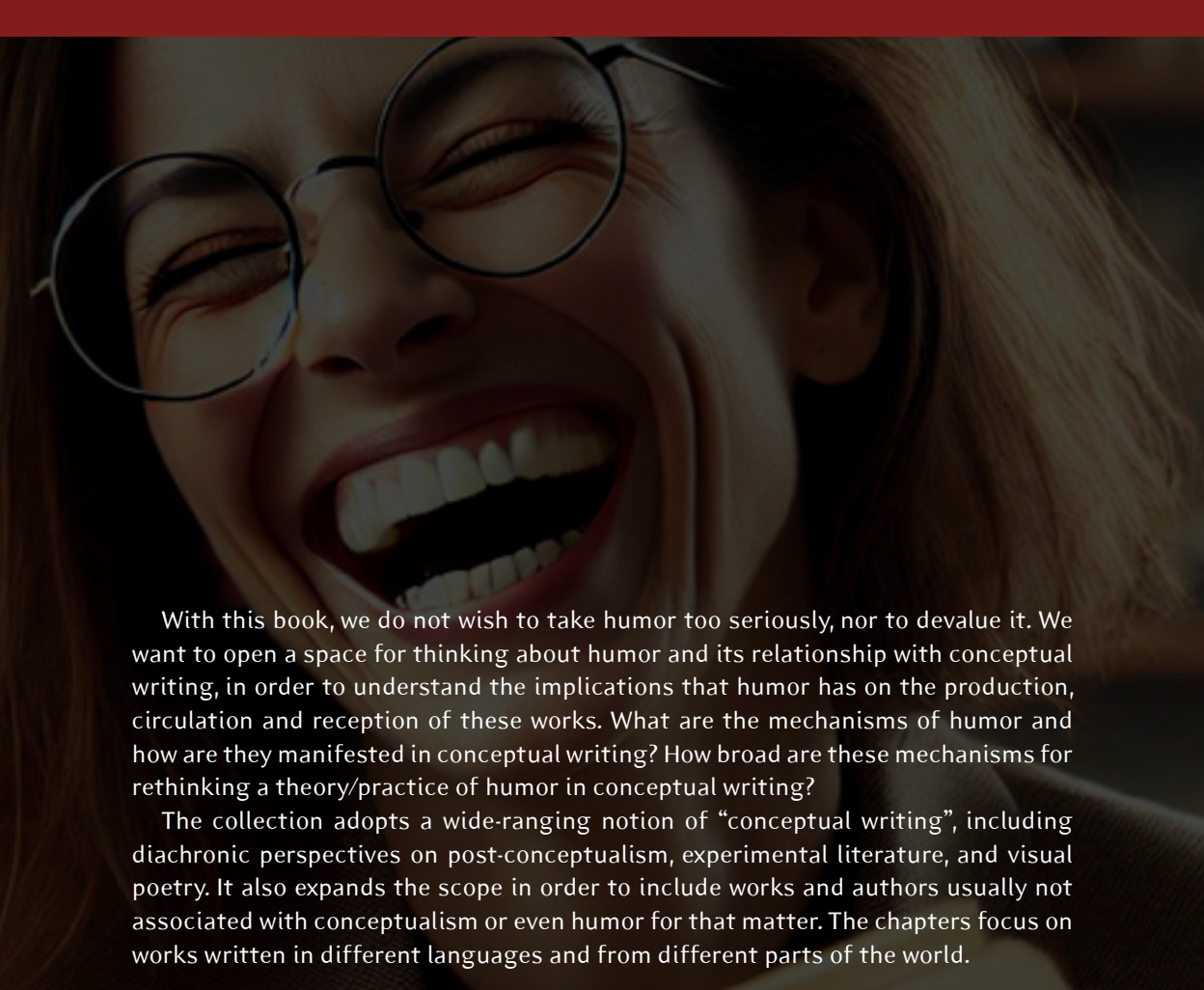
[15] The subtle irony of self-describing herself as a buzzkill before anyone could do so is not to be ignored.

[16] I am referring to the enlightening theories on subaltern subjectivities by Rosi Braidotti (1994).

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With this book, we do not wish to take humor too seriously, nor to devalue it. We want to open a space for thinking about humor and its relationship with conceptual writing, in order to understand the implications that humor has on the production, circulation and reception of these works. What are the mechanisms of humor and how are they manifested in conceptual writing? How broad are these mechanisms for rethinking a theory/practice of humor in conceptual writing?

The collection adopts a wide-ranging notion of "conceptual writing", including diachronic perspectives on post-conceptualism, experimental literature, and visual poetry. It also expands the scope in order to include works and authors usually not associated with conceptualism or even humor for that matter. The chapters focus on works written in different languages and from different parts of the world.

Libretos