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"Racism's part of my culture": Nation, Race and Humour in *Irish Jam* (2006) and *The Guard* (2011)

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Abstract: *This article applies theories of humour (incongruity, superiority, relief) to a reading of the films* Irish Jam *(John Eyres, 2006) and* The Guard *(John Michael McDonagh, 2011) in order to interrogate their depiction of racial, national and cultural stereotypes and differences. Both films combine elements of humour in their portrayal of the "fish out of water" experiences of the African-American male leads in Ireland. Through this we see three consequences: the incongruity of the protagonists' experiences, both in terms of their expectations of Ireland and the expectations the Irish have of them; the superiority felt by certain locals, and, thus vicariously, by audience members for recognising moments of (what they consider) ignorance or racism; humour being used to relieve the tensions of interacting with the Other. I argue that the different uses of humour in these films function as a social corrective in their interrogation of racist ideologies. However, the films play it safe by taking their protagonists out of America, allowing the discussion of race to unfold in Ireland where whiteness holds a unique status (as simultaneously nonwhite because of the historical discrimination the Irish faced), and racial and national differentiation can be conflated. Equally, the films ultimately remain conservative in their interrogation of racism, confronting certain stereotypes while perpetuating others.*

In this article I examine *Irish Jam* (John Eyres, 2006) and *The Guard* (John Michael McDonagh, 2011), two films with African-American male leads who, for very different reasons, find themselves in Ireland. While both films portray "fish out of water" experiences for these characters, they approach this narrative in different ways, perhaps reflective of the production context for each film. John Eyres, the British (with dual United States citizenship) director and cowriter of *Irish Jam*, previously directed and produced several films largely in the action, thriller and horror genres. On the other hand, *The Guard* was the feature debut, and something of an auteur effort, from British-Irish writer-director John Michael McDonagh. Equally, *Irish Jam*, which was made on an approximately $11 million budget, was a straight-to-DVD release, primarily for American audiences, with average ratings, while *The Guard*, with an estimated $6 million budget, had a theatrical release and was well received, particularly in Ireland. However, while the circumstances of each film are quite different, both ultimately use various types of humour—according to each film's style—to frame race and nation—the focus of this article. While the humour used in these films is perhaps made possible (or more acceptable) by the unique status of Irish whiteness as non taboo (discussed subsequently), many of the typical elements key to humour, including surprise, fear or tension, and feelings of superiority, are also easily linked with experiencing cultural difference—a differentiation often linked with race. Ultimately, I suggest that humour is used in these films as a type of conservative social corrective for the treatment of both racial and national difference.

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Race and Irish/Irish-American Whiteness

Ireland's historical relationship with race is a complicated one. Although there has long been heterogeneous cultural ethnicity in the country, it was only during the economic boom and mass immigration of the 1990s that multiculturalism began to emerge as a key topic in Ireland. Previously a country of emigrants rather than immigrants, Ireland had retained a fairly homogenous (white) national identity, which has yet to be fully reconceptualised; rather, the term "new Irish" has emerged to describe nonwhite citizens. This is perhaps why, as Zélie Asava notes, "[t]here has been little attempt made in the public sphere to adopt hyphenated identities, expand notions of nationalism to include the black-Irish, Chinese-Irish or Italian-Irish, or indeed to consider collapsing terms" (27). However, Fintan O'Toole observed that "what the Irish were experiencing as new—rapid urbanization, multiculturalism, the need to make one's way in a polyglot and physically unfamiliar society—was a recapitulation of their own ancestors" (xiv). The position of the Irish in America (where hyphenated identities are standard), for example, was not an easy one; for years they were considered among the lowest rungs of immigrants, to the point where, despite outward appearances, they had to "become white", as Noel Ignatiev terms their move up the social ladder.

The early Irish in America were amongst the poorest social groups in the country, alongside the Native Americans and African Americans (Kenny 32). Though the Irish had the advantage of voting rights and citizenship, they were treated in a similarly racist manner as African Americans by nativists and were often depicted in simianised form in political cartoons, such as those collected in L. P. Curtis's *Apes and Angels*.[1] Representations of Irish characters in vaudeville (one of the earliest manifestations of cultural identity performed humorously) were also reductive and basically similar to African Americans on stage, appearing unproblematically as "childlike buffoons—lazy, superstitious, and given to doubletalk, inflated rhetoric, and comic misuse of proper English" with the Irishman also seen as "highly temperamental and always ready to fight" (Quinn 667). This treatment, along with competition for jobs, often led, in turn, to Irish violence, riots and acts of racism towards African workers (Kenny 66). This racist behaviour, effectively distancing themselves from other poor groups, thus became part of the conscious move of Irish Americans towards upward mobility. Decisions such as these established an either/or situation of cultural identity recognition and classification that would later facilitate flexibilities of humour and the generation of comedy.

At the time, this distancing, along with the organisation of the Irish around the Catholic Church and trade unions, meant that by the early 1900s the Irish rose to a position of equality in the United States. Equally contributing to this rise were the "new immigrants" that arrived in America from Southern and Eastern Europe beginning in the 1880s. With their "strange" cultures, these immigrants became the new victims to be cast aside by nativists in the United States who sought to protect indigenous culture and interests (Kenny 181). Their arrival coincided with the Irish making professional strides so that by 1900 both first and second generation Irish "had achieved rough occupational parity with the native-born, and greatly surpassed the 'new immigrants'" (Kenny 185). Normally, the first generation Irish would move from unskilled to semi-skilled or skilled labour, with their children eventually rising to the ranks of professionals in some cases (Kenny 150). Thus, the social mobility of the Irish did take some time. Ultimately, however, an Irish middle class known as "lace-curtain" Irish emerged, largely

through the second generation (Kenny 150, 175). From this point on, into the second half of the twentieth century, the Irish gained "greater social acceptance with each generation" (Dowling Almeida 548). The election of Irish Catholic President John F. Kennedy in 1960 is thought by many historians to mark the ultimate acceptance of Catholic Irish America in the United States. However, because the Irish had been targets of such heavy nativist discrimination, Irishness has become "the most marketable white ethnicity in late-twentieth-century American Culture" in that it can be used "as a way of speaking a whiteness that would otherwise be taboo" (Negra 355).

Not only were the early Irish in America affected by and participants in racism, those in Ireland similarly experienced racism under British colonialism. However, as with the Irish in America, Ireland's emergence as a rapid-growth economy during the Celtic-Tiger period—and its accompanying net immigration—resulted in a shift from the Irish as victims of racism to perpetrators (and, as the rise and fall of social status is open to comedic play and mockery, so too are these shifts in social position). Ultimately, this is "the dialectical relationship between an anti-Irish racism which exerted a powerful force on Irish culture, within and without the country, and the specific contemporary forms of Irish racism evident in responses to immigrants and refugees" that makes the Irish experiences of racialisation distinctive (Brannigan 333). It is perhaps because of this uniqueness that a proliferation of critical material on Irish and Irish-American "whiteness"—along with Irish connections to the African Diaspora—has emerged since the early 2000s (see, for example, Brannigan; Gough; Lloyd and O'Neill; Meaney; Moynihan; Negra), to which this article seeks to contribute. As Meaney notes, "it is vital to deconstruct the binary of colonizer and colonized, agency and victimization, pure and hybrid, and acknowledge the extent to which complex processes of accommodation, resistance and opportunism have shaped the concept of 'Irishness'" (7). For instance, "[b]eing Irish is still often seen as a question of being the product of two Irish people descended from a long line of Irish ancestors and anything less removes one somewhat from the equation thus denying them access to a 'pure', i.e. legitimate Irish identity" (Asava 27), meaning racial "Others" are often left defending or explaining their Irishness. However, Stuart Hall considers that "national identities are not things we are born with, but are formed and transformed within and in relation to *representation*" (612; emphasis in the original). In this sense, our national identities (and conceptions of these) are part of an ongoing process of mediated construction, able to shift along with the processes of mediation and with our geographical relocations. As the Irish population changes, and representations reflecting this—the "new Irish"—increase, conceptions of Irish national identity may transform. However, it is important to interrogate exactly how these representations position race, as the side effects of multiculturalism—nativism, racism and stereotype—often lead to problematic depictions.

Race and Humour

Hall discusses race as a discursive category—consciously moving on from previous conceptions of it as a biological one—considering that "it is the organizing category of those ways of speaking, systems of representation, and social practices (discourses) which utilize a loose, often unspecified set of differences in physical characteristics … as symbolic markers in order to differentiate one group socially from another" (617). Following this conception, our physical differences are used to separate us broadly into different racial categories which are then

ultimately defined not by these differences, but instead by the collective cultures that emerge from these demarcations. This cultural consideration of race is further linked with nation (and nativism) by Paul Gilroy:

> We increasingly face a racism which avoids being recognized as such because it is able to line up race with nationhood, patriotism and nationalism. A racism which has taken a necessary distance from crude ideas of biological inferiority and superiority now seeks to present an imaginary definition of the nation as a unified *cultural* community. It constructs and defends an image of national culture—homogeneous in its whiteness yet precarious and perpetually vulnerable to attack from enemies within and without. (53; emphasis in the original)

While race itself is not removed from these categorisations, the emphasis is placed on a cultural differentiation that is ideologically rooted in the nation, its culture and identity. Considering this, Sergeant Gerry Boyle's (Brendan Gleeson) comment in *The Guard*—"I'm Irish, sure. Racism's part of my culture"—is an apt, and piercingly honest, reflection despite the protestations he receives from the other Gardaí present in the scene, stemming from the fear or discomfort of being labelled a racist.[2] These feelings are equally often the reaction to experiencing racial and/or cultural difference, alluded to by Gilroy in his discussion of the homogenous nation as vulnerable. It is here that humour becomes relevant, utilised as a resolution to the tensions produced by these fears, shocks and issues of superiority/inferiority, while simultaneously mocking and perpetuating racial and cultural stereotypes.

The three main areas that humour stems from are perceptions of incongruity, superiority and relief (Berger; Meyer; Raskin). Arguably the most dominant theory of humour is incongruity, wherein "there is a difference between what one expects and what one gets" (Berger 3). Following this, "people laugh at what surprises them, is unexpected, or is odd in a nonthreatening way" (Meyer 313). The superiority theory, which in some ways overlaps with incongruity, considers "that people laugh outwardly or inwardly at others because they feel some sort of triumph over them or feel superior in some way to them" (314). Power is associated with the superiority theory as we "see that humor can be a subtle and powerful means of social control by dominant elements in society. And it is, at the same time, a force for resistance by subordinate elements in society" (Berger 2). Through this, humour can act as a social corrective from either perspective, using laughter to illustrate what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. However, this type of humour is often negatively associated with hostility and ridicule (Raskin 37). Finally, the position of the relief theory is that humour and laughter are experienced because "stress has been reduced in a certain way" and, as these tensions are removed, the result is a "release of nervous energy" (Meyer 312). Relating these three areas of humour to standard reactions towards cultural and racial difference, we can arrive at a point where superiority is understood as revealing (and sometimes correcting) dominant cultural viewpoints, incongruity covers elements of surprise or false expectation and relief can be taken as addressing areas of fear and discomfort.

While these types of humour work together in various circumstances, they are particularly interwoven in humour involving racial and national categories, such as when "social groups are made recognizable via allusive, often stereotyped representations and further made fun of at incongruous moments" (Vandaele 236). Superiority and relief combine in these

stereotyped representations which often strip groups down to base elements, displaying their inferiority in some way and thus removing their threat, allowing for ridicule through incongruity. The way that humour is employed in *Irish Jam* and *The Guard* captures this combination through the "fish out of water" experiences of the African-American characters in Ireland. Through these we see three consequences: the incongruity of the protagonists' experiences, both in terms of their expectations of Ireland and the expectations the Irish have of them; the superiority felt by certain locals, and, thus, vicariously by audience members for recognising moments of (what they consider) ignorance or racism; humour being used to relieve the tensions felt in dealing with the Other. However, as the African-American lead in each film is positioned as Other in terms of both his national and racial identity, these categories become conflated to a degree within the films which position a homogenous, white Ireland as the dominant social category.

Framing the Black Yank

As noted in Hall and Gilroy's discussions of race and nation, notions of differentiation have shifted to focus increasingly on culture. This type of racism "discriminates on the basis of cultural difference rather than race difference and so implies that '*culture can also function like a nature*'" (Balibar 22; emphasis in the original). Both Jimmy McDevitt (Eddie Griffin) in *Irish Jam* and Agent Wendell Everett (Don Cheadle) in *The Guard* are differentiated from Ireland initially in terms of their American (or "Yank" as the Irish often label them) identities, and further in terms of their blackness. However, in this process of othering, national, cultural and racial, identity becomes conflated, in turn determining a racism based on cultural differences (relating to nationality and ethnicity) rather than simply biological ones.

In *Irish Jam* the residents of Irish island Ballywood (connoting Hollywood in name, but not appearance) are being economically squeezed by local landlord Lord Hailstock (Kevin McNally). Hailstock owns most of the town and has plans to build an Irish-themed amusement park there, ruining the village and its culture, and linking Ireland (and Irish identity) with consumerism, leisure, and unreal or constructed space. The local pub is the last thing the villagers own, but their debt is growing and they are unable to make the payments to maintain this ownership. To save the pub, they come up with a poetry contest that offers it as a prize, hoping to raise enough money from the entry fees to save both it and their village from Hailstock. Jimmy McDevitt sees their advertisement in his local Los Angeles paper while down on his luck and fleeing from debt collectors and decides to enter, envisioning his escape. Upon winning, Jimmy travels to Ireland, which he incorrectly imagines to be a tropical paradise island, rather than the cold, wet and grey place he discovers. Meanwhile, the locals have a similarly incongruous expectation of Jimmy. For one, they imagine that because he is American he will be able to help them raise the rest of the money needed to save the village, stating: "If there's one thing the Yanks are good at it's business." Of course, we are already aware that Jimmy has his own financial problems. In this sense, he is actually in a similar position to the locals rather than fitting their stereotyped perception of him as an American businessman. Before Jimmy arrives, the locals also call him a "long lost son of Ireland", perhaps connecting him with the large Irish-American Diaspora because of his Irish-sounding name. In making this assumption, the connotation of the Diaspora as white is also assumed, allowing for various uses of humour in the scene where Jimmy arrives in Ballywood.

Jimmy's blackness becomes the focal point of his introduction to Ballywood. He arrives in a small boat wearing full rain gear, which covers his skin and hides his face. As he emerges from the water, we see close ups of his body as he slowly removes this outerwear, building tension for the viewers who know that the locals' expectations of Jimmy will not be met. The claps, cheers and greetings of the locals welcoming Jimmy come to a sudden halt as he removes his hat and lifts his head—the big reveal of his blackness. The resulting stunned silence is broken by Jimmy who acknowledges the incongruity of his own expectation of Ireland with: "It ain't 'Temptation Island', but we'll make it work." Jimmy relieves the tension here, allowing the viewers to laugh as he accepts his false expectations of Ireland. The locals remain shocked, however, and, as one attempts to greet Jimmy with "Céad Mile Fáilte", he stutters on the first syllable, leading Jimmy to interpret his greeting as "KKK" and reply with "[t]his ain't no clansman rally". The "hundred thousand welcomes" of the Irishman's intended greeting is reversed and interpreted antithetically as a racist statement by Jimmy, perhaps because of the shock he is met with and his American cultural background. It is thus the stunned locals (and, in fact, the derogatory depiction of the Irish that assumes they would have such a severe reaction to the arrival of someone of another race) that the viewer is laughing at here. Further laughs are developed for viewers as Jimmy spits out Guinness, again to the shock of the locals, asking for Cristal champagne instead, and goes on to proclaim "black man coming through", overtly addressing the tension and incongruity of the scene, while also allowing viewers to feel a sense of superiority over the locals whose ignorance they can laugh at, already knowing better themselves.



Figure 1: The big reveal of Jimmy's race during his arrival in Ballywood.
***Irish Jam* (John Eyres, 2006). Bauer Martinez Studios. Screenshot.**

Jimmy stands out in his introduction to the locals as Other through his fast talking, use of slang and hip-hop style of clothing which serve to classify him as both black and American. As Jimmy notes his differentiation, he plays it up by repeatedly asking where the "native women" are. Zélie Asava observes that this "marks him as the only 'native', i.e. non-white, here" (113). Jimmy goes on to point out the physical differences between his consideration of "native women" and Maureen (Anna Friel), who confronts him as a native Irishwoman. He tells her he was "thinking about the ones with big booties" and goes on to say that she will "do", but needs a makeover and some collagen in her lips, placing the (implied) physical attributes of a black woman upon her. Interestingly, Jimmy is the only one to comment overtly on these differences during the scene, while the Irish are (excepting Maureen) not given a voice and presumed racist because of their silent shock. As it is Jimmy who speaks (and controls) the humour in this scene, it can be read as a humour which reverses or resists racism. This type of humour "is ostensibly comparable to racist humour, but differs, primarily, because it is the 'other' of the earlier discourse who articulates it, inflects meaning, and is often the preferred reader of the text" (Weaver 32). In some cases, it is precisely from this displacement of the source of the humour that the true comedy stems. Throughout this scene Jimmy's statements, which would be considered racist if they came from the Irish locals, are made acceptably humorous because it is he who gives them voice. In claiming this dominant stance, Jimmy turns racism, and particular tropes associated with it (including the KKK), into a humorous performance.

The film also utilises the locals to poke holes in, and mock, racism. This is primarily enacted through Maureen's grandfather, Pat Duffy (Dudley Sutton), whom she credits with teaching her to have an open mind. The use of an older character like this, who is surprisingly more accepting than some of the younger generation, appears as a common comedic trope in film, thus conservatively positioning *Irish Jam*'s comedy. Reacting to Jimmy's arrival in Ballywood, Pat tells Maureen that they will soon be invaded: "I know them Bloods and them Crisps. Oh, it'll be like that film the 'Boys and their Hoods'. There'll be naked booties on every corner." Humour is provided for viewers here through Pat's demonstration of cultural confusion wherein the Crips (gang rivals of the Bloods) are instead called Crisps (the Irish term for what Americans call potato chips) and the film title *Boyz n the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) is altered. For this humour to work, the writer must be confident that (at least some of) the viewers will know the correct cultural references. Those who do, and thus understand the joke, are able to laugh at Pat from a position of superiority. Nonetheless, Pat's misrecognition of various cultural contact points does show some knowledge on his part, and, in fact, moments later Pat reveals to a shocked Maureen that he was joking. Maureen, who didn't expect this type of racist stereotyping (associating every black man with a criminal/gang environment) from her grandfather, laughs with relief upon learning this and Pat is elevated to the same superior position as the viewer, now laughing with them at the ignorance involved in negative stereotyping.

Superiority is also used in relation to the McNulty brothers in the film, who are the local troublemakers. On Jimmy's first night running the pub, they debate about whether or not the locals should enter. When Pat points out that it is the only pub in the village they respond: "Aye, but himself's in there and he's black, in case you hadn't noticed." Pat tells them that Jimmy's blackness could rub off on them, alluding to Jim Crow ideology as well as colonial conceptualisations of the Irish as "lesser" or nonwhite.[3] The McNultys' ignorance is proven when they worriedly believe him (in the literal sense), another laughable moment for viewers

and Pat to share. Here we see how "humour can simultaneously unite and divide those experiencing it" (Meyer 316–7). Viewers will likely understand (and thus become aligned with) Pat as he pokes fun at the ignorance of the McNultys, enjoying the superiority of "knowing better", thus further dividing themselves from the brothers who are the target of the humour enacted as a social corrective. The McNultys, however, proceed with a mentality of segregating the Other in this moment, telling Pat that they thought of him as "one of us... an Irishman" and further questioning why he is going to "consort with one of them", referring to Jimmy as Other. Their unwillingness to "consort" with Jimmy could be due to his foreigner status (as they say: "Youse Yanks are all the same, all mouth"), but it takes on further meaning because of his racial identity, alluding to the historical segregation of African Americans in the United States. Pat tries to break down the McNultys' barriers here by referencing the history of the Irish in America, labelled as "green niggers" and "toasted Irish", removed from the norm of whiteness. At this point Jimmy's Otherness, and the long history of racism, is unpacked in a more serious light, demonstrating the film's ideological position regarding race: rather than allowing it to perpetuate and divide, we can establish cultural connections.

The villagers, for the most part, warm to Jimmy's presence as he offers them free pints, entertains them and begins to assimilate (wearing Irish-style clothing and learning Irish dance). Yet, while Maureen and her daughter Kathleen (Tallulah Pitt-Brown) form a relationship with him, and Maureen even notes her belief that Irish and African-American cultures are similar, the rest of the villagers, including Pat, retain a conception of him as Other. Numerous references are made to his style of clothing ("he looks like an M&M") and locals not being able to understand what he is saying—informed by historically racist views of black speech as lesser or unintelligible (Weaver 40). As Jimmy and Maureen start to spend more time together, the whole village talks about it. The McNultys (as expected) tell her that she is "bringing disgrace to [her] own kind", again using highly divisive language. More surprising, however, is Pat's comment on the matter: "He's a nice enough fella, if you can make out what he's saying. But him and my only granddaughter, oh, tis a bitter pill to swallow." Confronted by the Priest as to whether it's a "colour thing", Pat responds in shock: "God forbid! I'm no racist!", clarifying that he just imagined something else for Maureen. Despite his protestations, Pat demonstrates his ultimate lack of understanding of Jimmy here and reveals that, although he outwardly accepts Jimmy, there remains a hesitance to this acceptance because of his difference. This reveals a more subtle form of racism (both ethnic and cultural) deeply encoded in society that often goes unspoken and unacknowledged, but is equally dangerous. The influence of this type of racism is demonstrated when the villagers are quick to believe that Jimmy has betrayed them to Lord Hailstock, fail to recognise his true character and turn their backs on him. This leads Jimmy to acknowledge that you "can't buy acceptance" with free beer, and that, though the locals may consider him likeable: "Deep down inside they're all afraid of me. Afraid of who I am, what they think I represent." In spite of Maureen's protests ("everybody loves you just the way you are"), Jimmy's remark takes a serious look at the truth of the matter—fear of the Other (American, but more so black), and the difficulty of overcoming this. Additionally, Asava notes of Jimmy's comment that "given his position as an African-American rapper, the term 'represent' takes on another resonance: in hip hop culture, to 'represent' is to stand for something which forms a challenge to the white hegemony" (113). Considering this, Jimmy's identity proves a challenge for the locals. However, his comment specifically targets what "they think" he represents, rather than what he actually claims to, instead suggesting that the locals are the ones creating this challenge.

In *The Guard*, Wendell Everett experiences similar difficulties when interacting with the locals. Unlike Jimmy, we do not see Everett in the US at all and there is no big reveal of him in Ireland. Instead, after a passing comment that Sergeant Boyle will attend an FBI briefing in Galway, we are launched straight into Special Agent Wendell Everett giving this presentation. In this sense, his presence in Ireland is first considered in terms of his status as an FBI agent and an American. When we see him at the briefing we realise that he is also black, but there is no shock expressed at this or immediate attention paid to it.

Despite Everett's subtler introduction, his racial identity is focused on soon after he appears. This is courtesy of Boyle, who has already been introduced as an independent thinking, somewhat rogue Guard who samples drugs, takes money from the wallets of the dead, fiddles with corpses and tells his new partner: "Ah, would you fuck off to America with your 'appropriate', fucking Barack Obama." This statement, demonstrating Boyle's lack of concern for political (or social) correctness, is revealing in terms of his later interactions with Everett wherein he employs post-race comedy (using racist language to make fun of racism). During Everett's briefing, as he describes the suspected (white) drug traffickers, Boyle raises his hand and interrupts with the question: "I thought only black lads were drug dealers?" This question, and Boyle's continued interruptions, which expand his conception of dealers to include Mexicans, draw immediate attention to Everett's racial identity, supplying the tension of the scene, but ultimately the comments draw more attention to Boyle than to Everett. He is met with confusion and shock from Everett, silence from the other Guards present, and is finally told to apologise by Inspector Stanton (Gary Lydon). Boyle is "Othered" among his own category of people—white Irish Guards—receiving no support or laughter from them. Everett considers Boyle's interruptions as "racist slurs", which leads to Boyle's statement that racism is part of his culture. It is at this point that the other Guards actively protest his comments—something they notably did not do during his use of racial stereotype—and claim that he is "showing [them] up". They take offence at being labelled as racist, a categorisation that many are too uncomfortable or unwilling to face despite the persistence of racist perceptions.[4] Stanton tries to calm the situation, saying: "Now, now, lads, come on, not in front of the American" before turning to Everett to acknowledge that Boyle is "just messing" with him. Here, Stanton himself "Others" Everett—but as American, not black—by implying that everyone should be on their best behaviour because of his nationality. At the same time, he reveals that he and the Irish Guards present are all aware that Boyle is only joking—something Boyle confirms, saying he is just having "a bit of fun" and means nothing by it. Rather than invoking laughter in this moment, it is the "differentiation function of humour" (Meyer 323) that is enacted, creating oppositions between those present in the scene. In one sense, Everett is even further differentiated here because he, as an American, did not pick up on the culturally Irish sense of humour that the others realised was "just messing". However, Boyle is also differentiated in that even those who understood his humour did not appreciate it, particularly the Guards from Dublin who seem to consider Boyle as lesser, a "knacker from the country" who they deem unintelligent. Ultimately, these lines of division unite Boyle and Everett, an aspect of character construction that I will explore later in this article.

Everett is further framed as Other, and again drawn closer to Boyle, when he goes out to canvas the rural Connemara area central to Boyle's case, now linked to his drug investigation. The first door he knocks on is answered by a woman who, speaking in Irish, calls to her husband

to say "[t]here's a black man at the door". Incongruous humour is used here as Everett expected them to speak English and is confused when they do not. There is also superiority at play in that viewers are given subtitles to understand what the locals are saying about Everett, and are thus "in on the joke" that the couple *do* understand Everett's English, but refuse to speak it or give him information, something he does not realise. This humour, of course, comes at the expense of Everett who is "made foreign" here both in terms of his Anglo-American identity and his race—as the textual processes of othering can equally be mobilised in the generation of tonal qualities that are comedic. After repeatedly being ignored by the residents at home, at a hurling match and on the road, Everett eventually stops to talk to a horse, deriving further humour from the incongruity of questioning an animal, though he gets the same response from it as the people, a situation at which even Everett laughs.



Figure 2: Agent Wendell Everett interviews a horse after getting no help from the people residing in the area. *The Guard* (John Michael McDonagh, 2011). Reprisal Films. Screenshot.

Ultimately Everett seems to be considered an outsider equally because he is an American (with a different, more serious, and apparently politically correct culture) and because he is black, whereas Jimmy in *Irish Jam* is predominantly differentiated on the basis of his blackness rather than his nationality. This, in part, could be because Everett does not bear any stereotypical markers of his race (discussed in more detail later in the article), appearing and behaving only as a professional FBI agent, whereas the framing of Jimmy relies heavily on stereotypical performance, from his appearance to his actions. In keeping with this, the humour of each film is also quite different. Though both utilise stereotype, *Irish Jam* features overt, performative humour, whereas *The Guard* relies on more subtle and sarcastic humour, drawing on truths and relying on audiences' understanding of culturally specific behaviour and language. In what follows I will analyse specific themes of humour from each film, outlining how they function in different ways.

Romance and the Humour of Stereotype in *Irish Jam*

In the case of reverse humour, wherein racist discourse or stereotype is performed using the same signs but for reverse semantic effect (as anti-racist), its polysemic nature becomes problematic as a racist meaning is still mobilised and required in the generation of comedy (Weaver 32). Racism is used to create comedic effect on two levels: by reframing, or displacing, the racist gag (even if based on the ignorance of the speaker) and by mocking the very notions of racist discourses of othering. On the one hand, once a degrading of the Other is deemed to be generating the humour—even in a subversive or comedic swipe at earlier discourses—it could be deemed problematic; on the other, if the gag resides in a deconstruction of discourses of othering then the effect might be more affirmative. Historically, racist stereotypes were enacted by black and nonblack performers alike, but the intention of the black performers was to distance themselves from these stereotypes: "they were *performing* these roles, not embracing them as representative behaviour" (Sotiropoulos 9; emphasis in the original).[5] Unfortunately, these performances could equally be considered as furthering the stereotypes if audiences perceive the performance as real. Berger notes this risk in his discussion of ethnic comedy, stating that "the comedians always face the risk of being thought of as ashamed of their racial or ethnic identity" (70). Simon Weaver further explains that, just as we may laugh both with and at these performers, this type humour needs to be considered in terms of how it may "*simultaneously* 'play on' and 'play off' the long-established stereotypes" as, no matter what, it relies on "the sign-systems of earlier racism" (33; emphasis in the original). A performance of highly stereotyped humour, which falls dangerously close to simply perpetuating the stereotype, is particularly evident in *Irish Jam* through the dichotomy of Jimmy's relationships with the woman known only as Psycho (Mo'Nique) and with Maureen.

Psycho and Maureen are depicted in terms of "one of the central dichotomies of embodied racism—civilization/nature—which describes the 'other' as savage or corporeal in comparison to the civilized white European" (Weaver 37). This stereotypical trope is inherent even in the naming of the black female character in this film as Psycho; rather than treating her as a fully rounded, empowered character, this instead suggests that her agency is diminished due to a pathological psychology and constructs her as simply "crazy". The representation of Psycho as "savage" is enforced during her introduction in the film. She shows up to Jimmy's apartment in a wedding dress, pounds on his door, breaks it down, screams, chases him, tries to strangle and bite him and tells him she loves him as he expresses fear and attempts to evade her, eventually fleeing out a window. This scene contains physical humour during Jimmy's escape (particularly as he has just gotten out of the bath and is clad only in a towel) and in the hyperbolic performance of Pyscho's inability to control herself emotionally and physically. Meanwhile, although our introduction to Maureen does not portray her as tame—she defiantly approaches Jimmy after his call for "native women"—she is generally portrayed as level headed and dependable, a good mother and an active member of the community. While she does lash out at the McNulty brothers, attempting to punch one of them, it is only in defence of Jimmy, suggesting it is the "right" move. Ultimately, we are offered a well-rounded portrayal of her character, which contrasts with the one-dimensional portrayal of Pyscho.

The second time Psycho appears in *Irish Jam* is in a dream (or more accurately, nightmare) that Jimmy has after he has been attacked by the McNultys. In it, Psycho pulls a

chicken leg out of the fridge of Jimmy's old apartment as he sleeps on the couch, and proceeds to sniff and bite it savagely, while telling Jimmy she is going to chew him up in the same manner. The scene is enhanced with animalistic sound effects and ends with her forcing him to eat the chicken with her. Once again her emotions appear over-expressed, and there is an emphasis on overindulgence of both food and sex. While the overemphasis here is comedic, it also plays directly into stereotype. Although the exact origins of the stereotype associating blackness with an unhealthy predilection towards, or overindulgence in (fried) chicken are unknown, narratives from as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and visual imagery from the twentieth century onwards, make the connection between the racial category and the food, fuelling the racist stereotype that still exists today (Williams-Forson 44). This stereotype is also often linked to an overindulgence in sex or sexuality (as in *Irish Jam*). By using chicken to project broader cultural stereotypes (including overindulgence and excess), the white perpetuators capitalised on the known fact—which they then distorted and oversimplified—that black people did raise chickens, eat them and sometimes steal them out of necessity (Williams-Forson 49). The hyperbolic performance of Psycho's appetite (for both sex and food) here is similarly grounded in the reality of her basic need for both, and then distorted—depicting her relationship with each to the extreme—for negative impact. As Jimmy screams and wakes up we immediately note a contrast between the dark (evening), cluttered and overbearing aesthetic of his dream space and the clean, safe, white bed and bright daylight he awakes to. As Maureen's daughter Kathleen enters the room we realise that it is in her house, and further discover that Maureen has taken care of Jimmy, put him to bed (with no sexual connotation) and washed his clothes. Whereas Psycho was seemingly aggressive and dangerous, Maureen is seen to be nurturing and safe.



Figures 3 and 4: The stereotyped representation of Psycho (left) as compared to Maureen and her daughter Kathleen (right). *Irish Jam* (John Eyres, 2006). Bauer Martinez Studios. Screenshots.

We finally learn a little more about Psycho later in the film when Jimmy explains to Maureen that he was supposed to marry her because of a deal he lost, but that she "got all emotional" so he gambled and lost the money that she gave him for their honeymoon and fled. While our sympathies would normally lie with her as the victim of the situation, Jimmy goes on to describe her as "140 kilograms pit bull, block jaw" highlighting her aggressiveness as well as her weight. In a later scene, when Maureen tells Jimmy that if he ever hurts her daughter she will either kill him or call Psycho, he says that he would rather be killed, only increasing the level of fear associated with Psycho.

After this, Jimmy's relationship with Maureen develops further. This relationship, however, is generally marked by a lack of sexual intimacy in line with the trope of civilised modesty attributed to Maureen as a white European woman, and in keeping with fears of miscegenation. Kathleen is often present with Jimmy and Maureen, and they form a happy family unit. Even their eventual wedding is deemed a "family marriage" with Kathleen participating at the altar. It is only at the wedding that we see Jimmy and Maureen first kiss, condoned by the Priest, and even this is quickly covered by the veil. Additionally, Jimmy essentially acts as a healing device; Kathleen—mute since her father's death—reclaims her voice to ask Jimmy to stay in Ireland. Asava notes that "the fact that this healing occurs in the desexualized black male body recalls the slavery-era stereotype of the 'magic' or 'noble negro'" (110). In this sense, not only does the portrayal of Psycho affirm the "savage" trope, Jimmy's removal of himself from this trope through his preference for Maureen ultimately only places him within another stereotypical category—the desexualised healer. This positioning is not overtly performed or enacted as a form of reverse humour and, as such, it problematically presents this particular stereotype as natural, rather than mocking it.

Just as Jimmy cannot escape Psycho (she appears one last time during his wedding to Maureen yelling, "Jimmy, get your black ass away from that girl", and the film ends on a freeze frame of her, still in her wedding dress), stereotypification is (unintentionally) inescapable in this film, an unfortunate consequence of any othering process. Though these stereotypes largely focus on the black characters, and their contrast in white characters, the Irish are not immune to them. Attempting to fit in with the locals, Jimmy serves discourses of stereotypes and "assimilates by wearing green and drinking Guinness" (Asava 145). However, in doing this, his "constructed appropriation of an Irish identity … is commodified and consumable" (Ibid), and feeds into Hailstock's conception of Ireland marked by consumption and leisure. Further stereotyping of the Irish is evident in the locals' clash with the Anglo-Irish Lord Hailstock in the Big House (a remnant of British rule), and in Jimmy's warning to the local Priest to "stay away from little boys" referencing the sexual abuse scandals associated with the Catholic Church (though the Priest also reverses some stereotypes of religion by driving a motorcycle and wearing leather biker attire). At one level, the performance of stereotype is clear, particularly in the case of Psycho where hyperbole is overtly utilised, and can thus be interpreted as a reversal and considered as such by those who laugh along with it. However, these performances can equally be read as simply fuelling the stereotypes, playing into them for the purpose of laughs rather than attempting to change them. This dichotomy is further realised during the end credits of the film when, as part of Jimmy's rap which plays alongside them, Psycho is finally given voice to express her side of the story. She raps: "You don't like me because I'm a big girl, when all I want to do is rock your world. You can take a trip to the end of the rainbow, and even if you think I'm insane, I remain strong. And if you think I'm too big to hold, you better take a look, because I'm the real pot of gold." Without these comments, easily missed by viewers who don't watch the credits, her character is simply a stereotype and comic device. However, when she talks back here, and is given emotional depth, we see that in addition to the negative qualities attached to her stereotyped portrayal she has the positive attributes of confidence and strength. Though this moment of the film is an afterthought of sorts during the credits, it most clearly reverses the stereotype and reveals the need to look beyond it. Even still, the lyrics simultaneously and problematically suggest an alignment of her character with Irish identity (as the sought-after, traditional, upwardly mobile class in nineteenth- and twentieth-century

America) through references to leprechauns, rainbows and gold, but also through material wealth and possession. Like Jimmy, Psycho is also unable to escape problematic representation in the film. Ultimately, for the film's reverse humour to work, audiences are expected to realise that the (often problematic) performance of stereotypes within the film are (for the most part) not to be taken at face value as a truthful reality.

Friendship and Humour as a Social Corrective in *The Guard*

Though the friendship between Boyle and Everett in *The Guard* is unconventional in many ways, it does follow a longstanding archetype of friendship between black and white male characters in literature and film. Leslie Fielder notes a persistence of the relationship, "between a white refugee from 'civilization' and a dark-skinned 'savage'", throughout American literature (15). In film, this relationship has often manifested itself in the biracial buddy film (a subgenre in its own, often enacting the friendship between two men in law enforcement). However, in these films race is used to "efface the intimacy and vulnerability associated with homosexuality by the 'marriage' of racial others, so that this transgressiveness displaces homosexual anxiety" brought about by the pairing of male leads (Fuchs 195). The most successful examples of the buddy film reverse the binary of savage versus civility so that it is the black character who is civilised, but also out of touch with his masculinity and sexuality (Ames 53). In many ways, these (largely American) conventions are apparent in *The Guard*; as we have seen, Boyle does not follow the rules and appears isolated from his community while Everett is portrayed as a professional. Just as the characters continuously surprise one another throughout the film, conventions and stereotypes are also often upended.

Though Boyle and Everett do not start out as friends, given Boyle's interruptions at the briefing, he grows on Everett as his seemingly offbeat comments reveal a further depth to his character, leading Everett to surmise: "I can't tell if you're really motherfucking dumb, or if you're really motherfucking smart." While Boyle is "only messing" and many of his comments seem abrasive, they also reveal a further depth (of truth). For instance, Asava notes that, though his comments during the briefing are "farcical", they also "belie certain truths—media representations do focus on black and South American criminals, associating dark skin mostly with illegality, Irish nationalism remains linked to racist discourses given its insular approach and Irish people continue to be victimized by racism abroad" (163). Similarly, the questions Boyle asks Everett reflect stereotyped representations and perceptions of African Americans: "Did you grow up in the projects?"; "I thought black people couldn't ski? Or is that swimming?" By this point, we, and Everett, understand Boyle's character and it is clear to all parties that his questions are intended as humorous. While they do not directly elicit laughter, evidenced by Everett's blank stare and flat "Ho. Ho", they are recognisably facetious and reveal the incongruities between stereotype and reality. Everett explains that, though it "might surprise" Boyle (and viewers who are used to stereotypical representations), he comes from a privileged background including prep school, Yale, summer in the Hamptons and skiing in Aspen, and that he was a Rhodes scholar—all things traditionally associated with upper-class whiteness. While his answers reverse stereotypes, they also problematically suggest that, for the black man to become "buddy", or achieve respected status, he must not only be desexualised, but also defy

other typical stereotypes, taking on the qualities, and stereotypes, of upper/middle class whiteness instead.

Everett's blackness is not the only target of Boyle's humour in the film, however, and racist stereotypes of African Americans are not the only ones questioned. Everett's nationality, and involvement in American law enforcement is teased as well. Boyle jokes that, as an FBI agent, Everett is "more used to shooting at unarmed women and children" than armed men, and also says that if he dies during their raid to: "Just pin a medal to my body like with those lads coming home from Iraq." While Everett responds with a "fuck you" to both comments, and Boyle is clearly playing with him, these comments again touch a nerve, outwardly speaking on American militarisation and its problematic elements. Equally, with his racist line of questioning Boyle performs himself as a foolish stereotype—someone from the country who doesn't know any better. This stereotype is also quickly reversed, however, when Everett realises that Boyle has done research on him and knows about his previous cases. Everett's expectations continue to be reversed when he assumes that Boyle won't know what a Rhodes Scholar is, but is proven wrong. Demonstrating himself to be highly educated, and quick witted, Boyle disproves the stereotype of the rural Irish as uneducated and "behind" (which is particularly incited by the imagined superiority of the Guards from Dublin in the film).



Figure 5: Boyle and Everett as "buddies". *The Guard* (John Michael McDonagh, 2011). Reprisal Films. Screenshot.

Boyle's intelligence similarly disproves, or adds layers to, the archetypal reversal of savagery and civility in these buddy movies. Boyle does perform the "savage" in terms of his lack of restraint with drugs, drink, prostitutes and his comments, even telling Everett that someday he'd like to have a family but he's "too busy whoring around and getting fucked up at the moment". However, he also turns out to be the only Guard on the case who won't accept a bribe from the traffickers, and is ultimately the one to foil them. Equally, he reveals he has travelled to Disneyworld on his own and that Goofy is his favourite character—not typical of wild masculinity—and he demonstrates a worldly intelligence and awareness of perceptions,

both in his deliberately facetious line of questioning and awareness of everything from Rhodes Scholars to the Birmingham Six and the use of homemade submarines to smuggle cocaine out of Columbia. He also behaves in a gentlemanly manner while caring for his elderly, ill mother and while speaking with the wife of his newly appointed partner who is murdered early in the film (something Inspector Stanton is incapable of, making assumptions about her nationality and dismissing her concerns). Ultimately, Boyle cannot be pinned down to one category, surmised by Everett's inability to decide if he is really dumb or really smart.

Similarly, while Everett does perform as "civilised" in *The Guard* with his privileged background and professional and by the law attitude, he is not confined to this category. When he begins to tell Boyle about his wife and children, domesticating himself, Boyle shuts this down, refusing to look at the photo of his baby, and thus removing Everett from being relegated to this domestic sphere. His masculinity (in a more typically conceived sense) is re-established later on in the film when we learn that he has been shot three times in his line of work. Everett also returns Boyle's bluntness back to him, calling him an "idiot" and "rude", responding to his claims of being an Olympic swimmer as "bullshit" and repeatedly telling him "fuck you". His language and forwardness here matches Boyle's, again removing him from the realm of complete civility. The two characters' frankness with one another is what allows their humour to function as acceptable (even Everett eventually smiles at some of Boyle's confrontational comments) and brings them closer together, building their friendship and differentiating them from the others; it also allows them both to present the binary of "savage" and "civil" more as a blend, each character containing elements of both despite being weighted towards one side. These layers to the characters, along with many asides in the film (like Boyle's Olympic summer side story), interrogate surface and real narratives of the self, and raise questions of how well we can come to know another person.

The outcome of the two characters is similarly ambiguous in terms of how it deals with the "noble negro" stereotype (as discussed in relation to *Irish Jam*). On the one hand, it is with Everett's support that Boyle is finally able to realise his heroism at the end of the film in the takedown of the criminals, leading Asava to note: "Boyle … reclaims this manhood through the black male, albeit here the black male is a co-actor, a partner in the war against crime" (166). In this sense, once again, the black male has been used as a device to heal the white male, feeding directly into the stereotype. However, Everett is labelled a partner here, giving him equal footing. Further to this, it is Everett who is left standing at the end of the film while Boyle is assumed dead. Reversing the inequality present in the convention wherein the black male willingly sacrifices himself, it is Boyle who makes the willing sacrifice here, and it is for himself (and justice for his murdered partner) rather than for Everett, who is allowed his own path.

Ultimately, *The Guard* is "rooted in postmodern irony, intertextuality and polysemy, and full of cues not to take the text seriously" (Asava 164). Many elements of the film are, indeed, not meant to be taken seriously, allowing for the film's humour. However, both the polysemy of this humour and the characters themselves illuminate overt and covert racism and, conservatively, reverse stereotypes. Therefore, as a whole, the film should be taken very seriously. Boyle's behaviour, which positions him as the fool, acts as a social corrective throughout the film by confrontationally voicing covert racist perceptions that are often left unspoken, while proving them to be incorrect. Historically, laughing at foolish behaviour has

been used to show that certain behaviours or beliefs are not acceptable (Meyer 314), and Boyle's behaviour makes us realise that various forms of racism (overt and covert) are not only unacceptable and rude (as he is scolded), but also incongruous with reality, as his comments are juxtaposed with Everett's character.

Conclusion

The use of Ireland as a setting for these films allows us to consider the differentiation of individuals on two levels and, importantly, positions the interrogation of race within a uniquely nontaboo Irish whiteness (historically suffering its own prejudices). By placing Jimmy and Everett in Ireland rather than America, both films broach the topic of national identity as a form of Otherness in addition to race (creating a blended cultural differentiation) and simultaneously imply that Ireland, and the Irish context, may be a safer place in which to allow questions of race to unfold. While blackness acts as the primary marker of differentiation for both characters, this is sometimes conflated with national identity in terms of cultural difference (from interest in basketball to a business-like professionalism), suggesting that within the American cultural landscape they would be less "Othered". However, the brief glimpse we get of Jimmy in America reveals direct interactions only with other black characters. Though his street performance does have white onlookers, it appears that he offers only passing entertainment for them, especially considering their lack of donations. Therefore, the film equally frames a division between black and white identities in America, reflecting an unfortunate social reality of the country. Meanwhile, the whiteness of Ireland, a country much newer to multiculturalism than America, offers an acceptable platform for the humorous interrogation of racist ideology, considering humour ("messing around" and the ability to take a joke) as a marker of Irishness and the position of the Irish as historically both perpetrators and victims of racism. Ultimately, these films are able to interrogate racist ideologies (overt and covert) in a manner that is not overly confrontational by utilising humour as a social corrective.

The humour in *Irish Jam* and *The Guard* is quite different—though there are instances of incongruity, superiority and relief in each—but, ultimately, both films remain fundamentally conservative in their approaches to race. *Irish Jam* primarily utilises hyperbolic performances of stereotype to reverse expectation in its generation of humour, while also allowing some stereotypification to continue, whereas *The Guard* primarily utilises subtle, facetious humour to highlight undercurrents of racism, targeting media representations and unspoken contemporary racist perceptions. Accordingly, the African-American characters in each film are framed differently. While Jimmy controls much of the humour in *Irish Jam*—fitting as actor Eddie Griffin is also a comedian—he also embodies common perceptions of African-American males, displaying perceived markers of blackness. Though he uses these to prove there is nothing to fear about his Otherness, revealing the layers of his personality and ultimately becoming the hero of the village, he also falls dangerously close to being categorised as a stereotype, particularly in terms of the "noble negro". Meanwhile, much of the humour in *The Guard* is controlled by Boyle rather than Everett, though he does contribute to it. Perhaps because the humour stems from the white male character, Everett himself embodies the literal reversal of stereotype in that he does not fit into the box created by stereotyped markers of blackness, allowing for Boyle's confrontation of racism to be fully realised as incongruous. However, this can equally be taken to

suggest, problematically, that in order to achieve this reversal Everett had to take on a white identity. While *The Guard* displays a subtler, more intelligent, humour, both films ultimately rely on stereotypes in their interrogations of race, confronting them but also allowing them to persist. Therefore, though the humour in both films does act as a social corrective, confronting racist ideology, it ultimately remains conservative in its approach and limited in its scope, playing it safe in Ireland.

Notes

[1] While L. P. Curtis focuses on the depiction of the Irish in British periodicals, this book contains a chapter dedicated to American depictions, titled "Irish-American Apes", largely comprised of the work of caricaturist Thomas Nast for *Harper's Weekly*. One of these depictions ("The Ignorant Vote: Honors are Easy", published in *Harper's Weekly* on 9 December 1876) features balanced scales with an African American on one, labelled "Black", and a simianised Irish American on the other, labelled "White"; it portrays the balance of politics in America at the time, giving equal weighting to the emancipated slaves in the south and the "brutish and simian" Irish American in the north (Curtis 60).

[2] Gardaí refers to the police in Ireland.

[3] Part of Jim Crow ideology was the association of blackness with dirt and disease, which could "rub off" on "clean" whiteness. Zimring notes this conflation of dark skin and filth (82) and/or disease (98), as well as the racialisation of "dirt" in the advertisements of soap companies in the 1890s through the conflation of the terms "clean" and "white" (91). A clear example of this can be found in an 1899 Pears' Soap advertisement ("The First Step Towards Lightening"). Muhammad links the ushering in of "the age of Jim Crow" with statistician Frederick L. Hoffman's analysis of census data (published in 1896 as *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*) which linked blackness with disease, death and criminality as a result of race rather than disadvantaged socio-economic conditions (35, 39, 46). While Smith notes that the association of blackness with disease is an old one, predating the 1890s, he also connects it to this time period, updating it with new fears arising from the advent of germ theory, noting a close relationship between the rise of tuberculosis, medical segregation and racial segregation (64). The fear of interracial intimacy established in Jim Crow ideology continues to inform racial discourse and cinematic representations today as highlighted by this scene in *Irish Jam*.

[4] White discomfort with the term "racist" is confronted by comedian Jordan Temple in a sketch for MTV ("Is 'Racist' the N-Word for White People?").

[5] Sotiropoulos also to refers the work of two black minstrel comedians, Bert Williams and Ernest Hogan, as early twentieth century black resistance; the two comedians used their minstrel performances to celebrate black community, denounce Jim Crow and play up racial stereotypes for white audiences in a polysemic way that offered an alternative meaning for black audiences. Contemporarily, minstrelsy, blackface and racial stereotypes are still employed for comedic (often satiric) effect by black performers in order to highlight and resist racism. For key

examples of this see the film *Bamboozled* (Spike Lee, 2000) and comedian Dave Chappelle's television show (*Chappelle's Show*) which aired on Comedy Central from 2003–2006 (making use of "racial stereotype pixies" which would appear on people's shoulder and encourage them to partake in stereotypical behaviour).

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