

# The Humour Studies Digest

Australasian Humour Studies Network ([AHSN](#))

May 2018



## The 25<sup>th</sup> AHSN Conference

The 25<sup>th</sup> Conference of the Australasian Humour Studies Network will take place from 6-8 February 2019 at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Theme: "Humour in all its forms: on screen, on the page, on stage, on air, online ..."

### *Message from the Conference Organising Committee:*

We encourage you to submit your abstracts to come and join us next year in Melbourne! With a wide brief of 'humour across its forms', we are keen to create a dynamic, diverse and fun-packed schedule that mirrors the city that will be hosting you.

Celebrating the year of the 25th AHSN Conference, we are already planning keynotes, industry panels and 'special events' (!), so don't delay - come and play!

*Dr Kerry Mullan,  
School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University*

*Assoc. Prof. Craig Batty,  
School of Media and Communication, RMIT University*

*Dr Sharon Andrews,  
School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University*

*Ms Justine Sless,  
La Trobe University*

## **The 25<sup>th</sup> AHSN Conference – The Call for Papers Is Open**

The 25th Conference of the Australasian Humour Studies Network will take place from 6-8 February 2019 at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia, on the theme of "Humour in all its forms: on screen, on the page, on stage, on air, online ..."

### *Submitting a Proposal*

To submit a proposal for a paper, please send an abstract to [ahsnconference@gmail.com](mailto:ahsnconference@gmail.com)

## **THIS EDITION**

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Abstracts will be reviewed by at least two reviewers. Proposals for panels of three presentations on a specific topic are welcome. Proposals from research students are particularly encouraged, with **postgraduate scholarships** available to the first five to successfully complete the review process.

*The Call closes on 31 July 2018.*

Successful applicants will be advised of review outcomes in order of submission and in all case by no later than 15 October 2018. Please refer to the **AHSN Guidelines for Presenters** (below) and the **Review Procedures of the AHSN** both of which are posted on the AHSN website.

Presenters should also make sure they subscribe to *The Humour Studies Digest*, the free AHSN e-Newsletter, to ensure they receive all communications regarding the conference.

Information on transport and accommodation will be provided closer to the time via the Events page of the AHSN webpages at University of Sydney [<http://sydney.edu.au/humourstudies/>].

**Other conference enquiries** may be forwarded to [ahsnconference@gmail.com](mailto:ahsnconference@gmail.com)

For all other information about the AHSN and its activities, please visit: <http://sydney.edu.au/humourstudies/>



*Our courageous Convenors (from left to right)*

*Dr Kerry Mullan, Dr Sharon Andrews, Ms Justine Sless, and  
Assoc. Prof. Craig Batty.*

## **Guidelines for Presenters**

**Topics and Subject Matter:** Papers at AHSN conferences typically come from a very wide range of disciplines and should have a firm basis in Humour and/or Comedy Studies to ensure that they are not disadvantaged in the review process.

**Abstracts:** Abstracts are limited to 500 words only including references (if required). Please do not use foot- or end-notes, and retain a dated copy for your own records.

**Length of Presentation:** Papers are allocated 20 minutes for presentation and 10 minutes for discussion; pre-organised panels of 3 presentations are allocated 90 minutes; and practical workshops of 60 minutes are welcome. Please time your presentation and allow time for questions. Questions from AHSN delegates will come from a variety of disciplines and may give you valuable new perspectives on your project.

We look forward to seeing you in Melbourne next February!

## A word or three from the new Chair of the AHSN Review Panel

Always a sucker for a new hat, I might admit to being finally persuaded to take over from Bruce Findlay as chair of the review panel by the promise of a real jester's cap. It now has pride of place in my new "office", actually the garden shed, to which I will regularly abscond when the weather prevents me from being in the garden. The pleasures of retirement.

As you will know from the regular updates that appear in the Digest, the Call for Abstracts for next year's conference in Melbourne has already been made and, as we also all know, deadlines for submissions which seem so distant when first announced have a great tendency to surprise us when they finally arrive. Do not be caught that way! Our conference's deadline is **31<sup>st</sup> July** and abstracts can be submitted by email directly to the conference Organising Committee at:

[ahsnconference@gmail.com](mailto:ahsnconference@gmail.com)

Details on submissions and the form of papers, along with our AHSN Review Procedures can be found in the Events section of the AHSN website:

<http://sydney.edu.au/humourstudies/events/index.shtml>

But I would be more than happy to field any queries regarding possible presentations. My university email address ([a.mclachlan@federation.edu.au](mailto:a.mclachlan@federation.edu.au)) still appears to work most of the time or you can contact me at my shed address: [mclachlan@ncable.net.au](mailto:mclachlan@ncable.net.au)

The Organising Committee is forging ahead with their side of the arrangements for next February and will keep us regularly updated on vital things like travel and accommodation options, so now all that remains is for us to fulfil our role and produce those abstracts for review.

Angus (McLachlan)  
Psychology, Federation University of Australia,  
Ballarat  
Chair of Review Panel



*Such an iconic image deserves a really good caption.*

*Note - The Caption Competition starts now...*

Please submit your caption suggestions to: [michael.meany@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:michael.meany@newcastle.edu.au)

The image will be reprinted in the next Digest along with the winning caption. The winner will receive our undying gratitude and maybe a little something special at the 2019 Conference.

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## **Colloquium on the work of John M. Clarke**

### **Sydney University, 25 May 2018, 9.30 am - 6.00 pm.**

Where: Seminar Room S226, John Woolley Building A20, University of Sydney

Who: Open to AHSN members and friends – please email either Jessica or Peter to attend as numbers are limited (pay for own refreshments):

Jessica Milner Davis: [jessica.davis@sydney.edu.au](mailto:jessica.davis@sydney.edu.au)

Peter Kirkpatrick: [peter.kirkpatrick@sydney.edu.au](mailto:peter.kirkpatrick@sydney.edu.au)

#### PROGRAM, 25 MAY 2018

9.30 – 11.10 am.

Introduction – Conal Condren, Centre for Early Modern Studies, University of Queensland, Moderator

Anne Pender, University of New England

*John Clarke: The man, the mask and the problem of acting*

#### *Abstract*

John Clarke hated acting. In a series of interviews, I conducted with him over several years, he told me more than once that he particularly loathed acting (in the realist and other senses of the term), and had never envisaged for himself a career as an actor. In particular the quaint traditions of the theatre repelled him, in spite of his admiration for the plays and playwrights themselves, in evidence in his propensity to quote Ibsen (and others) every now and then in conversations. Clarke's complex relationship to acting forms the subject of this paper.

As a young man, Clarke helped out as a stage manager at Victoria University because of the free beer, and at the last minute devised a sketch that would allow him to perform without anyone interfering with the piece. It was 1969 and it was clear to those in the audience that he seemed to have an instinct for emulating the distinctive rhythm, cadence and lexicon of New Zealand English, for parody, and a firm grip of comic timing. By 1971 he had launched the sheep farmer character on stage, Fred Dagg, who would soon make Clarke a household name in the medium that suited him best: television.

This paper examines the development of Clarke's unique approach to acting and his solution to the problem of establishing a direct connection with an audience through an analysis of key influences on his career, and his distinctive contribution to significant Australian television satire in *The Gillies Report* (1984), *The Games* (1998) and *Clarke and Dawe* (1989-2017). Drawing on numerous interviews I conducted with Clarke, this paper also investigates the ways in which Clarke prepared for comic performance, at various points in his career, specifically during his collaboration with Max Gillies for Gillies' stage show *A Night of National Reconciliation* (1983), in collaboration with Paul Cox on the feature film *Lonely Hearts* in 1982, and later as a mature and celebrated performer in his last role in the feature film *A Month of Sundays* (2015).

Nicholas Holm, Massey University, Wellington

“Fred, it’s a mess” or the cultural politics of the laconic

### Abstract

Writing on “The New Zealand Sense of Humour” in the posthumously published *Tinkerings*, John Clarke describes the comic temperament of his country of birth as “laconic, under-stated and self-deprecating” (31). In his evocation of the laconic as a marker of national comic character, Clarke is far from alone: the term is frequently evoked as an easy, at-hand account of the comic characteristics of both Clarke’s native New Zealand and Australia, where he found his later comic success. Indeed, Clarke himself could certainly be described as a master practitioner of the laconic tone, and it was central to his personal comic style that finds its echoes throughout contemporary New Zealand humour.

Yet the ease with which the term, laconic, is conjured belies the complexity of the comic forms to which it refers. While ‘laconic’ refers literally to the use of few words, it is not always clear how this definition informs laconic humour. This essay will explore how the laconic might be understood through an examination of the comedy of John Clarke, with particular reference to his Fred Dagg persona. I will argue that the laconic can be productively understood as opposed to Sianne Ngai’s account of the “zany”. Whereas the zany is frantic and intense—always seemingly on the edge of injury and mania, as in the comedy of Lucille Ball or Jim Carrey—the laconic is lackadaisical and indolent—not just in terms of the characters portrayed but also the formal composition of the text itself. Laconic characters ignore social conventions and explicit entreaties to care: laconic texts court aesthetic failure through a phlegmatic at best enactment of formal expectations. In many ways then, the laconic is a form of humour that *does not care*. However, while the comparison to Ngai’s zaniness may suggest that the laconic can be understood as culturally resistant (Ngai argues that the zany is an aesthetic manifestation of the pressures of late capitalism), Clarke’s use of laconic tone draws attention to its regressive elements: its association with a surly, conservative masculinity. In his performance of Fred Dagg, Clarke does not just enact the laconic, he also parodies it through Dagg’s failure to adjust to or understand the stakes or rules of the world he inhabits. The laconic empowers Dagg—enabling him to mock powerful representatives of media and the state—but it also prevents him from fully understanding or engaging with his political and social environment.

11.10- 11.40am Morning Tea, Holme Building and Footbridge Theatre (A09)

11.40-12.30

Marty Murphy, Australian Film, Television and Radio School & University of Western Sydney

They can’t all be winners: John Clarke and the “shabby suit crime comedy”

### Abstract

John Clarke adapted two crime novels by Shane Maloney for television, *Stiff* (2004) and *The Brush-off* (2004). For *Stiff*, Clarke directed as well as wrote the screenplay. Production was by Huntaway films, a company owned by him, together with *The Brush-off* director, Sam Neill and co-producer Jay Cassells. While these films do not match the famed Clarke and Dawe sketches (ABC TV) for satirical bite and artistry, arguably they are part of a “cluster” (Leger Grindon, 2011) of what might be called “the shabby suit crime comedy” genre. This article identifies a group of Australian comedies that share similar syntactic and semantic generic qualities (Altman, 1999) and includes *Gettin’ Square* (2003); *Bad Eggs* (2003); *Stiff* and *The Brush-off* as well as *A Man’s Gotta Do* (2004). It discusses the place in that group of Clarke’s pieces and their techniques and artistic success.

12.30 - 1.30 pm Lunch, Holme Building and Footbridge Theatre (A09)

1.30 - 3.10 pm

Jessica Milner Davis, University of Sydney

*The bureaucracy of sport: John Clarke and The Games (1998; 2000)*

### Abstract

Taboo topics in humour reflect local cultural conventions about things that are held to be so serious that it is not seemly to laugh at them. During the post-war decades in Australia, one topic held to be too sacred for mockery was sport. This barrier began to fall in the 1980s. The attack was arguably pioneered by John Clarke with reports expertly dissecting the ancient sport of farnarkling formed a regular part of the popular *Gillies Report* (ABC TV, 1984-5). Other contributions came from the cross-over from serious sports commentary to satirical send-up created by the Sydney-based duo, Rampaging Roy Slaven (John Doyle) and H. G. Nelson (Greig Pickhaver). Their expert but irreverent radio commentaries on live matches began with *This Sporting Life* on Triple J (ABC youth radio) from 1986-2008 and on ABC TV from 1993, continued in their own ABC TV show *Club Buggery* (1995-7).

The approach of the Sydney millennial Olympics brought increasingly feverish preparations their staging which arguably increased the possibility of satirical critique aimed at the bureaucratic hype and posturing of self-appointed sports czars who draped themselves in the Olympic flag. The popularity of Roy and HG brought a commission (from Channel 7) to do a daily wrap-up commentary for each day of the actual events called, *The Dream with Roy and HG* (ABC TV, 2000), starring Fatso the Wombat as the Australian mascot. This played to bemused audiences around the world.

In the run-up to the Games, the ABC responded to the new-found sports scepticism by offering a series called simply *The Games* (ABC TV 1998; 2000), starring John Clarke, Bryan Dawe and Gina Riley. This full-fledged satirical critique of sport as just another bureaucratic construct effectively exposed the shady politics and inept institutional management of sport, both in Australia and more broadly. The present paper compares these artists' different perspectives and methods, examining structures and techniques. It aims to probe the connections between humorous creation, professional sport realities, audience awareness and cultural impact.

Lucien Leon, Australian National University

*Plus ça change: Three decades of Clarke and Dawe's political satire (1987-2017)*

### Abstract

Even the best broadcast satire tends to have a relatively short lifespan in Australia: after a couple of years or so the creators run out of ideas or the zeitgeist shifts and audiences and sponsors look elsewhere. Remarkably, John Clarke and Bryan Dawe's eponymous weekly political satire segment of Australian news media endured for thirty years before ending abruptly, a consequence of Clarke's sudden death in 2017. Originally framed in newsprint, Clarke's deadpan mock interview underwent its first evolutionary leap in media format in 1987 when he collaborated with Dawe to perform them as episodic radio scripts. A transition to television two years later established the show's definitive audio-visual format - one which later facilitated *Clarke & Dawe's* online success with the advent of Web 2.0 media.

Despite these radical changes in media form, *Clarke & Dawe's* satirical mechanics remained largely unchanged. In around two and a half minutes, an interview would deliver a revelatory and forensic dismantling of a complex topical - often political - concept or catch-phrase by mischievously but gently eviscerating its advocate. This paper outlines the durable structural format of Clarke's satiric creations and his deliberate cultivation of a recognisable and idiosyncratic approach, including tone, rhythm and delivery of speech. It

then examines the impact of the different media potentialities (newsprint, radio, television and the Internet) on these and other formal aspects in order to investigate Clarke's lengthy popular success.

### 3.10-3.40 pm Afternoon tea, Holme Building and Footbridge Theatre (A09)

3.40 - 5.20 pm

Mark Rolfe, University of New South Wales

*Is this a Dagg which I see before me? The politics of John Clarke's political humour*

#### **Abstract**

When John Clarke died, the media rushed to seek the opinions of politicians on his passing. Among the usual clichés about satire, politics and politicians came the intonation from Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull that he "spoke truth to power", lampooned "the absurdity of political life" and "with lethal accuracy...made politicians and prime ministers his prey". A former prime minister, Paul Keating, said Clarke understood what politicians were "actually thinking" and stripped them of "humbug and cant". A Greens senator mourned his loss: Clarke had kept him sane. Ironically, politicians were endorsing vehement anti-politics views, even though they are themselves the targets of such views

However, in understanding politics, Clarke was no dagg and did not simply wield a common and vicious dagger at politicians. In the view of that group, many humourists believe that the ideal of democracy is let down by knavish politicians. This outlook reflects the populist anti-politics strain of satire, particularly in America. Although Clarke was keenly aware of this watchdog role of the satirist in democracy, his work shows that he was alert to democracy's complexities and common human frailties that can have us all acting foolishly in certain circumstances. In that regard, Clarke's satire more resembles that of Armando Iannucci than, say, Jon Stewart's. This paper will draw distinctions between the 'fool' and 'knave' versions of anti-politics satire.

Robert Phiddian, Flinders University

John Clarke, poet

#### **Abstract**

Clarke's poetic output was never the main game, but he was persistent in developing the (entirely self-authored) Complete Book of Australian Verse (39 poems in 1989) through two intermediate versions to culminate with the 2012 edition of the Even More Complete Book of Australian Verse (68 poems). Some of the poems are wonderful parodies that deserve (and will receive) detailed critical attention in their own right. However, the core argument of this paper will address the central characteristics of Clarke's art through the parodic poems: voice, timing, rhythm.

The poems illustrate the sort of parody discussed in my 'Are parody and deconstruction secretly the same thing?' (New Literary History, 1996) and subsequent work. They seldom directly ridicule their literary or real world objects but, rather deconstruct by intimate imitation with distortion. They display a guarded, sometimes hostile affection and a jagged nostalgia both for the poetic vehicles and for the Australian subject matter.

As ever in his Australian work, Clarke inhabits the words of others, and speaks directly enough but only via parodic deflection. This contrasts with the Daggy directness of his New Zealand work, and raises a couple of questions: Was he only ever a visitor in Oz? Was the parodic reserve a necessary carapace against the sort of

fame he fled in the 1970s? There's a big difference between the voice of Dagg (rather Twain-like in its way) and the never-himself of Clarke's Australian personae.

These questions can be posed but not definitively answered. This paper aims to read the poems as a window on the distinctive rhythms of his writing and his complexly ironic relationships with both his homeland and his adopted nation. His resistance of the voice direct gave him great purchase on Australian life as a wry and knowledgeable visitor. Perhaps the fantasised John Howard as eloquent father of national reconciliation in the 'Sorry' speech from The Games is a destination of these rhythms and their play of detachment. His voice offers a great and abiding challenge to Australianness, calling us to our better selves via parody.

5.20-6.10 pm Discussion, led by Moderator

6.10 pm Concluding Drinks

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## ***Doctoral Scholarship for Indigenous Student to Research***

### ***Humour and Well-Being in Indigenous Communities***

The Lowitja Institute and the Starlight Children's Foundation have joined forces to create a scholarship for the study of humour and its connection and well-being in Torres Strait and Aboriginal communities around Australia. The Lowitja Institute is Australia's only Research Institute focussed on the Health and Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The topic for which they are seeking applications is:

To help better understand the value of humour, laughter and imagination for the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – focusing on the resilience of children and young people.

The Starlight Children's Foundation and the Lowitja Institute are looking for someone to work with them to research this unique, important and fun topic. They have funded a 3-year scholarship open to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander post-graduate student from anywhere in Australia who is already committed to a doctoral program starting 2018.

The scholarship funding consists of \$40,000 per year (\$30,000 stipend for research and \$10,000 for travel and related expenses).

Essential criteria:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person
- Enrolled or accepted to enrol in a PhD at an approved Australian university or institution
- PhD must commence in 2018
- Strong Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership through committee and mentors
- Strong community engagement

*Extended: Applications now closing 31 May 2018*

More details about the application process can be found at the link below, including contact details for the key person at the Institute for all queries:

<https://www.lowitja.org.au/starlight-scholarship>

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## Members' New Humour Studies Publications

Holm, Nicholas. 2018. "‘Against the Assault of Laughter’: Differentiating Critical and Resistant Humour." In *Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance?*. Eds. Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, Fred Francis and Iain Mackenzie. 31-44. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Leon, Lucien. 2017. "Biography of George Molnar (1927-2005)". *The Australian Media Hall of Fame*. At: <http://halloffame.melbournepressclub.com/article/george-molnar>

Leon, Lucien. 2018. "The animated moving image as political cartoon". *Journal of Comedy Studies*, 9 (1): 94-113. Published online 30 January 2018. At: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2040610X.2018.1428424>

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## Comedy and Critical Thought: Laughter as Resistance?

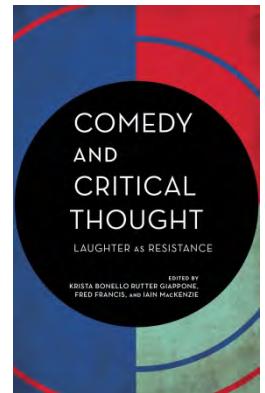
This anthology collects work originally presented at the "Comedy and Critical Thought" conference, hosted by the University of Kent in 2016. The essays explore humour's potential as a political force through a range of theoretical and cultural perspectives.

### Contents

Introduction: Setting the Agenda, Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone, Fred Francis and Iain MacKenzie

#### Part I: Comedy, Critique and Resistance

- Diagrams of Comic Estrangement, James Williams
- ‘Against the Assault of Laughter’: Differentiating Critical and Resistant Humour, Nicholas Holm
- Can We Learn the Truth from Lenny Bruce? A Careful Cognitivism about Satire, Dieter Declercq
- Laughter, Liturgy, Lacan and Resistance to Capitalist Logic, Francis Stewart
- Humitas: Humour as Performative Resistance, Kate Fox



#### Part II: Laughter as Resistance?

- Conformist Comedians: Political Humour in the Eighteenth-Century Dutch Republic, Ivo Nieuwenhuis
- First World War Cartoon Comedy as Criticism of British Politics and Society, Pip Gregory
- A Suspended Pratfall: Mimesis and Slapstick in Contemporary Art, Levi Hanes
- ‘Life’ in Struggle: The Indifferent Humour of Beckett’s Prose Heroes, Selvin Yaltir
- ‘Holiday in Cambodia’: Punk’s Acerbic Comedy, Russ Bestley
- ‘What Can’t Be Cured Must Be Endured’: The Postcolonial Humour of Salman Rushdie, Sami Shah and Hari Kondabolu, Christine Caruana
- Political Jester: From Fool to King 201, Constantino Pereira Martins
- Three Easy Steps to a New You? Or, Some Thoughts on the Politics of Humour in the Workplace . . . , Adrian Hickey, Giuliana Monteverde and Robert Porter

## About this book:

Throughout history, comedians and clowns have enjoyed a certain freedom to speak frankly often denied to others in hegemonic systems. More recently, professional comedians have developed platforms of comic license from which to critique the traditional political establishment and have managed to play an important role in interrogating and mediating the processes of politics in contemporary society. It examines the questions that arise when of comedy and critique intersect by bringing together both critical theorists and comedy scholars with a view to exploring the nature of comedy, its potential role in critical theory and the forms it can take as a practice of resistance.

### Call for Papers

## HUMOUR AND OBSCENITY IN THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLD

MEMSA Conference, Durham University, 9-10 July 2018

Humour and obscenity cross disciplinary boundaries, incorporating historical, archaeological, literary, musical, theological, philosophical, and art historical perspectives on the medieval and early modern world. This interdisciplinary conference invites postgraduates and early career researchers from any discipline to present research on any aspect of humour and obscenity in the medieval and early modern world. Building on the new academic interest in the history of emotions, this conference provides a forum in which to develop interdisciplinary research on the cultural and societal place of humour and obscenity.

Themes and topics for discussion could include, but are not limited to:

- The archaeology of obscenity and excess; archaeology and scatology
- Obscene or comic dress
- Representations of nudity
- Comic or obscene objects
- The humorous and/or obscene body
- Marginalia in manuscripts and printed books
- Humour in historical and legal documents
- Scandal, libel, insults, and feuds
- Humour and obscenity as a literary or rhetorical device
- Representing sexualities
- Humiliation and scorn
- The politics and ethics of humour
- Dissent and heresy
- Censorship and punishment
- Theoretical views of humour and obscenity
- Curating medieval and early modern humour and obscenity
- Humorous representations of the medieval and early modern world today

As well as panel sessions, the conference will include two keynote lectures, as well as a performance of 'Unruly Women' by Dr Daisy Black (Wolverhampton). There will also be an opportunity to visit Durham Cathedral and Castle. A conference dinner will be held on 9<sup>th</sup> July.

Papers should be 15-20 minutes long, and will be followed by time for questions and discussion. Please send abstracts of 200-300 words to [memsaconference2018@gmail.com](mailto:memsaconference2018@gmail.com). Abstracts should be submitted by Monday 16<sup>th</sup> April 2018. Please let us know if you have any accessibility needs or other requirements.



For more information and updates, visit our blog, website, or sponsors' pages:

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[www.dur.ac.uk/ias](http://www.dur.ac.uk/ias) [www.dur.ac.uk/arts.humanities](http://www.dur.ac.uk/arts.humanities) [www.dur.ac.uk/imems](http://www.dur.ac.uk/imems)

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***The Humour Studies Digest***

***The Australasian Humour Studies Network (AHSN)***

***'We put the "U" back into "HUMOUR"!'***

Send newsletter submissions to our Co-Editors:

Michael at [michael.meany@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:michael.meany@newcastle.edu.au) or Jessica at [Jessica.davis@sydney.edu.au](mailto:Jessica.davis@sydney.edu.au)

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