

# **Distorted Recognition: The pleasures and uses of televisual historical caricature**

## **Introduction**

A straitjacketed figure is wheeled on a vertical trolley through a dank corridor lit by flickering fluorescent tubes. A low-angled medium close-up reveals the bottom half of a royal blue skirt, and sensible black high-heeled pumps. After the trolley comes to rest, the porter moving it lifts from the figure a full-face mask, reminiscent of the one worn by Anthony Hopkins in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991).

The face revealed is not Hannibal Lecter's. It is a woman's. She has a red-lipsticked, downturned mouth, over which a sinister, cool smile plays. Her eyes wear pale blue pastel shadow. Her ears are bejewelled with tasteful pearls. The strawberry blonde hair atop is teased into a tall perm. When she finally speaks, it is in a low, slow voice with a lilting, arhythmical cadence that allows her to emphasise firmly her increasingly strange and fervent anti-socialist arguments. Any viewer familiar with her image and voice can see that this is supposed to be Margaret Thatcher. And yet, this is not an accurate impression. The hair is larger, the make-up less subtle than Thatcher's. The voice's soft authority is drawn out into a barely comprehensible drawl. The political sentiments voiced in the dialogue constitute a *reductio ad absurdum* of Thatcher's well-known social views. This isn't an impersonation of Thatcher. It is a caricature.

This scene appears in *Psychobitches* (Sky Arts, 2012 – 2014), a British sketch comedy programme whose central conceit is that famous historical or mythical women are offered diagnosis and treatment by a contemporary psychiatrist (Rebecca Front). The structure of sketch comedy demands that characters, whether recurring or one-off, should be instantly recognisable, their characteristics made transparent

through costuming, make-up and performance. Think, for example of Vicky Pollard (Matt Lucas) in *Little Britain* (BBC Three/BBC One 2003 – 2007), who is easily identifiable for her pink tracksuit, high ponytail and permanent scowl. When these characters are portrayals of real people, they become caricatures. Notable examples of such televisual caricature include *Spitting Image* (Central Television, 1984 – 1996) and *Dead Ringers* (BBC Two, 2002 – 2007). In these cases, caricature is used to satirical ends, to critique agents of contemporary politics or popular culture. This is in keeping with Judith Wechsler's argument that 'no artistic effort is as clearly linked to its time as caricature, and no aspect of caricature is as ephemeral as its humor.'<sup>i</sup> However, this article takes as its focus series, like *Psychobitches*, which engage in caricature of *historical* figures. Along with *Psychobitches*, I will explore the forms, functions and pleasures of historical caricature in *Horrible Histories* (CBBC 2009 -), the television adaptation of the popular non-fiction children's books, and *Drunk History* (Comedy Central UK, 2015 -), a British version of a US format in which comedians and media figures tell stories from history in an intoxicated state, their words lip-synced by costumed actors playing out the scenes they describe.

Caricature is usually understood as a comedic depiction of a real person that is deliberately distorted to convey through outward appearance a critique of the subject's personality. In portrait caricature, such distortions result in vulgar and abject imagery, but these are distinguished from other grotesques, as Gillian Rhodes notes, by individuation: the perceiver is meant to be able to recognise who is depicted. This, alongside purposeful exaggeration, is what distinguishes caricature from similar cultural forms.<sup>ii</sup> Art historian E.H. Gombrich noted that the earliest iteration of portrait caricature coincided with the growth of the pseudoscience of physiognomy, the belief that human character can be determined from analysis of a person's

physical appearance, particularly their facial features. This contributed to the sense that the antimimetic practice of the deliberately distorted portrait could nevertheless have a privileged relationship with 'truth'. As Gombrich and Ernst Kris summarise, 'caricature, showing more of the essential, is truer than reality itself'.<sup>iii</sup>

At its beginning, then, one of the central contradictions of caricature emerges: how is it that a clearly distorted portrait can not only be easily recognisable, but indeed more effective than a mimetic representation? Cognitive psychologist Rhodes coined the term 'superportrait' to account for the paradoxical power of the caricatured image that is superior to the veridical portrait in terms of subject recognition.<sup>iv</sup> Adam Gopnik suggests that the fact that we can recognise not only the subject of the image but also that it is deliberately exaggerated implies that the human mind has 'knowledge about its own perceptual functioning.' For Gopnik, this is crucial to the comedy of the caricature:

That's why we find caricatures *funny*: we recognise that an artist has somehow tapped into the tendency of the mind to exaggerate, generalize and simplify, and has made these tendencies explicit.<sup>v</sup>

The comedic value of the caricature is thus dependent on the mental energy of the perceiver. Similarly, Gombrich argued that the 'beholder's share', the active contemplation of the viewer, is especially relevant for the caricature.<sup>vi</sup> It is crucial that the perceiver possesses a certain basic knowledge to be able to decode the distorted image and understand its critique of its subject. This need for active perception, and the requirement of pre-existing cultural knowledge for it to function, renders the caricature a more sophisticated cultural form than at first glance.

In this article, I will be considering some of the ways in which historical television comedies draw upon precisely caricature's ability to engage a viewer's

knowledge and agency as part of their effectiveness in constructing popular alternatives to authoritative, narrative history. Caricature, as I will argue throughout, is in a unique position to do this as hinges on two central and paradoxical pleasures: that of distortion and of recognition. I will first consider some of the ways in which televisual form is used in order to distort the images of the historical figures portrayed: specifically through the use of framing and editing, performance conventions, costuming and make-up and intertextual referencing. This will be compared with the ways in which certain kinds of knowledge are invoked, an exploration that will be continued in the second section. Here, the ‘recognition’ required of the caricature is examined in relation to the representation of history on television and in postmodern contexts. This article will make the case that caricature should be more carefully considered as a form of televisual historical representation, and added to the pantheon of theorised techniques for the critical historiographical reading typical of postmodern approaches to history.

### **Distortion: Televisual caricature and its cousins**

Deliberate caricature is an only occasional but strikingly visible part of British television culture. It can function televisually in relatively simple ways, drawing purely on the pleasurable recognition of famous faces somewhat distorted. For instance, in the surreal gameshow *Bigheads* (ITV 2017 -), contestants compete wearing large three-dimensional portrait caricatures over their heads and are referred to by the presenters and voiceover commentary only by the name of the celebrity depicted. Similar absurd imagery has a notable place in surreal British television comedy, such as in *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* (BBC, 1969 – 1974), the work of Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer, or *The Mighty Boosh* (BBC Three, 2004 – 2007). Here, bizarre costuming, make-up and hair combines with a heightened, silly

performance style to produce representations that are exaggerations, if not always individuations. As previously indicated, the structure and style of caricature makes it an apt mode for representing real people within sketch comedies, where it will most often appear within parodies, as in the witty spoofs of popular movies in *French and Saunders* (BBC, 1987 – 2007) where the comedians are transformed into hyperbolic versions of, for example, Bette Davies and Joan Crawford. More usually, caricature is employed in the service of contemporary political satire, whether in extended comic representations of famous people, as in soap opera parody *The Windsors* (Channel 4, 2016 - ) or in the sketch show format, as in *Newzoids* (ITV, 2015 - ). However, it would be inaccurate to suggest that the satirical work of caricature has been limited to comment on current affairs and contemporary politics, as there exists a parallel tradition of caricaturing historical figures as part of period sitcoms such as *Blackadder* (BBC, 1983 – 1989) or *Let Them Eat Cake* (BBC, 1998). As will be explored in the second part of this essay, such historical comedies have been read as invitations to look askance at historical figures and to question received historical knowledge, specifically drawing on comedy's distancing effects to allow for a critical epistemological approach. The distorted recognition function of caricature supports this thesis, since it is predicated on subverting the pre-existing knowledge the perceiver has of the represented figure.

This brief outline of some of the ways in which television light entertainment and comedy have utilised caricature (or similar representational forms) is intended to highlight the lineage of the programmes under scrutiny in this article, and to indicate how their use of caricature derives not only from the art history tradition of the grotesque, exaggerated portrait but also from a specifically televisual legacy. Structural, stylistic and tonal similarities to these programmes are evident in

*Psychobitches*, *Drunk History*, and *Horrible Histories*. The former's tonal debt to *French and Saunders* is apparent in its evocation of the comic potential of the unruly woman, and particularly in its parodic allusions to popular culture. Indeed, the *Psychobitches* version of Joan Crawford and Bette Davies clearly echoes its spoof of *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Robert Aldrich, 1962). *Horrible Histories'* short skits parody contemporary popular culture forms like advertisements or reality television, as well as dramatising and satirising historical themes, often drawing on anachronous humour in a similar way to *Monty Python's* historical sequences. These are interspersed with brief animations and quizzes familiar from children's television programming more broadly. *Drunk History* draws on two seemingly contradictory televisual conventions: the theatrical performance style of studio-based sitcom, and the re-enactment used in some historical documentaries. In the conceit of actors lip-syncing the dialogue provided to them by the drunk 'historian', the historical figures become distorted from their conventional depictions in wider culture, and act as caricatures rather than as straightforward representations.

Of these three programmes, *Psychobitches* represents the most sustained use of historical caricature, since its structuring joke revolves explicitly around the pleasurable recognition of the famous woman depicted and the distortion of their images and stories by filtering them through the context of contemporary psychoanalysis. The programme is structured as a series of short sketches set in the psychiatrist's offices. Some take place in the waiting room, where unlikely historical bedfellows such as Gracie Fields (Samantha Spiro) and Medusa (Katy Brand) are brought together to interact (in this case, Fields's attempt to rally other patients into song results in her being turned into stone). The comic theory of incongruity can explain the effectiveness of these sequences, wherein deviations from expected norms

produce the comic sensation.<sup>vii</sup> But most sketches are set as an intimate conversation – albeit usually a bizarre one – between historical figure and therapist. The therapist is, in comedic terms, the ‘straight man’ (or woman, in this case) to the historical figure, presenting a relief of ‘normal’ behaviour and attitudes against which the eccentricities of the caricature can be measured. This is supported by the televisual format of the conversations, presented usually in a combination of medium long two shots and medium close-up shot/reverse shots. This structure not only emulates conventional television grammar for presenting interviews, but also allows for jokes to be structured through the therapist’s reactions as much as the comedic caricature. In this way, the portrayals of famous women can more easily be recognised as exaggerations of expected norms of human behaviour as well as against the expectations set by popular ‘knowledge’ of the historical subject.

*Horrible Histories* takes an accessible, revisionist and democratising approach to historical knowledge for children. Like in the books, the focus of most sketches tends not to be on history’s ‘great men’ or on teleological storytelling, but rather on the quotidian throughout history, particularly where it pertains to matters corporeal and scatological. A good example of this is the recurring feature ‘Stupid Deaths’ which portrays a cheerful Grim Reaper quizzing various historical figures – often but not always well-known ones - on their surprising or disgusting demises. Given the dependence of caricature on individuation, it would seem an uneasy fit with *Horrible Histories*’ aims, tone and politics. Yet many sketches in the programme take specific monarchs, aristocrats, or other famous historical figures as their focus, performed by the comic actor as an exaggeration of their best known physical or psychological attributes. This contradiction can be explained through caricature’s repertoire of ‘visual metaphor, personification and allegorical attributes’ which has rendered its

goal explicitly political.<sup>viii</sup> Like satire, the goal of caricature is to weaken through ridicule, to use ironic exaggeration to reveal the follies or vices of the rich and powerful. Andrew Stott reminds us that, ‘for Freud, the pleasure in caricature is derived from its ridiculing of political figures, even when the image itself is unsuccessful, ‘simply because we count rebellion against authority as a merit’.<sup>ix</sup> In its reduction of the elite to abject corporeal form, and the exaggeration of physical flaws, *Horrible Histories*’ caricature of the powerful and privileged demonstrates these dissident intentions. The brand’s creator, Terry Deary explicitly acknowledges iconoclasm as a chief objective, stating, ‘I set out to demythologise the idea of royalty, and the idea of a king dying on a toilet does that.’<sup>x</sup> According to the superiority theory of comedy, laughter is produced when the perceiver of a joke feels superiority over its victim. When the portrayed figure is a member of the elite the hierarchical shift that ensues is a specific pleasure of the caricature.

Make-up is used to support this critical embodiment of the historical figure, by changing the image of the actor into a grotesque. It often emphasises facial and bodily features that are socially unacceptable, such as the traces of disease or injury, obesity or ugliness. This performs the physiognomic function of caricature – to use the body as a critique of character. For instance, in *Horrible Histories* and *Psychobitches*, the make-up for Elizabeth I emphasises her large nose, pockmarked skin and rotten teeth, even though available portraits of the queen elide these features in their representation of her (and look more like the portrayals in *Drunk History*, where Elizabeth is played by young, conventionally attractive actors). The use of grotesque make-up for the queen enables these caricatures to act as a corrective to the inaccurate representation of the queen through available portraiture. The distance between the reality of the queen’s abject body and its representation is a source of

physiognomic critique, implying her vanity and lack of self-awareness. *Horrible Histories* dramatises this through a sketch in which the queen (Martha Howe-Douglas) rejects any portraits of herself that do not match up to her aggrandised self-image of regal beauty. She is horrified by the ‘honest’ image of herself she sees in a mirror (which she mistakes for a portrait), yet approves of a flattering portrait which she demands be copied by the artist. This short sketch speaks to the central paradox of the caricature, the use of distorted imagery to imply a privileged relation between this representation and ‘truth’. These may not be more *recognisable* images of the queen than the officially sanctioned versions, but they contain a strong claim to be more *truthful*, echoing Gombrich and Kris’s claim for the superior relation of caricature to reality.

Alongside make-up, costuming is a key mode through which the pleasure of distorted recognition is presented televisually. In the case of historical figures, for such recognition to work, the caricature must draw on pre-existing images (or verbal descriptions) that have enjoyed cultural re-circulation, regardless of how accurate these are to begin with. The strongest example of this is Henry VIII, whose striking features render him one of the English monarchs whose image is the most easily accessible. Most representations of the king draw on a limited range of images, the most important being Hans Holbein’s 1540 portrait. The features here – Henry is large and imposing, has a bushy ginger beard, a high hairline, wears a soft feathered hat and a gold chain – are replicated in most portrayals, and certainly inform the performance of this historical character in each of our sketch comedies. Indeed, a limited range of prominent features are precisely what caricatures draw on and distort. In each portrayal, an overweight actor or padding is used to emphasise Henry’s size, the actor wears a false red beard, is clothed in a doublet, tights and furs, outsized

jewellery and a feathered hat. The recollection of the Holbein image is crucial to the pleasurable recognition of the distorted version. Since the performed caricature tends to emphasise the attributes of Henry most familiar to be easily recognisable, they have a reasonable claim to Rhodes's 'superportrait' status.

Distorted recognition can also entail drawing on pre-existing *popular* cultural representations. The costuming of Cleopatra in both *Horrible Histories* and *Psychobitches* is a useful example here. The interchangeability of actors (even within *Horrible Histories*, Cleopatra is portrayed by both Martha Howe-Douglas and Kathryn Drysdale) indicates that the onus is on the costuming to convey 'Cleopatra-ness'. Though each has minor variations, in all examples the actress wears a large black wig with beaded braids, a snake-figure headdress, gold dress, and black and blue eye-make up to emulate Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963). Costuming is therefore a form of intertextuality, and an ironic guarantor of pleasurable recognition, though not veracity. The costumes in each of these programmes deliberately have a look of the dressing-up box to them, even though the *Horrible Histories* costume designer Ros Little is reportedly 'so scrupulous that she always wants to know the precise year in which a sketch is meant to be set, so as not to introduce an inexact ruff or skirt.'<sup>xi</sup> The pleasure of viewing these costumes is in their very *inauthenticity*, their play with history. Costuming marks the paradox of the caricature – to be effective it needs to balance mimesis and accuracy with exaggeration and *inauthenticity*.

Performance marks a major pleasure in the televisual caricature, since, as Dustin Griffin notes 'it is not the deformity that pleases but the satirist's skill in representing that deformity'<sup>xii</sup> *Drunk History's* central comedic value is to see representations of historical figures mouthing contemporary idioms, for example,

Henry VIII describing Anne of Cleves as “proper fit”. Facial performance is crucial here, not just because the words are lipsynced, but because the use of limited sets means that the medium close-up and close-up of actors is the most frequent framing used. Exaggerations come in the form of more animated expression that would typically be expected in televisual performance: widened eyes and lips, a greater level of movement in the face or shoulders, and, often, a deliberately raised eyebrow. This performance style is replicated in *Psychobitches* and *Horrible Histories*, though in these cases, the voice of the actor (as opposed to the non-diegetic voice of the drunk historian) can also be used as part of their portrayal of the historical figure. In *Psychobitches*, Frances Barber portrays Elizabeth I as aggressive, masculine and coarse, using sexualised language to intimidate the therapist. As with the representations of other royals, overstated working class accents (Glaswegian in the case of Mary Queen of Scots, Cockney for The Queen Mother and Princess Margaret) are used to subvert the expectations of what British monarchs should sound like. The contrast between the image of the historical figure and their voice creates comic incongruity. National stereotypes can be used to this end in the caricatured performances, particularly when this aspect of the identity of the subject is key to the sketch’s humour. For instance, in *Horrible Histories* Napoleon Bonaparte (Jim Howick) appears on ‘This is Your Reign’, a parody of *This is Your Life* (BBC / ITV, 1955 – 2007), in which his strong, silly Italian accent is used to underline the biographical fact (presented to the viewer as surprising) that Napoleon was not French but Corsican. Inauthentic, poor approximations of accents thus become a central feature of the performative style of televisual caricature, adding the important dimension of sound to the visualisation of historical figures. In all programmes, but particularly *Drunk History*, the ventriloquised voice of the historical figure and its

ironic contrast with their portrayed image is a key televisually specific aspect of these caricatures.

Alongside their vocal performance, the physicality of the actor is important to the creation of caricature. His or her stature can be used to match certain well-known aspects of the body of the historical figure, as in a relatively short actor portraying the famously (and disputably) diminutive Napoleon in the example above. Here the actor's body helps with the quick recognition of the character, alongside costuming and contextualising dialogue. In some cases, the actor's physique is important for the exaggeration function of caricature: for example, in *Psychobitches* 76-year-old actor Sheila Reid portrays ballerina Margot Fonteyn, who the psychiatrist attempts to coax into very late retirement (spoofing Fonteyn's unusually extended career). The aging body is portrayed both visibly, with the wrinkles of Reid's skin emphasised through make-up and lighting, and in the soundtrack, where the sound of joints clicking and a malfunctioning hearing aid dominate over dialogue. Alternatively, the actor's physical appearance may contradict the body of the figure portrayed, as with Katy Brand's performance of Diana Dors. Brand's fat body is used to satirise Dors's star image as a British sex symbol by comparison with Marilyn Monroe whom she mistakenly believes herself to be. Here, the actor's physicality aids the distorting function of caricature.

Nowhere, though, is this use of the actor's body to create incongruous representations of famous women more apparent than in drag performance. Drag is used in performances which satirise notions of female beauty. In *Psychobitches*, biblical princess Salome is portrayed by overweight comedian Johnny Vegas, who speaks in his gruff Mancunian accent with no apparent concession to the fact that the character is a famed beauty. The comedy is drawn from the distance between Vegas's

image and the mythical seductiveness of Salome. A variation on this joke is made in *Drunk History*, as the story of the famous disjuncture between the portrait of Anne of Cleves and her real appearance is told economically through the choice of an actor (Tony Way) who is not conventionally attractive to portray the queen, underlined by minimal use of make-up and a visible beard designed to deny any marker of femininity. As Ben Poore notes, drag performance in historical comedy is not simply a matter of cheap laughs, but also more troubling in its implications about the ‘proper’ place for power and influence: ‘Men dressing as Queen Victoria not only assign to the monarch a rough, unladylike machismo, but simultaneously take the monarch down the social scale.’<sup>xiii</sup> This applies to other famous and influential women as well, such as Emmeline Pankhurst, portrayed in *Psychobitches* by comedian Ted Robbins as a coarse northerner. This caricature of Pankhurst expands on a truth about her – she resided in Manchester’s notorious Moss Side area – and creates incongruity between her origins in this part of the city and her historical importance. The crux of the joke suggests an incompatibility between being a feminist and suffragist and being ‘a lady’, and between working class identity and power and influence.

In these various examples, the actor’s body and voice are used to draw on underlying social stereotypes – of women, the working class, obese or elderly people – for shorthand ironic juxtaposition. Stereotypes share with caricature a reputation for crudeness, oversimplification and representational dishonesty. The terms are used interchangeably and often uncritically, as Steve Neale notes of stereotype, to evaluate negatively portrayals in popular culture that decline to depict the complexities of ‘real’ human lives.<sup>xiv</sup> However, Richard Dyer argues, drawing on the work of T.E. Perkins, that this conception of stereotype underestimates the extent to which a range of social and cultural knowledges must be drawn upon for stereotype to function.<sup>xv</sup>

Stereotypes and caricatures both work, as Dyer notes, as a form of ‘short cut’, a means of quick access to a wide range of cultural knowledge which imply more agency on the part of the perceiver than is usually credited in critical analyses of both forms of representation. However, there is certainly a political critique to be made of the use of gendered, national and social stereotypes in such portrayals of historical figures, since, for the jokes to work, there must be a shared underlying assumption that existing hierarchies are neutral and transparent. This arguably undermines the claim of such caricatures to question the status quo; the subversion of the original can have the ironic effect of reinforcing its cultural power.

In this sense, caricature shares with parody an ambivalent politics, as Linda Hutcheon has argued: ‘as a form of ironic representation, parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimises and subverts that which it parodies.’<sup>xvi</sup> Simon Dentith similarly notes the dual transgressive and conservative nature of parody, inasmuch as it tends to preserve the forms that it attacks through the continued cultural circulation of those forms.<sup>xvii</sup> The paradoxical character of caricature suggests that it performs a similar cultural function. Even while caricature may distort the image of the portrayed figure, it relies upon – and thus extends – pre-existing recognition of and knowledge about that figure. In this sense, as Hutcheon notes of postmodern parody, it is a ‘a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history.’<sup>xviii</sup> Given close familial relation between parody and caricature, it is unsurprising that parodies play an important part in these historical comedies, as can be seen in the examples of the Thatcher and Davies/Crawford caricatures in *Psychobitches*. Caricatures are used as part of parodies to lend contemporary resonances to the portrayals of historical figures. *Horrible Histories* utilises popular music parody as

one means of creating such connections: the four King Georges' histories are potted into a boyband ballad, Mary Seacole's story is told through a pastiche of Beyoncé's 'Single Ladies', or Charles Dickens's biography is summarised in the style of The Smiths, with Dickens recast as Morrissey. Facts of the difficult early life of Dickens are alluded to in the song, which pastiches 'Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now'. For a viewer with enough familiarity with the miserabilist style of both Dickens and Morrissey, the conflation of these two figures combines pleasurable recognition with irony. Intertextual referencing in historical comedy establishes humorous relationships between present and past, granting the 'levity that gives us the freedom to move backward and forward in time and to transcend barriers between eras'.<sup>xix</sup> Such freedom is invoked too in the caricatured performance of historical figures.

The costuming, make-up, performance style, editing structure and intertextual referencing of these caricatures lend them their televisual specificity. In each case, though, they draw upon (or help to construct) knowledge of the portrayed historical figure. Whether the culturally circulated knowledge of the figure will be re-asserted or undermined in the caricature depends upon the extent to which the pleasure is drawn from recognition or distortion. But in all cases, the active contemplation of the viewer is relied upon to create the ironic connections between what is known of the 'real' figure and their exaggerated portrayal.

### **Recognition: Television, Caricature and Critical Historiography**

The use of intertextual referencing described above as part of the pleasure and function of historical caricatures suggests strongly the requirement of some pre-existing knowledge on the part of the viewer for distorted recognition to function, and certainly for caricature to achieve the status of Rhodes's 'superportrait'. However, particularly in the case of *Horrible Histories*' child viewers, it is problematic to

assume that such knowledge will be shared universally. Indeed, as Griffin notes of satire, ‘even when a satirist appears to “refer” to historical events or persons, the reader does not always make the identification.’<sup>xx</sup> There is an ever-present threat in the caricature of non- or mis-recognition. Using the above example of popular music parody in the show, we can question the extent to which a child viewer of the 2010s can be expected to have sufficient knowledge of the music of the 1980s for the Morrissey allusion to work for them. Surprisingly, then, executive producer Richard Bradley, stated that the writing team ‘realise[d] that it had to be written 100% for children and not have knowing references aimed only at adults’.<sup>xxi</sup> His use of the term ‘knowing’ is noteworthy in this context, as it is used pejoratively to refer to a kind of self-satisfied mode of reception, in which the viewer’s intelligence is flattered by multiple layers of intertextual referencing. Linda Hutcheon uses the term more positively to describe the viewer of media adaptations:

The term “knowing” suggests being savvy and street-smart, as well as knowledgable, and undercuts some of the elitist associations of the other terms [learned or competent] in favor of a more democratizing kind of straightforward awareness of the adaptation’s enriching, palimpsestic doubleness.<sup>xxii</sup>

She argues that adaptations are experienced differently by knowing and unknowing audiences, that experiencing adaptations *as an adaptation* allows the adapted text to ‘oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing’.<sup>xxiii</sup> Though Hutcheon’s work on adaptations specifically discounts parody and pastiche (and we could say, by extension, caricature), her concept of the ‘knowing’ audience can be used to discuss the distorted recognition of the caricature. ‘Knowing’ here has a double meaning: not only is this an epistemological issue, but also one of disposition, an expected stance of

critical distance from the material viewed. Both senses of 'knowing' will be now be considered in a discussion of televisual caricature as part of the repertoire of postmodern historical representation.

The 'knowing' viewer, in terms of an expected disposition of detachment and scepticism, is addressed in a number of ways in each programme. These can be structural devices that are commonplace in both comedy and postmodern media. In *Drunk History*, the actors lipsyncing the lines of the drunk comedian frequently break the fourth wall, looking to camera and sharing with the viewer a moment of silent judgement of the drunken narrator. This is a literal 'knowing' look, a shared moment which disintegrates any trace there might be in this programme of willing suspension of disbelief in favour of an askance view, crucial for the comedic function of the sketches. A similar device is also used in *Horrible Histories*, where characters will often break from their sketch to comment to camera about what is taking place. The historical caricature is also sometimes used to present quiz questions to the viewer, in a form of direct address. This halts any illusion of temporal specificity, fixing the historical figure firmly in the televisual context, and once again performing that anachronistic function which is typical of self-aware historical comedy. In *Psychobitches*, this 'knowing' gaze is implicated often, for example, in a very short sketch in which Princess Diana (Jack Whitehall) arrives at the door to the office of the therapist, her eyes cast downward in the manner made famous in her television interview with Martin Bashir. The therapist looks at her watch, quizzically, then back at Diana, who says only two words: 'Too soon?' Of course, this is a metacommentary on the media discourse around Diana; her posthumous sanctification has rendered her an apparently unfit figure for caricature. The sketch depends on knowledge of this

historical and medial context for the functioning of the joke, as well as the shared disposition (of sceptical distance) towards the cult of Diana.

Caricatures depend more than other forms of representation on Gombrich's 'beholder's share', the activity of the perceiver that draws on the sum of their cultural knowledge. This recognition function is implicated in the effectiveness of the caricature, since, as Gombrich and Kris note, it 'reveals its true sense to us only if we can compare it with the sitter, and thus appreciate the witty play of "like in unlike".'<sup>xxiv</sup> Only for the viewer with such familiarity with the original figure being portrayed could a caricature work as a 'superportrait', requiring a level of collusion between perceiver and image producer. Hutcheon acknowledges the threat of 'elitism' and 'lack of access' in postmodern parody, precisely the kind of potential exclusion forced by the lack of recognition of the subject of caricature. She notes that 'is the complicity of postmodern parody – its inscribing as well as undermining of that which it parodies – that is central to its ability to be understood.'<sup>xxv</sup> Although each of our texts is positioned in relation to niche audiences in complex ways (*Horrible Histories* speaks broadly to a child, or at least 'family' audience, *Drunk History* is transmitted on narrowcast channel Comedy Central UK, *Psychobitches* is a flagship original programme for the 'elite' pay-TV channel Sky Arts), the televisual medium demands a level of transparency that tends to work against such address to a 'closed' reading group.<sup>xxvi</sup> To this end, paratextual framing devices are utilised to facilitate such recognition in each programme, drawing on television's specific stylistic possibilities and conventions to convey necessary contextualisation for the short sketch.

*Psychobitches* employs two strategies for contextualising the subjects of the sketches sufficiently that they can be recognised. The first is the simple use of brief

close-ups of the psychotherapist's diary to announce who will be the subject of the ensuing sequence. This is an efficient means of setting up expectations drawn from the cultural associations with the famous subject that are to be undermined or exaggerated in the caricature. The second strategy is to use the therapist's dialogue is used to provide key details of the 'patient's' biography, usually framed vaguely within a therapeutic discourse that draws attention to their parentage, childhood or traumatic events from their life. The therapy setting of *Psychobitches* suggests that superficial 'knowledge' about a subject is inferior to the internal 'truths' of a psyche, in a mirror of the role of the caricature of externalising such inner 'truths'. The therapist is endowed with a privileged relation to truth in the programme, both historical and psychological, since she sees clearly facts about her 'patients' that they are unable or unwilling to see themselves. This both aids recognition of the caricatured figure and sets up the punchline for jokes. It is particularly useful when the subject is not perhaps especially well known, as in the example of a sketch about Hildegard von Bingen (Michelle Gomez). The therapist outlines the reasons why the medieval composer, polymath and nun who was passed over by the Catholic church for sainthood for nearly 800 years, may have some unresolved anger. This rather lengthy summary of Bingen's biography is delivered in a series of shots of the therapist and reverse shots of Bingen, in which she calmly listens to the litany of her achievements in an upright, poised posture, a reversal of the regular joke structure of the programme outlined above. This prepares the punchline, the answer to the question of how she feels about the Church, to which Gomez sings "fuck them" beatifically in the plainsong style of Bingen's compositions. The dialogue sets the behaviour of the subject as incongruous with the expectations of the historical figure.

*Horrible Histories* uses an on-screen graphic that explicitly confirms or denies the truth claims of the sketches that are being performed. A puppet rat called Rattus Rattus appears on screen during sketches with a sign that tells the viewer that what they see is 'true', and occasionally also admits that the performed actions are simply 'silly'. Rattus Rattus is also used to link different sketches in short segments where he directly addresses the camera, delivering short snippets of factual information like dates or brief descriptions of historical events or people. Like *Psychobitches*'s therapist, Rattus Rattus has a privileged relationship with truth, and is used as the arbiter for the audience between the exaggeration and reality. He remediates the voice of the author in the original children's books, which encouraged readers to take a sceptical view of historical knowledge and to consider historical subjects with empathy as well as critical distance. The use of a puppet rat to perform this role in the series is significant inasmuch as it reduces the reliance on an omniscient 'narrator' or the imposing figure of the (white male) historian.

*Drunk History*'s structuring joke, that inebriated comedians are in 'charge' of the historical story under scrutiny, provides in itself a context in which historical figures are likely to be exaggerated in the narration. The programme therefore begins with a text and voiceover disclaimer (by comedian Jimmy Carr) that asks the viewer to apply discretion in terms of their acceptance of the historical 'knowledge' that will be imparted throughout:

"The following stories are all based on genuine historical events. However, the comedians telling the stories are drunk, so the facts may have been embellished."

The effect of this disclaimer is not only to discredit the 'historians'' voices on the programme, but also to warn that the re-enactments that are displayed should be viewed critically. This draws on and undermines a familiar convention from factual

television that in ordinary context is used to gain (or, perhaps, gainsay) the trust of the viewer. Undermining this trust pact in the context of *Drunk History* is a means of enhancing the comedy, as well as demonstrating that the portrayals of real people in the programme should be questioned, and will be exaggerations rather than truthful or mimetic impersonations. The programme parodies the underlying syntax of television history programmes in John Corner's 'commentary', 'presenter' and 're-enactment' modes.<sup>xxvii</sup> Apart from linking segments voiced by Jimmy Carr, the voice of the 'historian(s)' is the only dialogue heard on the soundtrack, an echo of the authoritative 'commentary' delivered in history documentary. The show's narrative structure oscillates between the previously mentioned lip-synced re-enactments and shots of the 'historian' at repose in a softly-lit study, piles of books and desks visible in the background in a mise-en-scene that mirrors the kinds of settings commonly chosen for presenter-led histories. Caricatured performances in the re-enactments are thus complemented by the textual and paratextual structure of the series, one which borrows the grammar of television history programming to undermine it parodically.

Among historians and media professionals, there exists considerable anxiety around historical programming, particularly in its ability to retain accuracy and nuance in its presentation for the medium, as Steve Anderson notes:

There is remarkable consensus among both historians and media critics regarding television's unsuitability for the construction of history... TV, so the argument goes, can produce no lasting sense of history; at worst it actually impedes viewers' ability to receive, process, or remember information about the past.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Erin Bell and Ann Gray suggest the source of much of this consensus is that television's putative entertainment role tends to militate against the kinds of history

storytelling of which historians would generally approve. At the same time, however, historians have recognised the potential of television as an instrument for the dissemination and promotion of historical ideas, and 'are keen for people to be more engaged by television history programming as a route into a broader interest in, and critical appreciation of, the past.'<sup>xxix</sup> Such critical understanding may not be best served in the kinds of strongly authored, personality-led documentaries which currently predominate history programming on British television, since, as Bell and Gray argue, these are a particularly 'closed' way of telling.<sup>xxx</sup> In their play with not just history itself, but with the way in which history is mediated for television, these historical comedies, offer an antidote to such closure. Historical caricature thus not only diminishes the power of the historical figure through abject, grotesque representation; it also undermines the authority of the conventional means by which contemporary television viewers receive historical information.

Comedy's often theorised function of contained subversion is utilised to draw into question the typical modes by which historical storytelling is delivered on television. As Barbara Korte and Doris Lechner note, one of the effects of historical comedy is to encourage a critical view of historiography, to offer the audience an opportunity to look askance at hegemonic historical narrative.<sup>xxxi</sup> Marcia Landy describes this as 'counter-official historicizing'.<sup>xxxii</sup> Not only are alternative (fictional) historical stories being offered, but turning the comedic lens on historical events suggests that the narrativisation of history should be questioned. Historical comedy and caricature, then, share the effect of using ridicule to critique, question or undermine both those in power and the underlying structures that support the wielding of that power. *Horrible Histories* as a whole media text is predicated on encouraging critical historiographical reading in the child reader:

A noteworthy feature of the series is its recognition of the disputed nature of historical knowledge. Readers are alerted to the fact that the past can be interpreted in different ways – something which historical documentaries often fail to do.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Indeed, often the entire purpose of sketches in the series is to remind the viewer of how certain histories become distorted then privileged through diachronic cultural circulation. In one such skit, the ghost of Richard III (Jim Howick) appears before William Shakespeare (Matthew Baynton) to repudiate the factual inaccuracies through which the play defames him. He begins by disputing the famous physical traits of the Shakespearian king – the limp, hunchback and withered arm.

Shakespeare admits to constructing a physiognomical caricature of the king, arguing that these are symbolic and that Richard was ‘evil’. Richard’s ghost wields historic fact against the ‘evidence’ Shakespeare offers to support his characterisation, such as his supposed murder of the Duke of Somerset who died when Richard was three years old. This is supported by onscreen overlaid signs which assure the viewer that ‘The Ghost is Right’. Through sketches like this, the series points to the ways in which historical knowledge can be distorted through fictionalisation and caricature, though stopping short of explicitly acknowledging the irony of this attitude in a programme that does precisely that. In other words, the programme both addresses and works to produce the kind of detached or ‘knowing’ viewer discussed above.

Moving image historical representation of course also has its part to play in this distortion of historical knowledge. As Korte and Lechner argue, comedic histories on film and television have a formational effect on the public’s memory, and can shape perceptions of historical actors in much the same way as Gombrich argued that caricatures can reshape perception of a caricature’s ‘victim’:

because his picture is linked inseparably in our minds with the caricature we have seen. We have been taught by the artist to see him anew, to see him as a ridiculous creature.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Here, televised caricature engages in the contradictory construction of what Anderson calls ‘popular memory’, the culturally shared sense of history that includes both official and ‘counter-official’ histories.<sup>xxxv</sup> For example, *Horrible Histories*’ Elizabeth I – bad-tempered, spoiled and childlike - borrows extensively from Miranda Richardson’s mercurial Queenie in *Blackadder*. Rather than returning to the ‘official’ historical record of the Queen’s temperament – which the programme explicitly reiterates is unreliable - *Horrible Histories* uses a shorthand intertextual reference to relate the portrayal to the most accessible comedic performance of Elizabeth in popular memory. This lends some credence to John Corner’s argument that ‘keeping popular factual accounts, and popular interpretation, entirely free of the densely imagined fictions that now inform and misinform our sense of the past has always been impossible.’<sup>xxxvi</sup> However, as Jerome de Groot has noted, there is not universal acceptance of the popular memory paradigm within historiographical study. Some historians have viewed the televisual caricature available in *Blackadder* negatively, as it has perpetuated popular myths around certain historical figures such as Field Marshal Haig: ‘The show was being used as evidence in a historiographical debate, demonstrating the increasing influence of popular culture on historiography.’<sup>xxxvii</sup> The negative view here is tantamount to an anti-postmodern stance, opposed to the ‘gleefully postmodern’ historical television comedies including *Horrible Histories* and *Psychobitches* on which, as James Leggott notes, *Blackadder* is a clear influence.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

The programmes under scrutiny here may indeed be seen as the kinds of ‘de-totalizing’ representations that Hutcheon sees as typical of postmodern history: ‘what has surfaced is something different from the unitary, closed, evolutionary narratives of historiography as we have traditionally known it.’<sup>xxxix</sup> The sketch format of these series insists that they focus on the episodic (or even microepisodic) events from history rather than the long-form historical narrative, thus they work against the kind of teleological historical narrative familiar from more conventional historical programming (and broader traditional historical discourse). Consider the therapist’s waiting room in *Psychobitches*, or the Grim Reaper’s queue of corpses in *Horrible Histories*’ ‘Stupid Deaths’ sketches: here, figures from across time and space are given a context in which they are brought together against the logic of history. The comedic representation of such figures through caricature enable these representations to function within a sketch comedy – we need only recognise who they are to see that they do not belong together, and revel in their ironic juxtaposition. Caricature is little discussed as a mode of postmodern representation, but as this article has considered, it shares with other forms like parody and satire the ambivalent oscillation between conservatism and transgression, the ability to re-assert as well as undermine pre-existing knowledge, and the pleasure of distorted recognition. When used in the context of historical television comedy, performed caricature operates in complex ways to amuse a ‘knowing’ viewer.

## **Conclusion**

I began this essay by positing that the central pleasure available in the (televsual) historical caricature is that of ‘distorted recognition’. The essay traces a path that first analyses the form and function of the ‘distortion’, through costuming, performance style, dialogue and other televisual markers, and then considers the broader meaning

of the ‘recognition’ function, through a consideration of the role of cultural knowledge and a critical stance addressed by these performed caricatures. The pleasure of recognition, which flatters the historical and cultural knowledge of the viewer is combined with the dissident action of distortion, also speaks to a ‘knowing’ disposition, a critical historiographical approach that permits a delight in ironic or contrapuntal juxtapositions across time.

The role of the caricature here is aligned with its historical function of satirising historical elites – kings, queens, aristocrats and the rich and powerful. Re-figuring history’s most powerful in the forms of popular culture, exaggerating their physical and psychological weaknesses, and recasting their flaws in contemporary language, each programme offers a form of dis-empowering critique. The historical caricature also acts as a historiographical metacommentary. As Steve Anderson has noted of popular memory, this dis-empowerment extends to the ‘official histories’ sanctioned by historians:

Rather than simply learning new ways to forget, TV viewers may be acquiring a much more specialized and useful ability – to navigate and even remember their own past with creativity and meaning – even if it goes “against the design” of historians.<sup>x1</sup>

As distorted portrayals of the figures from the past, televisual caricatures add to the stock of representations of history, and require this navigational ability of their viewers. They demand a ‘knowing’ look, a scepticism about the ways in which history is told, and a delight in rebellion. As with comedy and satire more broadly, these caricatures can allow a sense of superiority over the represented figures, or as Griffin notes, a

sense of mastery [that] brings with it some relief from the burdens of complexity, a pleasure that we have proved ourselves more than equal to a difficult task of understanding and assessment. We have extended our imagined control of the world and in the process elevated our own status in relation to it.<sup>xli</sup>

The distortion function of caricature supports the superiority theory of comedy, that laughter devalues its object in the eyes of the beholder. There is pleasure to be had simply in recognition, but the distorted recognition paradigm of caricature also suggests the validity of the incongruity theory of comedy: that human beings simply enjoy seeing inconsistencies and incompatibilities, and interpret these as humorous. This enables television sketch shows to use caricature to perform the job of critical historiography, subverting the received wisdoms of historical narrativisation to produce a more sceptical, postmodern stance.

Caricature therefore should stand alongside parody, satire and intertextuality as a recognised feature of postmodern historiography, as another mode of historical ‘de-totalizing’ in Hutcheon’s terms. Like parody, caricature is a form with a longer history into which postmodern forms, such as the televisual sketch shows discussed in this article, should be situated. The televisual specificity of the caricatures under examination, though, should not be underestimated. That television is a place where historical caricature should thrive should not be surprising, since, as historians and television scholars have agreed, it is an ambivalent medium for the dissemination of historical knowledge. However, it should neither be a cause for alarm, since television caricature reveals ways in which this problematic medium can transmit critical historiography in a manner that may appease the fears of historians that lament television’s propensity to produce ‘passive’ viewers. Tristram Hunt is one such

historian, and argued of *Horrible Histories* that there are ‘more sophisticated, populist ways of getting people involved in history than this.’<sup>xlii</sup> In this essay, I have shown that the performed caricature is a sophisticated, populist method of historical representation on television, one that ironically draws on a vault of historical knowledge from ‘official’ and ‘counter-official’ historiographies and, of course, the ability to discriminate between them. Although significant cultural competence is required for caricatures to become ‘superportraits’, the performances are nevertheless accessible to adults and children alike. This is because the caricature is, at heart, a form of sophisticated simplification. It is little wonder that one of our central examples is a children’s television programme popular with adults. As Gombrich and Kris put it: ‘in the eternal child in all of us lie the true roots of caricature.’<sup>xliii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Judith Wechsler ‘The Issue of Caricature’ *Art Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4 (1983), p. 318.

<sup>ii</sup> Gillian Rhodes, *Superportraits: Caricatures and Recognition*, (Hove: The Psychology Press, 1996), pp. 13 – 14.

<sup>iii</sup> E.H. Gombrich and Ernst Kris, ‘The Principles of Caricature’ *British Journal of Medical Psychology*, Vol 17 (1938), pp. 320 - 321.

<sup>iv</sup> Rhodes, *Superportraits*.

<sup>v</sup> Adam Gopnik, ‘High and Low: Caricature, Primitivism and the Cubist Portrait’ *Art Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, (1983) p 373.

<sup>vi</sup> E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation* (sixth edition), (London: Phaidon, 2002).

<sup>vii</sup> See Andrew Stott, *Comedy*, (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>viii</sup> Wechsler, ‘The Issue of Caricature’, p. 317.

<sup>ix</sup> Stott, *Comedy*, p. 92.

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<sup>x</sup> Quoted in Margaret Scanlon, 'History Beyond the Academy: Humour and Horror in Children's History Books' *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* vol 16, no. 2, (2011), p. 82.

<sup>xi</sup> Richard Preston, 'Horrible Histories: 20 years of entertaining children', *The Daily Telegraph*, 21 February 2013,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/9857326/Horrible-Histories-20-years-of-entertaining-children.html> Accessed 9 Aug 2016

<sup>xii</sup> Dustin Griffin, *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), p. 166.

<sup>xiii</sup> Benjamin Poore, 'Reclaiming the Dame: Cross-dressing as Queen Victoria in British theatre and television comedy' *Comedy Studies* vol.3, no. 2 (2012), p. 179.

<sup>xiv</sup> Steve Neale, 'The Same Old Story: Stereotypes and Difference' in Manuel Alvarado, Edward Buscombe and Richard Collins (eds) *The Screen Education Reader: Cinema, Television, Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1993), pp. 41 – 47.

<sup>xv</sup> Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images*, (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>xvi</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.97.

<sup>xvii</sup> Simon Dentith, *Parody*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>xviii</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 91.

<sup>xix</sup> Hannu Salmi, 'Introduction: The Mad History of the World', in Salmi (ed) *Historical Comedy on Screen* (Bristol and Wilmington NC: Intellect, 2011), p. 29.

<sup>xx</sup> Griffin, *Satire*, p. 121.

<sup>xxi</sup> Leo Hickman, 'How Horrible Histories became a huge hit', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/mar/17/horrible-histories-huge-hit> accessed 1 August 2016.

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- <sup>xxii</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation: Second Edition*, (London: Routledge, 2013) p. 120
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> E.H. Gombrich and E. Kris, *Caricature*, (Harmondsworth: King Penguin, 1940), p. 13.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 101.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Simon Dentith uses this term to describe the social contexts in which parody has traditionally thrived, such as within educational or religious institutions.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> John Corner, 'Once Upon a Time...': Visual Design and Documentary Openings' in Ann Gray and Erin Bell (eds) *Televising History: Mediating the Past in Postwar Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 13 – 27.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Steve Anderson 'Loafing in the Garden of Knowledge: History TV and Popular Memory', *Film & History* vol. 30, no. 1, (2000), p. 15.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Erin Bell and Ann Gray, 'History on Television: Charisma, Narrative and Knowledge', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10:1 (2007), p. 127.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Ibid. p. 129.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Barbara Korte and Doris Lechner, 'History and Humour: Charting the Field' in Korte and Lechner (eds) *History and Humour: British and American Perspectives*, (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013), p. 8 – 9.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Marcia Landy, 'Comedy and Counter History' in Salmi (ed) *Historical Comedy on Screen*, p.197.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Scanlon, 'History Beyond the Academy', p. 89.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Gombrich and Kris, *Caricature*, p. 13.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> Anderson 'Loafing in the Garden of Knowledge', p.16.

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> John Corner, 'Backwards Looks: mediating the past' *Media Culture and Society*, 28(3) (2006) p. 466.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture (second edition)*, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 171.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> James Leggott, "'It's not clever, it's not funny, and it's not period": Costume Comedy and British Television' in James Leggott and Julie Taddeo (eds), *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama from The Forsyte Saga to Downton Abbey*, (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, p. 63.

<sup>xl</sup> Anderson 'Loafing in the Garden of Knowledge', p. 22.

<sup>xli</sup> Griffin, *Satire*, p. 168.

<sup>xlii</sup> Hickman, 'How Horrible Histories became a huge hit'

<sup>xliii</sup> Gombrich and Kris, *Caricature*, p. 27.