

Tim Renkow's *Jerk*: Cringe Comedy, Disability and Political Correctness

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This paper examines how the British BBC 3 sitcom *Jerk* (2019–2023) challenges contemporary liberal orthodoxy, mobilising the comic license of its disabled protagonist to interrogate the social prescriptions that breed both hypocrisy and opportunism.

Jerk examines the ways in which the codified structures of 'correct politics' can ultimately work against progressive aims: the 'politics of injury' defining minority groups by their trauma alone, and identity politics devolving into tribal thinking and niche marketing. *Jerk*'s plotlines examine how supposedly reformist positions can reinforce stereotypes, expressive conventions learned by rote can obviate more complex examination of moral questions, and belief in liberal virtue can result in complacency and imperviousness. *Jerk*'s 'cringe comedy' thereby disrupts the piety around liberal positions, reinforcing the right to challenge and critique.



The British sitcom *Jerk* (BBC3, 2019–2023) stars Tim Renkow as an anti-hero who exploits his cerebral palsy to get away with bad behaviour. Widely acknowledged to be ground-breaking in its representation of disability, the series is a radical departure from stereotypical narrative conventions that situate disabled characters as either victim or saint. The assessment of one British paper was characteristic of the startled critical response to the show: and argues that the series rights the wrong of under-representation ‘in the most combative fashion imaginable. This was scorched-earth comedy, where sacred cows were piled atop a pyre and set gleefully alight’ (Power, 2021). Tracing a clear kinship between Renkow’s anti-social character and Larry David in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Wieland Schwanebeck suggests both might be classified as cringe comics, arguing that each ‘acts as a vigilante who challenges the uncertain regimes of political correctness’ (2021: 6). Oblivious, able-bodied men have long been the chief proponents of cringe (Larry David, along with David Brent and Michael Scott from both the UK and US versions of *The Office* and Alan Partridge from *Knowing Me, Knowing You with Alan Partridge*); by contrast, Renkow’s disability offers a fresh take on the genre and, in doubling down on the ableist discomfort that surrounds disability, a further intensification of awkwardness.

In this article, I argue that during a rather censorious and paranoid cultural moment, *Jerk* is unusually bold in its examination of contemporary liberal pieties. Other recent television comedies are innovative in terms of the mainstream representation of disability—shows like *Speechless* (ABC, 2016–2019) and Ryan O’Connell’s *Special* (Netflix, 2019–2021) foreground complex disabled characters and demonstrate increased confidence in ignoring able-bodied comfort levels—but none harness disability as strategically as *Jerk* as a means to interrogate those procedures that constitute what Mary Gaitskill calls ‘the corrective apparatus’ (2023), or what we might loosely describe as either political correctness or the more current designation, ‘wokeness’.

The vocabulary involved in this discussion is clearly partisan, with ‘woke’ now dissociated from its progressive origins in becoming a slogan for conservative politics, and something of a dog whistle for ‘those who would defend the status quo against progressive change’ (Herbert, 2023: 268). Therefore, it is necessary to refine my terminology. Nesrine Malik usefully offers ‘correct politics’ as a way of both capturing the performative, virtue-signalling aspects of the phenomenon and safeguarding the definition of ‘political correctness’ as an attempt ‘to create a framework of equality of treatment, of opportunity and of respect to all’ (2019: 62). While legitimate moral concerns and the protection of human rights are the starting point for the protocols of correct politics, I argue that they have engendered an apparatus or a regime that, all too often, as Gaitskill suggests, enforces ‘unthinking zealotry’ (2023) and curbs freedom

of expression, another key human right. Mobilising the comic license of its disabled protagonist, *Jerk* interrogates the current social prescriptions that breed both hypocrisy and opportunism, using humour to support the right to challenge and critique.¹

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the broadcaster of *Jerk*, has a distinctive place in British cultural production, one that is very different to, say, a global streaming platform like Netflix. A public service broadcaster financed in part by a mandatory licence fee,² and required by law to be politically impartial, the BBC has a central role in ‘supporting democratic values, promoting social cohesion and driving investment in world class creativity and skills’ (Written Evidence, 2022: 1). As a recent report from Ofcom (the UK’s regulatory authority for broadcasting) notes, despite the continuing decline of linear television viewing in the face of competition from subscription video-on-demand services, the BBC still dominates the list of the most watched programmes, especially ‘when covering events of national significance’ such as the Platinum Jubilee and the state funeral of HM Queen Elizabeth II (2023: 26). Given the importance of the BBC to British national identity and its legal duty to provide public service content ‘for the good of all’ (BBC Group, 2022/23: 9), it is little wonder that the broadcaster is heavily scrutinised.

The heated debates about the BBC’s impartiality often centre on accusations of ‘wokery’.³ Its current diversity commitment, spanning April 2021 to March 2024, ringfences £100 million of existing commissioning budgets to spend on ‘diverse content’, with criteria for on-screen representation that includes all the protected characteristics listed in the Equality Act 2010: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage/civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation (BBC, n.d.).⁴ This is one place where there is a blurring of the line

¹ As Glen Loury notes, any address of political correctness will invite scrutiny; as ‘[c]ombatants from the left and the right ... try to assess whether a writer is ‘for them’ or ‘against them’. Readers of this essay will doubtless have suspicions about my motivations; Loury, in discussing his own work, articulates the tacit evaluation best: ‘How an essay like this is read and evaluated, what in it is taken seriously and what is dismissed as out-of-hand, depends for many readers on ... what they take to be [the writer’s] ulterior motives’ (1994: 434). For the sake of clarity, I identify as a liberal, and while I largely agree with many of the conventions of political correctness, I do think that it can be an enforced and stifling orthodoxy. In the interests of not presuming access to universality and acknowledging potential blind spots, I should also state that I am an able-bodied, white, middle-class, cis woman.

² In 2023, the licence fee ‘accounted for about 65% of the BBC’s total income of £5.73bn’ (BBC, 2024).

³ If wokery is the official new religion of the British state, then the BBC is its priesthood and Broadcasting House its central cathedral’ runs the headline in the British tabloid, *The Sun*, decrying how the BBC ‘relentlessly peddles the fashionable gospel of equality and social inclusion’ (McKinstry, 2023).

⁴ Within this criteria, a programme must comply with certain on-screen measures to be considered diverse: ‘landmark portrayal’, for instance, which ‘has a diverse storyline, topic or character front and centre of the proposition and narrative’; ‘incidental and integrated portrayal’ where ‘there is no direct comment on that characteristic; the character or contributor just ‘happens to be’ diverse’ and ‘diverse on-screen talent’, where ‘the talent most regularly associated with the programme or series are diverse’ (BBC n.d.).

between human rights and the need for diverse representation, and political correctness as the effective guardian of both rights and representation. The very guidelines that ensured *Jerk*'s passage to the screen might be seen by some as 'PC gone mad', but, given the extent to which mainstream representation contours the possibilities of social inclusion, it is surely vital that the representation of diversity is legally mandated.

If we accept political correctness as the guardian of both rights and representation, on what grounds should it be critiqued? Its primary detractors are conservative, with both the Tory party in the UK and the Republicans in the US stoking a culture war in which political correctness serves as a lightning rod for right-wing grievance politics more generally. Objectors to political correctness often define themselves as defenders of freedom of expression, a right that is legally protected in the UK by Article 10 of the 1998 Human Rights Act, and in the US, protected by the First Amendment, which states that 'Congress shall make no law ... abridging freedom of speech' (O'Brien, 2010: x). John Herbert is right to notice the degree to which 'much of the current outrage over supposed threats to free speech may in reality be a response to perceived threats to White identity' (2023).

However, while the defence of the right of free speech and the critique of PC is largely codified within both the British and US cultural contexts as right-wing and illiberal, there are progressive arguments too. Glen Loury, for instance, notes that the 'enforced orthodoxy' (1994: 9) of political correctness leads to censorship and conformity, thus stifling public debate and preventing 'a constructive, informative dialogue on vital matters of common concern' (1994: 429). Loury's article is 30 years-old and his case studies address the specific concerns of the day—sanctions against South Africa, for example—but the applicability to newer contexts demonstrates the ongoing relevance of his argument. He argues persuasively that 'the effective examination of fundamental moral questions can be impeded by the superficial moralism of expressive conventions' and worries that 'people may opt for the mouthing of right-sounding but empty words over the risks of substantive moral analysis' (1994: 441). Loury and others argue that this tendency has had a particularly chilling effect on academic freedom. Jeannie Suk Gersen, for example, observes the increasing use of the 'concepts of discrimination or harassment' to shut down challenging conversations and suggests that any criticism of especially sensitive issues (particularly around race and gender) is automatically seen as bigotry or discrimination (2024). *Jerk* intervenes in such debates, providing another forum for publics to meet and follow a representation of free speech issues; and disability is just one among many sensitive issues explored without much in the way of restraint. The series' plotlines examine how supposedly reformist positions can actually reinforce stereotypes and demonstrate how 'the superficial moralism of expressive conventions' (Loury, 1994: 441) can obviate the

more complex examination of moral questions, with belief in liberal virtue resulting in both complacency and imperviousness. ‘Superficial moralism’ is just as significant in shaping assumptions about disability as those around race, gender and other protected characteristics, and it actively contributes to narrative conventions that designate disabled people as victim or saint, the reaching for pity or praise equating to a perfunctory form of morality.

Jerk challenges the hypocrisy engendered by what Sarah Garnham describes as a ‘rules-based order’ (2021) and cringe, that ‘intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment’ (Dahl, 2018: 8), plays a fundamental part. As Alena Saucke notes, the tension so often created by other forms of comedy, in order to be dispelled through laughter, is in cringe deliberately left unresolved; ‘[b]y maintaining states of discomfort and moments of unresolved threat, cringe comedies linger in this state of irresolution, running counter to notions of comic relief’ (2015: 44). Schwanebeck notices the ‘purposeful ambiguity’ of cringe comedy (2021: 5), and I argue that disability and correct politics constitute the twinned pair of prohibited topics that the ambiguity of *Jerk*’s comedy seeks to address, the former used strategically to examine the latter.

Cringe has a long and fruitful association with disability. Schwanebeck mentions hidden-camera prank shows like Channel 4’s *I’m Spazticus* (2012–2013), ‘which puts disabled people in outrageous situations to coax horrified reactions out of bystanders’, as representative of cringe’s capacity for ‘highlighting the contested position of minorities and so-called “protected groups”’ (2021: 5). And in her discussion of *Flowers* (Channel 4, 2016–2018), a comedy series that addresses mental illness, Linda Hess comments on ‘the potential of cringe to facilitate constructive and critical negotiations of mental health issues while avoiding the comforts of cathartic relief or narrative resolution’ (2021: 9). It is notable that both these shows were shown on Channel 4, which, like the BBC, is governed by a public service remit in which diverse representation is paramount.⁵ Both Channel 4 and BBC3 have a target audience of 16 to 34-year-olds, and both their remits prioritise the importance of broadcasting content that, while engaging, is also ‘challenging’ (BBC, 2013: 1; Written Evidence, 2022: 1); the creative risk posed by the ambivalence of cringe comedy could be seen as a particularly good fit.

Gesine Wegner argues that cringe humour can build on able-bodied discomfort to use it ‘for its own purposes’. ‘Cringe humor’, she writes, ‘makes us look at disability [and] [m]ore importantly, it makes us look at reactions to disability’ (2021: 3). Indeed, in a radio interview, Renkow (I use ‘Tim’ to refer to the character and ‘Renkow’ to the actor) suggests that the sustained discomfort of *Jerk* has the clear purpose of

⁵ Both are publicly owned, but the BBC is funded by the licence fee, and Channel 4 is commercially funded.

positioning disability as ‘kind of meaningless from a social standpoint’: ‘My theory is that if I can keep you uncomfortable you’ll get sick of it’ (Front Row: 2021). Our social conditioning has led to something of a stand-off: we are taught not to stare, but this has had the ambivalent effect of causing a ‘turning away from difference’ (Wegner, 2021: 3), thus prompting the feeling of invisibility that some disabled people report.⁶ If the able-bodied can be exposed to physical difference and exposed to the discomfort of that difference, then perhaps disability will stop being so difficult to address.

The flipside of invisibility, however, is excessive visibility and exaggerated concern; too little and then too much, something Tim continually experiences: the passer-by intent on forcefully helping him to cross the road despite his protestations (Season 2, Episode 2), for example, or conversely, the over-conscientious, and somewhat hostile lollypop lady, who can’t bring herself to let him cross the road (Season 1, Episode 2). Octavia Calder-Dawe et al.’s research on the ‘diagnostic logic’ of ableist interventions reveals such experiences to be commonplace, noting that research ‘[p]articipants often described receiving unnecessary and unsolicited help from strangers who appeared to read participants’ bodies as a license to “help” by intervening in their activities’ (2020: 144). Such microaggressions, which include more broadly the denial of ‘privacy, patronisation and assumptions of helplessness’, emphasise ‘both the relentlessness of ableist intrusions and highlights how the psychosocial burden of managing intrusions falls squarely on the shoulders of disabled people’ (2020: 136).

The mainstream representation of these microaggressions and indeed daily life more generally are crucial in raising ‘disability awareness amongst members of the public, many of whom have little or no personal experience of “disability”’ (Soorenian, 2014: 49). Colin Barnes argues that cultural representations of disability or disabled people ‘form the bed-rock on which the attitudes towards, assumptions about and expectations of disabled people are based’ (1992). Moreover, Calder-Dawe et al. delineate ‘an ableist representational regime’ revolving around stereotypical traits including: ‘frailty, asexuality, low intelligence, extraordinary giftedness, immobility or inspirational courage in the face of personal tragedy’ (2020: 136). However, thanks in part to the advocacy of disability activists and human rights campaigners,⁷ there are an increasing number of ‘authentic’ mainstream representations now available, and

⁶ Tanyalee Davis, a disabled Canadian stand-up, has talked about the profound discomfort expressed by UK audiences, to the extent that some people turned their chairs away from the stage and later told her how uncomfortable she’d made them. With disability evidently ‘the elephant in the room’, she has become more confrontational, encouraging audiences to look at her directly: ‘look at me, come on everybody: look at me’ (Double and Quirk, 2023).

⁷ The Disabled People’s Direct Action Network (DAN), for instance, who, in the early 1990s, ‘embraced the slogan “piss on pity”, and twice protested outside ITV’s charity fundraising event Telethon, which they perceived to be patronising and limiting to their cause of legal protection’ (Lewis, 2020).

the hope is that ‘audiences can begin to understand disability discrimination as a social justice issue, in which discriminatory attitudes and societal barriers cause problems for disabled people rather than their impairments’ (Haller, 2020: 96).

In light of these arguments, we might suggest that *Jerk* actively directs the audience’s human rights gaze to understand the degree to which disability is ‘an equal rights issue on a par with other forms of unjustifiable discrimination and prejudice such as racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia’ (Barnes, 2007: 204). The institutional view of human rights suggests that ‘only governments or those acting as representatives of governments can violate human rights’, but on the interactional account, ‘individuals of their own accord are equally capable of violations of human rights’ (Perina, 2019: 25). *Jerk* reveals that ‘moral norms guiding interpersonal conducts’ are just as significant as ‘political norms’ in both defining and protecting human rights. As shown by the examples of ableist intrusions mentioned above, interpersonal conduct is as much the issue as institutional barriers, such as the lack of disabled access.

It is crucial that humour is so central to *Jerk*’s approach to ‘authentic’ representation: these encounters are played for laughs, without a shred of didacticism and with a narrative approach that is almost throwaway. Tim may be wearied by the relentless microaggressions but he is also often amused by their absurdity, and he gives as good as he gets: hugely underpaying a taxi driver and then, in the face of protests, putting on a stereotypical ‘mentally disabled’ voice (Season 1, Episode 1); or, publicly shaming an able-bodied man for using the disabled toilet by splashing water on his crotch in order to stage an ‘accident’ (Season 1, Episode 1). In these encounters, Tim demonstrates his agency by using his disability as a strength: taking advantage of ableist assumptions—low intelligence in the first instance, frailty in the second—to achieve his own ends; saving money on his taxi ride; exploiting the chance to humiliate an evidently odious individual with the shaming incident. We see the man talking on the phone to a friend on his way to the toilet, bragging loudly about a recent sexual exploit: ‘a 6 out of 10 – but a shag’s a shag’ (Season 1, Episode 1), thus establishing dislike for his arrogance as the motive for Tim’s ‘prank’ rather than any kind of righteous indictment of ableist indifference. This subtle distinction is important in claiming a universal, human irritation, rather than an irritation bounded by the conditions of disability. But for all the universality of this moment of irritation, the use of polysemy or punning in the show’s title is allowed to be fully meaningful: Tim’s disability—which makes him jerk—is shown to be fundamental to his capacity to *be* a jerk. This trait is not buried by ‘correct politics’ or any ‘superficial moralism’.

If ableist assumptions are frequently the butt of *Jerk*’s jokes, then so too are specifically liberal assumptions. Malik identifies ‘white liberal narcissism’ as the

motor for performative politics, as ‘over-empowered and overconfident’ white and/or able-bodied people try to be progressive in ‘ways which are narcissistic, self-involved, and actually detrimental to the wider cause’ (Chotiner, 2021). This is precisely what the series portrays: the charity activist who uses Tim to develop his profile (Season 1, Episode 2); the aggressively woke student hungry for righteousness (Season 2, Episode 1); the teacher who wants Tim as a teaching aid to enhance his career prospects (Season 2, Episode 3); the relentlessly positive Paralympian gym owner who wants Tim to further her brand (Season 2, Episode 2); the television presenter eager for uplifting content that signals his company’s virtuousness (Season 2, Episode 2). Each character proves to be blinkered by ambition and self-interest, which makes them easy for Tim to exploit, and for us to laugh at. While reactionary ableist attitudes to disability are addressed—the fundamentalist perspective which sees disability as a reflection of moral evil, for example, and Nazism or eugenics which demands extermination for the purity of the race—more frequently it is contemporary liberal attitudes that are the focus of the satire, uncovering the hypocrisy or self-deceit that is concealed or even facilitated by the ‘uncertain regimes of political correctness’.

A self-described ‘disabled redneck Mexican Jew’, Renkow delights in exploiting his position, evidently relishing the fact that, in his words, he hasn’t found ‘any group of people’ he is ‘not allowed to make fun of...’ (Saunders, 2019), and the show makes calculated use of his comic license. The ‘politics of injury’ (Estes, 2020), which assign ‘moral status in terms of exclusion or subordination’ (In These Times, 2022) and underpin the trope of the saintly disabled character, is central to Renkow’s freedom. Evidently, while identity politics are a vital catalyst for the conceptual architecture of global human rights discourses, with ‘the sophistication of the civil society advocacy networks’ often dwarfing ‘the effectiveness of the formal, UN-based human rights system’ (Kew et al., 2019: 46), they are also a significant aspect of the orthodoxy of ‘correct politics’. Garnham is one commentator who decries the centrality of identity politics to contemporary liberalism, arguing that marginality or oppression should not necessarily bestow ‘an unassailable moral authority that cannot be challenged or debated’ (2021). Olúfémi O Táiwò, meanwhile, suggests that deference to injury and trauma has ‘often meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to those who most snugly fit into the social categories associated with these ills—regardless of what they actually do or do not know, or what they have or have not personally experienced’ (2020). He goes on to argue that deference not only insulates individuals from criticism but also ‘from connection and transformation’. If the empathetic and authentic engagement ‘with the struggles of other people’ are ‘prerequisites of coalitional politics’, then, ‘as identities become more and more

fine-grained and disagreements sharper, we come to realize that “coalitional politics” (understood as struggle across difference) is, simply, politics’ (2020).

It is important to note that Tim’s license is not solely due to his disability. It is also visually cued by his appearance—his clothing (skull print trousers, band t-shirts in lurid colours), dense beard, and bare feet (Renkow finds it easier to walk without shoes), and his massive grin. The show’s soundtrack underscores the nonconformity of the punky clothing and bare feet, with a range of tracks sampling the energy of Northern Soul and 1960s psychedelia; Nick Lowe’s ‘I Love the Sound of Breaking Glass’ (Season 2, Episode 2) and Frank Zappa’s ‘Trouble Every Day’ (Season 2, Episode 3) are two standout tracks that evoke Tim’s idiosyncrasy. Furthermore, Tim is not an isolated figure; his distinctiveness is subtly consolidated by the two women in his life, both, in their different ways, oblivious to social norms in general, and PC in particular, who bring a hard-bitten warmth to the narrative: his mother (Lorraine Bracco, whose brashness foregrounds that fact that Renkow is American, another aspect of his character’s singularity) and Ruth (Sharon Rooney), his cynical but fond Scottish carer. Like everyone else in the show, both women are opportunists. Bracco shamelessly exploits Tim’s disability to get an upgrade on their flight home (Season 1, Episode 4), while Ruth is perennially on the make (stealing steroids from her patients, for example in Season 2, Episode 2). *The Telegraph* critic Suzi Feay’s description of Ruth as ‘a gobby corrective to the pious NHS heroes narrative’ points to another strand of the show’s baiting of PC conventions (2021). The script mobilises national stereotypes to both explain and supplement Tim’s character: Bracco’s familiar Brooklyn rasp registers her as straight-talking and tough-loving, while Glaswegian Rooney is foul-mouthed and majestically lazy, and easily equal to Tim’s worst anti-social antics.

The show produces much of its comedy from the opportunism of the show’s characters and their exploitation, both conscious and unconscious, of the codified structures of ‘correct politics’, a dynamic, which, as Loury says, is a ‘generic problem with conventions of values-signalling’ (1994: 444). Tim himself is just as implicated in that exploitation, albeit mostly as a means to basic subsistence rather than for any social or cultural advantage. That opportunism is particularly crass in Season 1, Episode 2, when, passing a foodbank, he is wrongly identified as a refugee and, in pursuit of more free food, allows the misunderstanding to spiral. Tim knows what Benedict, the charity boss (played by Luke McQueen, with a cut-glass accent to suit the public-school name), wants to hear, and his absurd backstory has Benedict salivating. ‘Let me get this straight’, Benedict recaps eagerly, ‘North African junior skateboarding champ—captured by ISIS, escapes, captured again, brother killed, sister killed, parents killed, captured again, tortured—cerebral palsy, sea, raft, swim, Britain?’ (Season 1, Episode

2). The breathlessly abbreviated list emphasises the reductive trauma-privileging narrative, with Benedict calculating how to instrumentalise the sorry tale to grow his charity, and thus his social and political capital. As Nick Estes explains in the context of Indigenous politics: ‘The cunning of trauma politics is that it turns actual people and struggles, whether racial or Indigenous citizenship and belonging, into matters of injury. It defines an entire people mostly on their trauma and not by their aspirations or sheer humanity’ (2020). Benedict, perhaps representative of wealthy white liberals as a whole, with his general air of patronage, is clearly guilty of defining refugees—and Tim—on their trauma alone. And ‘the audience for the politics of injury’ whom Estes describes as ‘white audiences or institutions of power’ (2020) rings true, too, given it is largely white audiences who are the intended consumers for Tim’s concocted narrative. The episode thus delineates the commodification and exploitation of trauma, with ‘trauma politics’ or the ‘politics of injury’ understood as one of the central protocols of ‘correct politics’.

A similar kind of instrumentalisation is a target in Season 2, Episode 3, when Tim encounters a teacher, Marcus (Ciarán Dowd), keen to use him to teach his son about disability, because ‘it’s something kids are not exposed to’; the implication is that the disabled man will act as a means for enhancing the able-bodied child. With disability ‘very on message with LEA guidelines’ (Local Education Authorities are the local councils in England and Wales responsible for education), Marcus invites Tim to present to his class, delighted that the event will help him meet his ‘self-generated curriculum goals’. The project is a disaster; however, with Tim’s cynicism bulldozing the teacher’s sanitised learning outcomes, and, increasingly desperate to get proceedings back on track, while revealing the same desire for prescriptive narratives evinced by Benedict, Marcus prompts Tim to speak about ‘day-to-day hardships’, to which he replies drily: ‘Shopping is hard when you’re disabled, that’s why I just steal shit.’ Tim’s anarchic truth-telling is shown to be an antidote to instrumentalism, which the kids respond to in kind (he is the catalyst for a massive food fight), with institutional as well as individual self-interest and ambition located as a fundamental part of the problem. One line, in particular, demonstrates the process by which experience is made over into ‘content’ and self-advancement. Surrounded by chaos, Marcus bewails his lost hopes: ‘I was going to turn this whole thing into a module—a module! My chance to impress those inspectors’. The satire here might feel uncomfortably pointed for some of us working in educational contexts, a comment upon intellectual avarice. As Melissa Dahl suggests, the cringe experience can work as ‘an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else’s eyes’ (2018: 8).

If personal advancement is the focus of the satire with Benedict and Marcus, the object of the satire is moral superiority with Bobbiey (Helen Monks), a student Tim

meets when he tries out a course to get a student visa (Season 2, Episode 1). Bobbyey argues vociferously about ‘privilege’ and ‘recentring’ and ‘unconscious bias’, ranting about ‘an alt-right rally’ in the library (‘it’s just the Lib Dems’, demurs her more moderate friend, Bisha, played by Anushka Chakravarti), and she’s quick to add Tim to her roster of right-on causes. Bobbyey is a type we have seen before, and interestingly they are nearly always young women. Andrew Doyle’s Titania McGrath is probably the preeminent British parody of a young ‘PCer’, while Thomas Tsakalakis mentions Rosa, a creation of Arkas, a Greek comic book artist, who is used to satirise ‘the hyperbolic ideological posturing and the ethical attitudinizing of nescient, abrasive, privileged, guilt-ridden white PCers’ (2021: 24). On a whim, Tim decides to identify as able-bodied, which provokes an ardently self-abasing apology from Bobbyey and a commitment to ‘re-educating’ herself. With all the fanaticism of a zealot, she decides to use the news to challenge ‘narrow minded bigots’ and thrusts Tim into a medley of circumstances with which he is physically unable to cope: yoga, rugby, darts. The predictably dire results are depicted in a musical montage that is punctuated with the intermittent slapstick of Tim keeling over and hitting the floor with a thump. The sequence suggests that Bobbyey’s blind pursuit of PC orthodoxy and the high of moral righteousness leads to denial about the reality of Tim’s physical limits.

A brief interaction in the union bar with Bisha, who is brown-skinned, gives another example of Bobbyey’s ideological thinking blocking out any information that does not fit. Getting a round in, she presumes Bisha won’t be drinking. When Bisha says drily, ‘I actually wanted a pint,’ Bobbyey is unheeding: ‘You are heard’ she intones loudly, ‘I respect your views—we may all be drinking – but you do you’. Her supposedly progressive position instead reinforces a stereotype, while the buzzwords ‘respect’ and ‘being heard’ are blatantly empty. Bobbyey’s absolute belief in her own virtue makes her impervious and dangerously over-confident, the logic being that if the system is slavishly followed, goodness will result, and demonstrating how ‘the superficial moralism of expressive conventions’ can obviate the more complex examination of moral questions (Loury, 1994: 441).

Through these individual characters, the series also satirises how correct politics functions in different fields. Along with the charity sector, and primary and tertiary education, the market’s relationship with correct politics, specifically gender politics, is lampooned in an episode about Tim’s brief experiment with paid employment (Season 1, Episode 1). He is taken on at Anarchy Hamster, a novelty cards company where the offices are characterised by the generic styling popularised by the tech giants; bright colours and ‘fun’ props signal a strenuously creative environment. Tim’s tenure amounts to one long showcase of offence as he experiments with the license he has been given as ‘a token hire’. In one instance he opens people’s payslips and reveals

that a male colleague earns more than his female counterpart: ‘I think it’s because he’s a man’, Tim quips, ‘although it could be because she’s shit.’

When he does finally get sacked, it is due to a joke about breastfeeding at the expense of one of the senior staff, Anne (Cicely Giddings), a ‘new mum’ who bores the rest of the company to tears with her obsession with card designs for... ‘new mums’. Given the earlier gag about Tim identifying as able-bodied, a joke which clearly references transgenderism, we might see a determination to be even-handed here, with a jab at the insularity of the Mumsnet contingent, a UK online parenting forum frequently accused of transphobia. Certainly, as journalist Sophie McBain suggests, ‘Mumsnet’s hosting of gender-critical discussions became one of its “USPs”’, noticing that such discussions were and are due in part to the forum’s distinctive position as ‘a community largely defined by biological function and sex’ (2022). Biological function—breastfeeding in this case—is clearly one of the targets of the mockery here, and might be seen as a counter to the stress on physical limits evidenced elsewhere in the show. More precisely, it is the humourless, po-faced prizing of biological function that is mocked; Anne’s brittle and sanctimonious defensiveness about breastfeeding registers as a peculiarly white, middle-class form of entitlement. Tracey Jensen describes a typical Mumsnetter as ‘a subject of social and economic privilege: middle class, university educated, online and digitally competent’ (2013: 133) and points out that ‘[s]ignificantly, the offensive language that Mumsnetters are urged to report does not extend to classism’ (2013: 137). Anne, as a professional middle-class mother, might be seen as emblematic of ‘a neoliberal, consumerist model of motherhood, more focused on ‘leaning-in’ for personal advancement than on supporting less privileged women’ (McBain, 2022).

This focus on individual advancement is an argument against identity politics more generally, or what Marie Moran describes as ‘the emergence of a strangely libertarian version of identity politics which focuses on the individual rights held by the self-conscious bearers of certain ‘identities’ over any sense of group solidarity and power’ (2018: 39). She distinguishes between ‘the personal sense of identity which tends to dovetail with the social logic of a virulently individualist free-market capitalism’ and the ‘idea of social identity’ that ‘can be and has been used in struggles for cultural and economic equality’ (41), which is fundamental to an emerging human rights discourse. The implication is that under ‘the personal sense of identity’ all identity positions are ultimately tribal or cordoned off; as a new mum, all Anne cares about is new mums (middle class new mums in particular). The ‘slippage between “identity politics” and niche markets ... the “pink pound”, the “grey dollar”’ described by Moran, and the idea that ‘identity operates primarily to facilitate consumption’ (2018: 39) is perhaps slyly gestured to here, with the novelty card company representing the ways identity is made

marketable, a theme that also suggests the risks of myopia in the celebration of specific identity positions, as a potentially competitive and insular approach.

These instances, and others like them, which deal in the opportunism of the able-bodied characters, are often cringe-making, but it is the scenes with Tim's nemesis, Keifer (played by Lee Ridley, aka Lost Voice Guy, whose cerebral palsy requires him to speak through a computer) that really lean into able-bodied discomfort. Two scenes in particular give a flavour of the awkwardness that is more generally cultivated: a fight between the two at the opening of Keifer's art exhibition in Season 1 (Episode 3); and, in Season 2, a race on an athletics track (Episode 2). Both incidents are ludicrous, given neither man can fight nor run, and as set pieces they gleefully ride roughshod over most ideas of taste or decorum, and emphasise instead the manifest embarrassment of the situation. In his discussion of cringe in reality TV, Patrick Whörle argues that public embarrassment is often 'perceived and accepted as a common challenge', which results in 'joint interactional effort to overcome the situation' through 'repair mechanisms' (2021: 4) and, as with the reality shows Whörle discusses, both the fight and the race render social repair impossible. Embarrassment itself is shown to be something of an able-bodied luxury, given that the unintentional public exposure of one's physicality or corporeality is inevitable for many disabled people. Renkow's avowed intention to keep his audience uncomfortable in order that they'll 'get sick of it' (via a kind of exposure therapy) is very evident in both scenes. The fight scene in particular delights in amplifying the abjection so central to the scenario; the men's emasculating scrap is capped by Tim's mother shouting out to his date, Clara, as she storms off during the fight, 'Would you take £500 to bang him?' (Season 1, Episode 3). The race scene, meanwhile, is also interested in the characters' humiliation, with a metatextual reference to the strategies used to sanitise and make safe a more abject reality. The scene starts out overlaid with triumphal classical music, and crowds cheering, only to have the soundtrack drop off abruptly and the crowds turn away, bored, leaving the two men moving very slowly and then giving up altogether. The triumphal narrative of heroic striving, so beloved of mainstream media, is discarded, showing instead the comically mundane reality of physical limits.

Triumphal, inspirational narratives are designed to placate able-bodied comfort levels, and *Jerk's* cringe comedy rejection of the safety of such framing clearly induces awkwardness. It is a deliberate undoing of the kind of soothing 'visual spectacle' that Tom Coogan notices in his analysis of the contemporary coverage of Christopher Reeve, the Superman actor paralysed in 1996 after a fall from his horse. Coogan highlights Reeve's role as monument rather than man (2013: 12), revealing that 'what appears elevation is in fact objectification', and he quotes from an *Onion* parody of the time,

an ‘editorial’ from *Inspirational Cripple*, which distils the cultural work implicit in such objectification: ‘As long as our magazine is getting out there, inspiring the non-crippled to count their blessings and get out there and achieve, and inspiring the crippled to find ways to be more inspirational, then I know I’ve done a good job’ (1996, cited in Coogan, 2013: 13). The initial television interest in Tim and Keifer’s race participates in a similar economy of inspiration, and it is precisely ‘objectification and stereotype’ (2013: 12) that the episode seeks to disrupt with its focus on the quotidian and banal. This focus on the unexceptional rather than the inspiring is emphasised further by an exchange between Tim and Keifer’s coach, Claire (Lisa Hammond), the tirelessly self-promoting two-time Paralympic gold medallist, founder of Ball’s Gyms and creator of fitness regime, Wreckfit. When it becomes clear that the race has fizzled out, Claire screams at him from the side of the track: ‘Keifer, why the fuck are you stopping? Wreckfitters can do anything!’ In a direct rejection of Claire’s fervent positivity and the ideal of endless striving, Tim responds: ‘I don’t think that’s true and even if it was, he just doesn’t want to’ (Season 2, Episode 2). His weary cynicism strikes a note of opposition to the obligation to be relentlessly positive, so central to the neoliberal paradigm, in favour of doing and trying less.

The comfort levels of the able-bodied viewer are explicitly referenced in the race scene, when the television interest, played by real life BBC presenter Adrian Chiles, becomes visibly unnerved on watching the start of the race. He mutters anxiously to his cameraman about being ‘accused of laughing at the disabled or, even worse, exploiting them’ (Season 2, Episode 2). Later, we see him heading to another event in search of inspirational content, this time an archery competition for the deaf, and his eagerness for something a little safer is representative of the nervousness of the media at large. Simon Minty, a disabled writer and performer, says of this nervousness: ‘All we get told is “disability is too edgy, risky, scary, audiences aren’t ready for it”’ (cited by Lockyer, 2015: 184). Gareth Berliner, a disabled comedian, notices a sliding scale, with some physical disabilities considered ‘a little bit scary, not safe’ (cited in Lockyer, 2015: 189), while an issue like deafness is very much ‘a safe disability’ in that its lack of visibility means ‘the audience doesn’t have to deal with anything uncomfortable’ (Berliner cited in Lockyer, 2015: 185).⁸ This safety is clearly in contrast to the flamboyantly overt affront to ‘good taste’ posed by much of *Jerk*’s cringe comedy.

The reluctance of some TV commissioners ‘to support what they might perceive as “disability heavy” comedies’ (Lockyer, 2015: 185) is, to some degree, justified by the anxiety of able-bodied audiences: Jane Sancho’s audience reception research, for

⁸ Lara Ricote, a young deaf comic, corroborated this recently in an interview, describing her deafness as “disability-lite” (Logan, 2023).

instance, found that when asked to consider a number of different identity groups, television audiences were ‘most troubled by tasteless jokes made about disability’.⁹ But perhaps what Whörle describes as a recent ‘awkward turn’ (2021:1), with cringe just one manifestation, means there is now more appetite for discomfort. As Schwanebeck points out, ““awkwardness” has a special history in the field of disability studies’, having been ‘used to describe the helplessness experienced by able-bodied people around disabled ones’ (2021: 5); there may well be more space for this particular kind of awkwardness within the paradigm shift described.

There is also a new interest in disabled performers, partly fuelled by the very cultural conditions that *Jerk* satirises. A plotline in Season 3, Episode 4, suggests that ‘disabled talent is the new hot ticket’, and Tim tempts a gullible talent booker with tales of a ‘one legged dwarf who has no nose and shoots fire’ and ‘an Albino with feet for hands, who does a very accurate impressions of Australian wildlife’—mocking the ‘Top Trumps’ model of identity politics, where each additional identity marker grants greater status while also suggesting that the ‘freak show’ model of disability as entertainment still persists. Here, the ‘politics of injury’ become entertainment, suggesting, perhaps, that within the new codifications, powered partially by able-bodied guilt, disability is now what people actively want to see. And, sure enough, the disability comedy showcase that results from Tim’s cynical efforts has an audience entirely made up of earnest, able-bodied white men. Nesrine Malik argues that concessions to race-equality demands are largely about ‘catering to the white consumer’s guilt and the white consumer’s desire to appear politically aware and have the right credentials’ rather than any concrete support for BAME groups, and her insights might equally be applied here. Malik sees ‘performative-solidarity’ culture as a form of ‘white liberal narcissism’, and ‘more about engaging in cultish self-help trends or self-improvement trends than it is about wanting to enact profound change in which your demographic loses quite a lot of capital ... if you were to do it right’ (Chotiner, 2021).

Season 3 of the show includes some interesting correctives to the PC baiting, with plotlines directly addressing race, something of a blind spot in earlier seasons. White guilt and white saviourism are significant targets; Idris (Rob Madin), Tim’s hapless white friend, invests his life savings in a failing African and Caribbean bookshop, and then inadvertently turns it into a coffee shop (a key harbinger of gentrification), and self-flagellates by trying to burn it to the ground. If, as Malik suggests, the superficiality of white allyship is an issue, then Idris’s determination to go all out with a literal

⁹ ‘65% of respondents said they would find a tasteless joke about disability either very or quite offensive’ which ‘was a higher percentage than tasteless jokes made about any other type of group’, for example, ‘41% of respondents would find tasteless jokes quite, or very, offensive about black people, 35% about Muslims and 35% about homosexuals’ (Sancho, 2003, cited in Lockyer, 2015: 181).

bonfire of his white capital is also unhelpful. New Black characters are introduced: Aaliyah (Mysie), who works in the bookshop, and whose comically bleak outlook finally quenches Idris's puppy-like optimism; and, Lily (Saida Ahmed), a scam artist with cerebral palsy whose skills and ambition put Tim's in the shade. Lily is clearly intended as a counter to Tim's white maleness, while Aaliyah is part of a rather belated effort to break up the homogeneity of the all-white inner circle of Tim, Ruth and Idris.

Significantly, there is also a corrective to the show's pillorying of liberal attitudes, with an attack in Episode 3 both on the Tory fixation on immigration and the 'political correctness gone mad' contingent. We see the phrase, the title of a book by Jordan Peterson, amidst a table of 'White books' that Idris's mother brings into the bookshop (other titles include *Diddly Squat* and *Is It Really Too Much to Ask* by Jeremy Clarkson, and *Enemy of the State* by Tommy Robinson). While Idris tries initially to excuse her politics as generational, this is the moment when he can no longer deny her outright racism. The episode seems to serve as a way of nailing colours to the mast, distinguishing the series' attack on liberal hypocrisy from the right-wing denigration of political correctness. Given that defenders of free speech frequently use the 'talking points of right-wing grievance politics' (Herbert, 2023), perhaps the show's producers felt some clarity about political positioning was necessary.

In attempting to prevent social discrimination 'by curtailing offensive speech and behaviour towards underprivileged groups of individuals' (Dzenis and Faria, 2020: 95), political correctness is in many ways synonymous with human rights, but, as we have seen, problems arise when 'the rote machinery of the apparatus' leads to 'unthinking zealotry' (Gaitskill, 2023), hypocrisy and opportunism.¹⁰ It is these aspects that *Jerk* examines, tracing the ways in which the codified structures of PC can ultimately work against progressive aims, with the 'politics of injury' defining minority groups on their trauma alone, for instance, and identity politics devolving into tribal, insular thinking and niche marketing. The series illustrates how apparently progressive positions can reinforce stereotypes, while 'the superficial moralism of expressive conventions' (Loury, 1994: 441) can block more nuanced debate, with a blind conviction of liberal virtue leading to self-righteousness and complacency. Through cringe comedy, *Jerk*'s thoroughgoing iconoclasm disrupts the piety around liberal positions, reinforcing the right to challenge and critique, and allowing for a much-needed sense of leverage.

¹⁰ Despite my focus on the series' satire of hypocrisy, it is important to note the significance of what Masha Gessen calls 'the tradition of aspirational hypocrisy' in terms of striving 'to act in accordance with moral values' (2017). Hypocrisy serves a vital social function and just because we know it to be a vice, doesn't mean that 'dissimulation, imperfect motive, and the feigning of views and opinions are not necessary to the cause of virtue' (Miller, 2003: 47).

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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