

Of War, Disease and Comedy

Shôn Ellerton, April 8, 2020

Are we slowly losing our sense of humour? My exploration into war, pandemics and comedy.



Whilst moving a few things around the house to tidy things a little, I spotted my old complete collection of [Dad's Army](#) DVDs sitting at the bottom of one of my bookcase shelves. I thought to myself, why not re-watch some of these again? I have fond memories watching these with my late grandfather as a child; those doting and amiable characters playing the [Home Guard](#) during one of the worst calamities in human history, World War II. The scene I remember most vividly is when the German got caught and, after being told off by one of the home guards, he barks with his thick 'Herr Flick' accent,

'I vill eff to poot you into my leetle black book!'

For those familiar with Dad's Army will know all too well of its light-hearted and joyful humour of a subject not particularly funny at all. After all, according to Wikipedia, WWII claimed an estimated 70-85 million people (of which 50-50 million were civilians), about 3% of the world population during 1940. Grim statistics indeed.

Dad's Army was only one of many outlets of entertainment which derived humour from war. There are many other funny TV series and movies based on war and conflict that I can think of: *M*A*S*H*, *Phil Silvers Show*, *'Allo 'Allo*, *Good Morning Vietnam* (the only one I can think of about the Vietnam War), *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, *Hogan's Heroes*, and *Blackadder Goes Forth*. Most recently for me was the very funny movie, [Er Ist Wieder Da](#) (Look Who's

Back), a German film satire portraying an Adolf Hitler who suddenly wakes up, still dressed in his usual outfit, in the middle of a public park in modern-day Germany. Dazed and confused, he convinces everyone that he *is* Hitler and becomes a celebrity with his political views, which oddly enough, aligns most with the Green Party. The quotes coming from Hitler (played by Oliver Masucci) in the film are legendary.

'Even Poland still exists!'

'Build the Fourth Reich? They can't even build an Ikea shelf.'

'Angela Merkel is a clumsy woman with the charisma of a wet noodle'

Brilliant! Yet, we can safely say that Hitler did a few atrocious things from time to time. A gross under-statement if I may say so!

Even in the frontline trenches of WWI, arguably, one of the very worst places to be in a war, humour was at its very best with Rowen Atkinson and his team in *Blackadder Goes Forth*. I can think of very few other places which could resemble a living hell that of a being in a cold wet trench riddled with disease and death and then being ordered to run out of it towards the enemy just to gain a few yards. However, *Blackadder Goes Forth* was, not only funny, but good enough for family viewing. And for those of you who are *Monty Python's Flying Circus* fans, one cannot forget the episode of the joke to kill off the Germans.

All the above TV shows and movies mentioned above were made well after the war or crisis that respectively took place, although saying that, there was plenty in the way of live or theatre-based entertainment during wartime which ridiculed the enemy and being of a light-hearted nature. Many of those old *Looney Tunes* cartoons from the 1940s, which I still find very funny today, bring much humour (and a little propaganda to throw in the mix) from the subject of war.

The [Cold War](#), a time of heightened nervousness of being wiped from existence by a flurry of nuclear bombs, had its share of funny TV shows and movies. The thought of being annihilated by an atom bomb or its fallout doesn't sound very appealing but we do have the Hollywood 1980s blockbuster, [Spies Like Us](#), the odd satire (usually from Britain) as in [Not the Nine o'Clock News](#), Terry Gilliam's [Brazil](#), Stanley Kubrick's [Dr. Strangelove \(or How I Learned to Stop](#)

[Worrying and Love the Bomb](#)), and the German movie, [Good Bye, Lenin!](#) as examples I can think of.

However, I certainly can't think of any humorous production that portrays some of the other grimmest events in human history. For example, imagine a comedy centred around the Japanese occupation of Manchuria or of the massacre that occurred between the Hutu and the Tutsis in Rwanda. What about the American Civil War or any civil wars for that matter? I, for one, simply cannot. And yet, we have a very funny Hitler in the (*German!*) movie, *Er Ist Wieder Da* produced only a few years ago. Sure, perhaps we're thinking that bloody civil wars are just too gruesome to ever portray being put into comedy, but what about the Holocaust? Charlie Chaplin played a Hitler. Even Monty Python made a very funny Hitler (played by John Cleese) in one of its Flying Circus episodes where he tried to run for the town of Minehead in England. In the episode, he was called Mr *Hilter* instead! One of my favourite all-time American comedy series, [Curb Your Enthusiasm](#), renowned for breaching many a PC-related topic, starts its first episode with Larry David, a Jew in real life and in the show who makes a comic analogy to Hitler only to be scolded by his screenplay parents how inappropriate such a joke is. Interesting, isn't it?

Now what about disease and pandemics? This is a very different kettle of fish. As of time of writing, the world is experiencing a new pandemic of COVID-19. How serious this pandemic is still under trial at time of writing, but the common consensus is that it needs to be considered as a serious pandemic. Such a crisis warrants us to *stay apart* from each other as much as possible. Not to get together to ridicule and make fun of a common enemy; an enemy we can't see with the naked eye. Some people don't believe the enemy even exists. It's really rather difficult to derive much in the way of humour out of pandemics. Being isolated is the opposite of bonding together and it is taking its toll with many in terms of relationships, [cabin fever](#), and loneliness. Thankfully, some of us have the Internet to help us get by, but many in the world do not.

Times were far worse in the olden days of course. Can you imagine being in a pandemic back in those days? During the [Black Death](#), red or black crosses were painted on doors of those affected leaving them in isolation waiting for them to die. *Nobody* cared for you except your family and closest friends. Another bad time was when London was ravished by the [Great Plague of London](#) about the same time as the equally infamous [Great Fire of London](#) in 1666. One could make a gruesome comparison to Australia's bushfires and

pandemic of 2020 but with today's modern society, our death count is a fraction of what it could have been.

Just about every TV show or movie about outbreaks and pandemics are undeniably grim, many with unhappy endings. [The Rain](#), [10 Cloverfield Lane](#), [28 Days Later](#), [REC](#), [Rabid](#), [Invasion of the Body Snatchers](#) (actually an alien invasion but similar to an outbreak), and countless others. Pandemics which did good for mankind include, of course, [The War of the Worlds](#) by H.G. Wells where the invading Martians were destroyed by our bacteria! The only genuinely funny TV show I can think of involving a pandemic is the witty, dark and (a little) creepy, [The League of Gentlemen](#) in which a nosebleed pandemic takes place in the second series. And of movies, [Monty Python's Life of Brian](#) springs to mind. 'Bring out your dead!' Only the Brits could do these!

I confess that I've not seen much in the way of comedy centred on more recent crises, for example, radical extremists cutting off heads, crashing planes into tall buildings or shooting rounds of ammunitions in schools and churches. This could never be funny in my opinion, although, I'm sure outlets like [South Park](#) would have had a go. However, there was a, not particularly good, comedy film, [The Interview](#) which made fun of Kim Jong Il, leader of North Korea. If you know anything on what goes on inside North Korea, this film is anything but funny.

Perhaps I'm not looking hard enough or maybe, we've become a little more sensitive about it. Maybe we can only portray those horrible events in which we can identify with an idiosyncratic stereotypical trait; for example, the German Gestapo, 'vee have vays of making you talk!' or perhaps, the Ayatollah, throwing his arms up in the air spelling out doom for the infidels, or maybe even a little snooty, spoiled brat of a Napoleon like that one in that zany comedy, [Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure](#) where a high school project involved bringing back a veritable menagerie of historical figures including Billy the Kid, Socrates, Beethoven, Lincoln, Freud, Napoleon and others through a time portal into the 1980s.

Sadly, I believe we could be losing a little sense of our humour. I recall last year listening on an Australian talk radio show how infamous figures like Ned Kelly or Billy the Kid should never be idolised; of talk of changing names of streets and towns of so-called 'violent' or politically-incorrect explorers and colonists in Australia to something else more benign or neutral. Any article or post in

social media that makes a mockery or satirises a cataclysmic event always attracts a crowd of self-indulgent do-gooders who really have nothing better to do than to try to get it removed because of it being potentially offensive. I'd like to think we can become more open and mature about our feelings towards the comic, absurd and humorous side of really bad events in human history but I think we are regressing to a state of one-sided opinion in the interest of a common narrative. Some of the funniest stories I ever remember listening to about WWII was from an old Mosquito pilot in the RAF who volunteered at a family-run steam railway in Wales. He long passed away but I'm quite confident that his stories would spark an outrage amongst many of those following the politically-correct narrative, of which I am certain none have ever experienced a war, that any war or crisis should never be demeaned, satirised or made a mockery out of. Reminding me of some of Roald Dahl's wartime stories, this old pilot showed me that he had the uttermost respect of those who gave their lives but, also, gave us an insight that comedy really is the best medicine even in the direst of circumstances. We will all experience, at some time or another, a low point in our lives or even a crisis, but we should try, at least to the best of our abilities, to keep a sense of humour and laugh at it later on.