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In the Dust of the Multiverse?

How black comedy in *Rick and Morty* elaborates on and challenges Eugene Thacker's cosmic pessimism

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Abstract

This thesis reads the American animated comedy, *Rick and Morty*, can be alongside and against Eugene Thacker's "cosmic pessimism", a pessimistic posthumanist philosophy elaborated over various works. The aim is to see how an understanding of the tenets of cosmic pessimism can enrich a reading of *Rick and Morty*, and moreover to see what challenges *Rick and Morty* poses for cosmic pessimism itself, since this latter, according to Thacker, takes the distinctly un-comedic genre of supernatural horror, not he animated sitcom, as the privileged site of its elucidation.

In order to carry out this investigation, the work considers *Rick and Morty* within two different traditions: that of dark comedy, and that of the postmodern sitcom. These guide the reading, with an understanding of the postmodern sitcom providing the tropological and contextual ground of the investigation and the major features of dark humour — specifically irony and the grotesque — providing the structure by which the analysis proceeds.

This investigation aims to explore Rick and Morty as a truly distinctive text at the confluence of diverse aesthetic and philosophical notions, and in so doing will challenge and modify the conclusions of Thacker's cosmic pessimism.

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Introduction

"We can remark in passing that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter."

Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer"

"It is the chasm lying between non-being, over which it is impossible for logic to throw any bridge, that, in certain forms of laughter, we leap. We land plumb in the centre of Nothing."

Percy Wyndham Lewis, "The Meaning of the Wild Body"

Burying ourselves

In small-town American suburbia, an older man dressed in a lab coat and his adolescent grandson sit on a rooftop and survey the wreckage below. An accidental catastrophe of their making has turned all human life on earth monstrous, and lumbering multi-limbed grotesqueries now roam the streets which were once the domain of pedestrian humanity.

Figure 1. Lumbering, multi-limbed grotesqueries (“Rick Potion #9” 14:44).

Luckily, the ability to travel between the infinite dimensions of the multiverse provides the old man with a solution which, he promises, will “turn everything back to normal, relatively speaking”. The pair step through an interdimensional portal into a familiarly human world, free of mutagenic catastrophe. There, in the safe environ of the family garage, they are confronted with their own mangled corpses, apparently the victims of some terrible accident.

Figure 2. Rick and Morty confront their mortality (“Rick Potion #9” 17:46)

“Everything is fine,” the old man explains to his horrified grandson, “there's an infinite number of realities, Morty, and in a few dozen of those, I got lucky and turned everything back to normal. I just had to find one of those realities in which we also happen to both die around this time. Now we can just slip into the place of our dead selves in this reality and everything will be fine. We're not skipping a beat, Morty. Now, help me with these bodies.” In montage they bury the bodies in the garden. The adolescent walks through the suburban house in a silent daze, looking at rooms that seem familiar, family members that seem to be his own. Can he grieve himself and his world when both these things are apparently present? His expression unchanging, he sits down to watch television, and his image fades to black.

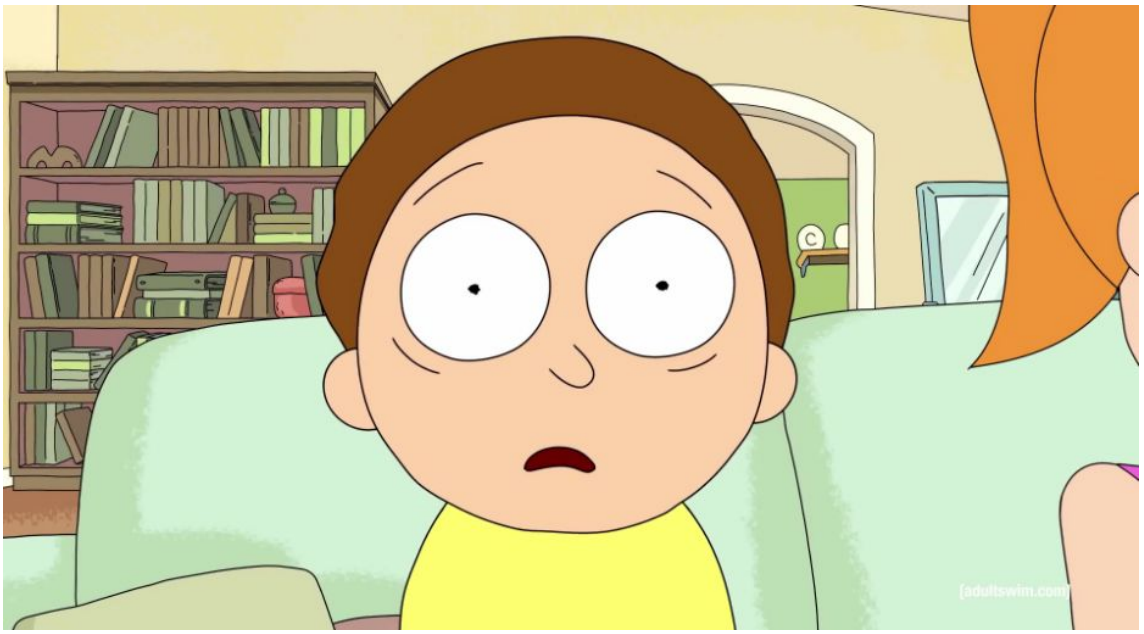

Figure 3. A horrified Morty ("Rick Potion #9" 19:54)

There are few popular US television shows which would air an episode in which two protagonists bury their own corpses, or indeed an episode in which human life on earth is so casually destroyed; there is likely only one popular US television show which would do so while ostensibly aping the set-up of a family sitcom, playing the bleakness of the situation for laughs. The old man in this scene is Rick, the adolescent his grandson Morty, titular characters of the American animated comedy series *Rick and Morty*, which, by way of sci-fi parody, low-brow humour and high-concept hijinks, has been relating the adventures of the dimension-travelling, substance-abusing, and morally repugnant genius scientist and his naive teenage grandson since its debut in 2013. Liberally and playfully quoting from the canon of popular (and less popular) American sci-fi and speculative fiction, *Rick and Morty* draws upon the deep seam of thematic content which

that genre has mined over more than a century, ultimately revelling in what Donna Haraway theorises as the fundamental character of "SF" as "storytelling and fact telling; … the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material- semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come" (31). This paradox of factive fabulation and its plays on possibility and actuality gets to the heart of a fundamental thematic of contingency at the heart of much of sci-fi. Which is to say that when sci-fi presents us with "life, but not as we know it", we are forced to confront what that means for life, and above all *human* life, as we thought we knew it. And when this questioning reveals the historical and material contingency of our thoughts, ourselves, and our thoughts of ourselves, the very figure of the human becomes increasingly untenable.

Ideas within the broad ambit hazily designated by the term "posthumanism" have attracted increasing attention over recent years; it is that strand which comprises a critique of the humanist episteme which is of interest for this study. *Rick and Morty* hews closest to the posthumanism of Eugene Thacker, for whom the non-humanity glimpsed in the cracks and fissures of the human constitutes an encounter with the "world-without-us", i.e. "the subtraction of the human from the world" (*In the Dust of this Planet* "Preface"). Thacker terms the response to this encounter "cosmic pessimism", and while he privileges supernatural horror as the cosmic pessimist genre par excellence, it is the objective of this present study to consider how *Rick and Morty* uses the television comedy to articulate this

pessimism. It is how this comic voice is used in this articulation which makes *Rick and Morty* a particularly fruitful object of study.

Certainly, other analyses of *Rick and Morty* have focused on the surprising darkness at the heart of a mass-market television comedy. A 2017 paper by Lucas Miranda entitled "The Self is Dead – Alienation and Nihilism in Rick and Morty" is a reading of the show which confronts its inherent "Nihilistic anguish of cosmic horror" (Miranda) from a Marxist perspective. This reading compares the characters of Rick and Jerry as embodying two opposite but symptomatic reactions to capitalist alienation, as diagnosed by Erich Fromm. In a 2015 article, Thomas Evans investigates how the narrative structure of Rick and Morty is used to undermine the strain of popular western thought, usually supported by the sitcom, according to which a nebulous notion of "happiness" is the ultimate goal of human endeavour. While both of these papers study how *Rick and Morty* performs a struggle for meaningful human existence which flirts with outright nihilism, neither reading considers how this struggle is provoked by the untenability of the very concept of the human, nor do they consider what is most apparent about *Rick and Morty*: it is *funny.*

Supernatural horror, with its emphasis on incommunicable and unimaginable monstrosity on an inhuman scale, seems a much more natural mode in which to explore this encounter with the "world-without-us". That a television comedy — a technicolour, pop-culture confection with a nominal teleology of easy entertainment — should take as its thematic grist this same dark horizon of the human provides the

possibility of re-reading, complicating, even contradicting the glum futility of cosmic pessimism. Thus, following Thacker's lead to think of the horror genre as providing "a non-philosophical attempt to think the world-without-us philosophically" (*In the Dust of this Planet* "Preface"), the present study will look to the operation of dark humour in *Rick and Morty* in a similar fashion in order to consider what privileges it itself has as a site for the performance of this struggle for meaning, and what differences will necessarily follow from the comedic and the horrors differing affective imperatives.

The chapter which follows will introduce and elaborate the fundamental theoretical underpinnings of the present thesis, principally considering what can be usefully understood by the terms "cosmic pessimism", "dark humour" and "the postmodern sitcom", including their broader significance and their specific implications for the project at hand. Thusly elaborated, these concepts will guide my inquiry and lead to a deeper understanding of what is particular about *Rick and Morty* vis-à-vis its location at the peculiar nexus of these three seemingly disparate ideas. The study itself will be structured around two tropological poles of dark humour: irony and the grotesque, and will proceed by considering how these distinctive elements of dark humour coalesce within *Rick and Morty* to articulate a profound sense of cosmic pessimism within the specific generic milieu of the postmodern televisual sitcom, with results that challenge and expand upon Thacker's theory. That it does so while appealing to a mass viewership and financed by a major televisual network suggests that this

comedic approach to pessimistic posthumanism has a wider cultural valence for 21st Century audiences.

Theoretical framework

Posthumanisms

The field of "posthumanism", or perhaps more properly "critical posthumanism" which filtered into the humanities' critical discursive practices sometime in the 1990s, is concerned with the passing of the enlightenment figure of the "human" and the removal of this figure from the centre of how the world is thought. This is an ample space, housing futurist transhumanist imaginaries, transgressive feminist-inflected attacks on humanist orthodoxies, and every shade in between. It is therefore convenient to here sketch the contours of critical posthumanism with reference to a selection of some of its best-known theorists. It is against this firmament that I will articulate the specificity of Thacker's thought, its relation to posthumanism more generally, and its specific suitability for studying *Rick and Morty.*

Along with Michel Callon and John Law, Bruno Latour is the primary architect of actor-network theory (ANT), an attempt, begun in the 1980s, to create a sociological framework in which agency is studied as a composed and distributed effect of relationship rather than the domain of specific, privileged actors. The implications of a paradigm in which "everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located" (Law 2) naturally entail an attack on the independence, sovereignty, and agency of the liberal humanist subject. Latour begins from a point of attacking the

standard models of society and "the social", which might be crudely characterised as taking as its object the totality of a set of human individuals, embedded in (but clearly separable from) their material culture, whose interactions create the scale effect known as society. That is, although traditional questions of the social by definition operate at a scale greater than the individual, they still inhere in the fundamental unit of humanism: the indivisible, individual, self-sovereign subject. With a specific focus on material culture coming from critical anthropology, Latour contests the easy separation between social and natural sciences. As he writes, "To distinguish a priori between 'material' and 'social' ties before linking them together again makes about as much sense as to account for the dynamics of a battle by imagining a group of soldiers and officers stark naked with a huge heap of paraphernalia (...) and then claim that 'of course there exists some (dialectical) relation between the two'" ("Third Source of Uncertainty" 75). Latour presents a fundamental challenge to the indivisibility of the human actor and its status as a clearly definable entity with a clear metaphysical separation between itself, the forces that act upon and the world on which it acts. To Latour what is commonly considered an instrument is as much an agent as is the human wielding it, and when these agents come together they mediate, mutually, the goals or functions of the other. Action is thus composed, it is "a property of associated entities" ("On Technical Mediation"31): an actor is never one but is always a network of elements, the composition of which the actor does not know. Thus, humans are themselves composite actors. Always acting with and never

acting on, the actor which calls itself human is, Latour claims, a relational effect like any other.

Adjacent questions of individuality, subjectivity and materiality motivate Katherine Hayles' enormously influential 1999 work *How We Became Posthuman*. Hayles writes against the transhumanist, cybernetic assumption that human consciousness is, in its ontological fundament, reducible to information without embodiment. From this assumption comes Hans Moravec's famous claim, which Hayles takes as her starting point, that human consciousness could be downloaded to a computer, the brain and body destroyed and the human subject remain in existential continuity having simply transplanted itself as simply as one might move house. If Hayles' story begins with this first realization, that somewhere in our intellectual history "information lost its body" (2), it is followed up by two equally vital and interrelated occurrences: "how the cyborg was created as a technological artefact and cultural icon, (and), deeply implicated with the first two, the unfolding story of how a historically specific construction called the human is giving way to a different construction called the posthuman"(2). Hayles' posthuman is the intellectual stance which arises from these three thought-events, a point of view which "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation (...) considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon" (2-3) and which "thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the

body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born by these and other means" (3). The most important assault enacted by the posthuman on that well-worn whipping boy, the liberal humanist subject, is the removal of the human body as a necessary constituent part of the human subject, which is instead reduced to a patterning of informational processes.

Within her intellectual history of the evolution of the posthuman, Hayles traces both the "terror" and the "pleasure" (283) excited by this posthuman moment, all the while reclaiming at every turn the oft overlooked fact of embodiment as an essential and irremovable constitutive element of human being. That is to say, Hayles treats "the deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject as an opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects" (5). Uniting these elements is a concern with moving beyond an epistemology bounded by questions of presence/absence (of the human, of the body, of fixed meanings thereof) and instead understanding (post)humanity in terms of a dialectic of pattern/randomness, in which "Meaning is not guaranteed by a coherent origin; rather, it is made possible (but not inevitable) by the blind force of evolution finding workable solutions within given parameters" (285). Whence, in the risky plenitude of randomness, encompassing everything "from phenomena that cannot be rendered coherent by a given system's organization to those the system cannot perceive at all" (286) one finds the pleasures and terrors of something like a posthuman condition, which, in arising from the dialectic

of pattern/randomness, cannot be loosely draped over the metaphysics of the liberal humanist subject, as in Moravec's thought of downloading a unified and disembodied self.

If Hayle's project is primarily diagnostic or genealogical, aimed at understanding an extant phenomenon called posthumanism and tracing its ascendance, *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway's latest writings in the field, offers a version of posthumanism as a hermeneutic for life at a critical historical juncture, a time of "multispecies, including human, urgency: of great mass death and extinction; of onrushing disasters" (35) which we have (clumsily, according to Haraway) named the anthropocene. Haraway's problem with the anthropocene's exegesis is that it can only offer a fundamentally anthropocentric epistemology, repeating the mistake of human exceptionalism that got us into the current and titular "trouble" to begin with. Indeed, for Haraway the notion of humanity is already unthinkable: "not available to think with" (Staying with the Trouble 30). It is therefore her intent to provide an alternative world to that of the anthropocene, one which is more suitable for the trouble, and there is no less than the world itself at stake since "It matters what thoughts think thoughts … what worlds world worlds" (35). Here Haraway extends the project begun with her 1984 "Cyborg Manifesto", a foundational text of both cyberpunk and feminist posthumanism, which developed a uniquely Harawayan "cyborg myth" concerned with "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities, which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" ("A Cyborg Manifesto"14). The rejection

of binary oppositions and categorical distinctions, above all those of animal/human, organism/machine and physical/non-physical, is articulated with a simultaneous call for affinity and hybridity, expressed in terms of their radical political potency against the rigid distinctions of patriarchal humanism. Similarly, 2016's *Staying with the Trouble* calls for the "worlding" of the Chthulucene: "a time of beginnings, a time for ongoing, for freshness" (2) whose central figure is not Anthropos but a multi-species muddle of intra-acting "chthonic ones" engaged in the common project of mass symbiogenesis. This new articulation of the redundancy of the human, Haraway writes, is as politically necessary now as the cyborg myth was thirty years earlier, as "Living-with and dying-with each other potently in the Chthulucene can be a fierce rebuke to the dictates of both Anthropos and Capital" (2).

Similar to how Haraway treats the "trouble", Claire Colebrook takes extinction as her starting point, extinction understood in three senses: "the now widely discussed sixth great extinction event (which we have begun to imagine and witness, even if in anticipation); extinction by humans of other species (with the endangered species of the 'red list' evidencing our destructive power); and self-extinction, or the capacity for us to destroy what makes us human" (*Death of the Posthuman* 9). All three of these, Colebrook notes, require a conception of climate which itself forms part of "a broader thought-event where humans begin to imagine a deep time in which the human species emerges and withers away, and a finite space in which 'we' are now all joined in a tragedy of the commons" (10). Armed with knowledge

of anthropocentric climate change and the great extinction event of the anthropocene, Colebrook indicates a necessary adjustment to be made in how the human is thought in terms of its relations with, and the mutual relations among, time, space, and species. Colebrook dismisses contemporary notions of a redemptive, posthuman future which offers eco-friendly deliverance from the ravages of the Anthropocene. Where Colebrook is candid in stating that "humanity is and must be parasitic" (178), this is no stated in order to contrast the figure of the "evil" human with that of "good" nature. She places herself as critic of both the human and posthuman; branding the mistaken assumptions of the latter "ultra-humanisms" she accuses much of posthumanism of "(attributing) all the qualities once assigned to man-qualities such as mindfulness, connectedness, self-organizing dynamism- to some supposedly benevolent life in general" (162). Instead Colebrook calls for an assessment of the "values" of the inhuman. "Inhuman" because it is a point of view which takes seriously the prospect of extinction, not as crisis to be averted but rather as a condition for thought about world and self, and as a figure through which we might escape the common myopia of humanity and posthumanity: this is a taboo attempt to look at "the world and ourselves without assuming our unquestioned right to life" (22). Colebrook aims at resolving the contradiction which the anthropocene illuminates regarding our assumptions of value as regards life, human and otherwise:

> We value what values: we defend animal life because it too makes its way in the world, possesses a degree of choosing this rather than that, and is

> therefore on its way to something like meaning or sense… (but) how can humanity be at once the figure of that which renders life self-evidently valuable … and yet be the being that has… precipitated the end of all modes of life, valuing and otherwise? (203)

Cosmic pessimism

The above is far from an exhaustive exploration of Colebrook's work, or that of her contemporaries. Rather it is intended to show some of the major trends within the field, to illuminate the range of perspectives, and to give us some notion of the more consistent elements of what posthumanism means, beyond the superfluous "following humanism". All four of the above posthumanisms insist upon the historical contingency of humanism's human object, of it's intellectual (as in Hayles) or material (Latour) construction. With this historical gaze comes the inevitable question of the contemporary moment, with Haraway and Colebrook particularly emphasising the exigencies of re-thinking or un-thinking the human in the age of the anthropocene. In highlighting and outlining these tendencies, it is my intention to show the broad strokes of contemporary debates within posthumanism and provide the context into which Thacker's "cosmic pessimism" erupts and against which it can be contrasted.

The chronology implied by the "post" of posthumanism is indeed present in much of the above, although always caveated by the admission that, to paraphrase Latour "we have never been human". That is to say that, if informatics, the sixth extinction, and anthropocene anxiety are all

contemporary concerns, they only reveal the fault lines in the humanist episteme that were always present. It will not go unnoticed, for instance, the emphasis placed on questions of systems and relational effects, most evident in the work of Latour and Hayles, elements of Haraway, and denounced (inasmuch as a general life system comes to substitute the value void left by the disappearance of man) in the work of Colebrook. Where this is given a modern inflection by way of references to cybernetics, the anthropocene, and science and technology studies, these apparently historical questions of system and relation consistently open out onto broader questions about the ontological status of life, humanity, and the individual human. As Stefan Herbrechter notes in his introduction to the topic, critical posthumanism contains both "a rigorously historical materialist, and a more metaphysical deconstructive approach" (9).

It is this latter tendency which is evident in Thacker's work, the two major strands of which are a deconstruction of the ontology of life and a pessimistic attitude toward the possibility of a coherent epistemology of (human) "self" and "world", in as much as such a division can be made. If this latter, vaguely-stated epistemological problematic can be said to apply to all of the above elaborated posthumanisms, Thacker's is distinguished most starkly by its morbid negativity, although here too he finds a certain affinity with our stable of posthumanist thinkers, with the possible exception of Latour. Thus, in Hayles we find ample time dedicated to the "terror" of posthumanism; Haraway does not shy away from the "trouble" (twisted into a positive question of politics but nevertheless beginning from

the looming presence of a precipice); and Colebrook takes mass-extinction as a starting point for thought. Where Haraway and Hayles both consider this negative posthumanism alongside a more positive mirror image (Hayles' "pleasure", Haraway's "chthonic ones"), Thacker does not accommodate the possibility of a palliative, positive posthumanism. Introducing his "Horror of Philosophy" trilogy, Thacker notes, similar to Haraway and Colebrook, that "The world is increasingly unthinkable – a world of planetary disasters, emerging pandemics, tectonic shifts, strange weather, oil-drenched seascapes, and the furtive, always-looming threat of extinction" ("Preface", *In The Dust of This Planet).* But where Haraway explicitly rejects any reaction to the disasters of the anthropocene which fall into the "the self-indulgent and self-fulfilling myths of apocalypse" (*Staying with the Trouble* 35), Thacker views the apocalypticism of contemporary life as a means of confronting what he terms the "Planet", or "world-without-us", a concept which arises from the inherent tension between the subjective human "World" (the "world-for-us") and the "objective" Earth (the "world-in-itself"). As that which is external to the human, the Earth is necessary for its existence, it is the matter from which the meaningful, human World can be elaborated. And yet by its nature this Earth constitutes an unthinkable horizon for thought, entirely inaccessible since, "the moment we think it and attempt to act on it, it ceases to be the world-in-itself and becomes the world-for-us" ("Preface"). Inasmuch as we may approach the world-in-itself, it is through precisely such apocalyptic disasters as climate change and mass-extinction. We find a commonality with Colebrook's idea of the "image" of the world which is

glimpsed between the geo-crises of the anthropocene and the looming spectre of human extinction: “a geological, post-anthropocene or disembodied image, where there is some experimental grasping at a world that would not be the world for a body, nor the world as body” (*Death of the Posthuman* 28).

There is an inexorable logic to this, and Colebrook and Thacker are only two among many to recognise that, ‘taken to its extreme, posthumanism thus implies a dystopic, literal posthumanism, reaching beyond the specific notion of the “death of the subject” to a scenario where actual extinction is at stake’ (Pedersen 246). Yet if both Thacker and Colebrook orient themselves unflinchingly toward the thought-horizon of world-and-extinction, they differ greatly in where this takes them. Despite challenging some of the comfortable myths of positive posthumanism, Colebrook by no means arrives at, or proceeds with, the gloomy pessimism of Thacker. Indeed, Colebrook argues explicitly against a reactive negativity which she likens to a Nietzschean nihilism, where the posthuman world is defined by the absence of a figure that was once there, much as one might rail against a world rendered godless (160). Contrarily, Thacker places pessimism front and centre, turning this “lyrical failure of philosophical thinking” (66) into the very substance of noesis. Where Colebrook can conclude that “the history of the human as an oscillation between self-formation and self-destruction … provides a thought for the future beyond our assumed right to life” (229), Thacker can offer no such possibility of thought. Instead, cosmic pessimism defines itself by a

pessimistic defeatism at the prospect of knowledge beyond the limited and compromised episteme of the human.

For Thacker we find ourselves drawn towards scenarios of extinction and disaster precisely for the glimpse of the unthinkable they provide. In subtracting the Human from the world, rather than think the subjective World in relation to objective Earth, the paradox may be resolved: while "The world-in-itself may co-exist with the world-for-us— indeed the human being is defined by its impressive capacity for not recognizing this distinction… the world-without-us cannot co-exist with the human world-for-us" ("Preface"). The Planet serves as a resolution to a paradox in the human, but it is one which is profoundly inhuman, impersonal, and anonymous. This lies at the heart of cosmic pessimism, a pessimism of the Planet which, neither subjective nor objective, amounts to the "drastic scaling-up or scaling-down of the human point of view, the unhuman orientation of deep space and deep time, and all of this shadowed by an impasse, a primordial insignificance, the impossibility of ever adequately accounting for one's own thought" ("Cosmic Pessimism" 68). Cosmic pessimism is a pessimism which recognizes the inhumanity of the world and the other worldliness of the human. It is a pessimism provoked by the inevitable futility at the heart of hubristic human attempts at understanding an inhuman world without accounting for the "irrevocable chasm between thought and world" (69).

The distinguishing features of Thacker's line of inquiry can therefore be said to be a tight focus on epistemological problematics, a pessimistic

response to this crisis of knowledge, and an alignment towards a foreboding sense of the inhuman, expressed in terms of cosmic insignificance, primordial disorientation, and a generalised and constant sense of catastrophe. It is my contention that the presence of the very same distinguishing features in an animated cartoon, postmodern or otherwise, are precisely what marks out *Rick and Morty* as a rarity, unique in its field. If the extent of the commonalities is not in itself enough of a justification to read *Rick and Morty* and cosmic pessimism side by side, the real point of interest can be found in their difference.

It should be noted that for Thacker the inevitable confrontation with the futility at the heart of cosmic pessimism is the "horror of philosophy", and the allusion to the horror genre is important here. Thacker considers an inextricable link between his lines of philosophical inquiry and supernatural horror, reading the latter as a privileged attempt at a "non-philosophical attempt to think about the world-without-us philosophically" ("Preface" *In the Dust of This Planet).* While Thacker privileges horror as the cosmic pessimist genre par excellence, he makes no claims of how other genres may express the encounter with the world-without-us; it is my contention that *Rick and Morty* performs a similar non-philosophical examination of cosmic pessimism. In part this is because it borrows elements from horror (it is no accident that Lovecraft's Cthulhu appears in the opening credits), but importantly it does so in the service of humour, specifically what we might term "dark humour", amounting to an ironic approach to pessimism which engages with the "horror of philosophy" via two defining features: irony and

the grotesque. If Thacker offers a glimpse of the "horror of philosophy", what might we see in a darkly humorous take on the same ideas? The hilarity of philosophy? The horror of comedy? What might such a formulation mean for cosmic pessimism? Might we find, in the ____ response, a way of understanding the imponderable world-without-us that resists Thacker's instinct of mournful retreat into a hollowed-out, posthuman humanism?

Dark humour

Pushed to formally categorise "hardcore pornography" during the obscenity trial *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, Justice Potter Stewart famously stated "I know it when I see it", and assumed the phrase to be adequate to the task of definition. In any attempt to define "dark humour" one is tempted to fall back on Potter's glib remark. Alas, the academic must be held to more rigorous standards than the Associate Justice. But it is notable that for a term which is so widely and colloquially used, especially in connection with *Rick and Morty*, exactly what it designates remains hazy, and this is also often true of more systematic and academic attempts to pin down exactly what is meant by dark humour. It doesn't help that the term is often used interchangeably with "black humour" or "black comedy", without any apparent difference in meaning.

In the anglophone world the idea of dark humour rose to prominence in the 1960s and '70s as a descriptor for certain stylistic and thematic concerns which were then popular among a generation of male American novelists. It would eventually be supplanted by the more general (and more

specific) rubric of postmodernism and Max Schulz, the main proponent of American dark humour, would, as Doug Haynes has noted, come to be regarded with a certain weariness towards the vagaries of this "quasi-existentialist" school of literary criticism (25). Thence, Haynes maintains, the phrase has become a "tired, generic label, fated to be kept in circulation by book and film reviewers" (25). Although Haynes' criticism is broadly fair, the term maintains a degree of useful applicability in studies which place greater emphasis on the comic: where, contrary to Schulz, we might agree that a writer like Thomas Pynchon is far better served by being described as postmodern than darkly comic, the term can be much more fruitfully utilised as a description of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, as it is in Wes Gehring's *American Dark Comedy: Beyond Satire.* The very persistence, or indeed growth of the use of "dark humour" as a popular term of critical cultural engagement could be taken to suggest its utility and applicability, rather than, as Haynes suggests, its intellectual degeneration. Moreover, it should be noted that black humour is not so generic a designation after all, with a broad reading of the topic revealing a common nexus of meaning which coalesces around particularly morbid takes on irony and the grotesque.

The term black humour itself predates its common American instantiation, and finds its ur-definition in Andre Breton's 1940 anthology of "*humour noir*". It should be noted, though, that Breton is more explicit in denying the possibility of easy definition than he is in actually defining what is meant by *humour noir*, writing that "there can be no question of explaining

humour and making it serve didactic ends. One might as well try to extract a moral for living from suicide" ("Lightning Rod"). Breton does, however, signal what his key influences are in thinking through his notion of black humour, citing both Freud and Hegel for their ideas of "gallows humour" and "objective humour" respectively. As I will elaborate in Chapter 1, it is a preoccupation with irony, understood as a certain play between human subjectivity and its object, which allows for the synthesis of these two notions. Breton's selection of texts also displays a strong tendency towards the ironic, and the American theorists who would develop dark humour as a viable theoretical paradigm would likewise lean heavily on irony as a defining feature.

In "*Humour Noir* and Black Humor", an attempt to bridge the gap between Breton's *humour noir* and its later American analogue, Matthew Winston notes that while irony is fundamental to dark humour, it is not in itself what makes a work darkly humorous. Instead, Winston claims, dark humour consists in the ironic treatment of three fundamental topics: the grotesque, death and the absurd. It is not only Winston who finds these three topics to be of central importance to the American tradition of Black Humour. In his study *Black Humor Fiction of The Sixties*, Max Schulz defines black humour and traces its genealogy, finding commonalities with existentialism in the treatment of "an absurd world devoid of intrinsic values, with a resultant tension between individual and universe" (6); differentiates black humour's grotesqueries from those proper to surrealism (7); and insists that "Like Shakespeare's Dark Comedies, Black Humor condemns man to a dying

world" (8). Similarly, Gehring identifies three central black comedy themes: "man as beast", "the absurdity of the world" and "the omnipresence of death" (166).

Death and the absurd operate as unifying thematic features across black humour; accounting for the blackness and the humour respectively, they are present in (or perhaps at the heart of) all its irony and grotesquery. This thesis will, for the sake of argument, work to extricate irony and the grotesque from each other and meet them on their own terms, while acknowledging their commonalities and interdependence within the broader operation of dark humour in *Rick and Morty*. The absurd element, it is hoped, will arise naturally from the treatment of these two elements, for while irony and the grotesque can be viewed on semantic or aesthetic terms, the absurd of dark humour is a philosophical stance rather than a trope, a rhetorical device or an aesthetic category. Death will be an ineluctable shadow beneath all, the common thematic vector providing the darkness wherever humour threatens to overwhelm.My guiding question here will be "what does dark humour do?" How is it equal to the task of expressing the "horror of philosophy" in a way that differs from horror or, indeed, philosophy?

Television

Finally, it will be necessary throughout the present study to maintain a careful awareness of television as a medium: its conventions, limitations, and common idioms, both verbal and visual. Though a secondary concern,

the question of medium is nevertheless vital insofar as it must necessarily inform our attempt to read genre. As much as dark humour has passed into mainstream colloquial usage with reference to texts in a broad array of media, it will be noted that much of the above elaboration of a critical understanding of dark humour is made with specific reference to the literary sphere, with the notable exception of Gehring's film studies. *Rick and Morty* positions itself self-consciously within two television traditions: the sitcom and the TV sci-fi. While allusions to this latter tradition will serve, at times, to inform our reading of *Rick and Morty*'s comic operations (above all in Chapter 1), it is for obvious reasons that we must consider the sitcom as a genre if we are to understand the specificities of the darkly humorous turn *Rick and Morty* enacts upon it.

The 2016 collection of essays, *The Sitcom Reader*, provides a longitudinal overview of the genre on US television, considering its genealogy and offering a tentative taxonomy of its various and varying manifestations. Primarily, what is at stake is a conception of the sitcom as a socially representative text, the evolutions and semiotic shifts of which broadly mirror the wider social changes of American society. There are, therefore, chapters dedicated to the change in family dynamics from *Leave it to Beaver* to *Modern Family* (chapter 2); to changing representations of gender (chapters 3, 4, and 9); to race (chapter 11); and to capitalist production itself (chapter 10). H. Peter Steeves' essay "'It's Just a Bunch of Stuff that Happened': *The Simpsons* and the Possibility of Postmodern Comedy", is of particular interest in reading *Rick and Morty* and locating it within a broader

tradition of television comedy, such that we might identify its distinguishing features and how its use of genre serves to articulate its sense of cosmic pessimism.

Steeves places the postmodern sitcom within its broader historical context, dividing the sitcom into traditionalist (developed in the 1950s and '60s), modernist (developed in the 1970s and '80s) and postmodernist (developed from the 1990s onwards) models. While there is a broad chronological order to this taxonomy, Steeves notes it is not all that rigid, observing that *Monty Python's Flying Circus,* airing in the 1970s, is arguably the first postmodern television comedy and the majority of contemporary sitcoms fall into either the traditionalist or modernist categories (238). What distinguishes the modern from the traditionalist is a recognition that "all production is somehow complicit in the modern market, including the production that makes television comedies possible…Acknowledging the nature of the commercial culture thus makes the show modernist rather than traditionalist. It could have taken the postmodern turn though, if it had admitted its own complicity in this culture" (239). Where the traditional sitcom reflected a cosy domestic ideal, an illusory moralistic model unrooted from social reality (Kutulas "Who Rules the Roost?"), the modern sitcom engaged in a deeper fashion with the social and material realities of the capitalist, late 21st Century west (especially the USA).

The postmodern sitcom differs in admitting the impossibility of reflecting a cultural landscape which it forms a not-insignificant part of. Above all else, this entails a profoundly quotational discourse. This begins

with an acceptance that “our words constantly ring with the echoes of all their past uses, that innocence is not only lost but was never really there to begin with” (Steeves 240). It proceeds by quoting, wilfully and obviously, from the popular screen-culture (film and television) of which it forms a part. But its quotational tactics disrupt the quoted signifiers, playing havoc with standard expectations of realism and representation. Thus, writes Steeves, *The Simpsons,* the postmodernist sitcom par excellence (and one of *Rick and Morty*’s most influential ancestors), “uproots the trappings of modernity, including linearity, narrative flow, and expectation in general” (244).

Steeves’ essentially social approach to television reflects a great deal of the work done on the topic. Perhaps the most canonical work on television culture is precisely that, *Television Culture*, John Fiske’s 1986 dissection of “television as a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society” (1). For Fiske, television culture is “a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction” (1). In Fiske’s analysis, which draws heavily on Althusser, Gramsci, Adorno, and Horkheimer, television is an ideological tool for the maintenance of power structures, a task carried out through the production of an alleged objective reality. Thus, the sense of realism inherent in television (even television as fanciful as *Wonderwoman* or the *Six Million Dollar Man*) is produced in the audience “through the same broad ideological frame as the way we make sense of our social experience in

the industrialized west" (25). Fiske, writing in 1986 before the ascent of the postmodernist sitcom, delineates the manner in which traditional/modern television recreates the grand meta-discourses that keep power ticking over. His task consists in describing how this feat is achieved and noting those occasions where, as in Gramscian hegemony, the possibility of resistance arises from a diversity of voices unrepresented by the televisual real and threatens the delicate balance of power (40-1).

These are the terms in which the vast majority of studies of televisual texts are made. Some are, like Fiske, deeply inflected by Marxism and cultural studies (*Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender* ; *Postmodern Culture, Channels of Discourse Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism*), others take the televisual construction of specific identities, such as race, as a starting point (*Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*), while still others are more sociological in their methodology (*TV Living: Television, Culture and Everyday Life*). In common is a resolutely historicist approach to reading television's texts which firmly locates the medium within socio-economic loci of production: production of texts, subjectivities, and ideologies.

The present study will deviate from this approach in proportion to Thacker's deviation from such questions in his readings of supernatural horror in his *Horror of Philosophy*. For instance, in the "QUÆSTIO I" of *In the Dust of this Planet*, Thacker traces the meaning of the "black" in black metal through various historical moments. First, he associates it with Christendom's various Satanisms, from the medieval, through the

renaissance, to Baudelaire's "Les Litanies de Satan" and the 20th Century work of Anton LaVey. Then he traces a similar genealogy through the various paganisms of Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, theosophy and spiritualism. But he does so to arrive at "another meaning of 'black' beyond this" ("QUÆSTIO I"), one which is non-anthropomorphic but instead cosmic, which is fundamentally of the "anonymous, impersonal, 'in itself' of the world, indifferent to us as human beings, despite all we do to change, to shape, to improve and even to save the world" ("Quæstio I").

If, in Steeves' model, the traditional sitcom relies on a social didacticism and the modern sitcom a social commentary or social realism, then the postmodern sitcom differs by being fundamentally critical. In the first place it is critical of itself and of its quoted material, and by extension it becomes criticale of a wider social question, in a manner which provides no answers, no lessons to be learned (Steeves 245-6). Questions of television and its social production are relevant precisely insofar as *Rick and Morty* converses with this tradition and subverts it. For our purposes, what is at stake in this reading is the dismantling of the machinery which produces the human, which, performed in a darkly humorous fashion, articulates a profound sense of cosmic pessimism with a comedic twist that threatens to undermine the lyrical futility which defines Thacker's paradigm.

If this central knot of posthumanism, postmodernism, and dark humour seem unlikely bedfellows, they are perhaps not so divergent as may be thought. As Herbrechter notes, there is an inherent similarity between postmodernism and posthumanism, both of which spurn notions of inherent

human nature (17) and which both "presuppose a radical openness and plurality of meaning" (30). Indeed, Herbrechter goes so far as to propose a study which proceeds by taking the two as readings of each other (30). We have already seen in this chapter how much of what was read as American "dark humour" in the 1960s and '70s came instead to be read as postmodernism, and the two share a certain ironic distance from their subject. In bringing together such differing theoretical paradigms I will certainly run the risk of flattening epistemes of great depth. Indeed, a certain amount of elision will be necessary. But it is not my intent to instrumentalise the work of others, nor to bastardise it. Rather, in my discussion of a singular text in *Rick and Morty*— the singularity of which is a property of its peculiar situation as a bright, pop-culture confection of profound nihilism, as a cosmic pessimist comedy and as a mass-produced televisual palliative for a peculiarly painful posthuman condition— it has been necessary to proceed, like *Rick and Morty*, with an ethos of heterodox hybridity.

Ironic Beginnings

"Just as philosophy begins with doubt, so also a life that may be called human begins with irony."

Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony.*

"Irony is not a concept."

Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony".

Irony? A rhetorical question

The most widely accepted definition of irony, one which still persists to this day, dates back at least 2000 years to Quintilian's description of that irony employed by Plato's Socrates. This definition holds that irony is that trope or figure of speech by which what is to be understood is contrary to what is actually said (Bernstein 2). Of course, Quintilian's definition makes irony itself the fundamental question of any literary or cultural scholar, who looks beyond what there simply *is* of any given discourse to understand, on some level, what is *meant* by what there is. Indeed, once this definition develops, as indeed it has, beyond pragmatic questions of oration and intent, the term develops polysemic valence and we find ourselves confronted with ironies situational and dramatic as well as linguistic; irony as device and voice, as trope or a way of life. The dissimulating irony of Socrates with its plays of ignorance and understanding has been attributed with nothing less than the foundation of Western philosophy itself (Lefebvre 12); for Kierkegaard the

essential character of irony was “infinite, absolute negativity” (Kierkegaard 27). So far so helpful: whatever the essence of irony, it lies somewhere on a spectrum between everything and nothing. Whatever it may be, irony is a defining feature of the postmodern sitcom, for which “Irony is not just a game; it is the only game in town” (Steeves 242). The uniting feature of all postmodern sitcoms is their readiness to take an ironic hatchet to the established norms of televisual discourse. What is specific to the irony of *Rick and Morty* is the use of a darkly humorous irony which, in its treatment of the human and her world, announces the spectral presence of the world-without-us in cosmic pessimist tones.

If we are faced with a question of multiple ironies, the task of the present chapter must be to first locate that precise irony which can be called proper to dark humour, a task for which we will first need some more general notion of irony. We must note that, to the extent that they treat a common condition, all ironies, be they Socratic or Quintilian, situational or dramatic, coalesce around what might be termed most simply a contrast between expectation and reality. In the presence of the ironic, what is to be understood of a given trope or object runs contrary to what is “ordinarily” to be understood of it, precisely because of the intervention of this germ we call irony. This chapter therefore deals primarily in the narrative level, as it explores how *Rick and Morty* ironises various well-worn narrative tropes of television and film, from the sitcom to the sci-fi horror, in order to hollow out their construction of the human. The two episodes read in this chapter are chosen for the preponderance of these tropes and the clarity with which

they are subverted. In reading them, we will approach an understanding of the specific irony of dark comedy and the world-without-us.

Caprices of memory

The season 2 episode "Total Rickall" opens on breakfast for the Smith family, who are being visited by "Uncle Steve", a previously unseen character who has apparently been staying with the Smiths for some time. "I wanted to thank you for letting me live here all this time," he announces, "so I'm treating the family to a vacation!"

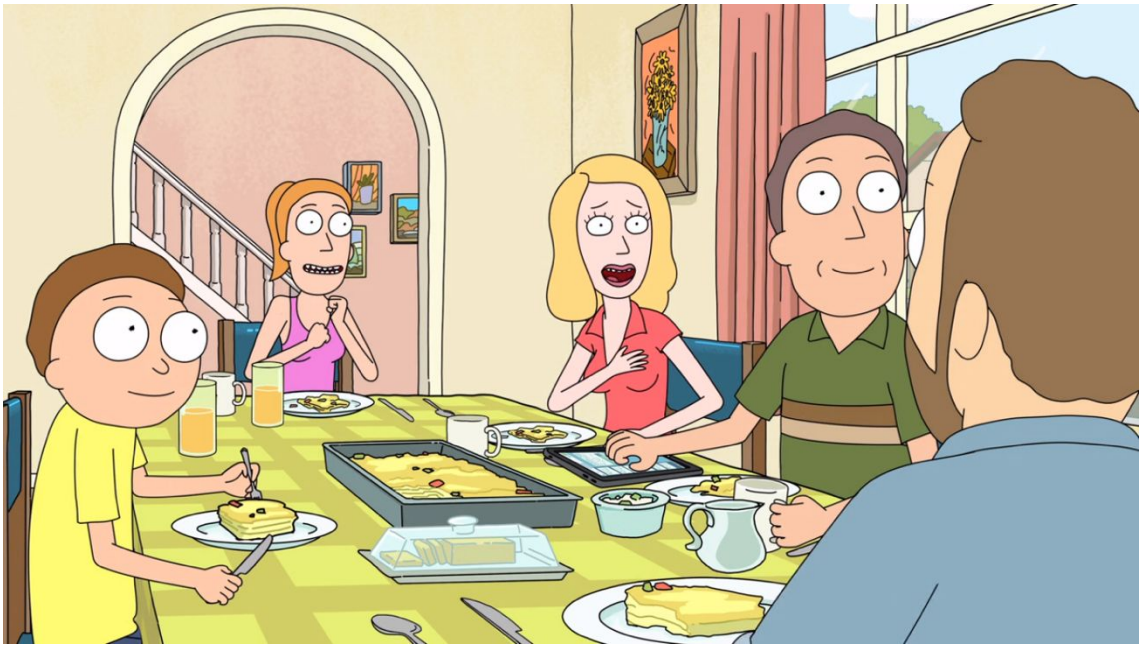

Figure 4. Breakfast with Uncle Steve ("Total Rickall" 00:20).

Entering in upon this happy domestic scene, a perplexed Rick fails to recognize Uncle Steve and is met with confused but good-natured taunting from his family who insist that Steve has lived there for well over a year. Laughter turns to horror as Rick curtly shoots Uncle Steve through the head (fig. 5). As the corpse transforms from human form into a wormlike alien (fig. 6), Rick explains impatiently to his horrified family that "Uncle Steve"

was in fact a type of alien parasite that propagates by assuming a benign form and embedding false memories in those around it, using these memories to proliferate and eventually take over the host planet.

Figure 5. The execution of Uncle Steve (“Total Rickall” 00:54)

Figure 6. Uncle Steve transforms (“Total Rickall” 01:01)

Here irony interferes with a standard trope of the domestic family sitcom. As developed on US television, the traditional sitcom of the 1950s

and ‘60s, and to a slightly lesser extent the modern sitcom which developed in the 1970s and ‘80s, tended to focus on the family unit, providing either a comfortable reinforcement of societal norms (in the traditional model) or a critique of such norms in the face of social change (the modern model) (Kutulas). Opening on a white, middle-class, nuclear family cheerily eating breakfast in suburbia, *Rick and Morty* apes its traditional predecessors. The somewhat contrived appearance of an apparently beloved relative who has been neither mentioned nor seen on the show before is a common enough occurrence on television shows to have its own name and entry on the wiki *TV Tropes,* which describes and compiles pop-culture plot conventions (“Remember the New Guy”). The usual valence of this convention is disrupted, however, by the revelation of a diegetic explanation for Uncle Steve’s sudden appearance. In the process, the social/domestic reading gives way to one of cosmic horror (neatly visualised by Steve’s transformation) and one which, through subversion, serves as a commentary on the conventions of the television comedy itself.

This ironic play of subversion and proliferation of meaning persists, as Rick notes that the presence of this parasite implies the presence of others:

RICK: We could be infested with these things, so we’ve got to keep an eye out for any zany, wacky characters that pop up.

The close up of Rick gives way to a wide shot revealing the presence of precisely such a zany, wacky interloper (fig. 7).

ZANY WACKY CHARACTER: Ooh, whee! Whatever you want, Rick! We're here to help!

RICK: Thanks, Mr. Poopybutthole. I always could count on you.

(“Total Rickall” 01:33-46)

Figure 7. A zany, wacky character appears. (“Total Rickall” 01:40)

The crudeness of the character’s name and design is an ironic joke which operates on two levels. On one level the joke is the primitive operation of the parasites and the credulity of the family members who are effectively enough brainwashed to accept that an elongated yellow blob with a top hat and a scatological moniker is an old family friend. Equally the joke is a self-reflexive one which makes the crudeness of the joke itself a target of ridicule, with the generic descriptor “zany, wacky character” no sooner enunciated than incarnated in a character of such rudimentary wackiness as to sink right past juvenility and settle instead for the barely infantile. This sort of meta-irony is fairly common in the postmodern sitcom (indeed the postmodern anything), and operates via obscuring both the subject enunciating the joke (which could be Rick, the writers, or the viewer who

laughs at them) and the object of the joke (which might be the parasite, the writers, or the viewer who laughs at herself). In the case of "Total Rickall", this obscuration is the very thematic at the heart of the episode, as the Smith family have to work out who is (human) subject and who is (nonhuman) object out of an increasingly zany and wacky cast of characters (fig. 8).

Figure 8. An increasingly zany and wacky cast of characters. ("Total Rickall" 09:32)

As implanted memories of false characters multiply, the episode takes on the form of a "clip show". Composed of a series of excerpts from previous episodes presented as flashbacks within a (frequently flimsy) framing narrative, clip shows are typically produced when a TV show has to produce an order of episodes but may lack the budget, time or resources to fill the full order with new material. "Total Rickall" adopts the clip show format but fills it with "false" excerpts (i.e. new material), reflecting back at the viewer

the falseness of these memories for the characters, a falseness which is heightened by the surreal nature of many of the "new" characters and thereby repeats the self-reflexive ironic motion of the "Mr. Poopybutthole" reveal throughout the episode. Importantly, while the falseness of the characters is apparent to the viewer, the Smith family become increasingly unable to tell the real from the false, with weak-willed family patriarch Jerry even becoming convinced that he himself must be a parasite.

This situation of heightened dramatic irony persists until Morty establishes a method for discerning the real from the false: the parasites, it transpires, are only capable of implanting good memories. At this point the irony collapses. As the Smith's gain knowledge of their situation they proceed to identify and kill the parasites in an action movie homaging finale (fig. 9).

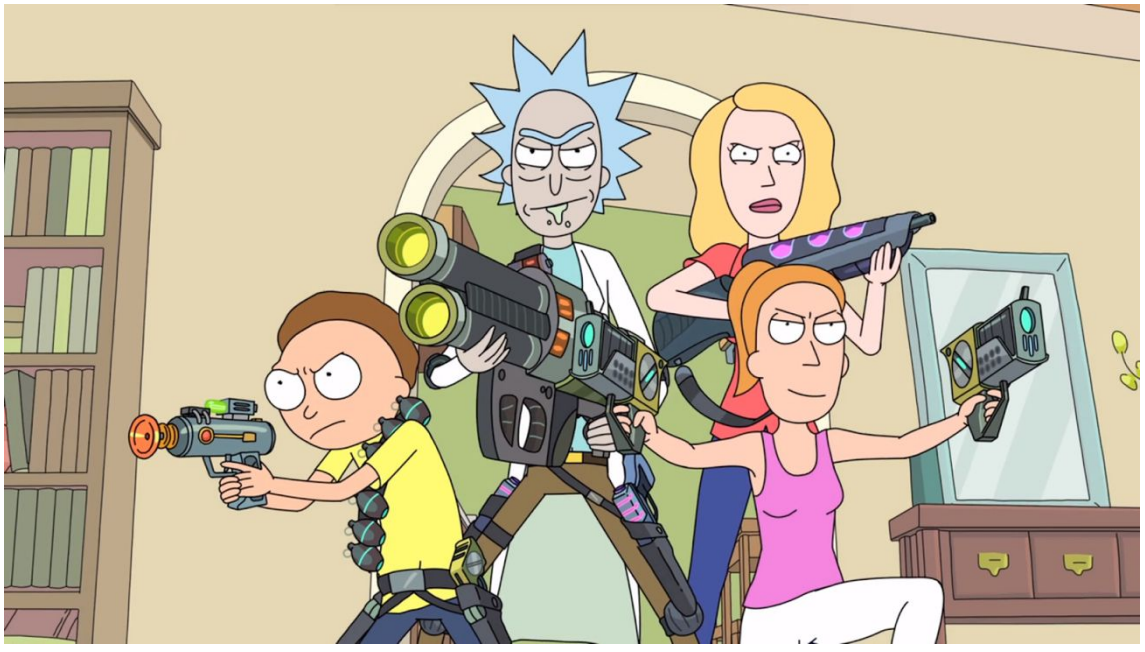

Figure 9. Action pose. ("Total Rickall" 17:17)

In a dark reflection of the domestic scene which opens the episode, "Total Rickall" ends with the family again gathered round the dinner table, this time surrounded by the remains of the day's carnage (fig. 10). Despite this visually transgressive twist on traditional sitcom setting, the episode is set to be resolved in an un-ironic, straightforward fashion with the status quo restored: the family gathered once again with all interplanetary interlopers vanquished. This resolution is disrupted by the reappearance at the table of the very wacky, zany character whose appearance at the start of the episode signalled the games of irony to come (fig. 10). Assuming, as the viewer must, that a parasite has survived, Beth shoots him through the chest, only for him to bleed red— that is *human*— blood (ibid.). A panicked Jerry calls for an ambulance, telling the operator that "There's been a shooting! My wife shot… my wife shot a long-time family friend" (20:14-17).

Figure 10. Dinner takes a violent turn ("Total Rickall" 19:40-20:29)

According to Robert Fiske's analysis (which, it will be recalled, pertains to the modern and traditional models of televisual discourse) television is "an essentially realistic medium" (21). By this it is not meant that shows like *Star Trek, Superman*, or *Mork and Mindy* are true to any external, empirical reality, rather that they "carry a socially convincing sense of the real" (21). That is to say, realism is primarily a question of the discursive conventions that establish the "facts" of a socially produced reality, for instance: a sense of the human, its worth, and its distinguishing features. Fiske borrows the deep structure of this realism from Colin Maccabe, for whom "an essential formal characteristic of realism is that it is always structured by a 'hierarchy of discourses'" (25). While various, contradictory discourses may be present in a realistic text, there exists a dominant, unwritten discourse taking precedence over all of them and telling the "truth" (25). As Fiske points out, television is "a profoundly 'generic' medium" (111), which constructs reality through access to intertextual codes of convention and genre. In the case of "Total Rickall", as with much of television, this "metadiscourse" is established with reference to the common generic tropes evoked, both of the sitcom and the inhuman invasion narrative. By having access to these metadiscursive signifiers, the viewer approaches a position of "dominant specularity" (25), clued in to a truth higher than that the characters have access to. In "Total Rickall", this position allows the viewer to "know", from his very first appearance, that a yellow ovoid called "Mr. Poopybutthole", never before seen by the viewer in two and a half seasons of the show, cannot possibly be a "real" character.

The twist reveal of his humanity is not a denouement that should be permissible according to the laws of reality itself.

As with the opening, this closing scene uses the narrative language of the TV sitcom to subvert the very cosy securities such narratives usually help establish. Such mundane certainties (the "all's well that ends well" finale) are invoked and ironised in order to remove all certainty, both that of the characters and, in this ultimate twist, the viewer, who sees dramatic irony itself ironised as their ongoing assumptions about the unreality of this ridiculous character are subverted. The episode closes on Beth, alone in the kitchen, frantically pouring a glass of wine with shaky hands as her old friend lies dying next door. The joke is on her and, by extension, it is on the viewer who made the same mistaken assumption of certainty. Unlike Beth, the joke is also *for* the viewer. Again, irony, refracting the plot of the episode itself, confuses subject and object and muddies the waters of knowledge of the human itself. If this is the ironic operation which is specific to dark humour, it would be useful at this point to return to Andre Breton to better understand it.

From Socrates to the gallows and back: the irony of *humour noir*

While Breton is steadfastly elusive about defining *humour noir* in any concrete fashion, the surrealist does posit Freud's gallows humour and Hegel's objective humour as its twin poles. Both these notions have in common a conception of humour as arising from an uncomfortable encounter between a sovereign human subjectivity and an objectivity which

in some way challenges this very sovereignty by resisting comprehension. Crucially, however, they differ in what it is humour makes of this confrontation, and Breton is tight-lipped as to how the two ideas are to synthesise.

Freud posits gallows humour as an assertion of the ego's self-mastery against the "provocations of reality", typified by the moribund joker who, on their way to the gallows, quips "Well, the week's beginning nicely!" (161) In doing so, Freud claims, the joker reasserts the sovereignty of their subjectivity in the face of an objective reality which poses it an existential threat, an attitude we might call a sort of subjective triumphalism. Hegel's objective humour, conversely, was meant as a corrective to the subjective triumphalism he perceived in the use of irony by contemporary novelists. For Hegel the self-reflective games of meaning and representation which typified humour in the Romantic novel went about "destroying and dissolving everything that proposes to make itself objective and win a firm shape for itself in reality", such that "now it is the mere subjective activity of the poet which commands material and meaning alike and strings them together in an order alien to them" (601). Against the solipsism of Romantic irony, Hegel posits an objective humour to which what matters is instead "the object and its configuration within its subjective reflex" such that we can "acquire thereby a growing intimacy with the object" even if "such an intimacy can only be partial" (609). If there is a synthesis to be made between the two very different notions, it is surely in this play of objective and subjective, with both humours intending the incorporation of the former

within the latter: Freud in terms of an attempt at mastery and control; Hegel in terms of that "inner movement of the spirit devoted entirely to its object and retaining it as its content and interest" (609).

It is precisely this tension between subjective and objective which defines Thacker's Planet, or world-without-us:

"the Planet moves beyond the subjective World, but it also recedes behind the objective Earth. The Planet is a planet, it is one planet among other planets, moving the scale of things out from the terrestrial into the cosmological framework. Whether the Planet is yet another subjective, idealist construct or whether it can have objectivity and be accounted for as such, is an irresolvable dilemma. What is important in the concept of the Planet is that it remains a negative concept, simply that which remains "after" the human." (*In the Dust of this Planet* "Preface")

In thinking this through one must consider the "objective" used in this sense to be at least as much a matter of ethical or social reality as physical reality. Thus the posthuman encounter with the Planet which cannot be incorporated into the human Earth is, by extension, an encounter with the very figure of the human and its non-human remainder, glimpsed objectively and nakedly; in the round and in all its socio-historical contingency. Perhaps counter-intuitively, the principal tool for exploring this relationship of subject and object is precisely irony. For though Hegel bemoans the Romantic irony which elevates the subject at the expense of the objective world, he elsewhere praises that "Socratic irony" which inheres at least

partially in the objective, since “like all dialectic, it gives force to what is - taken immediately, but only in order to allow the dissolution inherent in it to come to pass; and we may call this the universal irony of the world” (“Socrates”). Note that this dissolution is inherent within what is, it is not provoked by the subjectivity of the ironist which, in any case, exists within that very dissoluble realm of “what is”. Thus Socratic irony was also the method by which “Socrates taught those with whom he associated to know that they knew nothing” (“Socrates”). Insofar as it applies to the subjectivity of the ironist herself, Hegel’s Socratic irony resembles that conceived of by Paul De Man in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, according to which the fundamental “dedoublement” inherent to irony constitutes a split by which “a man differentiates himself from the non-human world” and by which, simultaneously, the subject is able to self-consciously reflect on itself as an object. De Man takes his cue from Baudelaire who, in “L’essence du rire”, defines laughing at oneself in falling as a profoundly philosophical act by which the faller can “'assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son moi" (De Man 194). In doing so, De Man suggests that “man” is forced to evaluate the terms by which he defines himself in relation to nature. The faller, he writes,

“is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself… As a being that stands upright… man comes to believe that he dominates nature… The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his

relationship to nature. Nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness" (196).

De Man concludes that ironic language, like the fall, "splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic" (197). This is that synthesis of Freud and Hegel which Breton obliquely gestured towards. Irony is at once the only language adequate to expressing the mistaken exceptionalism of the human ego and, at the same time, a paradoxical assertion of knowledge on the part of an inauthentic subject, re-asserting the primacy of self at the very moment of recognizing its dissolution. The irony of dark humour is a Socratic irony which is always lapsing into Romantic irony; a gallows humour which can only assert subjectivity in the face of its negation.

Further caprices of memory

With this in mind, let us consider again "Total Rickall". At first blush the episode presents a more or less typical tale of alien invasion, one which is redolent of that classic of the genre *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. From this the episode borrows the notion of an alien invader which does not make

itself visible and which masquerades as our loved ones in order to proliferate and destroy humanity. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the alien presence manifests itself in "pod people", extra-terrestrial replicas who, despite their appearance, may still be told apart from humans, by humans, because of their inability to feel emotions; a fundamental lack of human essence which they can mask, but not to those who know the real, non-pod person well. Despite the initial moment of confusion, this is still a fundamentally humanist take on the alien. As Neil Badmington describes it, this distinction supports the film's humanism in the following ways: "First, there is a belief in an absolute difference between the human and the inhuman. Second, this difference is hierarchical. Third, there is an appeal to a uniquely human essence that cannot be replicated. Fourth, there are clearly identifiable rules according to which a simple versus—humans versus aliens—may be maintained" (*Alien Chic* 136).

In *Rick and Morty,* pod people are substituted for shape-shifting parasites and false memories put a new twist on the old figure of the false friend, but the essential humanism is little altered. Negative memories replace authentic emotion as the alien "tell"; subverting *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* in which the aliens are defined by the absence of a positive trait (human emotion), here the parasites are identified by an absence of negativity, as a series of flashbacks to various ways in which the family have wounded, mocked, and disappointed each other illustrate. There is a pessimism about humanity here; certainly, Jerry's lamentation at the episode's end that the family have "killed every good person in the house"

(19:43-46) suggests that humans may not be all they're cracked up to be. But there is no serious challenge to a hierarchy which places human above malevolent non-human, as reinforced by the destructive intentions of the parasites, as well as their transformation at the moment of death into indistinguishable "others". This pessimistic humanism might turn a critical eye on the human but it does so in a fashion which reinforces rationality and emotional complexity as distinguishing features of a human essence, albeit features which apparently doom humanity to a certain amount of pain.

This pessimist-humanist bodysnatchers reading is then interrupted by the shooting which closes the episode and challenges both the clear rule of differentiation and the nature of the uniquely human essence (some people, it seems, do indeed only leave good memories). It pronounces something which the metadiscourse of the real, which maintains that humanity is a real and perceivable object, should not permit. In addition to the disguised threat which is "out there", *Rick and Morty* adds a disguised threat which is "in here", internal to the mind. It is this movement that crosses into the subjective which, as noted above, precipitates the fundamental ironies of the episode, including the dramatic irony which operates throughout only to be dissolved in the last instance. With this, the Cartesian demon which prohibits the possibility of certainty on the part of the characters is let loose on the viewer whose presumed knowledge of narrative convention and televisual reality has led them to a false conclusion. Moreover, the viewer is now forced into a situation which

challenges identification with any of the characters on-screen. In a narrative world in which apparently long-standing characters can suddenly appear, in which false people proliferate and real people seem false, in which, as seen in the introduction to this thesis, any of an infinite number of parallel analogues can replace or be replaced by the characters we thought we knew, continuity becomes impossible to establish and human value and self-knowledge is obscured by contingency on a cosmic scale.

This is not *Rick and Morty*'s only tale of cosmic invaders complicating humanity. If "Total Rickall" elaborates a sense of the darkly ironic which complicates the (self) knowledge of the human with a broadly epistemological critique, the season 2 episode "Auto Erotic Assimilation" shows a similar operation which attacks the more specifically historical, political, and social aspect of humanism, albeit on metaphysical terms.

On life and lives: human, alien, demon.

"Auto Erotic Assimilation" deals with a similar, and similarly well-worn, invasive alien other. Where the bodysnatchers-type invader relies on the insertion of camouflaged life forms into the host body that is the invaded planet, this invader inserts itself into the human itself, eliminating or mastering body and mind of the host to convert it into an instrument of monstrous ends. We might term such an invader an "assimilator", and its provenance need not be interplanetary - zombies, werewolves and vampires are all popularly known assimilators of terrestrial (if occult) origin. The specific contours of the assimilator of "Auto Erotic Assimilation" question

are, typically for *Rick and Morty*, informed by 20th Century sci-fi, especially, in this case, *Star Trek*.

The episode begins as Rick, Summer, and Morty respond to a distress signal coming from a spaceship. When they arrive hoping to loot the remains of whatever disaster has befallen the crew, they instead find a small contingent of survivors in dire need of aid, the entire population of their home planet having been hollowed out from within and their individual minds replaced by some singular malign force (fig. 11). In short order two assimilated crew members make their presence known (fig. 12) and infect their countrymen.

Figure 11. An encounter with the survivors ("Auto Erotic Assimilation" 01:07)

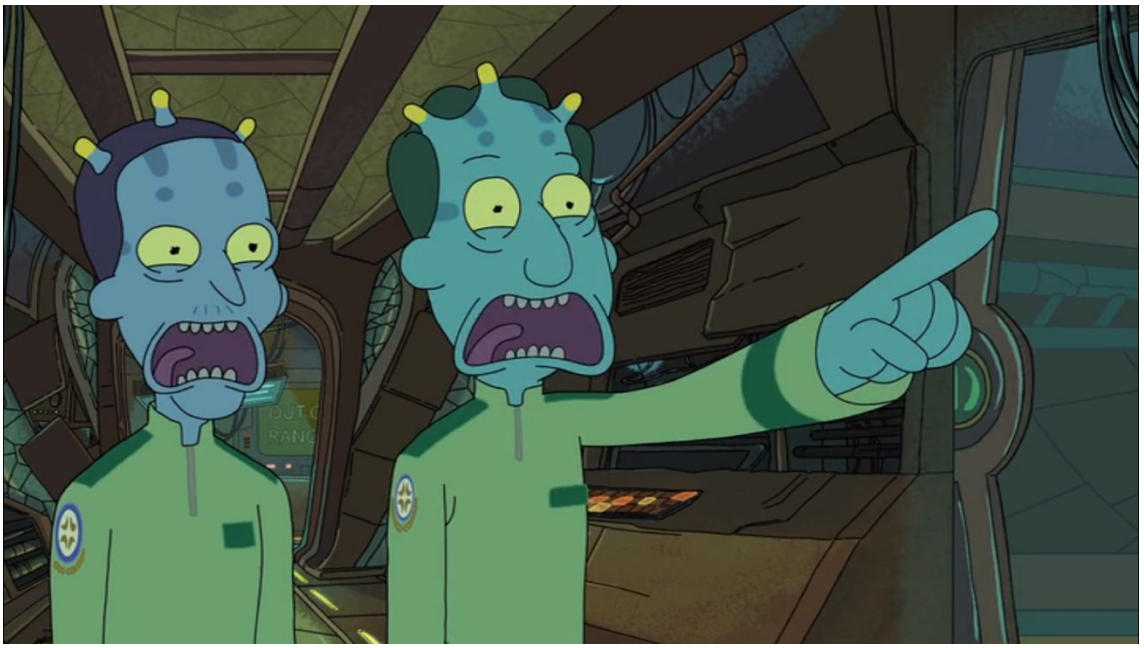

Figure 12. Assimilation nigh. A momentary, screeching homage to the 1978 *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* ("Auto Erotic Assimilation" 01:27)

It is worth noting here that these aliens— English-speaking and humanoid apart from superficial physical difference— are essentially human in nature. This is part of a tradition on television which dates back to the original *Star Trek*, created by avowed humanist Gene Rodenberry, in which most alien species stood in for humanity. These were not aliens as non-human others but rather aliens as a narrative device for exploring human concerns (especially those germane to 1960s America). Hence the suspiciously UN-like United Federation of Planets and alien races like the Klingons with differences operating at a cultural rather than essential level (save for the latex foreheads). The blue-tinged humanoids of "Auto Erotic Assimilation" will be read here as "human", while the assimilating entity will, for obvious reasons, be read as a non-human alien. Once assimilated,

the crew turn their attention to Rick, Summer and Morty, but do not attack. Instead, they turn to Rick and speak as one:

THE CREW: Hello, Rick. Long time no see.

RICK: Unity?

THE CREW ("UNITY") Rick?

SUMMER: Grandpa?

RICK: Oh, boy. Uh, these are my grandkids, Summer and Morty. Summer, Morty, this is, uh, Unity. We sort of used to, uh, date.

(01:35 - 48)

It transpires that this particular invasive hivemind, Unity, is Rick's former lover, and the trio are soon escorted by Unity to see… the rest of Unity, that is the planet which it now populates. Glimpsed from the spaceship, the planet's "society", such as it is, presents itself as an eerie, dystopian utopia (fig. 13), peaceful and ordered but devoid of difference and spark, entirely lacking the aleatory seeds of spontaneity and creativity.

Figure 13. Eerie symmetry (“Auto Erotic Assimilation” 02:03)

The situation is typical of such wide-scale assimilation narratives. The assimilator justifies their actions on a totalitarian-utilitarian basis (“I have transformed life here into a paradise”, Unity maintains (8:48-51)), while the heroes, stressing the humanist value of individualised liberty as the true measure of any morally justifiable social structure, assert the inherent perversion of this alleged paradise. Summing up his furious sister’s humanist complaints, Morty tells Unity “I don't think my sister's trying to say that life would be perfect without you. I think she's just saying that life would be, you know, life” (8:42 -48). This line gets to the heart of what is at stake in such a narrative: a definition of human life and a statement about its value. In exploring this question, *Rick and Morty* proceeds first by quoting from earlier genre examples only to challenge the fundamental differences of individual/collective, subject/object, and life/nonlife assumed therein, through the use of ironic inversion and polysemy.

TV’s best known sci-fi assimilator is *Star Trek’s* “Borg”, a cybernetic, part-organic, part-machine life form (or collection of life forms) which assimilates new bodies into the collective consciousness. Signalling its debt to this earlier TV hivemind, “Auto Erotic Assimilation” includes a visit from Beta Seven, a neighbouring assimilator with which Unity has established a détente and the design of which closely echoes that of the Borg (fig. 14).

Figure 14. Left, an assimilated lifeform of *Star Trek*'s Borg ("Borg" at *StarTrek.com);* Right, four assimilated lifeforms of *Rick and Morty's* Beta Seven ("Autoerotic Assimilation" 06: 39).

The Borg is always presented as something villainous, as an impersonal, insatiable, devouring force opposed to the inherent good of the individual human subject it seeks to consume. This is the same reading Summer has of Unity. When she first arrives on the assimilated planet, Summer attempts to liberate the populace, telling them they are "under the spell of an evil monster" and appealing to a sense of individuality that she insists must be somewhere within them (08:06-20). Naturally, Unity's retort is that freedom and individuality come with certain evils of their own:

UNITY: Summer, before I took over this planet, this man was a registered sex offender.

SUMMER: (Uncertain) Yeah? Well… so what? At least he was himself.

UNITY: This woman was a drug addict on the verge of suicide. Now she's a marine biologist.

(08:29-42)

Soon enough however, Summer gets her wish. Concurrent with this discussion of the relative merits of individuality, Unity has elsewhere re-ignited her tryst with Rick. This decision quickly degenerates into drug-fuelled debauchery which, in turn, causes Unity to temporarily lose control of part of the assimilated population. Summer's initial cheer quickly turns sour as the planet's citizens, senses returning to them, soon divide along tribal lines based on phenotypic difference:

SUMMER: Do all of you remember who you are?

RON BENSON: Yeah, uh, my name is Ron Benson. I'm an electrical engineer, father of two, and, as you can see from my flat, concentric nipple rings, I'm a member of this planet's top race! (*fig. 15)*

SUMMER: Okay, that's good. Uh, don't focus too much on the last part, but--

DARYL JEFFERSON: I'm Daryl Jefferson. I'm a landscaper. And I'll be damned if that ripple-nipple bitch's race is superior! The cone-nipple people will rule this world! (*fig. 16)*

(10:30-57)

As the planet descends into an all-out race war, a confused Summer tries to appeal for peace by abandoning her insistence on individual difference: "Why are you fighting," she asks, "can't you see you're all the same?" (11:15-18)

Figure 15. Ron Benson (“Auto Erotic Assimilation” 10:42)

Figure 16 Daryl Jefferson (“Auto Erotic Assimilation” 10:55).

Note that this turn of events does not simply ironise the assimilation narrative on the basis of a Hobbesian critique of the fundamental nature of human individuals. After all, this critique is a part of the narrative: it is the basis on which assimilation can be morally justified, as we have already

seen with Unity. Rather it immediately throws Summer's, and indeed Unity's, notions of the individual into question. No sooner is individual liberty granted than are individuals acting as groups. No sooner has Summer finished arguing for difference than does she find herself insisting on similarity. The most ironic part of Summer's apparent self-contradiction is that it is a contradiction which is almost always present and yet never articulated when we speak of human life. "Humanity" is a shared good and a collective object whose health and betterment is to be worked towards; at the same time, the very humans who make up humanity are unique and free, and it is in this radical freedom and difference that the worth and essence of "humanity" inheres. This paradox of liberal humanism is essentially a re-formulation of (or a direct result of) a fundamental and ancient paradox of "life" itself, which is on the one hand a transcendent quality or category and yet on the other can only ever be an individual immanent instantiation. Thacker traces this problem of life at least as far back as Aristotle, who, as philosopher, tries to describe a general life-principle *(psūkhế*) and, as naturalist, tries to taxonomise the various individual instances of life, as in the *Historia Animalium* ("Dark Life" 16). For Thacker, however, the problematic reaches its fundamental articulation with Kant, for whom,

"Life-in-itself is neither the knowledge nor the experience of the living (be it biological classification or the subjective phenomenon of living), and life-in-itself is also not the living being considered as such (e.g. the object given to science as an object of observation). In short, it would

> seem that the life common to all living beings is ultimately enigmatic and inaccessible to thought, since any given instance of the living (as subject or object) is not life-in-itself, but only one manifestation of life…It is precisely as living subjects, with life given as objects for us as subjects, that we are cut off from, and yet enmeshed within, life in itself." ("Dark Life" 14).

This contradiction is precisely what is articulated in the ironic reversal of the individual vs. collective dichotomy at the heart of the assimilation narrative, in which humanity and the individual human refer to each other without the possibility of either mutual identification or separate distinction. It is a contradiction which is further articulated in the character of Unity itself, an all-consuming force that claims calmly "One by one, I will unify them, I will become the universe, and I will be what the single-minded once called the God" (03:55-04:01). And yet this force is only known or knowable through various instantiations, the existence and activities of which never tarry with this grander purpose. As Rick becomes reacquainted with Unity, he walks through a bustling and remarkably familiar metropolis setting, apparently filled with individuals going about their days in much the manner of humanity in any major city of Earth (fig. 16). As they carry out their daily tasks, the citizens/Unity speak to Rick for the time that their paths coincide with him, then they carry on as another fellow countryman/manifestation of Unity takes their place (fig.16).

Figure 16. Rick catches up with an old friend, converses with a city ("Auto Erotic Assimilation" 03:50 -04:20).

This is an anthropocentric gesture that ironises itself: an all-conquering force essentially seems to operate as an unusually successful mayor. The newspapers may boast of an era of global peace, but as Rick notes, it's "(a) little weird to publish a paper about it for yourself" (03:40). The joke of course is that it is more than "a little weird" to have publication at all, have a city, or buses or a "part of me that's a cleaning lady (who) comes on Friday" (13:45). Later, Unity will end its relationship with Rick via letters scattered around town, and even then it will be uncertain if it is one or many, writing "forgive *me* for doing this in notes, I'm not strong enough to do it in *persons*" (18:44) (my emphasis). Unity's composition is an irresolvable contradiction, it is individual (cleaning lady), singular agglomeration of individuals (city) and unified collective in equal measure. Irony as it is in operation here hews closely to Paul De Man's definition,

adapted from Schlegel, of irony as the "permanent parabasis of the allegory of tropes" ("The Concept of Irony" 180). Where a trope defers meaning through metaphorical or figurative reference, irony defers that meaning *ad infinitum*. Irony, thus considered, "consists in stepping outside the circumscribing schema that accounts for meaning and that produces a sum significance without remainder, by taking the tropological turn through 180 degrees, such that obliquity becomes diametric opposition" (Springer 25). The problem that arises from this ironic look at Unity's composition is therefore a reformulation of the problem of humans/humanity; the identity of the individual defers to the universal which defers back. This is the irony of absolute infinite negativity, a statement about the impossibility of the human that necessarily undermines itself. It is Romantic irony without a subject, a gallows humour not of the dying but of the never-was.

To consider this in a cosmic pessimist mode, we might trace Unity's roots back to a text even older and more canonical than *Star Trek*: the Bible. The progenitor of all those Western tales of bodily possession which blur the one with the many must be the Gerasene demon which, asked its name by an exorcising Christ, answers "My name is Legion: for we are many" (Mark 5.9). Cast from the man's body, the demon or demons go on to possess a herd of swine, who run into a lake and are drowned (Mark 5.11-13). In *In The Dust of This Planet,* Thacker notes two striking and distinctive features about this demon compared to Old Testament counterparts: the transgressive confusion of one and many and the portrayal of a demon which is "unmediated and yet only embodied - the demons called "Legion"

are never present in themselves, but only via some form of earthly embodiment" ("Quæstio II"). For Thacker this demoniac points toward an unknowable non-human horizon which nevertheless interacts with the human, "a limit for thought that is constituted not by being or becoming, but by non-being, or nothingness" ("Quæstio II"). He therefore attempts to think demonology in a philosophic register, suggesting "demontology" as the term to denote this philosophical mode according to which "If anthropology is predicated on a division between the personal and the impersonal ("man" and cosmos), then a demontology collapses them into paradoxical pairings (impersonal affects, cosmic suffering)" ("Quæstio II"). In its ironic take on the tale of assimilation/demonic possession, this is precisely the mode of thought which *Rick and Morty* provokes. Indeed, it does so more overtly and more successfully than the traditional possession narrative precisely because the irony establishes an unending series of mutual reflections, between one and many, unity and multiplicity, Unity and humanity, humanity and humans, individual and collective and so on.

In the series of letters left to Rick, Unity writes "I'm sure I'll just unify species after species and never really be complete. But I know how it goes with us. I lose who I am and become part of you" (19:03-13). The humour arises from an ironic multivocality; in speaking as both devouring, unifying force and prosaically (if existentially) heartbroken person, there is both an anthropomorphising of the cosmic assimilating force and a depersonalised cosmic force traced through the human. According to Thacker's demontology, such paradoxical pairings, in collapsing the division between

personal and impersonal, move beyond the minimal ontological relation of being/non-being to undertake the thought of a more total nothingness, which Thacker describes with reference to Schopenhauer's *nihil negativum*. Where the *nihil privativum* is a nothing which is the absence of a given something, the *nihil negativum* "would in every respect be nothing" (Schopenhauer *World as Will and Representation* 409). As Thacker explains, "the *nihil privativum* is the world as it appears to us, the world-for-us, the

> world as "Representation" (*Vorstellung*), while the *nihil negativum* is the world-in-itself or the world as "Will" - or better, the world-in-itself as it is manifest to us in its inaccessibility, in its enigmatic, "occult qualities… the *nihil negativum* is not just about the limits of language to adequately describe the experience; it is about the horizon of thought as it confronts the unthought, the horizon of the human as it struggles to comprehend the unhuman" ("Quæstio II").

What is key here is that the ironic parabasis and *dedoublement* allows for the location of that horizon within the human itself and indeed without, as it constantly blurs subjective and objective boundaries. This would suit Schopenhauer fine, for whom "everyone in this twofold regard is the whole world itself, the microcosm… what he thus recognizes as his own inner being also exhausts the inner being of the whole world, the macrocosm. Thus the whole world, like man himself, is through and through will and through and through representation, and beyond this there is nothing" (*WWR* 162). As noted in the introduction, this scaling up and scaling down of the human is a paradoxical identifying feature of cosmic pessimism, an

expansion of the human that eliminates the possibility of its easy definition and leaves us only with an unthinkable Planet.

Screams of laughter

Rick and Morty shows that irony is the means by which dark humour can express a crisis of human knowledge and self-knowledge, of the kind Thacker claims is proper to cosmic pessimism. It is a crisis which begins with the objectifying identification of the human subject but which, from this self-defeating beginning, can only fall into a pattern of infinite absolute negativity. Here we might look to Thacker's reading of supernatural horror, which, he writes, "moves away from human-centric concerns over psychology, desire, motive, and free will" ("Mangled Corpse" 379), and instead reads it as a step beyond the human and a confrontation with "the enigmatic thought of the unknown" (*Dust* "Preface"). If, thusly read, the genre ceases to be about "human fear in a human world" ("Preface"), we might similarly say that, in our reading of *Rick and Morty*'s dark irony, the comic ceases to be about human laughter in a human world and instead becomes precisely such a confrontation with the limits of thought. If, per Schopenhauer, laughter is the response to "the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation" (59), then *Rick and Morty* takes the human as concept and object and sees only incongruity, indeed sees only incongruity in the concept of objects and concepts as objects.

Yet horror and comedy remain self-evidently different. It would not do to elide this difference in a rush to read cosmic pessimism in dark humour as well as supernatural horror. We have seen how the irony proper to dark humour can be particularly suited to the task of exploring that horizon of thought which characterises what might be termed the cosmic pessimist mood. But we must be wary of reducing dark humour and supernatural horror to the status of two different but equal devices, blunt instruments which can be wielded to serve the same end. At this point, we can already see a plain but important divergence in how the two articulate Thacker's resolutely enigmatic "thought of the impossibility of thought" (*Tentacles* "Neither Fear nor Thought"). What Thacker variously terms horror, supernatural horror, and cosmic horror approaches this impossible thought with a sense of "the blank horror of the unhuman" (*Tentacles* "Neither Life nor Death"), itself a response to a generalised and incomprehensible indifference on a cosmic scale, "an indifference registered by the human in the utter apophatic blackness of incomprehensibility" ("Neither Life nor Death"). As shown in *Rick and Morty*, the register of dark humour as it approaches the cosmic pessimist horizon of thought is far more ludic. Hopeless of resolving the paradoxes of the humanless Planet, it nevertheless asserts an impossible subjectivity. Untenable, self-defeating, and dead on arrival, the subjective triumphalism of gallows humour and De Man's "authentic self" nonetheless remain inherent parts of this irony, even as it proves inauthentic and dissolves in what Hegel termed "the universal irony of the world" ("Socrates"), or, perhaps, the Planet.

Of Pickles and Monsters

"Disgust recapitulates phylogenesis"

Vilem Flusser, *Vampyroteuthis Infernalis*

"Look at that thing right there. What the hell is that thing? You think you're gonna see that kind of thing at school? Look at it just lumbering around. It defies all logic, that thing."

Rick Sanchez, "Pilot"

A funny kind of fear

The "darkness" of dark humour involves a certain overlap with horror. We have seen this in the previous chapter with our discussion of how the irony of dark humour, like horror, approaches the uncanny and unaccountable alienness of thought, world, and self. But this affinity with the horrific is most apparent in the grotesque, a necessarily hybrid and shifting form, at once capable of delighting and disgusting. After establishing a working conceptual framework in which to study the grotesque, this chapter will proceed to analyse two grotesque case studies from within *Rick and Morty*. Taken together they exemplify, in their commonalities and differences, the peculiar intersection of horror and humour at the heart of this dark grotesque and its relationship with cosmic pessimism.

In "*Humour Noir* and Black Humour", Matthew Winston divides black humour into two fundamental forms: the grotesque and the absurd. For

Winston, black humour in its grotesque form is far more ambiguous and less obviously "funny" than in its absurd form; faced with the grotesque "both we and the characters are more thoroughly shaken" (281). While the grotesque has been approached from various intellectual traditions, precipitating multiple and differing conclusions, what is common is this sense of the visceral provocations of the grotesque: it is characterised by the strength and peculiarity of its affect. For Geoffrey Harpham, a prominent theorist of the grotesque, the grotesque's defining aesthetic quality (such as it is) inheres not in the work itself but in the reader's response, since "while the forms of the grotesque have changed remarkably over the centuries, the emotional complex denoted by the word has remained fairly constant" (462). In Harpham's definition, a grotesque object arouses three responses: laughter, astonishment, and disgust and/or horror. While he privileges laughter where Winston privileges disgust and horror, both speak to the power of the grotesque to engender a deeply ambiguous response, or an ambiguous array of responses, in its beholder.

Of course, if a definition privileges affect at the expense of form it risks losing any use as an aesthetic category and becomes something more like a psychic one. This is the problem Noel Carroll confronts in his "taxonomy" of the grotesque. While the obvious ambiguities of the grotesque might lead to a definition of it as whatever work cultivates "ambivalence through images that at once engender laughter and disgust, comic amusement and horror"(406), this definition is found wanting as "too exclusive, since it discounts as grotesque candidate images that are only horrific or only

comic" (406). After all, many instances of the grotesque, he points out, combine affects sequentially rather than simultaneously, providing a series of contexts and/or images, this one comic, this horrific, this awesome etc (316). With this in mind, Carroll advocates a structural, rather than functional account of the grotesque. Accepting the affective power of the genre, he suggests that first one must focus on the grotesque as a genus characterised structurally by "violations of biological and ontological categories" (308). Within this genus, Carroll argues, there are any number of species of grotesque, differentiated and defined by the affective states they elicit. It bears noting that Winston's, Harpham's and Carroll's accounts of the grotesque all refer to ambivalence, uncertainty and hybridity, of form and/or affect. This hybridity points us towards the contents of the common toolkit of grotesquery: contradictory forms, mutilations and mutations, chimeras, and "the dissolution of the borders separating the normal and abnormal, inside and outside, internal and external" (Edwards & Graulund 9). This confusion and dissolution on the one hand provokes what Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund term an "anxious indeterminacy" (4), but it is also deeply transgressive in its obliteration of standard forms and ontological categories. Transgressive, too, is the grotesque preoccupation with excess, exaggeration and extravagance (Edwards & Graulund 65-77), that is to say, with forms which exceed themselves "going beyond the limits of what we think possible" (307).

The grotesque is excessive, visceral, paradoxical, horrific, and thrilling. It's immediacy and affective potency come from its essentially

visual character; it embodies “the threat of images to mortally wound what is known, what is established, what is accepted” (Connelly 18). In its ambiguity, hybridity, and its challenge to established knowledge it operates in a similar fashion to the irony of dark humour. To an extent we might read the grotesque as an embodied irony, though this fails to fully account for the fullness of the grotesque affect or the breadth of ambiguities irony can encompass. Rather, inasmuch as there is that strand of irony which, as we have seen in Baudelaire and De Man’s notional fall, makes dumb matter of the human subject, so too is there an operation proper to the grotesque which draws the human as object and thus removes the pretense to some transcendent spirit. Indeed, as Winston writes, “The grotesque form of black humor is obsessed with the human body, with the ways in which it can be distorted, separated into its component parts, mutilated, and abused. People become animals or objects” (282).

Where the ironic challenge to the humanistic division of subject and object comes from an abstracted semantic realm, operating at either the linguistic or narrative levels analysed in the previous chapter, the grotesque operates on a visceral and visual level that is much more immediate to the medium (and the act of mediation) itself. On this latter note, Wolfgang Kayser wrote that the disturbances of the visual and the use of “paradoxical guises” to evoke “paradoxical responses” (56) create an affinity between the grotesque and the act of mediation itself, since the grotesque, like any mediated form only moreso, is “the appearance of a reality that is simultaneously of and opposed to the worlds in which the audience exists”

(Edwards & Graulund 11). Like irony then, the grotesque is self-reflexive in that it encompasses and expresses the very mediation by which it makes itself known. But where dark humour's irony does so by unsettling the viewer through, for instance, the self-conscious subversion of narrative convention, the unsettling ambiguities of the grotesque are immanent within the mediated image itself: an image of this world that is not of this world. This effect is heightened in animation, especially the crudely exaggerated style of *Rick and Morty* in which even characters and critters which are recognisable to us as denizens of our world are, simultaneously and quite evidently, not people or creatures of this reality.

The ontological confusion provoked by the encounter with the grotesque, along with its focus on transgressing the established boundaries of human(ish) forms, makes it an ideal vehicle through which to explore many of the ideas raised by Thacker, whose cosmic pessimist elucidation of the contradictions at the heart of life necessarily explores, as we shall see in this chapter, excessive and transgressive bodies which horrify as much as they question ontological securities and the status of the humanist's human in relation to its material embodiment and surroundings.

This chapter will proceed by analysing two key grotesque passages from two different *Rick and Morty* episodes. Though grotesqueries abound in *Rick and Morty*, these two case studies are chosen on a comparative basis for the complementary and inverted manner in which they relate the comic and the horrific. Furthermore, both individually show how the grotesque affect of the image constitutes what John Fiske terms the "terrain of

resistance" (243). As discussed in the previous chapters, Fiske considers television to be a tool of homogenising ideological power. But within the dominant ideological discourse of the television program (the "terrain of control"), Fiske admits the presence of a counter-discourse which is resistant to this dominant ideology ("terrain of resistance") (242-3). In chapter one we saw how, in a gesture typical to the postmodern sitcom, *Rick and Morty* performs an ironic inversion of the metadiscursive ideological real. In that case, it entailed the deconstruction of a humanist realism via dark humour's irony, which served as a paradoxically humorous evocation of cosmic pessimism. The two case studies of this chapter will similarly consider how the grotesque (both in comic and horrific guise) is used to articulate a cosmic pessimist terrain of resistance in opposition to a surface-level terrain of (humanist) control.

Pickle Rick; or the postmodern Prometheus

If the grotesque is indeed defined by an ambiguous and unsettling hybridity of affect, there can be no better place to begin an analysis of the grotesque as it operates in *Rick and Morty* than the third season episode "Pickle Rick". By turns comic, disgusting, and horrific, "Pickle Rick" provides a useful entry point into assessing the operation of the grotesque within *Rick and Morty* precisely because of the sequential nature in which it layers these affects as the "a-plot" which sees Rick deal with the effects of being transformed into a Pickle, begins on a note of surreal humour and proceeds to gain disgusting and then horrific dimensions by the episode's midpoint. From their this grotesque gives way to less darkly comic hijinks, but it is

this early grotesque element which is most striking about the episode and which will serve as the focus of the present analysis.

The narrative of “Pickle Rick” develops around the consequences of Rick’s decision to transform himself into a pickle in order to avoid having to endure a family counselling session. The first images of Pickle Rick are wholly comic, serving essentially as the punchline to a protracted set-up. The episode opens on Morty combing his hair only to be interrupted by Rick calling to him to come to the garage. A deeply suspicious Morty (“Are you far away,” he asks, “or are you inside something? Is this a camera? Is everything a camera?” 0:13-0:20) takes a fair amount of cajoling to come to the garage, approach the seemingly unoccupied workbench (fig. 17), and acquiesce to an insistent Rick’s demand that he “flip the pickle, Morty. You're not gonna regret it. The payoff is huge” (0:35-40). The “payoff”, the strongly telegraphed punchline to the opening minute, is “Pickle Rick”, as he proudly calls himself.

Figure 17. A pickle on a workbench ("Pickle Rick" 00:30).

From the outset, Pickle Rick is a hybrid figure which exceeds ontological classification ("Pickle Rick" is neither a true pickle, nor Rick as we know him) and easily eludes biological sense. Yet inasmuch as Pickle Rick is grotesque, he is not, at first blush, a figure of fright or disgust, but rather a purely comic figure, which leads us to affirm the sense in Carrol's rejection of the notion that a given grotesque image must provoke a combination of its possible affective states. But what makes this particular grotesque funny? Carroll points to incongruity, an inherent part of the grotesque, as the key element of its comic potential.

Some incongruities are funnier than others however, and it is doubtful the joke would work as well were the punchline the reveal of "Eggtimer Rick" or "Limestone Chipping Rick", even if these two are categorically just as incongruous with the human as a Pickle (perhaps more so, since unlike the pickle they exceed the bio-ontological category of "organic matter"). If, per Schopenhauer, laughter arises from "the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects that had been thought through it in some relation" (59), we must consider the specificity of the concept, the real object, and the relation at hand. What is the incongruity of object and concept beyond the otiose truism that "the object *pickle* does not pertain to the class *human"*, and vice versa?

Certainly, we can point to contextual cues. As discussed, the Pickle Rick reveal is set up *as a joke*, the scene deliberately and palpably builds to this precise point. Pickle Rick here serves as an exemplar of two prominent

and well-worn notions of what generates a comical affect: relief and incongruity (Morreal), and the relief here points us to the specific humour of this incongruity. Rick's insistent aggrandizing gives way to a payoff that, rather than being as "huge" as promised, is instead a combination of the surreal and the bathetic: however impressive it may be to effect such a transformation, this affect is more than a little undermined by the ridiculous figure of Pickle Rick himself (fig. 18). The rudimentary geometry of his acquired form, not to mention the lowbrow association of the pickle with cheap fast food, is at odds with Rick's insistence on the genius of his actions. Moreover, beyond non-threatening, he has turned himself entirely helpless, limbless, a stripped trunk of a "man". The specific humour of the incongruity then is in the distance between the scientific mastery of matter in Rick's instrumentalisation of the natural world and the ends to which it is used. Using power to render himself powerless, Rick has used his mastery to reduce himself to this most basic of material forms, and what little embodiment remains to him incarnates in a symbol of low-culture: a mass-produced salty snack.

The grotesque here works in support of something like the carnivalesque function by which Bakhtin characterised the Renaissance grotesque in *Rabelais and his World.* Bakhtin's carnivalesque operates via "a special form of free and familiar contact [which] reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age" (10). Here this grotesque involves a Rabelaisian collision of distinct registers,

i.e. that of Rick's lofty scientific positivism with the simplicity and vulgarity of his acquired form.

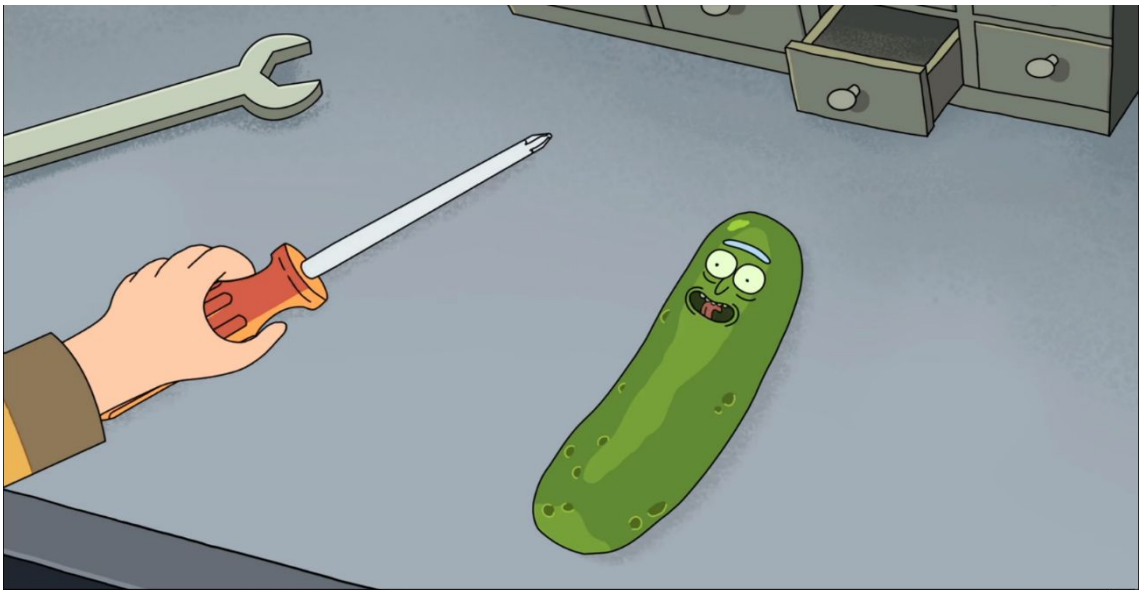

Figure 18. Pickle Rick ("Pickle Rick" 0:41).

The contact of man and pickle does not quite insist on the elevation of the pickle, but it does perform something of a degradation of certain precise characteristics— intelligence, scienticity, and unparalleled manipulation of the world— on which the elevated status of the human relies. But the gentle visual surrealism of a pickle-man is not particularly cosmic pessimist, nor does it constitute a real attack on the human. It is, rather, a tale of deeply human folly. Having become a pickle, the crude animation which constitutes "Rick" is rendered even cruder. In this way, attention is drawn to the similar uncanny simplicity of the animated "world" itself. As a nonplussed Morty stares at his pickled grandfather in total bemusement (fig. 19), so too are viewers left staring at the simplified human form of Morty and by extension themselves; this object is a "human" which is not human of a world which is and is not ours. The viewer is again left to laugh at the (human) object

thought through the (humanist) concept. This projected incongruity is the grotesque as Kayser's "structure of estrangement" (Harpham 462) which operates on and via the process of mediation itself, an estrangement which begins in the image and then works out to the viewer in much the same fashion as the meta-narrative ironies discussed in chapter one. The joke is on "us" and for "us", but it is still about "us", and reinforces a sense of the human, if only through ironic deprecation. Insofar as "Pickle Rick" articulates a stance towards the human, this cheerily non-threatening grotesque operates very much within Fiske's surface level terrain, offering a comforting narrative of familiar and reliable human folly.

Figure 19. Simple creatures ("Pickle Rick" 0:52)

Were it to operate in the terrain of resistance, it would have to be something more akin to a properly Bakhtinian grotesque, according to which "The grotesque body (...) is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and

creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world" (317). It is this state of flux and constant interactivity with the world which will reveal the terrain of resistance in "Pickle Rick". But contrary to Bakhtin's insistence on the grotesque potential for the positive affirmation of identity, as the episode proceeds from the comedy of incongruity to something altogether more horrible the grotesque being outgrows, builds and rebuilds itself. As it does so, the grotesque affect shifts from the purely comic, to acquire disgusting and horrifying dimensions, ultimately bringing Pickle Rick into the domain of Thacker's world-without-us

A pickle walks into an abattoir...

Knocked from the workbench by a cat and eventually finding himself washed down into the sewers, Rick must rely on his ingenuity which, as the episode progresses, manifests itself in formal mutation. His first act in the sewer is to lure in a passing cockroach by biting his lip, releasing irresistible pickle juice as roach bait (fig. 20). When it approaches, Rick kills the cockroach by biting down on its head. Using his tongue, he removes the back of its head, exposing its brain. Unsteadily, he probes at the brain with his tongue, each probe provoking a different physiological reaction: the jerk of a limb, the flutter of a wing. Mounting the cockroach and using it as a tongue-driven vehicle, Rick is able to fly off. The next we see of Rick, he has dismantled the cockroach (and seemingly others) and rearranged the crude

matter of their corpses into a sort of full body prosthesis. He has thus gained limbs, which are operated via licking the twisted strands of roach brain which criss-cross his body (fig. 21).

Figure 20. Pickle Rick rides a roach. ("Pickle Rick" 05:33-06:08)

Figure 21. Pickle Rickroach. ("Pickle Rick" 07:51)

With this focus on the mouth as the means of transformation, the body in question approaches the Bakhtinian grotesque, almost literally engaging in that process of swallowing itself and the world. As it does so, it also moves from a purely comic mode to a more disgusting one. Returning to Carroll for an understanding of this disgusting affect, it can be understood that "the criterion of disgust is impurity" (Carroll 311). This notion of impurity, "correlates with the violation of our standing categories in various ways … (such impurities) are ambiguous or interstitial between categorical distinctions such as me/not me, living/dead, and inside/ outside. Likewise, things that combine contradictory cultural categories are impure" (Carroll 312). As it outgrows itself, the grotesque necessarily takes on an ambiguity in relation to the categories me/not me and inside/outside.

The mouth here in one sense serves as an entry point for the consumption and conversion of matter, it is a literalised symbol of transformational interactivity between self and world. But it also serves as an ambiguous point of interstitial contact between these categorical oppositions. The contact of cockroach and mouth disgusts in its complication of the inside/outside divide, which works via a complication of the division between food (matter which is outside, waiting for consumption) and waste (matter consumed, now cast outside). The sewer-inhabiting cockroach, a terrestrial bottom feeder whose ambiguous presence in human environments reminds us of the uncomfortable omnipresence of waste amongst us, has no place in a human mouth, even if said mouth is currently on a pickle.

In exposing the cockroach's brain and instrumentalizing it as an interface for his prosthesis, Rick provokes a further transgression of the boundaries between inside and outside and between individual bodies or agents. More than any other individual organ, the brain has a longstanding metonymic association with the self; the use of a brain by some external consciousness disgusts because of the impure contamination of agency it implies. Parasitically, Rick inserts himself into the cockroach through the very image of the seat of the mind, and the body's prime mover is itself moved in turn by another foreign body. Our human protagonist, already literally embodied in "dumb" matter makes dumb matter of another's mind. The disgust is thus also operating via a transgression of the mind/matter division in a fashion which necessarily reflects back to the human. Not only do organic, sentient bodies become something to be consumed (Pickle Rick himself is a snack), the fact of their potential for consumption renders any pretence of transcendent, non-material spirit or value moot. Just as waste is always present in food and food in waste, we are forced to confront the uneasy truth of the existence of the inhuman within the human. This is what Edwards and Graulund identify as precisely that "form of grotesque that has the power to shock readers, bewildering and disorientating us by questioning the relationship between the human and animal, the carnivorous and the cannibal" (39). The transgression of this final category is the most important as it is the transgression from which the others spring: it is the waste in the stomach, the outside internalised, the death within life. The inhuman is the otherness which "cannot be accounted for or

rationalised, or in any way assimilated into ordinary life, though it is a permanent part of that ordinary life. The inhuman is the other side of the human or cohabitant with humanity" (Edwards & Graulund 87). It is fundamentally disgusting.

As Rick continues in the sewer, his new body continues its outgrowth. A passing rat is lured into a trap and decapitated by a piece of broken glass (fig. 22). Its head is placed in a piece of elaborate machinery that Rick has improbably made during a brief interlude, apparently almost entirely from dismembered rats. As the beheaded rat's brain is removed, Rick is lifted up into the machine. Assorted parts of cannibalised rat bodies are reassembled around him, forming a new and more capable rat-prosthesis as the brain is "plugged in" to Rick's "head" (i.e., the upper portion of the pickle, where his face is located) (fig. 23).

Figure 22. A rat approaches, allowing Rick to trigger a trap and decapitate it. ("Pickle Rick" 08:05-10)

Figure 23. Assembling Pickle Rickrat.(“Pickle Rick” 08:20-35)

With a horde of equally grotesque and pickle-hungry rats closing in, the man-pickle-rat-cyborg grotesque called Rick dispatches of them in a massacre of escalating bloodiness (fig. 24).

Figure 24. Rat massacre (“Pickle Rick” 08:43-09:04).

It is a striking and visually inventive sequence, made all the more effective by its compression: it moves from trap-springing Pickle Rickroach to rat-bloodbath in under a minute of screen time. It is also deeply horrific, from the screeching contorted rats on the hunt to their brutal dissection at the hands of this most improbable of monster-protagonists. The sequence begins with a continuation of the disgust of the earlier cockroach consumption. At its heart is a mutation of that earlier scene’s transgressive impurity. Here, as before, categorical distinctions of dead/alive, inside/outside, and self/not-self are blurred by the decomposition and recomposition of various bodies. According to Carroll’s structural account of the grotesque, horror is the product of disgust plus fear (311). The fear enters first through the caricatured rat: its face twisted in permanent feral rage; its eyes an unaccountable and uniform radioactive green suggesting an

otherworldly internality glimpsed narrowly through these two “windows”; its movements characterised by a muscular and determined spasticity conveying a need to attack which is at once deeply intentional and entirely mindless. If the threat dissipates when the rat is killed, we have cause to fear again as Rick’s machine springs into operation and the threat of the grotesquely fearful hyper-animality of the rat is converted into that of the grotesquely efficient hyper-technology of Rick’s abattoir-cum-armourer. According to the visual logic of dismemberment and reforming, of parts and their constituent parts in assemblages and disassemblages, Rick’s joyful and one-sided rampage turns so gratuitous that our sympathies as viewers shift away from our nominal protagonist and towards the very rats which incited horror seconds earlier.

In his treatise on the cosmic horror of animality and bodies in *Tentacles Longer Than Night*, in part formulated as a response to the Comte de Lautréamont’s *Les Chants de Maldoror,* Thacker delves into the uncanny terror of forms endowed with grotesque excess. In this analysis Thacker again returns to the contradictions at the heart of life itself, traced back at least as far as Aristotle’s *De Anima*. Returning to the thorny question of the life-principle (*psukhē)* that is common to (and cannot be independent of) all life forms, Thacker notes that Aristotle’s *psukhē* must be “directly connected to the form of any living being… Furthermore, this principle of life forms is always forming, in the sense that it is an actualization of this potential for life… The capacity for form is, for a thinker like Aristotle, tantamount to the potential for life; there is no life without a form of life” (“The Bliss of

Metamorphosis"). For Thacker, the excess of metamorphosis both within the text and of the text of *Maldoror*, with its "dynamics of tearing and sucking, flesh and blood, claw and tooth" ("The Bliss of Metamorphosis") is suggestive of a generalised and hyperbolic animality which takes Aristotelianism to its (il)logical conclusion, "in which the forming is also re-forming and deforming as well… it is Aristotelianism run amok, a feral Aristotelianism" ("The Bliss of Metamorphosis"). This same spirit of excess, articulated in the gleeful recombination and disintegration of forms, marks the gory and visually-detailed minute-long sequence of "Pickle Rick" described above. Thacker names this ecstatic anarchy of forms the "bliss of metamorphosis" and positions it as a metaphysical and semi-mystical extension of the principal of biological classification, which names and accumulates the various forms in which *psukhē* may manifest. The bliss of metamorphosis may "conceive of form in a way that is at once the lowest and the highest, the bestial and the spiritual, the deformed and the informed" ("The Bliss of Metamorphosis"). But this ecstasy is not all that is brought into play here; clinging, shadow-like, to the bliss of metamorphosis is its horrific verso, "a shadowy region, a gothic mode where form and forming are inseparable from deforming and unforming" ("The Bliss of Metamorphosis"). This, Thacker writes, is the horrific image of living bodies as living decomposition, contradictory gothic anatomies…

> whose various parts are all mutually estranged from each other in a kind of Aristotelian nightmare of parts and more parts. These are not coherent bodies… And yet, they are not simply irrational bodies, bodies

opposed to the unity and coherence guaranteed by Enlightenment rationality. These gothic anatomies contain a logic of their own, one that centres on the various contradictions of the gothic - the fecund ruin, the living corpse, reason devouring itself, enclosures of vastness, the substance of shadow. (“Floating Abattoir”)

Ultimately, the presentation of such bodies as they relate to the human crafts “an image of humanity as a kind of floating abattoir, the meat of the body subject to myriad, anonymous, inhuman forces that ensure its decomposition the moment we are born” (“Floating Abattoir”), and it is precisely this morbid and incoherent logic that poses the threat which inspires the horror of the sequence described above.

The image of the floating abattoir gains allegorical form around Rick’s treatment of the rats, an all-too-(in)human industrialised massacre of animal life and organic form. For here, in Ricks macabre machinery, we see beings reduced to flesh and thence to mechanical parts, disassembled with an uncanny impersonality. In not only wearing but truly becoming the flesh of his victims, Rick has become a living corpse in the *Frankenstein* mould (although, in an efficient twist, Rick is both scientist and abomination). Once he begins his bloody rampage, the impersonal abjection of the dismembered rats cannot but turn back on Rick himself: a human without human parts who nevertheless maintains a broadly human anatomical structure, who is all parts, who is the very death he reaps, who epitomises the notions of fecund ruin, living corpse, and reason devouring itself. This abjection becomes human, extracts the inhuman therefrom and draws it

into the floating abattoir. The horror, then, is precipitated by the threat of Thacker's Planet as its domain encroaches on that of the human, as impersonal, irresolvable forces are shown to operate within the human and across its constitutive categorical divisions of life/death, human/inhuman etc., and all of this with the relentless and morbid efficiency of a machine which harvests rats for bio-mechanical components.

As the forms onscreen become increasingly abstracted from a sense of the whole, as parts proliferate, separate, and recombine, the structure of estrangement within the grotesque image operates in a much more totalizing fashion. Unlike the ironic deprecation of the earlier comic moment, in this horrific turn towards the senseless and contradictory formings of the floating abattoir, Rick's scientific instrumentality ceases to be a human folly and becomes instead an expression of something greater, less knowable, and far more terrifying. If the essence of a cosmic pessimist mode of thought is the failure, or perhaps the inability, to "live as if you are not, in fact, being lived by some murmuring nonentity both shadowy and muddied" ("Cosmic Pessimism" 67), then here we see the necessary unspoken corollary of Thacker's formulation: a simultaneous and inextricable dying (or perhaps "being died") by the same murmuring nonentity.

Who's laughing?

The question remains of how the comic relates to the horrific. Certainly, it should be noted that the easy distinction I have thus far made needs challenging. Although dominantly comic, the early man-pickle of

"Pickle Rick" is certainly disgusting, and later, as the episode ramps up the disgust and horror, it does not lose its essentially comic character: the shocking excess of Pickle Rick's rampage plays on the taboo laughter of the horrifying. In leaning into its cosmic pessimist sense of horror, *Rick and Morty* does not diminish its comic aspects. But it is notable that there is no room for the comic in Thacker's numerous literary and philosophical analyses within his *Horror of Philosophy* series, and nor is there much space for horror within Bakhtin's carnivalesque. In the medieval carnival grotesque of which Bakhtin writes, laughter was a vital element and terror, inasmuch as it was present, "was familiar … only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter" (39). The laughter of the carnival was "joyful and triumphant" (38) and arose from the joy of communion, regeneration, excess and transformation. The essential character of this laughter is inscribed in those grotesque outgrowths which exceed the confines of the self, turning the body "cosmic and universal" (318). Yet we have seen how the grotesque outgrowths of *Rick and Morty*, far from turning the body cosmic and universal, end up turning the body, and the humanity which this form incarnates, to a state of abjection as it is exposed to a cosmic morbidity which decomposes rather than synthesizes.

In Bakhtin's analysis the presence of the horrific necessarily entails a change in the nature of the laughter the grotesque provokes, as he discusses in his description of the Romantic grotesque which succeeds the medieval/renaissance carnivalesque. The latter, which for Bakhtin embodies the "true nature of the grotesque" (47), is inseparable from "the culture of

folk humor and the carnival spirit" (47) of its time. The Romantic grotesque, however, is deeply steeped in the rationalist and individualised logic of the enlightenment humanist subject, the dominant cultural logic of the age. Whereas the "true" grotesque body "is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as some-thing universal, representing all the people" (19), the Romantic grotesque "acquired a private "chamber" character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation. The carnival spirit was transposed into a subjective, idealistic philosophy" (37). Considering the implications of this for the role of laughter in the Romantic grotesque brings us into familiar territory. Here, Bakhtin writes, "laughter was cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm. It ceased to be a joyful and triumphant hilarity. Its positive regenerating power was reduced to a minimum" (38). In this critique of the deeply subjective, individual humour of the Romantic grotesque we see more than an echo of Hegel's criticism of solipsistic Romantic irony. Intriguingly, we also find that the ramifications of this transformation in the laughter principle bring us back to Freud's gallows humour in interaction with a sense of cosmic pessimism. Bakhtin writes:

> The transformation of the principle of laughter which permeates the grotesque, that is the loss of its regenerating power, leads to a series of other essential differences between Romantic grotesque and medieval and Renaissance grotesque. These differences appear most distinctly in relation to terror. The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary,

> commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure. Such are the tendencies of Romantic grotesque in its extreme expression (38-39).

The advent of the Romantic grotesque sees laughter transformed into a corollary of terror: humour becomes the possibility of subjective liberation from (or defence against) an alien and terrifying world, and as it gains this liberating power it loses its regenerative potential (Bakhtin 38). Yet as much as we might see in the descriptions of such a horrific world clear resonances with the alien and alienating world-without-us of *Rick and Morty*, it is unclear how such a world which, per Thacker, exposes the very limits of the human ("Clouds of Unknowing") is compatible with the strident assertion of the human which, in Bakhtin's account, is enacted by the laughter of the Romantic grotesque. As with the irony discussed in the previous chapter, the specific grotesque of dark humour will necessarily have to laugh at the horrific without falling into Romantic solipsism. To consider this further, we will now turn to another mutating grotesque in a different episode of *Rick and Morty*. Inverse of the above, the following grotesque begins from a point of humanistic horror and develops to a place of cosmic pessimist laughter.

Vole, mantis, Cronenberg: a dissolution of man

In the season one episode “Rick Potion #9”, Rick attempts to craft a “love potion” for Morty at the adolescent’s insistence, combining Morty’s DNA with oxytocin extracted from a vole (voles, Rick notes, mate for life) in order to create liquid lust. Naturally, the plan goes awry. Morty arrives at the flu dance and successfully drugs Jessica, the object of his affection. Unfortunately for him, the serum combines with the flu virus being carried by his would-be paramour (they are, after all, at the annual flu season flu awareness dance) becoming airborne and highly contagious. Soon, Morty is being set upon by doe-eyed love-zombies, distinguishable by their enlarged pupils.

Figure 25. Trouble at the flu awareness dance (“Rick Potion #9” 05:27-07:52).

In the nick of time, Rick, unaffected by the serum since it doesn’t work on blood relatives, arrives to hurry his grandson into his spacecraft,

taking him safe above the over-amorous masses. Here he reassures Morty that he has concocted an antidote from the DNA of the famously unromantic praying mantis. He looses it in green clouds from the underside of the craft and, with grim predictability, mantis parts begin to erupt from human flesh as the crowd below are transformed into human/mantis hybrids (fig. 26) who are no less infatuated with Morty.

Figure 26. The humantis race ("Rick Potion #9" 09:22)

On his way to see his wife, Jerry is held up by a scene of total devastation on the highway. He is soon accosted by mantis-monsters demanding to see his son. In a scene ripped straight from the generic movie conventions of such apocalyptic horrors (this one specifically somewhere between zombies, bodysnatchers, and plague), Jerry grabs the shotgun from the hands of a nearby dead cop and begins to blast his way to safety (fig.27).

Figure 27. Scenes from the apocalypse (“Rick Potion #9” 09:43-62).

Meanwhile, Summer is sat at home watching the television only for a special news report to interrupt her programme. Two mantis-anchors announce the breaking news that “Morty Smith’s whereabouts are unknown. The only thing that is known is how cute he is. I love him so much I want to make love to him then eat his head” (10:14-26) (fig. 28). The broadcast proceeds to show that the virus has already become a global pandemic, as crowds of mantis people are shown around the world, all of them single-mindedly demanding Morty.

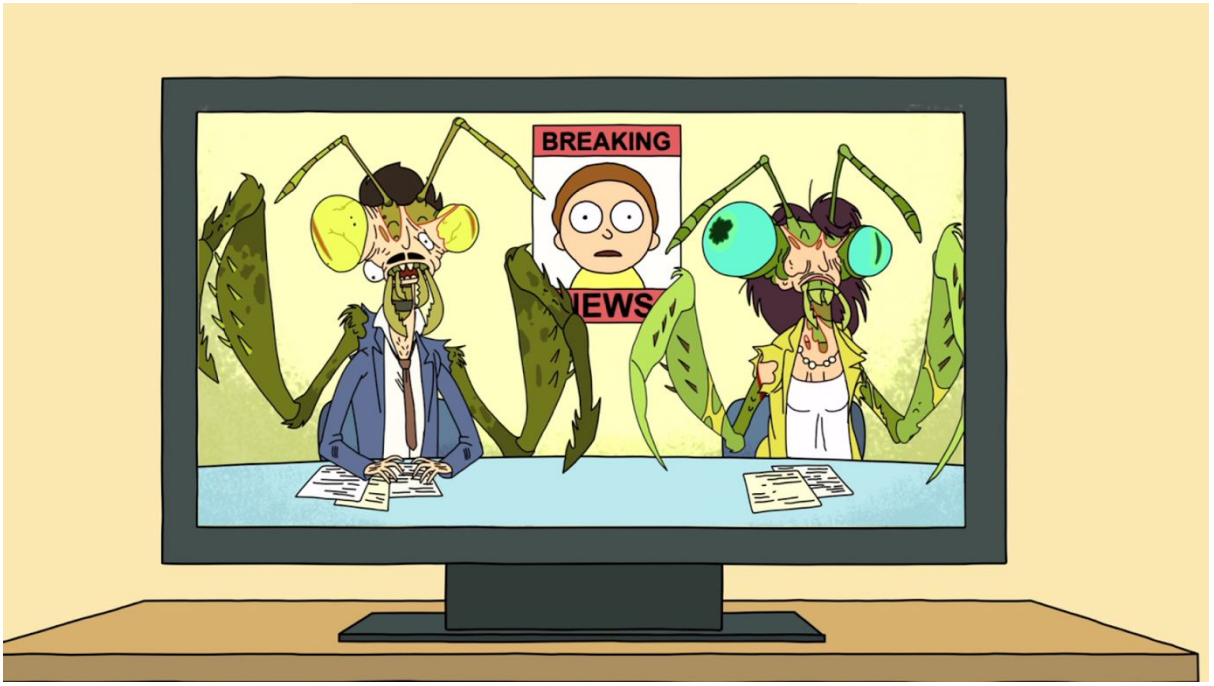

Figure 28. Breaking news ("Rick Potion #9" 10:19).

Again, *Rick and Morty* mixes comedy with its horror throughout the episode up to this point. But it is notable that the sources of its pop-cultural quotation here come from horror. Morty's wish to be the object of romantic attention play out like Jacobs' "The Monkey's Paw", as his wish turns out more terrifying in its fulfilment than he could possibly have imagined. The mindlessness of the love-stricken hordes, their individual differences elided by uniformly dilated pupils and sinister grins, again recalls invasion narratives. Indeed, one shot of Morty being set upon at the dance is a conscious homage to a specific zombie attack shot first used in George A. Romero's *Day of the Dead* which has appeared throughout the genre ever since (fig. 29).

Figure 29. Love and zombies. Captain Rhodes' death in *Day of the Dead*; Morty's attack at the school dance ("Rick Potion #9" 07:52).

We remain in the realm of grotesque horror with the transformation into mantis- monstrosities. Specifically, still quoting from Hollywood canon, *Rick and Morty* here turns to Cronenbergian body horror. According to Edwards and Graulund, body horror draws upon an anxiety of the grotesque body's potential for defamiliarisation "by a series of alterations, corruptions, erosions or de/evolutions from within, thus breaking down the borders separating the human from the not-human" (56-7). The mantis element grows from within human flesh, erupting through viscera which remains hanging limply from insect bodies like an ill-fitting garment. Cronenbergian grotesquery also draws on a secondary anxiety, "the fear of being subsumed

by an overwhelmingly powerful system such as commoditization, techno-science or hegemony that transforms the body into a grotesque site" (57). The result of Rick's scientific chicanery, these horrific grotesques encompass both anxieties, consisting of a rupture from within which undermines the human form and a technological imposition from without which escapes the control of its hubristic inventor. In this regard, we can show how the above discussed horrific elements of this evolving grotesque express humanistic anxieties with regard to challenges to human integrity.

According to R.L. Rutsky, representations of technology in science fiction have typically fallen into two categories, respectively defined by a utopian and a dystopian tendency ("Technologies" 182). There is a single conception of technology at the base of both these models: a fundamentally instrumental view, coterminous with Renaissance concepts of rationality, modernity and scientific positivism, according to which technology is "an instrument, means, or tool through which human beings are better able to know and understand the world and to achieve the power to control it" (184). In the utopian model technology proves suitably pliable to its human master's will while in the dystopian model it becomes an unruly upstart that defies the master. Both are steeped in humanist anthropocentrism. This is what Heidegger, in his *Question Concerning Technology*, refers to as "the instrumental and anthropological definition of technology" (5). According to Heidegger, it is in one sense perfectly correct to take this view, according to which technology is defined by the human will to power that characterises instrumentality. The more important question

which remains is one of essence: what is the essence of this instrumentality? This question is of vital importance because technology as essence is not only proper to machinery and tools, rather it becomes a way that all entities present themselves in the modern world; it is "the concealed basic trait of the actuality of everything now actual" (58). Heidegger names this essence *Gestell*, translated variously as *positionality* and *enframing*. *Gestell* imposes orderability upon the world, plundering those excess qualities of a thing's presence which are not reducible to the "equality of the orderable" ("Bremen Lecture" 32). Heidegger thus positions technology as all-encompassing, a plague on the metaphysical presence of things which "constantly draws what is orderable into the circuit of requisitioning, establishes it therein, and thus assigns it as something constant in the standing reserve" ("Bremen Lecture" 31).

Rick's insistence on the "equality of the orderable" thus generates scientific monstrosities. His attempt to order human will in one specific fashion creates a world of love zombies, his attempts to rectify this first mistake creates a race of mantis monsters. In both instances, the grotesque forms which result from his meddling follow the same arithmetical logic. Humans + voles = doe-eyed love zombies. Humans + mantises = hideous mantis people. Yet when Rick attempts to take this logic to its extreme it falls apart. An exasperated Rick seems to note his failings so far: "I don't know what I was thinking. Mantises are the opposite of voles? I mean, obviously, DNA's a little more complicated than that" (11:10-16). And yet his solution is yet more instrumentalisation of the natural, more reduction to

the equality of the orderable. A final attempt to restore normal humanity involves a cocktail of “koala mixed with rattlesnake, chimpanzee, cactus, shark, golden retriever, and just a smidge of dinosaur. Should add up to normal humanity”, Rick notes (11:19-28). Inevitably, it does not.

Figure 30. Not pictured: “normal humanity” (“Rick Potion #9” 14:14-44)

Instead Rick’s logic of *Gestell* collapses, and this is reflected in the entirely illogical forms which now walk the earth. Moreover, these new grotesqueries have ceased to be horrifying, they have become ridiculous (fig. 30). Their forms are excessive, and illegible. There is no clear delineation of the various elements involved in their mutation, the arithmetical logic can no longer be applied. As with Pickle Rick (before he engineers himself some limbs), there is a tendency toward curvature which belies any pretence that these might be threatening beasts. They are fleshy, edgeless, entirely

impractical. Within the story, too, these beasts no longer threaten. What was a danger to the Smith family instead becomes the incarnation of a threat which has already been fulfilled. Humanity is all but gone, Rick's last gambit has failed. These creatures no longer threaten destruction, they are its residue. At this point then, as the threat subsides, the horrific gives way to the comic. Above all else, these creatures are ridiculous, and they serve as visual parodies of Rick's logic of ordering and instrumentalising. In a typical postmodern nod, Rick dubs the creatures "Cronenbergs", but, in truth, the body horror is passed and these grotesques are something else entirely.

But if Rick's naive belief in the equality of the orderable is contradicted by these new forms, that does not make this a victory for Heideggerian humanism. For Heidegger, technology is humanity's mistake, and it is monstrous for the industrial positionality it imposes upon the natural world. But it was not always thus. *Gestell* is a product of modern, industrial technology, and differs entirely from its pre-modern forebear. Pre-modern technology, the technology of the craftsman, is technology properly called: it inheres in the *technē*, or technique. *Technē* itself belongs to *poiēsis,* or "bringing-forth" ("Question" 13), that which "brings hither out of concealment forth into Unconcealment" ("Question" 10). Pre-modern technology is generative, productive, and poietic, revealing natural truths or essences of the things of the world. Modern technology is reductive, it "challenges-forth", transforming nature into an endless game of "unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching" ("Question" 16). Yet the disruption of Rick's logic does not constitute a retreat from *Gestell* to some

Heideggerian, pre-modern and poietic ideal of man's interaction with nature, because Heidegger's poietic interaction of man and nature is still fundamentally intelligible, if not so precisely quantifiable and orderable. In their excess, these final grotesque forms run counter to Heidegger's ideal precisely in its attitude towards poiēsis, with important consequences for our understanding of the grotesque, it's operation and its articulation within a posthumanist paradigm.

A cosmic pessimist walks into a carnival…

We might best understand this by reading Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* as a work of posthumanist theorising very much in the vein of a carnival grotesque but which explicitly takes its mood of excess and connectivity well beyond the figure of the human. As touched on in the theory chapter, we find in Haraway's text familiar Bakhtinian outgrowths valorised in the form of "tentacular ones" which "make attachments and detachments; they make cuts and knots; they make a difference; they weave paths and consequences but not determinisms" (31). Haraway's spirit of "tentacularity", like the grotesque at Bakhtin's carnival, "is about life lived along lines–and such a wealth of lines–not at points, not in spheres" (32). Haraway, who advocates for life lived not in the anthropocene but rather the "Chthulucene", is, like Bakhtin, focused on the possibilities of procreation and regeneration, the name for her proposed epoch coming from the Greek khthon, "of the earth", and kainos, "completely new" (2). To Haraway, the central posthuman question of the trouble concerns a posthuman kinship which extends far beyond "ourselves" as she asks "what must be tied if

multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?" (2) According to Bakhtin, the medieval carnival, which served as the privileged sight of true grotesquery, was similarly concerned with a broadening of kinship bonds beyond their traditional boundaries. Broadening out this notion of kinship to its logical conclusion, Haraway advocates for a move away from individuality, from ontologies of interacting units, and instead insists on the breakdown of separation between an inside and an outside of the system. Reading Haraway's description of the sympoietic Chthulucene, one cannot help but be minded of Bakhtin's carnival, which

> is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part (7).

If we follow Haraway's line of thought, the mistake of instrumentalising a world which is falsely ordered is, in part, the same mistake Heidegger makes in his conception of proper, poietic technē as the artisan who brings forth truth by crafting his object. Both are imagining a poietic act composed of two or more interacting "units". Haraway, however, imagines poiēsis as "always partnered all the way down, with no starting and subsequently interacting "units" (33). This is *sympoiesis*, and it is integral to the worlding of Haraway's Chthulucene. Haraway eschews the

dominant view of the earth as an autopoietic system: a self-producing unit of defined boundaries which is homeostatic, predictable, and closed. Instead Haraway proposes a view of the world as sympoietic: evolutionary, collectively-produced, open, and erratic (33).

As in other areas, where Haraway emphasises the positive, or at least emphasises generative potential, Thacker, with similar ruminations in his "An Exegesis on Tentacles" (*Tentacles Longer Than Night),* instead focuses on the incomprehensible and the alien. In Thacker's thinking, tentacles may or may not, in Haraway's words, "weave paths and consequences but not determinisms" (*Staying with the Trouble* 31). What matters more is that this is not to be known, since "the many tentacles always seem to trail off into nothing, into a distant ocean abyss as black as the ink it secretes" ("Exegesis on Tentacles"). While Thacker is, like Haraway, opposed to the simple homeostasis of a scientific model of life, the negation of such a model is nothing to be cherished. Encountering a chthonic or tentacular beast instead arouses a sense of "tentacular alienation" provoked by the unaccountability of such a creature to any schema of life. In thinking up "taxonomies, anatomies, and nomenclatures," ("Exegesis") we have sought to read life clearly. But confronted with something which runs counter to this system, we prove instead to have made "the most systematic, rigorous articulation of this alienation. In a sense, the result of scientific classification is not that we as human beings finally find our place in the world, but the reverse – that we increasingly feel ill-at-ease in the world. It is we who are alien" ("Exegesis"). If Haraway provides a posthumanist twist on

Bakhtin's Rabelaisian moment, we can see how Thacker provides a way of approaching this posthuman carnival in a cosmic pessimist mode

Something like the chthonic looms large in “Rick Potion #9”. Rick has made the mistake of assuming the world to be an autopoietic system composed of interacting components with defined boundaries within an organizationally closed system. What follows is an eruption of chthonic sympoiesis. The genetic structures which Rick had thought he could easily master are loosed upon the world, partnering and unpartnering in combinations which astound our human protagonists and arouse laughter in the audience. As one man becomes a mutated Cronenberg his arms become snakes and slither away (14:03). One Cronenberg eats another and gains its limbs (14:08). Rick had assumed his system to be autopoietic and closed; it was sympoietic, and it is as much his mistaken assumption as the inherent ridiculousness of the resulting creatures which the audience laughs at. Indeed, the former manifests itself in the latter: the greater the categorical transgression of the Cronenberg’s form, the more mistaken Rick is proven to be. Moreover, having set up a scenario in which *Gestell* provides the ultimate threat of the episode’s grotesque, this threat is finally realised with neither an excess of *Gestell* nor a retreat to its Heideggerian opposite. Instead it (the “it” in question being nothing less than humanity itself) develops (or degenerates) into a pure and unclassifiable excess. The transition from horrific to comic grotesques adds an affective thrust to a less tangibly immediate inversion which underpins the episode: the supplanting

of a dominant humanist ideology (here articulated in vaguely Heideggerian terms) by a subversive posthumanist and cosmic pessimist resistance.

Dominance and pleasure

In *Television Culture,* John Fiske describes how the fundamental pleasure (as opposed to the more anodyne comfort) of watching television comes precisely from those moments which allow the reader to resist the dominant ideology which the medium enforces and find instead the space in which to "evade, resist, or scandalize ideology" (242). Fiske's analysis is primarily concerned with power, social control, socio-economic conditioning and the possible resistance thereof. But we might easily consider the dominance of the humanistic episteme within televisual conventions in similar terms, without positioning that ideology or the resistance to it in such explicitly political terms. We have already seen in Chapter One how, by engaging in the quotational discursive practices proper to the postmodern sitcom, *Rick and Morty* is able to make the dominant humanistic ideology which has underpinned much of popular culture into the subject for a posthumanist inversion. Here, to pull the disparate strands of this chapter together, it will be necessary to consider how Fiske situates resistance in relation to control, its kinship with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, and its ramifications for our readings of these two case studies thus far.

Fiske's binary system is best elaborated by the following table (fig. 31) which shows clearly the distinguishing characteristics of television's terrain of control compared with its terrain of resistance.

Ideology	:	*Popular pleasures*
signified	:	signifier
meanings	:	physical sensations
depth	:	surface
subjectivity	:	the body, physicality
responsibility	:	fun
sense	:	non-sense
unity	:	fragmentation
homogeneity	:	heterogeneity
THE TERRAIN OF CONTROL	:	THE TERRAIN OF RESISTANCE/ REFUSAL

Figure 31. Control vs Resistance (*Television Culture* 242-3)

The similarity between Fiske's resistance and Bakhtin's carnival is evident, as Fiske himself notes (243-4). Almost by extension, we can see the posthumanist and cosmic pessimist twists on the carnivalesque (tentacular thinking and cosmic pessimism respectively) well-represented by the right-hand column. According to Fiske, the terrain of control is the dominant force shaping the narrative. It is the world of convention; specifically, for our purposes, those many elements of televisual and cinematic convention which reflect and reinforce an overarching humanist ideology. The terrain of resistance, on the other hand, operates like the carnivalesque, insofar as, like the Rabelaisian grotesque, it too acts "to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted" (Bakhtin 34).

Rick Potion #9 begins with what we might term a "weak" horrific grotesque. That is, the horror of its forms serves the elaboration of recognisable (and fundamentally humanistic) narrative conventions. The familiar uniformity of the love-zombies and the very forms of the

mantis-people reinforce the dominant interpretation of events as a familiar story of *Gestell* run amok, the industrial-scientific human impulse turned against its purported masters. It then switches into a "strong" comic grotesque in which non-sense, fragmentation, and heterogeneity reign. In other words: it turns carnivalesque. As it does so, this carnival-grotesque expresses a Thackerian tentacular alienation: a posthumanist, carnival refusal of what had been established as dominant humanist convention. The affective change from horrific to comic forces a pre-logical, bodily recognition of this shift, expressed through laughter. *Pickle Rick* likewise begins with a weak grotesque, this time comic. Where the horror of *Rick Potion #9* constitutes a humanist critique of a deeply human folly, the comic grotesque at the beginning of *Pickle Rick* similarly holds a funhouse mirror up to human scienticity, eliciting laughter at a folly which is "ours", the recognition of which acts only to reinforce a humanist episteme. As this grotesque turns disgusting, and then abruptly horrific, it builds towards, and then suddenly becomes, a horrific carnival-grotesque which acts to prostrate the human in abjection at the eruption of cosmic pessimist grotesquery. Both episodes then, utilise the affective power of the grotesque to enact the sudden eruption of resistance within a well-established terrain of control and convention. Here we can begin to see the strange similarities between laughter and horror, which both serve as the bearers of this resistance.

It is only in reading comedy and horror through the lens of pleasurable resistance that we can begin to consider how these two elements

can be so close in a carnival grotesque without, as Bakhtin warned, falling into the play of alienating terror and solipsistic laughter proper to the Romantic grotesque. As we have noted, Bakhtin's Romantic terror bears a strong resemblance to the cosmic horror which Thacker considers a lyrical elaboration of cosmic pessimism, insofar as both involve an alienating encounter with an inhuman world. And yet Thacker writes that, properly speaking, cosmic horror need not leave one terrified. This he elaborates through a study of Lovecraft, the godfather of the genre. Thacker writes, "For Lovecraft, one does not leave a tale of supernatural horror feeling better, or, for that matter, feeling anything at all. There is no truth to horror, in the sense that one ultimately discovers a state of being-there that is the exclusive provenance of human beings" (*Tentacles* "Neither Death nor Life"). That is, the alienation of subject from world is not borne of hostility, as Bakhtin writes of the Romantic grotesque, rather it is borne of an encounter with a world "which is neither anthropic nor misanthropic, but simply indifferent, an indifference registered by the human in the utter apophatic blackness of incomprehensibility" ("Neither Death nor Life").

Within the ambivalent space this "indifferentist" attitude creates, the horror of *Pickle Rick* is able to present something other than fear; in affecting resistance to the established domain of humanist control it invokes that peculiar pleasure of resistance which Fiske likens to Barthesian *jouissance* (226). It thus recasts the gloominess of cosmic pessimism as a strange sort of liberation. This is a deeply limited liberation to be sure, but it is one which is inscribed within the boundaries of cosmic

pessimism all the same. The logic of cosmic pessimism is rooted in refusal, “a no-saying to the [world] for-us and the [world] in-itself” (“Cosmic Pessimism” 68). All that is left is a vast indifference, and a deeply unclear relationship between self and world. But refusal of the world-for-us or the world-in-itself is tantamount to an embracing, however reticent, of the unthinkable indifference of the world-without-us. *Rick and Morty* embraces this indifference by showing its jouissant eruption through established conventions and their co-morbid myths of order and knowability.

Naturally, this has consequences for the cosmic pessimist laughter which culminates the grotesquery of *Rick Potion #9*. Bakhtin, it will be recalled, characterised the laughter of the Romantic grotesque as essentially solipsistic, a sort of weaponized humour focused outwards against a threatening world. Though it is true that the alienated and alienating world-without-us is some distance (lightyears perhaps) from the “merry and rich universe” (308) of Bakhtin’s carnival, the laughter which greets it is not of this Romantic sort. The “festive laughter” of a true carnival grotesque “is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed” (12). The laughter which greets the end of *Rick Potion #9* is much more of the festive than the Romantic sort. As we have seen, it invites laughter at the mistaken and untenable world of humanist assumptions as much as the world of cold indifference, since the disruption of the former constitutes the jouissance of resistance. Moreover, with its sympoietic ruptures from seemingly within the human figures, its

transgression of the inside/outside of *Gestell* or poietic ordering, it works towards Edwards and Graulund's maxim that "the inhuman is always 'in humanity': it is in-human or 'in the human'" (87), reiterating with ambiguous laughter Thacker's complaint that "it is we who are alien" ("Exegesis").

Conclusion

"Oh Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning, they're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh."

Homer Simpson, "Mr Lisa Goes to Washington"

"Nobody exists on purpose, nobody belongs anywhere, everybody's gonna die. Come watch TV."

Morty Smith, "Rixty Minutes"

Cosmic paradox

This study began first and foremost with an observation, or perhaps an intuition. An intuition that the comedy of *Rick and Morty* elaborates the same philosophical ideas which Eugene Thacker places squarely within the realm of supernatural horror, and that following this generic divergence might complicate Thacker's cosmic pessimism by suggesting one might encounter the Planet in a mode other than a cryptic and poetic mourning for a world, and for a mourner, razed by cosmic futility. In following this thread, we have seen how *Rick and Morty* uses the techniques proper to both the postmodern sitcom and to black humour in order to hollow out the standard televisual construction of the subject of modern, enlightened humanism. We have seen that in doing so it articulates a position which closely aligns itself with Thacker's cosmic pessimism. But we have seen, too, how despite accepting the major tenets of this Planet-view, Rick and Morty differs in its curious mixing of "the utter apophatic blackness of incomprehensibility" ("Neither Life nor Death") with a comic and playful

sensibility anathema to Thacker's mode of futility-as-horror. While the irony of Rick and Morty approaches the cosmic pessimist horizon of thought with a playfulness that seems alien to Thacker's moody and horror-inflected thinking, its postmodern, carnivalesque grotesque allows *Rick and Morty* to greet a vast cosmic indifference with a paradoxical species of visceral joyfulness.

If the fundamental distinction between *Rick and Morty*'s black comedy and Thacker's cosmic pessimism seems to be less of the intellect than of the attitude, then this difference in attitude does itself amount to something more fundamental: it challenges the essence of the paradox which lies at the very heart of cosmic pessimism. This great unspoken paradox is that at the very moment where one confronts the Planet and feels, viscerally, the limitations of the humanist episteme, prepares to take the leap into the great posthuman beyond, the cosmic pessimist returns with a crash, if not to earth than at least to himself. The lyrical mourning which constitute the cosmic pessimist way of being is itself a re-affirmation of the human, only in photonegative. For what else can we make of admitting the impossibility of accounting for one's thought than a retreat to "our" side of this chasm between thought and world? One cannot mourn futility without necessarily ascribing value to purpose: ironically, the pessimism proves an almost parochial response to the cosmic. Cosmic pessimism provides a negative account of the posthuman encounter with the Planet, and suggests that the only way to begin incorporating it (partially of course, never fully) into one's experience is to retreat into the now untenable humanist subject-position,

from where one can mourn only in a spirit of total futility, since there is no one to mourn and no-one to do the mourning. Thus the cosmic pessimist becomes a ghost reciting his own eulogy.

Rick and Morty greets the Planetary encounter with an altogether different reaction. As we have seen, *Rick and Morty,* in its ironic treatment of narrative televisual tropes, not only points to the constructedness of the narrative real itself (as postmodern sitcoms do), it uses the self-referential operation of dedoublement to reflect that irony back onto the viewer, expanding it to the point of infinite, absolute negativity, with destructive consequences for human knowledge of self and world – and indeed, for those very ontological categories. If we thereby encounter the Planet —defined, it will be remembered as "simply that which remains "after" the human" (In the Dust of this Planet "Preface") — then we do so *laughing*. And this difference from Thacker inheres not in the bravado of gallows humour or subjective triumphalism, but rather in an acceptance of the absurdity of this "encounter" between two non-objects.

It thus makes explicit the implicit paradox of cosmic pessimism. In its pseudo-carnivalesque grotesquery, *Rick and Morty* embraces the indifferent and morbid world-without-us. Rather than mourning what is lost (itself a contradiction, since that which never was cannot very well be lost) *Rick and Morty* finds liberation in its vanishing and possibility within indifference.

If this all seems to approach Camus' well-worn maxim that "there is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn" (117) then the comparison is only partly apt. Certainly, absurdity is the defining feature of this dark

comic deviation from cosmic pessimism, but where Camus' distinctly humanist study of the Sisyphus myth lands squarely in the realm of the Romantic aggrandisement of the self, we have seen the myriad ways in which *Rick and Morty* eschews and contradicts this triumphalist mode of being. Rather, the show espouses a scorn not only for fate, but for the scorner and, indeed, for scorn itself. If this does not seem the most productive labour then we might turn here, like Camus, to the figure of Sisyphus. For the Greeks, as for Thacker, condemnation to futility was a thing of horror. The Sisyphean labour of cosmic pessimism is its insistence on mourning absence from a position of absence— an inescapable bind. The Sisyphean task of what one might, tentatively, call cosmic absurdity is much the same. But it recognises, joyfully, the futility of mourning futility. If this does not produce any answers in itself, it does, at least, allow for the possibility of a non-pessimistic sense of the world-without-us. If not exactly happy, one must, at least, imagine Rick and Morty laughing.

Limitations and areas for future research

If this thesis has been successful in the central task of reading *Rick and Morty* alongside the corpus comprising Thacker's work on cosmic pessimism, infecting the latter with the former and noting down whatever mutations may occur, it has, perhaps, been too consumed with this central task. Where I had at first hoped that this study may unveil something unexpected about the postmodern sitcom or black humour, instead I have too often had to rely on their definitions, as established at the beginning, to

remain relatively stable as the grounds of my central texts shifted beneath my feet. This does, however, suggest an area for further study. Now that I have established *what Rick and Morty* does with the same material as Eugene Thacker, turning his pessimistic metaphysics into something more jouissant it would be a fruitful area of study to consider the fact that it does this at all. What might it say for the televisual and cultural landscape of the early 21st Century that such a show should air?

One might embark upon a comparative or genealogical study that investigates how *Rick and Morty* fits into a broader cultural landscape in the 21st Century.

A turn towards such questions of *Rick and Morty's* broader cultural valence might consider the findings of the present study in light of the show's cult status, its critical praise, and a predominantly white, male and very online fan base —or elements thereof— denounced by the show's creator as "disgusting" (Mumford) for fierce and unjustified criticisms of the few female writers on staff. A particularly interesting area of study might be the peculiar masculinity of revelling in a meaninglessness universe, a metaphysics of absence, a morality of indifference. Compare, for instance, the futility of Thacker's posthumanism with the productivity of Haraway's or Colebrooke's. A feminist critique, not only of *Rick and Morty* but specifically of the masculinity of its posthumanism, could help us consider how the show, and cosmic absurdity, intersect with larger cultural movements. These then suggest avenues for further study which take the findings of the

present work and reincorporate them back into the more sociological context of the majority of television studies.

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