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# **Dissecting Humorlessness**

Humorless comedy and  
the affective life of  
normative subjectivity



**Universiteit Utrecht**

Dissecting Humorlessness: Humorless comedy  
and the affective life of normative subjectivity

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## Abstract

Analyses of western late capitalism are diagnosing the overarching importance of humor and comedy in contemporary life. At the same time, the establishment of a broad neoliberal consensus and the progressive rise of conservative forces are tuning the political atmosphere towards theorizations of the rigid and the immovable. These two advancements overlap in analyses conducted through the notion of humorlessness. In this thesis, I argue for expanding the use of this notion beyond conceptualizations of rigidity through the development of an affective vocabulary of humorlessness. Using Lauren Berlant's concept of humorless comedy as a tool for understanding humorlessness through its affective structure, I read Nathan Fielder's TV series *The Rehearsal* as a case that exemplifies the contradictory affective tendencies nested inside the subject that inhabits contemporary normativity. By analyzing this case, the thesis pursues a twofold aim. First, to make propositions on what it feels to live in the historical present by outlining the affective life of contemporary normative subjects in the ambivalent relation between the desire to connect and that to control. Second, to use this expanded understanding of humorlessness in order to point towards replacing the rigid image of late capitalist power as an intractable formation with a more nuanced one, which accounts for more of its contradictions and uncertainties.

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# 1. Introduction

In 2017, Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai described our era as a “permanent carnival” (233). Through this phrasing they attempted to theorize the social omnipresence of humor, the persistent expectation of a joke, and an almost existential desire to live as if in a comedy. Before them, alongside them, and also after them, a lot of theorists have been diagnosing the rising significance of humor in public life, either as a form of thought (Bonello et al. 2018, Gray and Trahair 2022), a means of political intervention (Borum Chattoo and Feldman 2020, Bhargava and Chilana 2023), or a topic of controversy itself (Davies and Illot 2018, Young 2019).

The era of permanent carnival, in which humor is infecting both the form and the content of our debates, has also given rise to a discussion around humorlessness. Both in theory and the everyday vernacular, the question of who isn’t laughing is populating discourses of political correctness, trauma, resistance, and community. From the construction of the humorless other in the context of conservative groups (Philips 2019), to a feminist reclaiming of laughter as a tactics of resistance (Sundén and Paasonen 2020), over to appeals for fighting the humorlessness of power (Allen 2023), and up to adopting the refusal to laugh as a political strategy (Ahmed 2010, chapter 2), clarifying the position of humorlessness in our political vocabulary appears as a growing concern.

At the same time, much of this discussion, both in scholarly debates on humorlessness and in the everyday conflicts of the “culture wars” (Hartman 2016), is mainly unfolding in terms of a hegemonic battle, around collective attempts to preserve or dislocate the rigid borders of social hierarchies. However, given the contemporary conceptual attunement to theorizing the affective (Barnwell 2022), the negative (Edelman 2022), the wild (Halberstam 2020), or the minor (Manning 2016),<sup>1</sup> the problem of humorlessness also seems to demand an analytics that locates the collective in the folded, the latent, and the imperceptible. This sensibility is displacing the question from “who is humorless” in terms of social position to “who is humorless” in terms of understanding a complex subjectivity.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis’ conceptual springboard for approaching humorlessness in the sense described above is Lauren Berlant’s understanding of it through the structure of an affect (2017). Before their death in 2021, Berlant managed to give us a tool for pursuing this aim, one they named humorless comedy. Since their work on humorlessness was left incomplete, their

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<sup>1</sup> This study draws its inspiration from sources coming mainly from affect and queer theory. However, the tendency to draw insights about social life from uncovering the latent sensibilities and contradictions situated inside the subject, through the fluctuations of the senses, or in the parasocial domain of almost invisible actions, is occupying the interests of several strands of theory. See, for example, the post-anarchist focus on movements that refuse to seize power (Day 2005), the new-materialist turn to neural ambiguity (Conolly 2011), or the decolonial reclaiming of the self through the senses (Sheik 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, at the end of the day, these questions cannot live in isolation, as understanding the first requires insights gained from the second, and vice versa. As described below and explained further in the Theoretical Framework chapter, I am drawing from both articulations of humorlessness, first to isolate a humorless style connected to normativity, and then to read for the affective life of the subjectivity that inhabits it.

pending conceptualization is prone to be forgotten or overlooked. With this in view, I advocate for activating and unlocking the potential of this concept.

The necessity of developing a more complex affective vocabulary of humorlessness has to also be located in the emotional atmosphere surrounding the historical present and its relation to political structures. With this I refer to how the western (neo)liberal democracies – on which this thesis’ observations are based – are now overflowing with accounts of the deterioration of the economic, social, and emotional conditions of contemporary life, whether through a collapse of the material prospects of survival (Graeber 2016, Wark 2021), a politically enforced investment in vicious circles of feeling and desiring (Han 2017, Lovink 2022), or a stagnation of the aspiration (Brown 2023) and capability (Fisher 2020) for broad political participation. These conditions are producing an all-encompassing sense of defeat, the atmosphere of an impasse, which articulates power – and its institutions – as structurally immovable, or, as has been theorized, as humorless (Bruner 2005). Therefore, the immovability that accompanies most accounts of humorlessness seems to be in tandem with this expanding sense of structural immovability that is perforating the current conjuncture. Here, I will focus on that account of the humorlessness of structural authority in an attempt to dissect the subject that inhabits normativity, situating my analysis not in the space that emerges between the one who laughs and the one who doesn’t, but in the interstice inside that one subject which is thought of as humorless. My aim is to provide some observations that may contribute to replacing this rigid image of late capitalist power as an intractable formation with a more nuanced one, which accounts for more of its contradictions and uncertainties.

For a large part – as the literature mentioned here implies – the discussion on humor revolves around aesthetic processes. This is inevitable inasmuch as humor’s main mode, comedy, is expressed in cultural utterances, and reflected in and transformed through artistic developments. On this basis and drawing from humorless comedy’s foundational relationship with cultural texts, this research’s claims are laid in relation to an analysis of Nathan Fielder’s TV series *The Rehearsal* (2022). Using a case study from the domain of art is not a circumstantial choice, but reflects, first, a belief that the aesthetic is a privileged space from which to peruse “sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas” (Ngai 2005, 12), and second, that transformations in the material and conceptual life of aesthetic forms have the power to recalibrate our collective existence. In that sense, alongside and while making claims on the affective life of the normative humorless subject, my aim is to keep alive its connection to comedy and the aesthetic form.

On these grounds, my research questions are:

What does the humorless comedy of *The Rehearsal* suggest on the affective life of normative humorless subjects?

- How does the humorless subject bear the affective tension between a desire for connectivity and the power of structural norms?
- How do the aesthetic and comedic features of *The Rehearsal* reflect this tension?

- What does this form of humorless comedy demonstrate about the affective character of the historical present?

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### Humor and Comedy Studies

In order to make a claim for the type of humorless subject I will be working with in the analysis, I will first traverse the terrain of critical humor studies and literature on humorlessness. In that way, I will locate the connection between humorlessness and social hierarchy, power relations, and normative structures through insights gained from critical humor studies in general, and the work of Giseline Kuipers more specifically, in order to suggest what may be missing from the literature, and which Berlant's account of humorlessness and humorless comedy can provide.

Stemming from an understanding that dominant approaches to researching humor were often partial or uncritical (Weaver 2011, 8), critical humor studies ventured into "examining the intersections of humor, identity, culture, inequality, ideology, and power" (Pérez 2023). This move enabled the proliferation of research that investigated humor not only as subversive, truth-telling, and rebellious, but also as potentially repressive or reactionary (Pérez 2022, Sienkiewicz and Marx 2022). At the same time, it made a case for focusing on questions of whether and how certain subjects or groups can get "negatively framed, stigmatized, or even excluded and silenced" (Tsakona 2020, 154) through a humorous discourse, bringing to the forefront the inherently political nature of the latter.

Since humor and comedy studies entered the terrain of social and political hegemonic struggle, there has been an interest in locating the spaces and social formations that determine how power is allocated in relation to who is and who can be the subject or the target of comedy (Davies and Ilott 2018, Clements 2020). Giseline Kuipers frames any such network of power differentials situated in a specific time and place as a humor regime (2011). The humor regime dictates who, in a specific geographical and socio-historical conjuncture, is granted the power to joke, joke back, bear a joke, or reject a joke, while setting the limits of what constitutes a joking matter, and to whom those limits apply (*ibid.*). In short, the humor regime not only determines who can make a joke, but also who is allowed to refuse becoming the joke. That is, who can be humorless.

Although in her article Kuipers (2011) refers to humorlessness as an accusation that western liberal democracies launch towards their idea of a Muslim culture, her conceptualization hints to a more nuanced understanding of this notion. Consider her remarks on the western sensitivity towards Holocaust jokes, which requires for any such utterance to be measured for its appropriateness, a sensibility that is often absent in encounters with the Muhammad joke. In a sense, then, the humor regime doesn't really dictate who can be humorless, but whose humorlessness will appear excessive or threatening, and whose will become invisible.



Therefore, humorlessness is a metrics for the disturbance and disorganization a social group is forced to bear or can avoid confronting. This also means that the capacity to be humorless is “unequally distributed” (Berlant 2017, 310) and contingent on “one’s structural location in hierarchies of difference and value” (Berlant 2019).<sup>3</sup> Hence the appearance of connections between humorlessness and specific structures, like the state (Webber et al. 2021) or contemporary entrepreneurial masculinity (Hennefeld 2021).

In short, there are always certain formations that resist being disrupted. Here, I name these *humorless spaces*, and I am mostly interested in those of them which are constituted as specific sets of social formations occupied with reproducing the normative. The normative is described here as a set of specific “demands for bodily and psychic organization” with which the structural is “suffus[ing] the ordinary” (Berlant 2011, 17). To follow the normative by residing in specific humorless spaces, such as the nuclear family or the couple, is to get proximate to a “condition of general belonging”, to inhabit a “site of rest and recognition” (Berlant 2008, 22) where one can feel legible and accepted by the social world.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, any subject that resides within the limits of a normative humorless space is endowed with a greater amount of safety, power, and stability.

To summarize, everyone can be thought of as humorless or as aspiring to become humorless. And what determines this potential is one’s place in social hierarchies, their capacity to fall into the lines of a humorless space or the power to create a new one, the extent to which their bodily disposition is capable of following certain normative demands or capable of refusing them. The question that arises is about the tools we have to perceive and analyze the qualitative differences between the humorlessness of a reproductive normativity and the aspirational humorlessness of the threatened, the minoritarian, or the systemically oppressed. It is at this point that I suggest a deeper confrontation with the insights of humorless comedy as a way to complement and accompany existing research.

## Humorless comedy

Berlant’s contribution to the study of humorlessness stems from their conceptualization of its affective structure. This enables us to refine our readings by avoiding focusing exclusively on the observable rigidity of the humorless, which bears the danger of misrecognizing, for example, the humorlessness of a “feminist killjoy” (Ahmed 2010) for that of a trumpist politician.<sup>5</sup> Berlant’s articulation evades this risk by venturing inside the subject of

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<sup>3</sup> Also see Balkin (2020) and Allen (2022).

<sup>4</sup> For more on this understanding of normativity and the normative subject see the Affect Theory part of this chapter.

<sup>5</sup> Although scholarly research is generally not failing in drawing clear lines when constructing such arguments, the inadequate dissemination of sharp and lucid analytic tools in the public sphere – I am thinking of, for example, discussions around political correctness – hints to the need of amplifying our efforts to understand and conceptualize humorlessness.

humorlessness and unearthing the variables of its affective structure which can distinguish between styles of being humorless, and hence between what each humorless subject asks for, aspires to become, and fears of confronting. Here, I will first refer to Berlant's understanding of humorlessness and their notion of the humorless subject, and then move on to explain the inner workings of humorless comedy.

Humorlessness, for Berlant, refers to a style of relating to the world where a subject tries to impose their version of a situation above any other's. This means that the subject simultaneously attempts to present an unambiguous version of themselves, control and contract the dynamic of the relationship as to not adapt to what others bring into it, and, hence, proceed into the world as a sovereign, a thing, a machine that never fails to appear as one's fantasy of themselves would desire. That, for Berlant, takes shape as a control over form – the form of appearing to the world, the form of addressing it and the possible forms with which the world is allowed to address you in response. At the same time, as much as humorlessness is a form of “relational rigor mortis” (2017, 308) that bestows the subject with the need to “[bring] down any person or world that threatens their ambition” (2019), it is also always struggling with what Berlant calls “one's inevitable, technical openness” (2017, 311).<sup>6</sup> In this articulation, humorlessness is always bound with failure and appears as a process of continuous microadjustment that only disguises itself as intractable. Three important things stem from this understanding of the internal structure of humorlessness.

First, a more complicated approach to what constitutes the humorless subject. Berlant anchors this approach to the image of the combover, a haircut style which simultaneously reflects a grave ambition, a trembling fear of exposure, and a high level of fragility in their overlap. The desire of the humorless subject is to become “a thing without holes” (2017, 311), or in different words, to inhabit a humorless space where the disturbance of the world is fenced out and any ideal self-image, any combover arrangement, remains intact.<sup>7</sup> However, the aforementioned technical openness brings forth two complications to that ambition. One is the necessity of continuously maintaining the integrity of the space through rearranging the combover, for everything is a threat to those who are so tied to an ambition, a promise, or a fantasy that they “would prefer to bring the world down around it” (Berlant 2022, 27). The other is that fighting against the inevitable always has a cost. To calculate it we have to attend not only to the fatigue of incessantly rearranging the combover, but also to the separation from the forms of relationality that are unavoidably left out of the

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<sup>6</sup> The notion of the self's technical openness refers to a conception of identity and selfhood as fluid, never in control, and constantly transforming, rather than one based on any kind of ontological characteristics. In the context of this research, it describes the inherent fragility of a subject that, as much as it wants to be a thing, is also obliged to take in and manage stimuli coming from encounters with the world. In other words, everyone is always already implicated in the world. For a larger discussion of those ideas through “negativity” and “non-sovereignty” see *Sex or the Unbearable* (Berlant and Edelman 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Berlant's example of the combover uses the first scene of the film *American Hustle* (2013) to show the relationship between a very serious, for the subject, process of arranging hair to conceal a bald skull, with the funny and sad reality that this boldness can never really be concealed. This last point is always visible in humorless comedy, as is the sheer importance of acting like this fragility is not there, trying to impose an invisibility – here of boldness – that is only utopian.

humorless space, a separation that often appears as “a radical insecurity about being lonely” (Berlant 2017, 309).

Second, a more nuanced understanding of the affective life of humorless spaces. This is invoked the moment we start probing normative formations as relationships that always try to balance the safety and fulfillment they provide with an inevitable psychic cost. This cost of inhabiting a humorless space, the toll of becoming “a thing without holes”, is weighed, in the case of normativity, against the benefit of being socially intelligible, or in Berlant’s words, of participating “in the practices on which conventional modes of social intelligibility rest that become naturalized and moralized” (Berlant and McCabe 2011). In that sense, if humorlessness requires continuous, strenuous effort, and if its affective structure always involves a propensity for unbinding, then what seems, and maybe currently is, immovable, can begin to arise as inherently fragile and susceptible to being molded, or to collapse; that’s another way to articulate hope.

Third, a different way of reading cultural texts, one that Berlant names humorless comedy (2017). A humorless comedy does nothing else than play out the contradictions and ambivalences we already detected at the heart of humorlessness: the struggle between an ambition and an always imminent failure; between the subject’s “aspirational thingness” (ibid., 307) and the emotional cost of pursuing it; between the need to be known and the urge to control the form of being so. However, since “whatever else structures it, the comic is motivated by the pressure of humorlessness” (ibid., 308), any comedic text could potentially be a humorless comedy. Therefore, although I will be referring to certain texts as humorless comedies, this research doesn’t approach the concept as hinting to a classifiable comedic genre, but rather understands it as two other complementary things: a reading practice and a theoretical lens.

Reading with humorless comedy entails a focus on contradictory but co-existing tensions that are neither dialectically resolved nor mutually destructive but whose existence in the “co-presence of structuration and collapse” (ibid., 313) draws this peculiar image of a subject that desires “to move toward and away from himself and the world” (ibid., 307). What humorless comedy looks at is to catalogue a flooding of “complications, threats, potentials, constraints, and consequences that are never definitively ordered” (ibid., 313). It offers a way and issues a call to crack the structure of humorlessness open and attend to the incongruity of formations that seem definite and immovable. In short, it allows us to witness a thing as not yet being one.

As a theoretical lens, humorless comedy makes it possible to determine and distinguish between different types of humorlessness, or different styles of “investment in humorlessness” (ibid., 314). It, thereby, affords us to create clusters of texts on the basis of resonances that wouldn’t be visible otherwise. In that way, it enables us to avoid approaching humorlessness as the often homogenizing and schematic rhetorical construct we encounter in everyday interactions, one that is flatly ascribed to anything someone is defensive against. Instead, the dissecting power of humorless comedy divides the different types of humorlessness in terms of the costs they exert on different subjects. For example, this study’s focus is on the humorlessness of normative structures, which implies a reading

through the lens of privilege and the ordinary or the straight, coupled with the cost of inhabiting an unfulfilling but yet safe conventionality. In contrast, something that is left outside is the host of texts that examine the aspiration, on the side of oppressed or silenced subjects, to create a humorless space in order to fence out the aggression of structural norms. For those subjects, the humorless space is not a given they have to negotiate with, but an urgency they have to actualize. In those cases, the cost of being humorless has to be thought of as the affective toll of surviving as a minoritarian subject, reified in what, of joy, peace, and carelessness has to be sacrificed to stay alive in a predatory environment. Hence, while, in the current climate of expanding “culture wars”, both these types of subjects are often accused of being humorless, the lens of humorless comedy renders their differences visible and calls for new and expanded types of analyses for each one.

## Affect Theory

Affect theory has been an undercurrent in every argument that has been unfolded until now. First because, being concept-oriented, this research bears all the affinities and presuppositions of its organizing tools, which, in this case, are Lauren Berlant’s theory of humorlessness and concept of humorless comedy. Second, because it is a study of the imperceptible, the fluctuating, and the potential. To focus on the internal tensions of seemingly rigid structures, to discuss a bifurcated directionality inside a subject that proclaims certainty, to detect the reasons for a persisting inclination towards institutions that are failing their promises, one needs to turn to the discussion around affect. The context of Berlant’s work and their scholarly interests are further explored in the Methodology section, so I will here focus on the strands and tenets of affect theory around and beyond Berlant that have also informed what has preceded and will inform what follows.

The immense expansion of affect-related scholarship has made it impossible to conduct a study in its domain without first clarifying how one approaches the notion of affect. For this reason, I begin with a definition that animates my thinking: “affects are augmentations or diminutions of a body’s ‘force of existing’ that are expressed in feelings and qualified in emotions” (Anderson 2014, 85). Therefore, here I focus on affectivity as a visceral force that provides bodies with a tendency and a directionality (a lengthier mention on that follows in this section), and its abridgement with the social and collective intelligibility of emotion through the pursuit of a recognizable feeling. However, it is important to note that in Anderson’s definition, these three terms are not ontologically but only contextually distinct, meaning that they cannot be really isolated from one another but only function as “sensitizing devices” (ibid., 103) for attending to different aspects of an encounter. In the context of this research, I will, for example, be using Anderson’s definition to analyze how the ambition of qualifying a vague feeling of success into a socially recognizable emotion of

reciprocal love, acts as a trigger for costly affective investments in the promises of certain humorless spaces.

In order to focus on processes of normative reproduction and analyze social formations that are part of specific socio-cultural conjunctures, I derive my principles for perceiving affective life from a strand of affect theory that is engaged with “historicised and structural notions of affect” (Barnwell 2020, 4). I am, thus, considering affect not as a neurological, autonomous, anti-social entity,<sup>8</sup> but rather as an element of specific historical and ideological regimes which are conditioned by certain affects and also themselves exist affectively (Anderson 2016). It is this connection between affect and ideology, or affect and history, that enables this research to concentrate on detecting “the strength of our affective attachments to social norms” (Pedwell and Whitehead 2012, 120). In this vein, it is important to mention how these approaches often stress the mediated character of affect, trying to reconcile its fleeting nature with the position it occupies in shaping and being shaped by the present. In that sense, “the affective field must be seen as a discursively constituted ideological regime [...] as well as a field of visceral intensities” (Bradway 2017, 154). This is particularly important when trying to seamlessly move between insights gained from the more sociological and discursively oriented terrain of critical humor studies to that of affect theory.

In addition, there is a basis in affect theory under my insistence that the unequal allocation of humorlessness requires us to distinguish it into types and styles that refer to how it is ascribed to different subjects. I keep this as a major tenet of the research because I follow the idea that different affective promises, capabilities, and threats attach to certain bodies (Hemmings 2012), and thus we should try to avoid rushed generalizations that may imply a horizontality in the way particular affects unfold (Bradley 2023). Hence the notion that different subject positions, in terms of class, race, nation, gender, or sexuality, can have rather diverse access to experimenting with humorlessness and its others, while experiencing different pressures on how to appear and respond to the world.

This idea also informs my perspective on how subjects inhabit humorless spaces and why different subjects can find the same space more stable, safe, costly, toxic, or unbearable than others. I locate normativity in this affective comfort of residing in conventional social spaces and understand the subjects that may or may not feel this comfort along the lines of the hierarchies of difference described above. More specifically, I derive the notion of a demarcated space that can or cannot be inhabited by different people from Sara Ahmed (2006, 2017). Ahmed talks about spaces that let certain subjects and not others to “sink in” (2006, 160), and which produce disorientation to the unwelcome ones, the kind of seasickness of an unstable ground (ibid.). The same work also lends me the vocabulary of directionality I use to talk about affective investments, with terms like “reaching out”, “keeping within reach”, “following”, “moving towards”, which are also part of Berlant’s vocabulary of affect.

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<sup>8</sup>As is considered by affect theorists closer to the writings of Brian Massumi (2002). For example, see Thrift 2007, Connolly 2011, Leys 2017.

In total, whether explicitly or not, affect theory is grafted in all aspects of this research, as the latter attempts to unclench humorlessness from its inflexible image of one-sided aggression, towards a more promising one that may come through an attentive listening of the grinding inside its affective structure.

# 3. Methodology

## Case Study

Here, I will proceed by briefly describing my case study and locating its type of humorless comedy through, first, its relation to normativity and, second, its articulation of the notion of the comover. To begin with, *The Rehearsal* (2022) is a TV series made for HBO by U.S. comedian Nathan Fielder. The show's premise is to offer real people the possibility of rehearsing situations of their lives and, hence, when these finally play out, achieve some desired outcome. Fielder is starring in the show as a – probably – exaggerated version of himself, first only as presenter and orchestrator but later as himself a participant, rehearsing a conventional role as a father and husband, along with testing out his capacity to emotionally connect with others. This longing for connection, the question of the possibility of empathy and a pursuit to produce a genuine emotion are the main threads that drive Fielder's actions, following his failures and misendeavors in relating to others.<sup>9</sup>

In this study, I will focus on the ambiguous relationship between these desires and the terms on which they are sought. In particular, and in Berlant's term, Fielder's humorless comedy engenders the moment when aspirational thingness meets aspirational normativity meets a desire to connect. What this means is that in *the Rehearsal*, the urge to exist as an intractable version of oneself is sought through the channels of normative structures, or what I have already called humorless spaces. In order to unpack how the affective structure of humorlessness is thought of in the show, I will follow Fielder's subject, Nathan, as he moves inside the scene of the normative family,<sup>10</sup> occupying different positions and roles in an attempt to mitigate the emotional costs of being the exemplary subject of conventionality.

Nathan's goals and comportment unfold in the line of Berlant's comover subjectivity but replace the compulsive fixation on an unattainable perfection with self-reflexive attempts to reconcile the comover with controlled doses of the world's disorganization. In *The*

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<sup>9</sup> His persona as a socially awkward loner who longs for connection has already been established in his previous show *Nathan for You* (2013-2017).

<sup>10</sup> Although this analysis involves several references to what the contemporary normativity of the family form entails, this is not an object of this study. For this reason, I restrict the discussion on the family to what *The Rehearsal* presents as normal, desirable, and conventional in it. For a discussion on contemporary transformations of the normative image of the family see *We Need to Talk about Family* (Garrett, Jensen, and Voela 2016) and *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Cooper 2017). For a focus on the changing role of male subjects inside the family see *Plural Masculinities* (Aboim 2010) and *Some Styles of Masculinity* (Bordowitz 2021). For a critique of the family form itself see *Abolish the Family: a Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (Lewis 2022) and for a thorough overview of queer responses to family theory see "Hegemonic Heteronormativity: Toward a New Era of Queer Family Theory" (Allen and Mendez 2018).

*Rehearsal* this is rendered visible by the contrast between two kinds of humorless comedies. First, the show's "real people" participants embody the typical comover subject, struggling within the form of aspirational thingness plus failure plus microadjustment. Second, Fielder's humorless comedy employs a catoptrical form of that structure. He begins with his comover intact, as the master orchestrator of the show and in utter control of its form, and tries to engineer a way to let the disorganization in. This functions as a reconciliation between the advantages offered by the normative space and the desired connection, emotion, and empathy whose lack is the cost of this space's inhabitation. At the same time, the relationship between the protagonists of those humorless comedies and their alternating roles in becoming the series' joke offers another door into understanding humorlessness through the comedic.

In making the focal points of my reading of *The Rehearsal* explicit, I aim to put specific limitations on the breadth of my claims. For what can I say, and what I can see, is always contingent on "the style of the subject's or the artwork's investment in humorlessness" (Berlant 2017, 314), and also on my reading of it. Fielder's HBO-funded, white, male subject is able to test the limits or look for loopholes in the relations he inhabits only because these are the spaces his body can easily sink in and be absorbed (Ahmed 2006); he can negotiate the levels of his disorientation from normative roles only because he is not the source of disorientation himself (ibid.); and he can stretch and poke and pinch and joke with them only because his disposition and social capital allows him to (Kuipers 2011).

## Affective Reading

Since the 1990s and the inauguration of what was later called, "the affective turn" (Clough and Halley 2007) in theory and criticism, there have been numerous attempts to situate the study of affect inside the multidimensional map of academic methodologies. On the one hand, the focus on affect was sometimes presented as a turn away from the suffocating pragmatism of social sciences (Massumi 2002) and the soul-crushing negativity of post-structuralist critique (Sedgwick 2003), which lead to affective approaches being thought of not so much as methods but as an attitude that exceeded methods (Hemmings 2012, 559) or just a style of being present (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 14). On the other hand, the proliferation of scholarship on and around affect in recent years has brought forth new kinds of research that mitigate the harsh divide which ascribed value either to "the verifiability of fact or the emotional truth of fiction" (Barnwell 2020, 1). Social sciences are already developing new tools trying to incorporate the vast terrain of affective life into their traditional methods, or to design new ones tailored to the needs of this complex scholarship (Wetherell 2012, Knudsen and Stage 2015, Kahl 2019). At the same time, cultural studies, and the Humanities in general, have been experimenting with different ways to read affects and "find a vocabulary or method adequate to their extralinguistic [...] evanescence and complexity" (Ingraham 2023, 6). This research is, however, specifically interested in those



approaches that try to read the fluctuations of affective life in aesthetic forms. This emphasis on researching the affective through artistic phenomena relies on a belief in “how sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas [...] produce formal or representational ones” (Ngai 2005, 12). Or, in reverse, how “in the affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life” (Berlant 2011, 9). Such methods range from Sianne Ngai’s close readings (2005), Eugene Brinkema’s influential radical formalism (2014), or readings of narrative structures (Bradway 2017, 2023), to broader attempts of bringing an array of different approaches into a coherent context (Van Alphen and Jirsa 2019). In total, in order to do justice to humorless comedy’s potential as a concept that works between the aesthetic, the affective, and the political, I have chosen to follow Lauren Berlant’s way of reading affective life.

## Lauren Berlant as Scholar

Similar to their writing, Berlant’s trajectory often appears as a multifaceted, sometimes chaotic assemblage of theoretical affinities, interests, and ideas. However, one may start approaching it by considering why Ben Anderson has catalogued their writing into a broad genre of “diagnostic critique” (2021). What we can gather from Anderson’s articulation is an aim and a method. The aim is understanding how the present feels, and the method is making propositions on the way different forces assemble to produce this feeling of historical consciousness (ibid.). This intersection between the work of historical forces and a visceral, affective field is at the core of Berlant’s work. Equally close to Marxism and anarchism, to psychoanalysis and queer theory, Berlant pushed all those domains forward into a new understanding of the role of affective life in the formation of social conventions (Hsu 2019). By grafting affect into discourses of social reproduction, they articulated the academic turn to affect as “another phase in the history of ideology theory” (Berlant 2011, 53), something they exemplified in their “national sentimentality trilogy” (ibid., 2).<sup>11</sup> In those books, they described the nation, and all social and political infrastructures, as “constellations and economies of affective investments” (Duschinsky and Wilson 2014, 182). In that way, Berlant managed to steer the scholarly discussion of British-American cultural studies toward a vocabulary of intimacy, sexuality, and affect (Sturken 2012). The connection between the affective life of subjects and the structural life of social formations is achieved through the constitution of what Berlant called the “intimate public sphere” (1997, 1). Any intimate public induces an “identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging” (Berlant 2008, viii). That is, individual participation in the public takes place through private feelings that appear shared or through affective investments in a common fantasy. In their later work (see 2011, 2022), Berlant moved on to examining what happens when these common fantasies fade out and fail us, and how to escape their

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<sup>11</sup> Namely *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991), *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), and *The Female Complaint* (2008).

affective ties in order to create new and better ones. This pursuit is what led them into working with humorless comedy as an exploration of what it means to compulsively hold onto these fantasies while, and despite them, striving to negotiate the advent of something else. A work in comedy that appears even more crucial in times when the historical present appears to be inhabiting the form of a “permanent carnival” (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 233).

## Berlant’s Affective Reading

Given the importance of Berlant’s concept of humorless comedy for the present study, I have decided to conduct the research through some of their core methodological tools. In particular, I will now advocate for a three-step method which I believe condenses some crucial parts of Berlant’s way of reading aesthetic phenomena. These steps are here thought through the notions of proxemics, the scene, and generalization.

Although proxemics as a term appeared only in Berlant’s late work, studying “the closeness and distance among things” and asking “what does it mean to be in the span of proximity” (Berlant 2022, 15) has always been central to their work. Considering that their readings mainly spring from a focus on the subject,<sup>12</sup> a study of proxemics would include questions like: what objects does the subject attach to; to what does this attachment bring them closer; what fantasies are felt more proximate that way; what promises of intimacy are imbued within these fantasies? Or else: which object’s overcloseness has to be managed; what – normative or else – obligations does this adjustment bring along; what threats to the subject’s personhood; what does the subject cling to as defense? The mapping of proxemics, thought by Berlant as “a dialed-back preliminary concept of “belonging” (Berlant 2022, 181), is especially useful in reading humorless comedy’s space of failed reciprocity, “contraction of relation” (Berlant 2017, 308), and proximity without connection.

Reading for the scene could be grasped as the temporalization and contextualization of the affective relations located in proxemics. This includes three things. First, an analytic relation to the case which focuses on the scene as an extended temporality, rather than a succession of rupturing events. This elongated duration is the time of the narrative unfolding, and, thus, reading for the scene becomes the reading of narrative form (Bradway 2023). Second, as the narrative unfurls itself, the objects of the proxemics relations are transformed, they become imbued with different fears and desires, while contrasting affects may adhere to them (see Seigworth 2012, 350). Attending to these mutations allows ambivalence to come into play, preventing uncritical linearity and easy generalizations – like cataloguing objects of attachment or affects into harmful or beneficial, conservative and revolutionary. As Berlant articulates it, “we have an ethical obligation to overdetermine our objects while clarifying

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<sup>12</sup> From the subject of a vague authorial or narrative voice in analyses of poetry (for example see Berlant 2008 or first chapter in Berlant 2011) to a more concrete focus on characters in their readings of films or series (for example Berlant 2017).

the scenes of their action” (Berlant 2022, 19). Clarifying the scene is the third point I want to stress. It starts by understanding that it “will not be enough to approach a scene as if its relations are entirely self-contained or self-constrained”, but rather we should attend to “the torsions between affective relations and social form” (Bradway 2023, 268). Contextualizing the scene clarifies the broader societal frame in which this transforming narrative belongs, or the subject wants, for itself and its objects, to belong. Berlant’s example of the scene of infidelity (2012, 78) describes how this scene can nest contradictory and transforming images and narratives, from the unloved subject who revolts, to the betrayal of a commitment, the unbearable guilt of following a bodily urge, to adultery as irrelevant to romantic relationships. Since these can all coexist among different subjects that reside in the frame, and also take turns in becoming more prominent, it is important to clarify how they are all points in the same scene, that of infidelity, which marks the limits of the discussion within certain societal norms about what that scene entails and within specific debates for how it is to be changed and transformed.

The third step of the method I plan to follow, generalization or “the becoming general of singular things”, departs from the analysis of the case and tries to track how a thing, a narrative, a story, or an aesthetic form in general, is “circulated as evidence of something shared” (Berlant 2011, 12). For Berlant the aesthetic always provides something more than an understanding of what happens to specific people, for it is in the affective scenarios of aesthetic cases that we can discern how the historical present feels, how contemporary life is understood viscerally (Berlant 2011, 9). For this reason, reading a case is ultimately an attempt to make propositions on the affective character of the present through generalizing the affective structure located through our reading, describing a certain geo- and socio-historical conjuncture through the movements in its affective substratum. This step is similar to theoretical attempts of locating a certain structure of feeling, a collective atmosphere, an emotional era, or an affective culture.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For an analysis of the different conceptual tools used for describing the historical present in affective terms see chapters 5 and 6 of Ben Anderson’s *Encountering Affect* (2014).

## 4. Analysis

### I. Capturing Humorless Comedy

#### Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to relate humorless comedy to the specificities of *The Rehearsal*. In view of this goal, I will first conduct three micro-analyses, each concerned with a “real person” participant of the show, namely Kor, Angela, and Patrick from the first, second and third episode respectively. Through them, I will try to locate how some of the basic characteristics of humorless comedy are presented and worked with in the show, and also identify certain actions and investments that the show constructs as humorless strategies of the comover subject, and which will be important in later analyses of Fielder’s humorless persona. Then, I will proceed with discussing how specific aesthetic and formal elements of the show pertain to humorless comedy, followed, lastly, by an analysis of the work of comedy and the joke in the series.

#### Creating Thingness

##### *Kor*

Kor, the participant of *The Rehearsal*’s first episode is stuck on an impasse; keeping alive a lie about having obtained a master’s degree is taking a toll he cannot bear anymore, while at the same time he dreads the repercussions of that revelation for a friendship he has founded on this idealizing fantasy. He thus reaches out to Fielder’s show looking for a way to minimize the consequences of his confession. Minimizing the influence the world has on one’s self-narrative is, of course, the work of humorlessness. *The Rehearsal* is very precise about what this work entails, which is taking control over form. This, in the show’s understanding, includes managing when and how one talks, is heard, and gets responded to, along with what is located in, is seen, touched, or felt in a situation, among other things; the process of rehearsing per se. Hence how control over form in *The Rehearsal* is presented as a transition from the real to the artificial, which includes the incessant work of a large group of people among which construction workers, programmers, and TV crews. However, although difficult, control over form appears essential, as, in that way, through Nathan’s ability to restrict all unpredicted potential interactions during a trivia night confession, Kor will control the form of presenting himself to the world and thus limit the possible forms with which the world may address him back to just one: that in which Kor’s friendship survives.

While making visible the strenuous work involved in ensuring one's solidity over potential disorganization is a main feature of humorless comedy, *The Rehearsal* doesn't stop there. For it follows Kor in an apparently peculiar investment on winning the trivia night. His intention of abandoning the confession altogether in the case of losing the game is an instance of "holding on to the object so tightly one would prefer to bring the world down around it" (Berlant 2021, 27). What is important here is how the object of winning the trivia functions as Kor's substitute for his supposed master's degree. Instead of harvesting the possibility to relinquish his costly fantasy of appearing as a knowledgeable subject, Kor grafts this fantasy into a new object whose promises have not yet exceeded its costs. This process acts as a self-replicating strategy of the humorless subject's self-image, where the affective disruption of this image's solidity is absorbed by a "compulsive sovereignty" (Berlant 2019) that will stick to anything so as not to lose its grounding. Kor's strategy of reinvesting in new objects only to stay proximate to whatever being educated means to him, is exposed, in the humorless comedy of *The Rehearsal*, as equally fragile. However, this remains untold, as a comover secret we keep dear, and whose uncovering we delay for another time.

### *Patrick*

Patrick needs to confront his brother, since, after their grandfather's death, he is being denied his family inheritance in the name of a weird demand from the deceased: that he shall not date a gold digger.<sup>14</sup> By examining this episode, I want to illuminate the way the comover subject attempts to solidify its humorlessness by conflating its subjectivity with the tenets of a humorless space, which, in this case, are the normative values of the family. What Patrick is asking from the show is not, in reality, just to help him get the inheritance money, but to strengthen a self-image that is withheld alongside it. This image belongs to the broader scene of familial care as it is invoked by the grandfather's will, and positions Patrick as the caring, selfless, loyal grandchild that he wants to be. These target-values are established by their contrast to the notion of the gold digger, whose cold, calculative, unfaithful approach to human relationships is the repudiation of the traditional family altogether. In that sense, tying Patrick to the gold digger positions him as the abject object of this scene, whose presence can spoil the family money, the grandfather's heritage and ultimately their whole lineage. The stakes of Patrick's counter-narrative are, then, immense, as he tries to create a humorless account of where he stands on the scene, selflessly taking care of his grandfather until the last minute. He, however, fails. The emotional cost of staying intact amidst a battle over the sincerity of his relationships and his right to being in the family, crashes him. In his last scene, his humorlessness breaks down, and he cries, accepting no argument except his own fatigue of having to prove he is the right object in the right scene. And then he disappears, leaving untold whether his humorless comedy, resolved in the rehearsal by failure, was also played out in real life, and what complications that would

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<sup>14</sup> The absurdity of this claim is never given a context or further explanation. The use of withholding information as a strategy that gives *The Rehearsal* a specific comedic character will be further discussed later in the analysis.

have outside the controlled environment of Fielder's show, where what prevails is "the uncertainty of the event's solidity" (Berlant 2017, 308).

### *Angela*

Angela plans to become a mother. In her rehearsal she wants to replicate the conditions of her future motherhood, which include a host of specific requirements, like a self-sufficient country house, a Christian husband, and a son named Adam. Engendering a typical comover subjectivity, Angela "[wants] to be in relationality yet so in control of its dynamics that [she] become[s] defined by what is immovable" (Berlant 2021, 27). However, as much as it is essential to her, the stillness of her animating fantasy often reveals itself as threatening. Angela seems to be entering the rehearsal motivated by a fear of seeing her object recede from sight, witnessing the years go by without getting closer to the promise of a perfect family. That is, she is afraid of loneliness, but won't drop her humorlessness and go for second best. Through the artificiality of Fielder's rehearsal, she finds a comover glitch which allows her to live something that doesn't apply to her standards, without them diverging from an idealized fantasy that resides somewhere in the future. In other words, the very fact that she chooses to rehearse reveals a desire to connect along with the way this is impeded by a desire to control, which has by now become costly. That is, Angela wants to live a life but is trapped in searching for *that* life. Angela is a recurring participant in almost all the episodes of the show, but the second episode, on which I focus here, presents her with a shadow of suspicion, as if she has lied about her desire to rehearse only to have a chance of playing out her fantasy. Indeed, she seems to live in the rehearsal, rather than using it as an exercise in humorlessness. In light of this, the make-believe of the show appears to construct a safe space where she can protect herself from the inconvenience of the world and the cost-bearing truth that what she is looking for might not be out there, or at least not in the form she wants it. Caught in a replica of the world that, at least, keeps her close to her fantasies, she is committing the ultimate sin of the comover subject, "mistaking control over form for a form of life" (Berlant 2017, 340).

## The Humorlessness Machine

Here, I will try to lay out the elements that distinguish Nathan's comover subjectivity from the ones described above. Specifically, I will first argue that the narrative devices and aesthetic strategies of *The Rehearsal* function, themselves, as humorless mechanisms. Second, that these elements render the show a frictionless vacuum for experimenting with the affective ties of a humorless space through the unbinding of the comover. My focus will be on the devices of the rehearsal, the voice-over, and the behind-the-scenes.

The rehearsal itself is the par excellence process of constructing humorlessness. It bears the ambivalent characteristic of being *for* the world but not *in* the world, replicating the affective structure of humorlessness that lies in two simultaneous, contradictory moves, a toward and

an away. A toward the world, a preparation for entering it, and an away into constructing our terms for living there. Terms that are being ensured through slow and painstaking efforts to render the form of being presented to the world strict and predictable. Control over form through creating an action script or devising a choreography is part of the very ontology of the rehearsal, and it is humorless as a process of microadjustment to the space between the not-yet-predictable and the already-held-still. *The Rehearsal* promises its participants to render them humorless in real life through this process, in exchange for them confronting the limits of this humorlessness on camera. For as safe as the rehearsal is, they are not really in control of it, as Fielder ensures that their fears are always exposed and brought into play. The question then would be, who brings the trouble into Fielder's own rehearsal, and why, if it's only him that decides how safe is his safe space?

Fielder's specter of control over the encounters enacted in the series becomes ubiquitous through his ever-present narrating voice. The voice-over, and the self-reflexivity it brings with its first-person variation, is an enforced interpretation of a situation. It is always an attempt at restricting what is perceived, at hiding what shouldn't be observed. It rephrases an ongoing situation as a congealed event and transforms the feeling of the present into a study of the past.<sup>15</sup> *That's what happened*, the voice-over says, with all the flattening implications that may emerge when foreclosing an encounter into the visualization of an already given knowledge. That said, Fielder is not only scripting, reorganizing, and replaying situations until they end up as what he perceives to be a successful rehearsal, but he can also overlay that all with a specific interpretation.

While we experience Fielder as our only narrator and the sole dramaturg of how the show unfolds, we are rarely allowed to be absorbed by witnessing the series as a flowing process organized by storytelling. For the show often takes time to make the process of its production visible. We witness actors signing release forms, workers constructing sets, and camera staff looking at monitors. We, thus, know who controls the form. We are always reminded not only of who interprets the encounter, but also of who constructed it in the first place, and how. This is the making manifest of the work of humorlessness that is often invisible in other media texts. In that sense, *The Rehearsal* seems diligently preoccupied with creating an environment that most clearly pinpoints humorlessness in the making while organizing its presence around one single subject, that of Nathan.

The devices of the rehearsal, the voice-over, and the behind-the-scenes function together to present Fielder's show as a space rotating around the desires and needs of one person only, allowing him to stay away from the world's resistance and friction. These conditions, perfect and artificial as they are, enable *The Rehearsal* to take the form of an experiment, its constants being those of humorless comedy. First, in the experimental vacuum of *The Rehearsal*, with nothing threatening him, Nathan can have the perfect comover. Second, this comes along with a cost, namely that he cannot feel anything, or connect to anyone. In

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, the humorlessness of the voice-over is always open to be contradicted by what is in sight, and the complications emerging from the incongruity between the two could function as a device for producing ambiguity and multiplying possible interpretations. That would be an instance of humorless comedy that plays with complicating the humorlessness integral to the subject of the voice-over.

his words: “I was starting to wonder why I could so easily create feelings inside other people’s rehearsals when I couldn’t do it for myself” (The Rehearsal, episode 3, 23:57 to 24:05). From here, his experiment unfolds via two questions. First, how much does he have to unbind the combover for the disorganization of the world to affect him again, bringing close the relationality he craves? Second, how much can he keep this combover intact, in order to stay proximate to the benefits of being humorless? To answer these questions, Nathan has to choose a variable, that is a scene to enter, where he can use his resources, strategies, and devices to diagnose the possibilities of ensuring a viable balance between cost and desire. What he chooses is the humorless space of the normative family.

## The Joke in Motion

Before entering the analysis of Fielder’s in-show persona, Nathan,<sup>16</sup> I will first refer to some elements that characterize the comedic work of *The Rehearsal* in relation to humorlessness. This appears important as the comedic purposes of the show inform a large part of Nathan’s comportment in his relations with the other participants. Specifically, Nathan could be said to employ a persona that works close to what Nicholas Holm has termed “uncomfortable humor” (2017), or what is more widely known as cringe comedy (Attardo 2024).<sup>17</sup> Holm uses this term to refer to comedies that work to unsettle social norms by amplifying the discomfort associated with witnessing a public deviation from what counts as acceptable conduct. In Holm’s words, this kind of humor “confronts its audiences with the consequences of failure and deviancy” (2017, 111). What’s important for this study is how the failure Holm refers to is the one that the nervous desire of humorlessness tries to conceal, and which then always returns to haunt the humorless subject. I refer to the failure that becomes the joke as haunting because I consider it to be first, unwanted, and second the outcome of the combover subjects’ aspirational thingness, of “the kind of onerous comic labor of which s/he is now the target” (Duncan 2017). The kind of comic labor of humorlessness is the always precarious effort to untarget oneself, to leave the discomfort of being the target of the joke to others. The work of humorlessness then, for a combover subject such as Nathan, is to create the conditions where his counterpart “who had been comfortable on camera begins to feel trapped in the frame” and where “a film perceived as

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<sup>16</sup> I have been already referring to Fielder as Nathan when analyzing his own combover subjectivity rather than his presence as the director and organizer of the show, as was the case in the first section of this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> The references to these comedic genres together with the affectlessness of Fielder’s expressionless persona may invoke associations with the category of deadpan comedy. Although the comedic tactic of the deadpan is definitely employed in *The Rehearsal*, its regular conceptualization along the lines of a strategic withholding (Berlant 2014, Holm 2017, Post 2023) would need a more extended recalibration to account for the fragility and cracking that are the focus of humorless comedy. For this reason, I here chose to stay closer to the largely uncontested ambiguity of the notion of awkwardness.



a documentary turns out to be a parodic mockumentary” (Middleton 2014); as long as the parody is not on him.<sup>18</sup>

This sets the joke of humorless comedy in constant motion. For as long as Nathan’s humorlessness prevails, we laugh at the absurd behavior and ill-conceived beliefs of the real people populating the show. But by the time the specter of an inevitable failure has messed the combover arrangement, and Nathan has been forced to be affected by and adapt to someone else’s viewpoint, then his inability to respond properly, to appear flexible, or even to understand, makes him crumble. For the subject bearing the combover, this marks the collapse of a whole world, which makes it simultaneously funny and sad, repulsive and demanding of compassion, painful and arousing, owing to “the multiplier effect of comic disturbance”, a “flooding” (Berlant 2017, 313).

Passing around the hot potato of the joke and accepting it only as an irreparable wound ties this description of humorless comedy to the idea of the humor regime as described earlier. Let’s remember here how the contemporary western liberal democracies’ humor regime claims that everyone can and should be joked about equally, while simultaneously it’s the same institutions that try to set an intercultural agenda on what should be considered as a joking matter (Kuipers 2011). In the same way, and echoing those contradictions on an affective level, the combover subject claims to be living in a comedy but restricts the possibility of becoming the joke. Consider, here, the growing social category of subjects who adopt this version of the “desire for comedy” (Berlant 2017, 309), by excluding themselves from the potentially hurtful, disturbing and disorganizing effects of humor through a unidirectional argument of “just joking” (see Zijp 2024). Therefore, the dissection of the affective structure of humorlessness can work through cataloguing the flooding of those contradictions, giving access to the psychic life of subjects as well as structures, holding in view both their power and their flimsiness.

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<sup>18</sup> Consider how the expressed intention of depicting Patrick’s situation in episode three quickly turns into a parody by leaving the absurdity of the gold-digger argument float around without any further justification. The careful absence of contextualization through editing disguises Nathan’s awkwardness as a proper reaction to the other person’s cringeworthy behavior (the only other information we get is that Patrick is wearing a necklace containing his grandfather’s ashes). For another approach to how editing works in *The Rehearsal* see Mittell 2024.

## II. Escaping Thingness

### Introduction

Towards the end of episode two, Nathan enters Angela's rehearsal, taking the role of her future husband and father of her pretend son Adam. Through this relationship, and by occupying the humorless space of the normative, nuclear family, he hopes to engineer a way into emotion. This chapter follows Nathan's ordinary struggles of a comover subject that cannot but pursue its desire to connect. Of course, Nathan is not an ordinary subject, for the humorlessness machine of *The Rehearsal* enables him to seamlessly move between subject positions, roles in a relationship, and locations in a scene. For that reason, he peruses the space of the family from a host of different vantage points, as he attempts to amend the costs of humorlessness from inside that same space. In that vein, I will first outline Nathan's comover by locating his directionality towards certain objects, and then I will present two storylines of failed rehearsals, in which the fixation on the conventional demands of this comover stymie his efforts of getting proximate to what he desires.

### Nathan's Comover

In episode six, Nathan rehearses a situation where his pretend son, Adam, played by a child actor, is being bullied at school. Nathan's role is to comfort and advise his son in order to prepare him for future incidents. The rehearsal of the advising process, as a humorless comedy in three concurrent steps – control, fear, and failure – gives access to the structure of his comover. This refers to the proxemics relation of the organizing norms, promises, and threats whose co-existence orients his endeavor into the humorless space of the normative family, offering a first mapping of the unstable ground where Nathan's pursuit for an emotion is grounded.

The foundational motor for all of Nathan's actions in the show appears as an ever-present affectlessness that perforates all of his encounters. This is presented as the absence of any feeling towards others and as the incapacity of any of his relations to imprint on him a desirable, or even recognizable, emotion. Following the acknowledgement of this reality on his part is a constant affective tendency to achieve proximity to others, to move towards them by following and multiplying his encounters, entering his participants' rehearsals, extending the time he spends with them, following them into their private spaces and expanding his reach into their lives. This firmly implanted desire, whose other side is the fear of loneliness, is what someone would call a sincere opening of the self towards the world, an

instance of vulnerability that searches for genuine relationality. And it is, as Nathan appears to honestly express this fear and this desire, outlining a subject which invites all sorts of identifications on the side of the viewer, non-judgmentally reflecting struggles and insecurities rooted deep into the current condition. However, at the same time, humorless comedy's insistence on residing "in the copresence of structuration and collapse", couples these attempts of grafting the subject's vulnerability into its encounters, with the desire to control their unfolding.

For there is a limit to how far one can go into the desire for genuine connection when grappling with the reality of humorlessness. Sergio Lopez-Sande has described this kind of sincerity, the leaning of certain privileged bodies towards vulnerability and emotional connection, as "a self-dismantling shield, programmed to self-destruct should it be met with hostility" (2023, 9). In the same way, what humorless comedy makes apparent is how this sincere affectlessness and the subsequent desire to be seen, is inevitably tied, in the case of subjects inhabiting normativity, with the desire to control the terms of being seen. Or, in reverse, and what humorless comedy adds to Lopez-Sande's articulation, the control this subject exerts is proportional to its incapacity to connect, which is here read as the cost of being humorless.

If we now turn to the instance of Nathan advising his son, we should read his attempts under this ambiguous lens of internal contradictions. His humorlessness, having entered the scene of the family, is now occupied with controlling the role Nathan will inhabit, rearranged in order for him to appear as a "good" father. Being wise, strong, and comforting, having ready-to-hand advice, knowing how to handle difficult social interactions, being able to tackle the hardships of reality and transmit a sense of conviction grounded in experience; all these appear to be part of Nathan's perceived skillset for being a successful father and a presupposition for addressing his son. They are the attributes he should approximate in order to get closer to his fantasy, while simultaneously they are part of the fantasy itself. And although Nathan has been presented as lacking several of these characteristics, the humorlessness of *The Rehearsal* can sidestep the deficiencies of his personality to attest to his success on this fatherly challenge, as the child actor accepts his advice with delight.

But the advice itself is bad advice, as it replicates Nathan's very humorlessness: "You are in control because you don't want anything from them. You don't want their friendship" (*The Rehearsal*, episode 6, 6:56 to 7:03).<sup>19</sup> Telling his son to avoid the inconvenience of others, to control the situation by receding from the encounter, to become a thing which cannot be addressed – for good or bad – Nathan is inheriting his humorlessness to his son, defining their relationship through a vicious circle of the same aspirational thingness from which his affectlessness sprung in the first place. This reflects the way that humorless comedy works when testing out the contradiction of stepping into the world armored with an array of defenses. But, in contrast to the self-destructive sincerity described by Lopez-Sande, or the

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<sup>19</sup> Here is a longer quote for a better understanding of the context: "You really want to be friends with those guys huh? Maybe the next time they ask you to hang out, you should just say no. [...] that way they don't have any power over you. [...] You are in control because you don't want anything from them. You don't want their friendship." (*The Rehearsal*, episode 6, 6:33 to 7:03)

radical vulnerability of unconditionally reaching out for connection (Steinhilber 2022), humorless comedy never resolves the contradiction, leaving the humorless subject in an endless limbo between holding on and letting go. In another framing, advocating for Nathan as a subject radically open towards the desire for intersubjective connection would be to only capture the moment when the moving joke of the humorless comedy has been thrown away from him, and attending to the self-destruction of his sincerity would mean to focus on the moment the joke gets back to him in all its force and shame. Contrary to those accounts, humorless comedy insists on capturing both those movements in an unresolved tension, attesting to what it looks like to “[be] humored, with no repair in sight” (Berlant 2017, 315)

This reading enables a complex understanding of the subject that inhabits normativity. It decouples privilege and emotional fulfillment, opening research into the ways that a humorless space may let down or even hurt the same subjects who reap its benefits. At the same time, it doesn’t sideline how any effort to amend the costs of humorlessness is rendered possible by the safety, the comfort and the privilege that is foundational to inhabiting a humorless structure. Therefore, instead of sidelining the desire for genuine connection in view of the terrifying rigidity of the structural, but neither uncritically celebrating a subject that has been blessed with a quest for emotional sincerity, humorless comedy attends to a subject that sincerely wishes to exit a humorless space but is affectively bound to the reproducing power of both its benefits and costs. It reads for a gesture that tries to enter the world but reaches out a thorny touch.

### ABSENT, Caring, TOUGH, and Loving Father

For the first half of episode four Nathan is absent from Angela’s family rehearsal. After he gets back, his fake son, Adam, has grown into a teenager, almost having reached the limit of the rehearsal, which is due to end when Adam becomes eighteen years old.<sup>20</sup> Noting that in the “real” participants’ rehearsals so far we have seen the importance for a situation to be unfolded in whole, as well as how crucial it is that the participants experience and rehearse every version of every hue and shade of their situations, one would expect for this incident to mark the end of this storyline. Indeed, the script deviation, the undelivered promise of Angela’s dream family, the rupture of a plotline that for the first episodes bore a commitment to linearity, all appear to be in contrast to what has been until now *The Rehearsal’s* rules of conduct. Therefore, when Nathan breaks the rehearsal, he abandons its humorless goals. He comes back not as a father, but as the director of the show, someone who failed to be immersed in and embody his role. He enters Angela’s fake house only to find a different experience, a different son, a different actor in a broken concatenation of actors he didn’t see. This rehearsal could never be replicated in the real world.

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<sup>20</sup> The show has constructed its own temporality by condensing eighteen years of life in a two-month period, made possible through the employment of a large number of actors that play Adam in different ages.

However, Nathan seems to be unable to abandon the family, seemingly the only viable placeholder for his desires, and thus crafts a new plot for him, Angela, and Adam, one that incorporates his year-long absence into a different kind of conventional family narrative. As Kor, the participant of the first episode, also did, Nathan uses the strategy of substitution, this time to graft his precious fantasy of fatherly love in a new object. Of course, the promise of forging a connection through his gradual ascendance to being a loving father is now out of the question, since graduality cannot fit the plot of the father that left. Therefore, Nathan re-establishes the scene of familial love, first by reimagining the object of the child, which in its many iterations seems to be as disposable and transformable as the actors that embody it. Now, Adam is an angry teenager, one that feels betrayed by Nathan's absence, an alienated son who kicks against his father's desires, and, in response, Nathan comes to occupy his new role as a wounded and concerned father who, instead of the affectionate and caring interactions with his former object-son, he is now exercising a kind of tough love.

Therefore, Nathan's script now follows the repercussions of a conventional family disintegrating under the wound of fatherly absence. The genre of this plotline – the emotional scripts of its characters, their affective reflexes, and their material consequences – are drawn from a supposedly real-life experience belonging to a friend of the actor who plays Adam. The unstable methodological grounds on which this story is integrated into the script of Angela's rehearsal – is it a real story, is it exemplary of what a fatherly absence would cause, isn't it an overly one-sided narration – doesn't prevent Nathan from following it blindly as the paradigm of family trauma. In the sense that Nathan's adoption of a narrative follows less a trajectory of alignment with his lived experience, and even less one of rational deliberation, then his positioning in the family scene hints more to an affective relation. He insists on staying inside the scene even when having to radically transform, across the span of episodes, his affective investment in different objects, in order to preserve a feeling of care towards his son. The work he does is that of keeping alive the promise of qualifying this feeling into the socially legible emotion of fatherly love, which seems to be a cornerstone of the intimate public<sup>21</sup> Nathan desires to belong to. The affective tendency to emotionally connect with this intimate public irrespective of the transformations needed to sustain its promise of belonging is a powerful pointer to how structural formations often use affectivity as their main method of attachment, which in turn hints to a need for new and different modes of address, unlearning, and persuasion towards the subjects that inhabit them.

The rest of the episode unfolds the story of a rebellious teenager whose affectively mixed urges of both repulsion and need for his father get him further into a spiral of alcohol, drugs, and abuse. This is the genre that Nathan chose as the only one that would allow him to stay inside the humorless space of the family, but one that more and more seems to fail him. He acts out the whole emotional script of tough love and exasperated concern, only to end up with a rehearsal that has left him, on one hand, successful and humorless in the way he revived, controlled, and reinterpreted the situation of his fake family, but, on the other, again

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<sup>21</sup> See "Lauren Berlant as Scholar" section in Methodology chapter of this thesis for a description of Berlant's concept of intimate publics.

without anything that would count as a real, deep, genuine relationality. The only thing left is for this plot to get closure, for this object – the betrayed child – and this role – the absent father – to abandon their cause. Close to the end of the episode, Adam has a drug overdose incident, and Nathan acknowledges that this script of conventionality could not but repeat the cocktail of social legibility and emotional dryness that has been following him as the other side of his privileged subjectivity. However, Nathan will try again, by setting the scene once more, from the beginning, employing the humorlessness machine of *The Rehearsal* to give him one more shot in his pursuit of emotional fulfillment through the normative family. In the end of episode four, Nathan rewinds time, turning Adam, one more time, into a toddler.

### Absent, CARING, Tough, and LOVING Father

Meet Dr Farts, the comic role-playing game that the, now “reborn”, Adam plays with Nathan, his father. Episode five rewinds the scene of the normative family, re-establishing Nathan in the role of the caring and loving father, one who is fully invested in his son’s well-being and the family’s integrity. The scene is the same, and the enactment is one of a serene, peaceful familial environment, with one exception. Angela doesn’t like the “Dr Farts” game, since her strict and sometimes peculiar Christian values are prohibiting the exposure of a child to any utterance of evil, or satanic, feces-related talk. This example of Angela’s deviation from what Nathan would consider part of the loving upbringing of a child, opens up an episode that is concerned with how conflicting stories about conventionality reveal the confused awareness of a humorless subject that falls into disparate and contradictory promises of conformity.

After a visit from his parents, Nathan is urged to pay attention to the Jewish education of Adam, and occupy himself the role of a Jewish father, one which comes with a set of values, cultural habits, and norms for what it means to raise a child. These expectations are, of course, contradictory to those of the rigid Christianity of Angela. Nathan is, thus, put in the position of having to choose between following the calcified heritage of a Jewish tradition, or the already established marital serenity of the nuclear family that was until now running around the epicenter of Angela’s fantasy of the perfect life. Of course, the form of the nuclear family is not contradictory to Jewishness, neither is a two-religion marriage and upbringing impossible. What is unraveled here is the complex affective reality of a subject that is falling between the cracks of different accounts of conventionality, and which has to rearrange the proxemics relations of its comover in order to find the best arrangement for following its fantasy. In that sense, the analysis I am pursuing is concerned less with the actual contradictions or mutually exclusive elements between those accounts of conventionality and more with the intractability of a subject who fails to loosen its grip on any of these stories, and, thus, to let one slip into the other.

In direct contrast to that possibility, Nathan decides to follow both roads but preventing them from meeting, passing down the cultural traditions and religious doctrines of his heritage while keeping his peaceful and cloudless marital life intact, in hope that he would multiply his chances of finding fulfillment. He, thus, follows a tactic of dividing one's energies in pursuing two iterations of the same goal, or two enactments of the same scene, investing in a kind of wishful thinking that by keeping two possibilities alive, one and the same subjectivity will be imposed on both situations, hence implying that neither of them can affect his thingness enough to influence how it is perceived in the other.

When, inevitably, Nathan's trick is exposed, and Angela learns about the way he was secretly providing Adam with lessons in the Jewish culture and tradition, he is accused of being manipulative and controlling, of excluding Angela from having a say on the rehearsal. When later Nathan rehearses a possible fight with Angela,<sup>22</sup> he accepts those charges about the nervousness of his control over the situation by molding them into an existential fear that his emotionality will never be unlocked:

Fake Angela: "Do you want to feel something? Do you want to feel something real?"

Nathan: "Yeah."

Fake Angela: "That's sad. You never will, no matter how hard you try, you never will."

Nathan: "Oh, okay. Maybe we can try just a nicer version of the entire scenario."

(*The Rehearsal*, episode 5, 23:40 to 24:20)

The verbalization of his fear of a permanent emotional predicament, along with an ashamed awareness of how his own comedic techniques are ridiculing and thus distancing Angela<sup>23</sup> function to resurge the ghost of humorlessness amidst a fake landscape of emotional warmth. This does not only present Nathan's attitude towards his conflicting doctrines of conventionality as insufficient but also gives a glimpse on humorlessness as always providing a deadlock, an affectively weathering short circuit between the desire to connect and that to control.

At the end of the episode, Angela leaves the rehearsal and abandons the show. For a moment this makes Nathan optimistic that his conundrum has solved itself. He can now fully pursue the role of the Jewish father by fusing his moves and actions with the values and norms of the Jewish heritage, and possibly find a solid grounding and an emotional fulfillment in passing down that lineage to his son. However, in what is the last joke of the episode, the Jewish tutor Nathan has hired for Adam urges him to use the show to propagate how Israel is "a light to the nations" (*The Rehearsal*, episode 5, 30:23), and that

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<sup>22</sup> Here I read the rehearsing technique as a strategy of self-exposure, in which Nathan finds a predictable space in-between his relationship with the real participants in order to acknowledge his comover fragility.

<sup>23</sup> Fake Angela: "Are you really trying to help me? Or am I the silly part that you talk about? Is my life the joke? Do you sit here with your friends at the end of the day laughing at me?"

Nathan "No, you are not the joke, not at all. No one is the joke. The situations are funny but interesting too."  
[...]

"You are a liar because if this was real, you would have some sort of emotion instead of standing there like a rock..." (*The Rehearsal*, episode 5, 23:02 to 23:38).

taking a strong stance against Palestine is “part of being Jewish” (ibid., 29:53). Nathan’s awkward wordlessness, which is also what makes the scene comedic, imbues this encounter with the atmosphere of an impasse, as the person who laid out the normative narrative of Jewish subjectivity for him is now filling its puzzle with a controversial piece, which is evidently problematic for Nathan. To forge a Jewish identity outside of the tutor’s norms would require a dialogic approach to Nathan’s subjectivity, one that accepts and incorporates difference, objection, and negativity, one, in reality, that is unreconcilable with the immovability of a humorless space, and would, thus, expect from Nathan to move alongside inconvenience and accept that he will often stand in spaces where his body cannot sink in so easily.

In total, what we can gather about the humorless subject based on those combover slaloms inside and around the same scene of normativity is the flexibility and innovative maneuvering employed to keep something in place. As Sara Ahmed phrases it, it renders visible how “the means for defending against movement move” (Ahmed 2017, 137). In that way, the same scene of sociality can be seen to function as a placeholder for a host of narrations about the role and position of the subject, which coexist by, and at the same time without, excluding each other, bound by the affective grip on the secret of the combover. That is to say, incoherence, contradiction, and paradox are not hazardous for the power of the structural, but instead part of its composition, the way in which we can “maintain conflicting ideas of who we and our objects are without collapsing or going psychotic” (Berlant 2012, 78).



### III. Successfully Rehearsed

#### Scene Collapse

When Angela abandons the show, she takes with her the nuclear family form. Nathan is now without a wife and Adam without a mother, and they are thus unable to rehearse other articulations of the normative family scene they were pursuing. In other words, Nathan is left alone to bear the weight of single fatherhood, a rather unperfect position to embody in the face of dreams for a comfortable conventionality. What happens when the family scene collapses, is that the affectively restricted rehearsal space cannot be guarded anymore. Nathan's combover fantasies are, therefore, more visibly exposed as a lie, a pretense, and a travesty. The beginning of the sixth and last episode of the show catalogues a series of inconveniences emerging in the wake of Angela's departure and finds Nathan crumbling under the pressure of several backstage demands and technical challenges. This is the high point in the visibility of his combover fragility and his inability to gatekeep his fantasies. Nathan cannot pretend to be the "good father" anymore.

In that sense, the inaugural mood of the episode recapitulates Nathan's combover struggles not anymore as an effort to be a conventional good father, but as a dizzy incoherence trying to retain fragments of his now-confused desire to achieve this normative status. In other words, we are witnessing the tail of his failure to follow the long arc of his experiment into crafting the humorless image he wants for himself while re-activating his capacity to feel. What he doesn't control anymore is coming as an attack of the real, a now looming overcloseness of what he was trying to keep out of the rehearsal, intruding in the form of budget restrictions and outside demands. What is left for the show is to attend to the combover subject's confrontation with the inevitability of its failure and witness the resurgence of a responsibility to respond to the world's incoherence, to someone else's interpretation of your life, your image, and your relationships. This, for Nathan, comes as an unsolicited emotional connection with a child actor, Remy.

Remy, who plays a six-year-old version of Adam, is, in real life, growing up as the child of a single mother. When Angela leaves, the absence of a pretend mother breaks the illusion of the rehearsal, and Remy starts to think of Nathan as his actual father. Nathan's relation with Remy bears all the absent until now qualities of inconvenience, threat, danger, incoherence, and asymmetry, but also awkwardness, hesitation, tenderness, heartache, and consolation. In that sense, the multiplicity of feelings that Nathan was seeking is now coming to him, but brings along all kinds of disturbances and inconveniences, along with a sense of responsibility and guilt towards hurting Remy.

The humorless comedy's multiplication of clashing forces and ambiguous couplings enables a focus on Nathan's incautious manipulation of Remy but combines it with an atmosphere of warmth. The ethical ambiguity of confusing the easily molded reality of a child is never

hidden, neither are the asymmetrical power relations between Nathan Fielder, the director, and a low-class family striving for an extra income. But the show complements this image by having Nathan witness how the aggressive invite of his humorless address to the world is poisonous, compelling him to re-evaluate his objects and his relations with them. Is it worth having the immediacy and trust of a child at reach, when that implies dragging that child into a humorless circle that cuts it out from the rest of its world? Should Nathan's guilt stem from his structural position, his decision to stick to it, or the recklessness of his desire to overcome it? Is it his fate in heteronormative carelessness that he has to abandon, or the promise of being a little less lonely? And is the object that would bring him closer to finding comfort a child, a marriage, a heritage, or none of them? Could he have built or entered a new lifeworld where his fantasies of reciprocity would still stay active and motivating without being forced to becoming normative relations?

### I'm Your Mom

Humorless comedy doesn't give answers to those questions but follows the subject as it struggles with an awareness of their complications. It is a form of documenting the affective distancing from the suffocating norms of a humorless space along with a renewed investment in its failed promises and wondering about the emotional reality of a subject that experiences – and sometimes thinks about – this two-directional pull. Nathan's genre of contemplation is acting, imitating, and rehearsing, all attempts to embody and incorporate different viewpoints in one's sensorium in search for the relations that a specific type of movement or style of dressing or form of an eyegance might elicit. Thoughtful of how the promises of a path to comfort through conformity overturned his journey of reconnecting with others, he is, in the second half of this episode, investing in a promise of correcting his partial view by observing how his humorlessness hijacked his sincerity.

In order to do this, he takes up the role of Remy's mother, wearing identical clothes, putting on make-up, replicating her way of talking to her son. With another child playing Remy, and an actor being Nathan, we rewatch a montage of the whole show, now re-enacted with its epicenter at the experience of Remy's mother. What is rendered visible is the inherent powerlessness of her position as she moves among the cameras, the crew, and the producers. In reality, she is unable to have a say in what's happening, and while fearful of Remy's comportment and foreseeing his emotional confusion, she cannot but go with the flow of Nathan's humorlessness machine and his mastery over what's happening. In that way, Nathan is re-entering the space he made, and the scene he instituted, but now from a non-humorless position.

In occupying the role of the single mother, one that doesn't fit in the humorless conventions of the family as they have been laid out in the show, Nathan gets a glimpse of his humorless space as a bargaining with a constant threat. For him, of course, this doesn't appear as a real danger, but rather as a journey into a world molded by the inevitability of negotiating with

inconvenience, in which the urge for achieving any kind of thingness is absent. Alongside the promise of becoming a thing, Nathan's affective reality also gets deprived of the emotional cost of this endeavor. His adventure as a subject that's been denied the prospect of humorlessness opens him up to a world full of disturbances as well as possibilities for feeling and connecting,

Nathan's newly forged affective proximity to Remy in the re-enactment is expressed as a feeling of affection and a desire to protect. In the emotional vocabulary of the show – developed by the documentation of the real mother-son interactions in the same episode – these feelings are labeled as the very unique relation of motherly love. However, the show's ever-present artificiality and the drag undertones that accompany Nathan's transformation deter an indulgence into confusing Nathan's feelings for some quintessential motherly experience. Nathan is still the white, male, privileged subject that he always was, and thus the newly found feelings he is experiencing cannot be but his own. By re-entering the normative scene of the family as not only a single mother, but also, in reality, a transvestite version of the father he was trying to become, he gets access to the feelings that this space was keeping away from him. In that way, the show avoids flattening structural difference as a fissure that can be simply bridged by compassion, sympathy, understanding, or sinking in someone else's viewpoint. Instead, it proposes the thorny touch of humorless comedy and its foundational ambivalence as the model for a subjectivity that affectively lingers, constantly moving towards and away from its position on this fissure and unable to escape it. What's novel is that here, for once, the immovability of privilege also becomes the privileged subject's own tragedy.

## I'm Your Dad

However, the potential to recalibrate one's receptivity so as to be immersed in a world unobstructed by the borders and limitations inherent in humorless structures is too broad a promise. At first sight, *The Rehearsal* seems to suggest that the incorporation of different viewpoints and the work of realization, guilt, and reparation could potentially be enough to replace the comover of naturalizing the socially privileged spaces of sociality with a less violent string of everyday negotiations unfolding in a flat space of co-existence. This promise is given in the final scene of the show, where Nathan, still as Remy's mother, is rehearsing a scene of comforting Remy after he has had to accept that Nathan is not his real father. This monologue, the exemplary moment in which Nathan seems to dip into the pool of mothering and its accompanying emotions, is about the acceptance of mistakes, the messiness of life, the impossibility of being perfect, and also about genuine connection, about the necessity of mutual care in the face of life's inevitable surprises. That should be enough.

But then Nathan makes a slip, a parapraxis, telling fake Remy that "I'm always gonna be here for you, cause I'm your dad", to which the confused actor replies: "I thought you were my

mom". (*The Rehearsal*, episode 6, 30:18 to 30:27) Then there's a long pause, a moment to think, an extended duration of calculation. And calculation is a utopia collapsing, for when Nathan gets back to the child, he is confident in his choice: "No, I'm your dad" (ibid., 30:40 to 30:45). This lingering moment, and the immediate ending of the episode afterwards, leaves the show with a looming threat and a hovering atmosphere of defeat. Because just after Nathan has managed to turn the rehearsal from an exercise in humorlessness into a journey of self-acceptance through the unbinding of his emotional obstacles, it is then that he most forcefully regresses to previous forms of relationality. He rearranges his combover of being a good father, re-enters the previously collapsing scene and establishes the humorless space of his rehearsal as a permanent setting. He chooses to live there.

In total, there are two things *The Rehearsal's* ending proposes about unfastening the bonds with a humorless space. One is found in the pause, the other in Nathan's last line. The first is that the work of reaching out to the world in a radical fashion, by fully unclenching the grip of normative, structural humorlessness, needs something to land on. There is no way to answer the final question of the show, about what Nathan is thinking during that long pause before deciding to re-establish his role in conventionality. The pause itself, however, is what demarcates the point of entering the unknown he has championed in his monologue. It is a moment of contemplation, the reckoning before a leap of faith. Its length is a metrics for the perceived risk of jumping, a calculation of the odds of finding the wrong footing, if there is a footing at all.

The idea of finding a footing for entering the desired unknown is what Berlant would call a "transformational infrastructure" (2022, 68), something to lean on while building that which to grow on. It is the absence of such an infrastructure, of a bridge between the safety of the rehearsal and the dangers of a non-normative life, which leads Nathan to claim for himself an already failed identity. This failure invokes a feeling that intuitively traverses the whole show from its beginning: that once the rehearsal ends, Nathan will inevitably return to his status of a lonely, shy person, since the artificiality and restricted nature of the show refuses to build such an infrastructure, even in the limited form of a relational chain that will bring him to a community. Nathan seems to understand that, and in the face of a rampant, uncontrolled intrusion of the messiness of life, he resorts to his humorlessness. In the end, the stark seriousness with which he asserts his fatherhood is a lucid pointer of what the show suggests about the affective structure of contemporary humorlessness. That is, a coupling of every desire to exit normative formations with a contradictory and often involuntary, hence compulsive, obsessive, or outright sociopathic (Hennefeld 2021) lock on the norms of the humorless space. What is left is to find ways to loosen that grip.

## IV. Becoming General

What does humorless comedy suggest, then, about the affective character of the present? What does reading the normative and the privileged through humorlessness, and via the affective contradictions inherent in its structure, provide us with? And how does this help us make sense of a world simultaneously populated by tender, liberatory desires of relationality and regressive, violent resorts to conservatism? Also, a world where those two are often nested inside the same subject?

I will use this space to open up the remarks and observations that surfaced throughout the analysis to questions of this nature. This entails an attempt to make propositions about the possible connections between what can be gathered from reading humorless comedy and the broad array of transformations shaking affective and social life in western democracies. To work by generalizing notes taken on the affective, through couplings of the individual and the public and synthetic remarks merging the emotional to the cultural, the economic and the political, is of course always risky, and justifiable only to a limit. But being propositional sometimes means taking the risk and holding a space for broadening the terrain of thought enough to be able to wander inside it, to investigate, question, and speculate.

When Berlant talked about cruel optimism,<sup>24</sup> they were observing an insistent investment in institutions that were failing us. At its heart, this affective relation was motivated by the desire for these institutions to work, by the optimism that at least once, or at least for me, they will work. Humorlessness redefines this relation with the structures of conventionality as one not anymore motivated by desire, or a visceral belief in the institution, but by fear, by a threat. Desire is only laterally connected to the family, the state, the market, or liberal democracy, those crumbling institutions of intimacy and participation that Berlant was describing. I'm referring to this relation as lateral for desire in humorless times seems to be outwardly directed, pointing away from those formations, into the desired unknown of new types of relationality. Yet, the western world is less than blooming with new connections, but rather appears to be spiraling into a resurgence of conservative, repressive, and violent forces.

The threat that prompts humorlessness is the same as the desire that drives it. It's the reflex of holding on to the structure that keeps you safe in the face of something disorganizing that you still desire. With the difference that this time the structure cannot keep you safe, as the processes of late capitalism have weathered any material and emotional buttress sustaining the illusion of belonging to the life organized by those institutions. In contrast to a hollow discursive regime that retains the liberal promises of equality, stability, and progress (Crouch 2020), "the incoherent background with which people have to live and dwell in" (Anderson 2021), that is the affective register of everyday life, is individually experienced as a discomforting, threatening uncertainty. And individually also means collectively (Cvetkovich

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<sup>24</sup> Berlant's concept of cruel optimism (2011) refers to a relation that exists "when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Berlant used this idea to describe how, despite the demise of the promises of the western good life, people are still clinging to the institutions of the post-war welfare state.

2012). In that sense, the desire for an alternative that is imbued in humorlessness cannot be detached from a reality that is destabilizing the ideological promises of conventional neoliberal forms of sense-making like work (Berardi 2009), the market (Varoufakis 2024), or the couple (Illouz 2007). Why is, then, that this attrition doesn't provide the springboard for liberatory alternatives, and instead hardens the binds with our cruel objects? This study proposes humorless comedy as a first tool for examining this question deeper and more fully, suggesting that the answer may lie, indeed, on the affective level.

In total, to inhabit the affective structure of humorlessness is to reside in a grey area of costly maintenance, disaffected by and in disbelief of the institutions that were once providing life with a promise, but perceiving the possibility of something outside them as threatening and unwanted. It is an aggressive grip on a normative remedy that can only deliver a series of adverse side-effects. This nervous, compulsive clench of humorlessness produces "a sociopathic positionality engineered by a system that savages naive good intentions" (Hennefeld 2021, 135), and which rather than dissolving and destroying those intentions, it transforms them into a thorny touch, a tearful and suffocating urge to connect. For an example of the humorless combination of a need for connection, a reflexive aggression, and a systemic influence, consider the contemporary field of online interaction. The internet landscape, and especially the social media environment, is resembling a pit of increasingly accumulating rage and furious dissent (Orvel 2011) unleashed by individuals who initially sought a way of connecting, being heard, and participating in a common aesthetic (Ingraham 2020). However, the humorless subjectivity of the average online user is, at the same time, foundationally constituted by platform design, by the very structure of the field supporting online communication (Lovink 2019). This relation might provide a promising conceptual bridge for understanding the way that a contemporary affective inclination to inhabit the structure of humorlessness is partly constituted and also usurped by new powers of social subjectivation.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the association of normativity with a sincere desire to escape its impasse brings forth another question. How does the coexistence of "structuration and collapse" inside humorlessness get reproduced steadily enough for this affect to be reflected in aesthetic forms like that of *The Rehearsal*? This is to say, how do its contradictions avoid getting resolved into resignation or chaos (see Stiegler 2012)? What does the fact that it persists enough to dominate an atmosphere say about the transformations it brings forth or accompanies? A fruitful route for thinking about that question may emerge by relating humorlessness to one of the big questions of western political thought today, that of the rise of the far-right (Lazaridis, Campani and Benveniste 2016, Mudde 2019, Moore and Roberts 2022, Kondor and Littler 2023). A way to start contemplating this relation is by understanding part of the allure of far-right populist regimes as fulfilling this deep-rooted need for new kinds of social relations by providing individuals with a "promise of intensity" (Anderson 2021). That is, trying to counter the affective costs of inhabiting the failing institutions of liberalism, like boredom (ibid.) or loneliness (Wilkinson 2022), by tuning social

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<sup>25</sup> For a multi-faceted discussion of contemporary processes of subjectivation through digital media see chapter 5 of *The Political Philosophy of AI* (Coeckelbergh 2022).

friction into turbulence and disarray.<sup>26</sup> In this way, humorlessness' outward inclination keeps being fueled by the advent of new social arrangements, pulls, and repulsions, produced by the deregulation of neoliberal low- and middle-class competition. Simultaneously, this way of amplifying inconvenience, responsibility, and disorganization works through processes that masquerade the self's technical openness with othering makeup.<sup>27</sup> This means that rather than incorporating and negotiating negativity as inherent to any relationship with others and the self, the far-right subject only has to confront the disturbance of specific groups, in that case those that cannot sink in the humorless spaces structured around gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity and more.

What is important in humorless comedy's ability to render visible the contradictory affective tendencies of humorlessness is that it allows to re-focus the same frame towards more liberatory aims. For as much as the concept may function to explain the affective transitioning from neoliberal alienation to conservative or even proto-fascist fervor, its nuanced understanding of the comover subjectivity unmasks the rigid aggressiveness of these formations to reveal a wobbly uncertainty covered under a panoply of defenses. The sincere emotional deficit and resulting desire for connection underpinning the theorization of humorless comedy replaces the pessimist foreshadowing of an unstoppable downward spiral into violence with a call for multiplying our tools of affective pedagogy. Understanding the historical present through the structure of humorlessness, that is as a transitional, affectively mixed ambivalence in search of support structures, brings forth an ethical obligation to develop and nurture those transformational infrastructures that can uphold us against the damage and attrition of the current condition. In this sense, the conceptual gift of working to understand the tragedies of normativity is that it allows us to reformulate the ghosts of its structure as only one – no denying powerful – strategy of arranging and assembling the multiplicity of our collective affective forces. Those other strategies we have to invent, devise, and improvise on the way, whether in the form of an aesthetic pedagogy of unlearning (Berlant 2022), a creation of provisional everyday utopias (Cooper 2013), an expansion of communitarian ethics (Barukh Milstein 2024), a tactics of fugitivity (Harney and Moten 2013), or a practice of radical care (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Or all of them, and more.

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<sup>26</sup> While Anderson theorizes the "promise of intensity" in view of the politics of Trump and Boris Johnson, his insights extend to a large and growing group of far-right politicians and parties, with the most noted recent example being the election of Javier Milei in Argentina. For a recent review of this far-right turn see Forti 2024.

<sup>27</sup> For a description of the process of othering and its relation to postcolonial thought see Fuss (2023), and for a use of this idea in affect theory see Ahmed (2000).

## 5. Conclusion

The punchline of late capitalist life is that it was never a comedy. That against the liberal comedic promise of being indestructible and allowed to repeat oneself in eternity, you are stopped. This is to witness a world that is ready to crumble under the slightest gesture, never to be given its former shape. And it is to have knowledge of this fragility, to know in the most visceral, intuitive way, that you cannot lean on the structures of this world, that, while they will not be there to sustain you, you will still be here to bear their loss. This is an intuition to trust, for it is history distilled. It is collective life in search of the comedic capacity to insist. Humorless comedy is the word for the need to understand that. It wonders about the objects that are fighting to harness our insistence and about how we reach and hold on to them, against their costs or through our fear. It reads the loss of our certainties alongside an excitement for the new, and the arousal of possibility side by side with a fear of the unknown. It is a war concept, orienting our gaze towards those lifeforms fighting to take hold of the energy emanating from these contradictions. Or that's how I understood it here, leaning on the unfinished conceptual legacy of Lauren Berlant, still here to bear their loss.

Berlant died a full-time comedy theorist – or almost. Their work overflowed disciplinary boxes and dichotomies, their tools and insights moving between and beyond their particular interests in comedy, affect, ideology, love, poetry, depression, or – as it seemed – pretty much everything. To follow such a thinker, especially by assembling the fragments of an incomplete project,<sup>28</sup> was also to reside in their world, trying to do justice to their language, ideas, and their vast but peculiarly coherent endeavor of theorizing a thing so broad as the way we live today. Which means that many of the challenges of writing this thesis were about navigating this world, trying to fruitfully activate the concept of humorless comedy, fillings the gaps of its loose ends against the backdrop of Berlant's work, and also maintaining the courage to make my own claims, to mold the concept without being daunted by their influence and stature. At the same time, I believe there is something more hidden in the question of Berlant gradually becoming a comedy theorist, in understanding what made such an astute reader of our world and an already established superstar academic to invest their power in this often-sidelined domain of intellectual work. For this I have no answer other than my attempt to step where they stepped and wonder about what they could see from there. And although what I saw was certainly not the same, my effort to bring uncertainty and contradiction into accounts of rigidity owes a lot to Berlant's prioritization of ambivalence, ambiguity, and an ethics of overdetermination. And my attempts to palpate normativity through both its violence and vulnerability – thinking about conventionality without sidelining its costs and analyzing those costs without forgetting

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<sup>28</sup> Berlant had announced that they were working on two books, which would form an unofficial trilogy with the posthumously published *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), which is in a large part also concerned with comedy. The first was to be called *On Humorlessness*, and which would expand, among other ideas, on the conceptualization of humorless comedy. The one to follow that, *Matter of Flatness*, would have been occupied with articulations of flat affect, one chapter of which was announced to be about deadpan. (see Berlant 2016, 2017, 2022).



structural violence – couldn't exist without their insistent commitment on avoiding the shaming of people's objects, on focusing instead on the systemic roots of any affective attachment, especially of those that bind people to what hurts them.

In the end, to talk about the – much-discussed here – subject of humorless comedy, the comover subject, is to refer to collective life as it presents itself in the contradictions of affect. For the importance of using affect theory to approach individual life is that we are conceptualizing something that is transmitted, circulating between the public and the personal, without borders, but still situated, historical, and specific. Therefore, any answer given about the affective life of the humorless subject – with its contradictory pulls, its emotional failures, its copresence of desire and fear, of control and friction – is a remark on a collective atmosphere, a structure of feeling, a visceral present. I already tried to articulate this conceptual transition from the singular example of *The Rehearsal* to the general feeling of the present in chapter four of my analysis. Here, I will conclude with a few notes on the potential for further inquiry.

Normative humorlessness has surfaced here, and through Nathan's rehearsals, as a process of excluding the world's friction in an effort to secure a place inside conventionality. Mitigating the noise of the world's disorganization, that is of other people and ways of being, is to enforce a one-sided story, a singular interpretation of reality. It is for this reason that the subject of humorlessness is a node through which we can traverse, dissect, and possibly understand a number of current issues and debates. More specifically, consider the neoliberal principle of individualism through the doctrine of self-actualization, of the demand to clean and tread a path alone, to create one uncontestable narrative that doesn't account for interdependence and mutuality. To understand a society organized around this demand requires a lucid and complex account of humorlessness. One that would also enrich the debate around the contemporary diffraction of reality that surrounds our post-truth era. To attend both to the confusion brought forth by the demise of a common image of what is, and the blooming of new, rigidly divided, and aggressive resorts to individual truths, we need to turn to the contradictions described by humorless comedy. And then there are the contemporary modes of public address, an ever-present culture of sharing, of exposing one's psyche while curating its image, an overspill of communication alongside an epidemic of loneliness. Highly contradictory, highly funny, highly tender but obscure, the digital public self is a humorless subject, and it is becoming urgent to analyze it in all its affective ambiguity, neither as only the bearer of a commercialized pseudo-vulnerable conventionality, nor as a pole of the democratization of feeling and openness – but as both, and more.

Nathan has here occupied the position of being pulled by contradictory forces. He is, for this thesis, an exemplar case of life lingering in-between, and of collective affective life as this hovering, uncertain, fearful confusion. This account of the emotional present raises the question of the ways in which normative powers are hijacking this structure of feeling to harness the desire for new relationalities into the carriage of conservative or pseudo-progressive goals. I already hinted to platform capitalism and the rise of the far-right as processes that take advantage of the affective in-betweenness that surfaced through this

reading of humorless comedy. Simultaneously, though, to follow humorless comedy's account of the present is also to accept the need for reconceptualizing a transformed time. For example, it is to revisit and problematize some easy-to-go analogies between today's far-right and historical fascism, as the early twentieth century's possibility of attaching to the rigidity of a national, imperialist formation cannot bear the optimism that it once had, neither exploit the serenity of a stable collective emotionality. In contrast, today's right-wing populisms' sharpened tools are hijacking a new affectivity. And it is crucial that we sharpen our tools for understanding it, and for seeing the blind spots of the seemingly unmovable. And these tools, Berlant has taught us, have to also be affective.

Humorless comedy has the power to remind us that being hurt by an institution is not enough to evoke its demise, neither is knowing that you are hurt, nor is looking for something outside it. Because a trunkless tree is not a rhizome, but some branches with a utopian wish. Utopia is good though. And if humorless comedy is a concept that tries to understand, and understanding in our times is dark and sometimes depressing, that's always part of the story. Thousands of action concepts and resistant practices are springing every day, folded, hidden, imperceptible, but still here to help us bear the loss, and resurge.

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