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An examination of superiority theory and power relations within the British sitcom *Blackadder*.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role of superiority theory and power relations within *Blackadder* in relation to class and spatial awareness, to see how laughter and joke telling work as expressions of power and audience engagement up to and including the final series, *Blackadder Goes Forth*. The character of Blackadder is forever in a fight to gain more power over his peers and retain his power from his superiors. Blackadder steps down the social scale throughout the series, but the overall structure within the “trio” of main characters remains the same. Chapter 1 defines superiority theory and explores power relations and the butt of the joke. Chapter 2 explores spatial awareness and the structure of situational comedy, highlighting the importance of each within the overall series of *Blackadder*. Chapter 3 combines these findings and applies them to *Blackadder Goes Forth* and the final episode “Goodbyeeee”, to interrogate when laughter and power shift. The thesis found that superiority theory applies not just to the characters, but to an audience, and that power relations are critically linked. Spatial awareness was critical to *Blackadder* after the first series due to the move to studio filming and this went hand-in-hand with the structure of situational comedy, superiority theory and power relations.

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Introduction

This dissertation will explore the role of superiority theory and power relations within the British situational comedy, *Blackadder* (*The Blackadder*, Lloyd, 1982-1983; *Blackadder II*, Lloyd, 1986; *Blackadder the Third*, Lloyd, 1987; *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Lloyd, 1989). I have chosen this theme because, as a fan of “classic” British situational comedy such as *Fawlty Towers* (Davis & Argent, 1975-1979), *Only Fools and Horses* (Butt et al., 1981-2003), *Blackadder* and *Red Dwarf* (Jackson et al., 1988-2020), I was interested to explore the comedy form and how comedy theory applies. I chose *Blackadder* due to the changing historical setting between series and the interesting relation to social class inasmuch as *Blackadder* seems to be in a constant battle to move between social classes through the acquisition of power.

To achieve this, I will investigate several areas of the foundations of comedy, including, but not limited to, John Morreall’s definition of superiority theory (1983) and Adrian Bardon’s ideas about the object of amusement (2005). Exploring the “broadly agreed characteristics” (Wagg, 1998, p. 3) of situational comedy is important to be able to investigate how they meld with comedy theory, such as how comedic situations characters find themselves in may be perfectly believable, and that it is the way in which the situation escalates which makes them bizarrely comic.

Richard Curtis and Rowan Atkinson met at the Cambridge Footlights show and worked together on *Not the Nine O’Clock News* (Lloyd & Hardie, 1979-1982). They were planning a new series when the idea for *Blackadder* came after watching *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Curtiz & Keighley, 1938). J. F. Roberts noted in their 2013 book *The True History of the Black Adder* “If it was murder and skulduggery they wanted, after years of topical sketches, what would be a cleaner break than a medieval tights-and-codpiece spoof”? (p. 81).

Blackadder is historically set and draws upon an audience's basic understanding and assumptions of the historical period being portrayed. (*The Blackadder*, Medieval period; *Blackadder II*, Elizabethan;

Blackadder the Third, Regency; *Blackadder Goes Forth*, World War I). An audience may know of the earlier periods, especially due to the popularity of costume dramas, but connections to historical figures are difficult to form until *Goes Forth*, which is set within living, modern history. Even then, the historical figure of General Haig is only seen within the final moments of the final episode, which I believe was a deliberate move by the creators due to the contentious character and with it being within living history. The earlier series are glamorous in set design and costume, however, moving into *Goes Forth*, this changes and a stark contrast between the trenches and General Melchett's chateau is formed, which we will explore in relation to social class and hierarchy.

Made for broadcast on the BBC, *Blackadder* joined a list of many influential BBC productions, such as *Dad's Army* (Croft, 1968-1977), *Porridge* (Lotterby, 1974-1977), *Fawlty Towers*, *Only Fools and Horses*, *The Young Ones* (Jackson, 1982-1984) and *Red Dwarf*. Amongst these, *Blackadder* is often rated amongst the top British TV sitcoms (British Comedy Guide, 2004, para 2; Hyde, 2023, para 19) but is also notable for the interest in critiquing its historical attributes, especially by history scholars who believed *Goes Forth* provided false historical context for the Great War. *Haig: The Unknown Soldier* (Bettinson, 1996) "used scenes from *Blackadder Goes Forth* intercut with the commentary of historians in order to establish the stereotype before subjecting it to scrutiny." (Badsey, 2001, p. 114) and in 2014 Michael Gove, at the time the Secretary of State for Education, called for bans on *Blackadder* being shown in schools during history lessons (Groves, 2014). Therefore, looking at this overall comedy series, with a focus on the challenges of representing power structures in the final series - will allow us to interrogate ideas of power and representation within comedy - and how *Blackadder* may challenge ideas about this.

Chapter 1 will set up the core idea of power through joke telling and we will see if this applies to characters within *Blackadder*, whilst Chapter 2 will change the focus to the structures of sitcom and physical and textual awareness to argue its importance within the studio and situational comedy environment and how class is portrayed through such an awareness. We will take the findings from

the aforementioned chapters and apply them to a focused case study in Chapter 3 where we will look at the construction and reception of *Blackadder Goes Forth*, with a particular emphasis on the final episode “Goodbyeee” (Curtis, Elton & Boden, 1989d).

Chapter 1

This chapter will define superiority theory and examine the position of class and characterisation in *Blackadder*. We shall examine John Morreall's definition of superiority theory and Adrian Bardon's ideas about the object of amusement, as well as T. Bradford Bitterly's ideas on how humour is linked with power (2022), and James Read's critical approach to power relations (1991), before exploring how the "butt of the joke" is closely tied to these and theories on the positioning of comedy and power.

John Morreall discusses superiority theory in detail, defining it as "The oldest, and probably still most widespread theory of laughter is that laughter is an expression of a person's feelings of superiority over other people", and "The laughable person is the one who thinks of himself as wealthier, better looking, more virtuous, or wiser than he really is" (1983, p. 4). Morreall uses examples from various works, but one stands out and that is from some of the earliest literature: the Bible. After describing a passage where the prophet Elisha has a member of the clergy slain for taunting him and curses a group of children for mocking his baldness, Morreall states that "To modern Western ears these passages seem cruel, but that is only because of our relatively recent moral objections to the enjoyment of others' suffering.", but also, "We should keep in mind, too, that our objections to cruel laughter are not, even today, part of all cultures". (p 9). Here Morreall enables us to form a distinction between laughing *at* someone (cruel laughter) and laughing *with* someone. To laugh *at* someone enables an exertion of power over them, whereas laughing *with* them would suggest equality. Morreall continues to define superiority theory using examples of how a baby's laughter cannot be considered under the theory, but an older child and adults are, as they are able to "evaluate themselves and are capable of a sense of superiority" (pp. 10-11). He also clarifies that not all laughter situations fit into the superiority theory, such as laughter at a magic trick where one "would have to judge himself *inferior* to the magician who has succeeded in tricking them" (p. 11).

One situation, however, fits perfectly, and that is one that would today be called a “roast”, popularised in recent years by YouTube stars such as Linus Sebastian (Linus Tech Tips, 2019) and Sidemen (2019). The example Morreall uses is from the Greenland Eskimo, where opponents would ridicule each other and “All that counted was who got more laughs at his opponent’s expense” (p. 9). Another way to look at this would be that the winner is those who are able to portray to and convince the audience that they are superior to their opponent.

An important aspect to take away from all the examples is that the object of amusement must be a person, or something that can be identified as such.

In this sense of ‘laugh at’ we cannot laugh at anything other than a person, or something which we can treat as a person, since we can compare ourselves to, and feel superior to, only things of our kind, namely, other persons. We cannot ridicule inanimate objects, or situations. (Morreall, 1983, p. 13).

Morreall expresses their distaste for situational comedies (p. 10), but it is essential to critically review the role of superiority theory in situational comedies, such as *Blackadder*. In doing so, Morreall’s statement that “We cannot ridicule inanimate objects, or *situations*.” (p. 13, my emphasis) starts to be questioned - is it the situation the characters find themselves in, or how they handle this situation, that we laugh at? With this in mind, we may start focusing down on the definition of superiority theory and assess how the object of amusement plays a key role.

Adrian Bardon argues that “The Superiority Theory is the theory that the humor we find in comedy and in life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior.” (2005, p. 463). Bardon discusses Superiority Theory in relation to Incongruity and Relief theory, citing various works such as Henry Bergson’s essay *Laughter* (1912/2014) and John Morreall’s *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987).

Bardon continues “In other words, laughter results from a feeling of pleasure at seeing others suffer the misfortune of being deluded about their own wisdom.” (p. 463), but in what might seem like a contradiction to this, also:

Even when we are amused by human folly or mishap, the true object of humor is not the inferiority of the victim. We may laugh at seeing a person of great gravity and dignity take a fall, but our enjoyment (insofar as we find the situation *humorous*) derives not from a resulting sense of our own superiority, but from the contrast between the victim’s demeanour and his or her situation. (pp. 465-466).

The “person of great gravity” “falling” is not necessarily a literal translation and could be describing someone of high social standing finding themselves in a situation where they have “fallen” into the metaphorical gutter, which frequently occurs in *Blackadder* when his or Baldrick’s “cunning plans” backfire spectacularly. The object of amusement tends to argue against Morreall’s statement that we cannot ridicule situations, yet if the situation *is* the object of amusement, it enables the sense of superiority to take over - the audience would never allow themselves to be caught in a situation like that!

T. Bradford Bitterly discusses power relations within humour (2022) stating that “humor is intricately linked with power. Individuals who use humor well can elevate, maintain, and solidify their position within the social hierarchy.” and that “attempting to use humor is risky”. (p. 125). They use real life examples of political figures losing their status and careers due to inappropriate jokes or comments, as well as examples of humour being used diplomatically as a political icebreaker of sorts. They use these examples to support their comparison between humour and power.

In addition to helping individuals increase their influence and climb the hierarchy, humor has multiple interpersonal benefits which help leaders solidify their elevated position. The use of humor by leaders increases positive affect in subordinates, which improves subordinates’ creativity, job performance, and job satisfaction. [. . .] humor not only helps a leader

maintain their position in the hierarchy by promoting subordinate trust and respect, but also increases the likelihood that others recognise them as a competent leader due to their groups' elevated performance. (p. 126).

An individual may use humour to express power over a group or a hierarchy and within a situational comedy setting this person may also be the one who attempts to control the most power. This person may also express power through their joke telling and awareness of a situation. Blackadder's observations are usually based on sarcasm, and he attempts to keep control of situations through humour, such as when General Melchett visits their dugout in various episodes of *Goes Forth*. Blackadder is powerless to Melchett but can keep control of his power over George and Baldrick through humour.

A key point Bitterly raises is that "Humor is also cognitively distracting, making it helpful for pulling attention away from negative information", though they warn "*Humor* can be profoundly beneficial, but a *humor attempt* is not always successful. Attempting to use humor and failing can have dire consequences". (p. 126, their emphasis) - a critical and frequently used theme in *Blackadder*. This use of humour to convey power can backfire: "Humor which targets individuals with less power might be particularly risky and lead to losses of status and power" (p. 127), which plays out in *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* (Boden, 1988) when loved and respected nice-guy Blackadder is shown an alternative reality where he is mean to people but holds tremendous power. Blackadder rather likes this potential future and immediately acts contrary to his character and, as a result, he loses this potential power and progression.

This power isn't always present, and as Thomas Hobbes wrote, "The Power of a Man, (to take it Universally,) is his present means, to obtain some future apparent Good." (1651/2005, p. 360, their emphasis). This provides a motive for a person to take power, with that motive being that it may come in handy or *pay-off* to have it in the future. Examples of people attempting to gain power over

their equals are numerous throughout history, as well as in *Blackadder*, such as when Blackadder tries to obtain evidence that his brother is a bastard in “Born to Be King” (Curtis, Atkinson & Shardlow, 1983a), or when he claims George’s paintings as his own in “Captain Cook” (Curtis, Elton & Boden, 1989a).

However, James Read critically examines Hobbes’ concepts, suggesting that:

[. . .] nothing in this general definition of power requires that the power of one come at the expense of the power of another. Whether and to what degree this occurs depends on the character of the apparent goods at which one aims, and on the methods used to secure the cooperation of others. (1991, p. 508).

Read continues with “in cases where that good is such that one can only enjoy it at another’s expense, the power of one comes at the expense of the power of another.” (p. 509). In these examples, the power is not physical, rather institutionally surrounding class. Be it Blackadder’s status as the “true” bastard, or his status as a talented artist, they can all be categorised as either a step up or down the metaphorical social ladder. Read poses an interesting scenario surrounding how a person’s power can influence another’s actions, and it can be assessed against the character of Blackadder and his so-called position on the class ladder:

[. . .] If he [A] is the cause of B’s action, and B the cause of C’s action, and C the cause of D’s action, and so on without limit, then, in this perfectly deterministic world, A’s power has perfectly and absolutely determined the actions of all the others. (p. 513).

Blackadder’s position on this scale is determined by his surroundings and company. When he is in the company of his equals, it is far more likely that he becomes “person A”, whereas when he is in the company of people of a higher class, for example Queen Elizabeth I or General Melchett, he is knocked down a few places. However, in *Blackadder the Third* this example falls apart, as the Prince

Regent is portrayed as a particularly unintelligent person in comparison to Blackadder, with Blackadder often holding the power over the Prince Regent. Read concludes their examination of Hobbes' views on power by comparing them to Robert Dahl and Felix Oppenheim's, which fall closer in-line with the power relations portrayed in *Blackadder*.

Instead, power is differentiated into any number of different aspects or "scopes"; A might exercise power over B in one respect while B has power over A in another. Thus "countervailing power" and "checks and balances" are clear possibilities: power may be unidirectional and causal, but only within one narrowly defined scope [. . .] (p. 522).

This description best represents *Blackadder*, as although the Prince is literally royalty and Blackadder is his servant, Blackadder often holds the power over the Prince, rectifying (or attempting to rectify) various situations the Prince has found himself in, or setting the Prince up to certain situations so he may benefit from the outcome. Power is a fundamental aspect of *Blackadder*, whether it be Blackadder's attempts to gain more of it from those above him, or the depiction of what power he already has over his peers.

Another important concept within *Blackadder* is that of the comic fool and butt of the joke, which are closely connected. Orrin Klapp (1949, p. 157-159) outlines their categorisation of different comic fools, with the "simple fool" and "comic butt" standing out amongst the others which can easily be associated with the character of Baldrick:

On the other hand, a demonstration of deficiency of intelligence or wit places a person in the category of the simple fool. He is classed as naïve, senseless, backward, or rustic. Among the roles which create the simple fool are ludicrous failure, comic frustration, unintelligible behavior or utterances, and the quality of being easily taken advantage of. (p. 158).

Baldrick is naïve (he buys a large turnip for £400,000 in “Dish and Dishonesty”, Curtis, Elton & Fletcher, 1987a), he is senseless (“Not to worry my lord, the arrow didn’t in fact enter my body. By a thousand-to-one chance, my willy got in the way.”, “Bells”, Curtis, Elton & Fletcher, 1986a), he is backward (he cannot do simple maths in “Head”, Curtis, Elton & Fletcher, 1986b), and he is rustic (even when wearing a wedding dress in “Bells”, he is still somehow dirty and grotesque). Klapp continues by saying how the “role of the comic butt is played particularly by deformed, weak, and simple fools” (p. 159), which matches Baldrick’s description exactly.

Two other types of fool which Klapp defines, and which the character of Blackadder is better categorised under, are the Pompous Fool, who are “persons of rank, age, or great size” and are “deflated or ‘shown up’ by revelation of pretense, defeat by a lesser rival, or a mistake, and thus made fools” (p. 159), and the mock hero, which is “made by casting an ineffective person in the role or pose of the hero” who “performs the gestures of the hero, but his weaknesses are apparent through his armor” (p. 159). One thing all the classifications have in common is that the fool has no power and is often the object of amusement or ridicule. Klapp concludes with “Everybody avoids the role of the fool. Fear of ridicule may be as strong as fear of punishment or death” (p. 162), however, this is not always observed in *Blackadder*, particularly with the characters of Baldrick, Percy, or George. It can’t really be said that they are attempting to avoid the role of the fool, and in certain instances they are depicted to be more intelligent than at first glance, such as how George is a talented painter in “Captain Cook”.

This is interesting because the series explores ideas of power relations and superiority, but at times questions the superiority. However, this does not happen with the character of Baldrick, who is never shown to be superior and is unable to escape his position and evolves into the continual fool by *Goes Forth*. George and Percy can demonstrate superiority through power and class, but their relationship is not actively hostile in any of the series - to Blackadder, they are always the fool, even

in instances where George shows a higher-class status such as in *Goes Forth* when interacting with General Melchett and singing their school song ("Captain Cook"). Blackadder can become the butt but relies heavily on his joke telling and awareness of the situation he finds himself in in order to resolve these situations.

The importance of power within a comedic situation is clear: those who hold the power are usually in control of, or are attempting to gain control of the situation, however the constant seeking of power by Blackadder is also the instigator for these situations. His joke telling is used to belittle a person or situation, but above all assert his power, which requires there to be a butt to the joke. Blackadder becomes the butt of the joke more frequently throughout the series as he descends through the social ladder. We will extend these ideas into Chapter 2.

Chapter 2

In the previous chapter we identified several fundamental aspects of comedy theory, including definitions of superiority theory, the position of class and characterisation in *Blackadder* and the ideas of an object of ridicule and butt of the joke. In this chapter we are going to focus on the structure of situational comedy, including equilibrium and disequilibrium, and the importance of spatial awareness within a studio-filmed television show, which is how *Blackadder II*, *Blackadder the Third* and *Blackadder Goes Forth* were filmed. This will aid us in identifying how power relations and spatial awareness were so important to *Blackadder Goes Forth*.

There are several integral aspects of comedy which must work together closely for success, such as the form of comedy, the format for the series, setting and spatial relationships. Leo Charney (2005, p. 586) outlines the “highly ritualized form” of television sitcoms: “a half-hour time frame; a setting in a home and/or workplace; a set of four to eight recurring characters, each defined by fixed character traits that generate predictable reactions and ritualized conflicts; and three genres: family comedy, friends-as-family comedy, and workplace comedy.” This typically occurs within an “adapted form of Todorov’s equilibrium-disequilibrium-new-equilibrium model of narrative - a movement, not towards a *new* equilibrium but rather to a forceful restatement of the *existing* equilibrium, a narrative *status-quo-ante*.” (Langford, 2005, p. 17, their emphasis). *Blackadder* challenges these narratives through conflict within a workplace comedy with a familial overtone, especially in *Blackadder Goes Forth* where the dugout is their home *and* workplace, and in *Blackadder the Third* where you never see Blackadder’s servant quarters - a concept I will return to later.

Stephen Wagg (1998, p. 3) discusses the “broadly agreed characteristics” of situational comedy, which include “hav[ing] a form of dramatic plot” with “each programme ha[ving] a self-contained plot”; and “familiar scenery and sets”. Characters must operate within a comedic or dramatic (often

both) situation with each new show vying to produce the most laughs. The episodes will start with a disequilibrium - the presentation of the plot, or conflict, with the characters engaging in various shenanigans throughout the episode failing to accomplish their task until they finally do so and restore the equilibrium at the end of the episode. It isn't particularly that these situations are unimaginable in everyday life, but rather the way in which they escalate out of control is unimaginable. Del Boy being mistaken for Mafia Boss Don Vincenzo Occhetti in *Only Fools and Horses* (Sullivan & Dow, 1991) is perfectly believable, but not the way in which he has no control over how it escalates; Howard rushing to develop a fix for his special toilet in place on the International Space Station in *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre et al., 2009) is believable, but not the way in which his mother's meatloaf is launched into the ceiling when they test the repairs; or Roy desperately trying to find a window-cleaner who left his ladders at his flat in *The IT Crowd* (Lineham, 2010) is believable, but the exaggeration of the fact and his complete lack of control over the situation is within the realms of unbelievability. However, the resolution of the problem at the end of the episode is inevitable, thus allowing a new story to be told in episodes to come.

Mick Eaton (1981, p. 37), notes the different paradigms of situational comedy, "The necessity for the continuity of character and situation from week to week allows for the possibility of comedy being generated by the fact that the characters are somehow stuck with each other". They continue by pointing out that in workplace situational comedies, "At work it usually turns around the possibility that we can choose our jobs, but not the people we work with [. . .] It is as if the formal necessities of the series provide the existential circle from which the characters cannot escape." (p. 37). This is an important observation, as it helps to structure and provide continuity to the story, especially for a workplace comedy. As a series progresses, patterns may form where one character can be expected to always fail at their task, and the way they fail could be predicted, such as Raj Koothrappali's failure to keep a girlfriend in *The Big Bang Theory* (Lorre et al., 2007-2019) or Jake Peralta's repeated and failed attempts to capture Doug Judy in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (Goor et al., 2013-2021). *Blackadder*

fits this template as, setting aside the production differences of *The Blackadder* compared to later series, the series typically has the same cast of characters in different groups, with Blackadder being accompanied by Baldrick and Percy, the Prince Regent or George (in *Blackadder II*, *Blackadder the Third* or *Blackadder Goes Forth* respectively). Particularly, Blackadder's group find themselves in situations which escalate based on loss of control and misunderstanding, but the concept of not being able to choose the people you work with remains the same. It could be argued that Blackadder could easily choose *not* to work with Baldrick, as in "Bells" he fires him to replace him with Bob, but when Baldrick offers to work for even less than the zero pennies he is currently paid, Blackadder finds himself unable to get rid of him.

The use of location in situational comedies is important, as most locations are frequently reused throughout a series. If the series was filmed in a studio with a live audience, the fourth wall is rarely depicted and the cameras must operate from that perspective, never crossing the threshold into the world of the characters. A sense of containment is formed within the limited space the creators must work with and this can create a sense of conflict within the scenes. Camera placement is somewhat restricted and more likely to involve static camera placement with little movement. The acting is always "for" and in the direction of the camera and the sets are designed with this in mind, as there is no need to see what is behind a walled desk, or on the inside of a fridge if its door opens towards the camera. Due to the static nature of the cameras, action must occur within the same key areas of a set, resulting in the spatial awareness of the creators being a critical factor in filming. For series *not* filmed with the restraints of a fourth wall or static camera placement, confined spaces are still used to generate conflict within the plot such as within the surgical tent in *M*A*S*H* (Gelbart, Reynolds & Metcalfe, 1972-1983), or the characters' many impromptu meetings in supply closets in *Scrubs* (Lawrence et al., 2001-2010).

John Lloyd noted on the production of *The Blackadder*, “Because there was no audience seating in the studio, we could have huge sets and put the cameras almost anywhere - this meant it took longer to shoot and (to be honest) none of us really knew what we were doing.” (Roberts, 2013, p. 88). Without a studio audience restricting filming locations, *The Blackadder* has some vast scenes, such as in the forest in “Born to Be King”, at Bosworth Field in “The Foretelling” or in the village in “Witchsmeller Pursuivant” (Curtis, Atkinson & Shardlow, 1983a, 1983b, 1983c, respectively). This caused production to go over budget, with the show being dubbed by BBC insiders “The show that looked a million dollars, and cost a million pounds” (Roberts, 2013, p. 177), and the spatial awareness previously discussed was not as relevant due to the freedom of camera placement and epic sets. Scenes within the banquet hall, however, were subject to the same restrictions in space as any other show may be. Regardless of this, it was still possible for camera placement to be *anywhere*, as they were not confined behind the fourth wall of a studio. Moving into production for *Blackadder II*, producers were required to make radical changes to reduce the budget and increase viewership. The new restriction of camera placement had a significant effect on the comedic value of the series. The smaller sets and restrictive scenes created the possibility for conflict to be the key driver in the comedy where, should they have been filmed on location, a punchline or situation may not have had the same impact. One such example can be found in “Head”, where Edmund, in Traitors Cove, hides the head of Lord Ponsonby on the back of his belt so Queenie (Queen Elizabeth I) does not see it. The confined space creates this conflict with him desperate to keep his body between the head and Queenie.

The characters were fine-tuned and “while in the first series, Blackadder is still depicted as rather naïve himself, the remaining instalments turn him into a highly cunning and malicious character, whose only motivation is to maximise his personal gain.” (Sedlmayr, 2016, p. 157), with Baldrick taking a step in the opposite direction. A format where the situation is consistently rarely resolved in

Blackadder's favour was created and *Blackadder* was brought closer to Charney's definition of television sitcoms. As John Hartley wrote:

Sitcom could put seriously funny actors into fictional situations (like John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers* [BBC, 1975-9] and Rowan Atkinson in *Blackadder* [BBC, 1983-9] or *Mr Bean* [ITV, 1990-5]) where the 'situation' in the sitcom was a vehicle for the comedic genius of a given actor, without whose services the show would be hard to imagine. (2015, p. 97).

With Rowan Atkinson taking a step back from co-writing, it enabled him to focus on acting, and in turn enabled *Blackadder II* to focus on the dialogue and acting, which was suddenly far more important due to the restricted space of filming within a studio. Atkinson being a "seriously funny actor" in "fictional situations" was a necessity for the ongoing success of the series.

The situation within *Blackadder*, which serves as the disequilibrium, varies, but frequently results in Blackadder's restoration attempts backfiring. He may spend an entire episode in conflict with himself, such as falling in love with his manservant, only for it to appear to resolve itself when she reveals her true identity and agrees to marry him just before Lord Flasheart to steal her away at the last moment ("Bells"); or spending the entire episode attempting to prove he is the better person and impress the Queen by going on a voyage of discovery to bring her home some gifts, only for her to be bored of explorers and gifts on his return ("Potato", Curtis, Elton & Fletcher, 1986c). As discussed earlier, Langford (2005, p. 17) highlights "a movement, not towards a *new* equilibrium but rather to a forceful restatement of the *existing* equilibrium", which is precisely what occurs at the end of most episodes. Although whatever cunning plan has likely backfired, but in the end somehow resolved itself, the equilibrium is the same as before the situation, albeit with different parameters, such as in "Nob and Nobility" (Curtis, Elton & Fletcher, 1987b) where Blackadder tricks the Prince Regent into thinking he is The Scarlet Pimpernel. This battle between equilibrium and disequilibrium is constantly disrupted until the end of each series. With the exception of "Duel and Duality" (Curtis,

Elton & Fletcher, 1987c) where Blackadder takes the place of the Prince Regent, in the last episode of each series the equilibrium is not returned, resulting in the death of most-to-all of the characters.

In the Elizabethan era of *Blackadder II*, the primary locations are set within Blackadder's home and the court, with occasional moments elsewhere. These two locations clearly portray the power relations between the characters whilst enabling a clear social hierarchy to be stated: Blackadder is on top at home, but the moment he steps into the throne room, even Nursie is above him as she sits by Queenie's side, with Queenie having absolute power. Queenie's power within her throne room is best portrayed at the end of "Bells" where an unusually large number of people are present, and she is standing high above them all. In contrast to this absolute power, she is stripped of it in "Beer" (Curtis, Elton & Fletcher, 1986d) where she is mistaken for a prostitute by Blackadder and is forced into a cupboard by him to hide her from his Aunt and Uncle, the Whiteadders. Renée Dickason writes that this is a calculated move with *Hancock's Half Hour* (Wood, 1956-1960) setting the trend:

Indeed, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, the writers of the seminal *Hancock's Half Hour* (and its successor, named simply *Hancock*) rapidly saw the comic potential of moving the central figure out of his restricted home environment in order for the limits of his lower-middle-class character to be exposed by contact with people of different backgrounds and horizons, and many subsequent Britcoms have adopted the same approach. (2016, p. 37).

Dickason continues by pointing out that when the character *is* within their home environment, the use of space is significant in that "working-class homes are typified by the crowding of characters into a single room" and that "This promiscuity contrasts with the comfort offered to middle-class couples, many of whom are childless [. . .] or empty nesters." (p. 40). This is interesting when considering *Blackadder* due to the conflict between home and workspaces. As mentioned earlier, we do not see Blackadder's servant quarters in *Blackadder the Third*. In fact, the closest we get to seeing this is the kitchen space where Blackadder always seems out of place with his clean uniform in

comparison to the dirt of the kitchen and those within it. The kitchen is a domestic space and workspace, as is the Prince Regent's room and they are each in contrast to one another - Blackadder almost seems out of place in the kitchen, but within the Prince Regent's room it is Baldrick who seems out of place.

This spatial awareness is mimicked in *Blackadder Goes Forth* with scenes primarily in the dugout, the adjoining trenches, and in Melchett's office at the chateau. As discussed in Chapter 1, Blackadder's position within the social scale is determined by his surroundings, which include location and the *people* surrounding him. The trenches act as a form of no man's land and although Blackadder's superiors are seen to be in the dugout at times and Blackadder, George, and Baldrick are aware of the social hierarchy and chain of command in these scenes, Blackadder's say is absolute when it is just the three of them. When the location changes to the reception area of General Melchett's office, which is Captain Darling's place of work, Blackadder and Darling share the same rank but are forever in a battle of power, with Darling winning that battle as soon as they step into Melchett's office as this is Darling's place of work, not Blackadder's and when they are in the office, Melchett is clearly the one with the power. We will return to this in Chapter 3.

Having discussed spatial awareness in a metaphorical sense, it is just as important to discuss it in a literal sense. The budget restrictions imposed for *Blackadder II* forced filming into a studio. In the extra material for the digitally remastered *Blackadder DVD* boxset (2009), Tony Robinson and Tim McInnery visit the studio where *Blackadder II* to *Goes Forth* were filmed and they discuss this change:

Robinson: I think I always felt a lot more confident with the second series, I didn't really know what we were doing in the first series, not that anybody did really, but I didn't know

how it was supposed to feel, I didn't know what reaction we were supposed to get, and as you [McInnery] said, because there wasn't an audience there there was nothing to marry it up against, whereas at least if you've got an audience there you know whether it's funny or not.

McInnery: It's a much more controlled environment, so you can judge how things are going to go much better.

McInnery's idea of a sense of control is important here because control of the physical space meant control of the comedy. The performance encouraged more comedy because the live audience triggered their own laughter *through* laughter and response to the humour.

This chapter has explored several critical elements that form a situational comedy and how each of them play a role within *Blackadder*. First the "equilibrium-disequilibrium-new-equilibrium model of narrative", with the idea of situations escalating unimaginably, but resolving to a new equilibrium (although very rarely to Blackadder's gain) and how *Blackadder* ties into Mick Eaton's definitions of workplace comedy, but perhaps most importantly, the use of location and spatial awareness which acted as a hidden saviour following the rocky production of *The Blackadder*. This spatial awareness meant that the power relations we explored in Chapter 1 can better develop, which when combined are critical in analysis of *Goes Forth* - the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Blackadder Goes Forth aired between 28th September and 2nd November 1989. It won the 1990 BAFTA awards for Best Comedy Series and Best Light Entertainment Performance (BAFTA, 2023), and the Royal Television Society award for Best Situation Comedy (Royal Television Society, 2023, p.22). It has an 8.8 out of 10 user rating on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb, 2023) and a 92% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes (Rotten Tomatoes, 2023). *Blackadder* is often listed highly in “top of all time” lists (EMPIRE, 2021, para 73; McIntyre, 2022, para 42; Shepherd, 2022, para 23) with many of these lists primarily referring to *Goes Forth*, and it has also been reproduced for the stage (Williams, 2018), permanently solidifying its place within British television comedy history. Each series was based within a specific historical period, but *Goes Forth* is based in the year 1918, which is modern history and within living memory, more so within the lives of an audience in 1989, meaning it is a particularly emotive subject for the general public.

Before production began, Ben Elton decided historical research was a necessity, quoted by J. F. Roberts “With *Blackadder* two and three, we weren’t particularly respectful of the periods, but I don’t think we were really into any blatant howlers. [. . .] Obviously, with World War I we had a very different approach.” (2013, p. 297), with Roberts noting “Ribbing the attitudes of centuries gone by was one thing, but finding humour in the deaths of 35 million people within living memory was not a task that anyone connected to *Blackadder Goes Forth* could countenance taking lightly.” (p. 297). Roberts continues to explain how Curtis and Elton read history books and noticed that “all of the stuff [Curtis & Elton] wanted to write about, which was a sort of the clash of the classes, and getting stuck in a small confined space, was funny.” (pp. 297-298). Roberts also quotes Rowan Atkinson discussing the representation of the characters and situations they find themselves in:

But of all the periods we covered it was the most historically accurate. We may have exaggerated the characters and what happened to them but it is very difficult to exaggerate the absurdity and horror of World War I. People thought we were really going over the top .

. . It may sound ridiculous for someone to face a court martial for shooting a pigeon, but madder things happened in reality. Towards the end of the war thirty soldiers were court-martialed and shot in France by our own side for not wearing a hat in the trenches. It is so absurd nobody would ever believe it. (pp. 288-289).

It is clear from this that the creators intended to form *Goes Forth* into a commentary on the clash of classes and an insight into the absurdity of situations that occurred within the trenches. They wanted these situations to be believable, however, but allowed the escalation of the situation to be just so unbelievable that it could clearly be construed as fictional and funny, not a historical commentary.

In Chapter 1 we explored how Adrian Bardon argues that “The Superiority Theory is the theory that the humor we find in comedy and in life is based on ridicule, wherein we regard the object of amusement as inferior and/or ourselves as superior.” (2005, p. 463) and we established power relations within humour and how “Individuals who use humor well can elevate, maintain, and solidify their position within the social hierarchy.” (Bitterly, 2022, p.125). An important part of Bitterly’s article was how using humour to convey power can backfire: “Humor which targets individuals with less power might be particularly risky and lead to losses of status and power” (p. 127). This is important because, as we discovered in Chapter 1, “humor is intricately linked with power” (p. 125) and power over a person or situation is critical to a character maintaining their position on the social scale. We also saw how Blackadder’s position is determined by his surroundings, through James Read’s examination of Hobbes’ essay on laughter.

In *Blackadder Goes Forth*, Baldrick is the recipient of most of the ridicule as the established butt, but the object of amusement varies between Baldrick, George, and Blackadder. When it’s the situation the characters find themselves in that we are laughing at, it is usually the way in which the situation escalates, and specifically how the characters handle these situations, that we are laughing at. Their attempts to restore the equilibrium often backfire, conveying the power relations within the group.

“Captain Cook”, starts with a barrage of ridicule towards Baldrick from Blackadder. Blackadder is casually sitting in an ornate chair, reading, and listening to music. Baldrick explains to him how he’s carving his name into a bullet, as “the chances of there being two bullets with my name on them are very small indeed”, to which Blackadder responds “Yes, it’s not the only thing round here that’s very small indeed. Your brain’s so minute, Baldrick, that if a hungry cannibal cracked your head open, there wouldn’t be enough to cover a small water biscuit.” Clearly, Blackadder holds the power within the dugout - power he desperately attempts to keep hold of when General Melchett and Captain Darling visit, in ordering Baldrick and George not to speak unless with permission from himself. Melchett outranks Blackadder, but Baldrick and George still answer to Blackadder.

In “Corporal Punishment” (Curtis, Elton & Boden, 1989b), Blackadder shoots General Melchett’s beloved carrier pigeon, which he claims is “scarcely a court-martial offence”, only for the situation to immediately escalate when he is arrested by General Melchett. Blackadder struggles to remain in control of the situation, appearing not to truly notice he is in a prison cell when talking to the prison guard, until the situation escalates beyond plausible belief during the sham trial Melchett leads. It is at this moment our own superiority is felt, laughing at the implausible situation Blackadder has found himself in.

In Chapter 2 we explored Stephen Wagg’s “broadly agreed characteristics” of situational comedy (1998, p. 3), and the structure of situational comedy within an “adapted form of Todorov’s equilibrium-disequilibrium-new-equilibrium model of narrative” (Langford, 2005, p. 17). We also explored in detail how spatial awareness was critical for the success of *Blackadder II* when production moved into a studio and away from location.

Virtually every episode resolves to a new equilibrium placing the characters almost where they were when the episode started, to allow for the next episodes events to take place. In “Private Plane” (Curtis, Elton & Boden, 1989c) Blackadder, feeling inferior to Squadron Commander Lord Flasheart, signs himself up to “The Twenty Minuters” for the promise of five months of training, “soft tucker,

tasty beds [and] fluffy uniforms!” and “do[ing] twenty minutes’ work and then spend the rest of the day loafing about in Paris drinking gallons of champagne and having dozens of moist, pink, highly experienced French peasant girls galloping up and down”. The disequilibrium here serves as the realisation that “Twenty Minuters” means the *life expectancy* of new pilots and the trio’s capture by the Germans. It is returned by Flasheart saving them and Blackadder continues to seek an escape from the trenches, only to be rejected by Melchett.

Throughout *Goes Forth* the structure of the episodes are served by Blackadder’s attempts to get away from the front lines of the war, which also serves as the disequilibrium. As noted, before, Blackadder is in a constant power struggle with Captain Darling as he attempts to navigate through the bewildering orders from General Melchett. Social class is also at play here, as although George is a Lieutenant and answers to Blackadder, *back at home* he is of a higher social class. This is apparent when General Melchett bonds with George over an old school song and even offers him an out from the big push in “Goodbyeee”. Baldrick is shown to be dirty and diseased and is only seen outside of the trenches under the supervision of Blackadder.

“Goodbyeee” is emblematic of *Blackadder* and several aspects of the episode are symbolically important. However, it is also an emotional shift in terms of the series, in that as the last episode, it needs to negotiate the previous series practice of killing off most of the characters or situating an escape for Blackadder. Blackadder’s constant class battle between himself in the trenches and Captain Darling and General Melchett in the chateau is addressed, depicting disgraceful behaviour from the General and Field Marshal Haig. Blackadder’s final attempt to escape the war involves him telephoning Field Marshal Haig to ask for help. During this call, Field Marshal Haig is seen to be literally sweeping toy soldiers, from a mock battlefield, into a pan and throwing them over his shoulder. When he tells Blackadder to “put your underpants on your head and stick two pencils up your nose” to “make them think you’re mad”, Blackadder finally accepts there is no escaping the war. The high-ranking officials are seen to be hiding in their chateau with no consideration of the

lives of the soldiers in their command and this can only be the creators expressing the view that the Battle of the Somme was simply a wilful massacre of men.

General Melchett presents Captain Darling with a gift - a commission for the front line. Drums can be heard in the background, and the laugh track becomes awkward and patchy as Darling begs Melchett not to send him to certain death. There is nothing funny about this scene, a man begging for his life. The door opens and a looming shadow of his driver is seen which, alongside the marching drums, mimic that of an executioner waiting to walk a convict to a firing squad. This is a defining tonal shift where the laughter and comedy stop, and when Blackadder stops his attempts to escape the war and accepts his fate; and any sense of superiority is lost as an audience quickly realises the equilibrium at the start of the episode will simply not be returned, as Blackadder and his men prepare to *go over the top*. When Darling arrives at the front line, Blackadder does not mock him once. George tells Blackadder that he is scared, and it is at this point the tonal shift is most apparent. From this moment on, whilst there is sporadic laughter at various witty comments, the audience understands the characters they are watching are about to die. This is hammered home by Darling's comment "We lived through it! The Great War, 1914 to 1917", whereas an audience would know the Great War did not end until 1918, and Blackadder's final words of "Who would have noticed another mad man around here? Good luck everyone".

It is in these scenes the power relations and the spatial awareness truly present themselves.

Throughout *Goes Forth*, Blackadder and Darling have been in constant battle, despite being of the same rank. When Darling has been in Blackadder's domain in the dugout, Blackadder rules, however, when Blackadder is at the chateau and at Darling's place of work, he is powerless to Darling. The trenches act as a form of no-man's-land, but from the moment Blackadder accepted his fate he also accepted the fate of all the men around him, including that of Darling's. It is at this point that Blackadder sees everybody around him as equal, and therefore has little wit or humorous comments. When they are talking to each other they are lined up and facing forward, again

mimicking a convict's last moments in front of a firing squad. Baldrick continues to show his lack of understanding about the entire war by commenting that somebody might hurt themselves on a splinter on the ladder they are about to climb to their deaths. The first three series had humorous endings surrounding the death of the cast, but with the fact that *Goes Forth* was set within recent history and the manner in which the characters died meant it would not have been possible to play such an ending off as humorous, so instead, creators decided to fade to a field of poppies, reminding any viewer that whilst *Blackadder* was a work of fiction, the World Wars were very real and the reality of the War must be remembered.

Conclusion

This dissertation aimed to examine the position of class and characterisation in *Blackadder* whilst defining superiority theory and exploring various definitions and theories such as Adrian Bardon's object of amusement and T. Bradford Bitterly's ideas on how humour is linked with power. The structure of situational comedy and the importance of spatial awareness within a studio-filmed television show were important to investigate to guide this research. It is important to consider these power relations and the spatial awareness when critiquing the comedy form deployed by *Blackadder*, especially when considering the final moments of the final episode where comedy was not appropriate, and the history being portrayed was within an audience's lifetime. The findings allow a deeper understanding of the construction of humour, detailing how "humor is intricately linked with power" and how it relates to the characters within *Blackadder*.

A hierarchy must be established, and this hierarchy is rarely disrupted within individual episodes. Spatial awareness from the creators is paramount in the construction of the power relations between characters, especially when being filmed in a studio set where camera movement is restricted and acting must be towards a "fourth wall". All aspects together form the basis of superiority within a character, but also an audience, with audiences allowing themselves to feel superior over characters who have found themselves in believable situations which escalate unimaginably.

If I extended this study beyond a restricted word count, I would examine in more detail the charity special (*Blackadder: The Cavalier Years*, Fletcher, 1988) and one-off holiday specials (*Blackadder's Christmas Carol*; *Blackadder Back & Forth*, Weiland, 1999) to see how they discuss history and to see if the themes we have discovered in this essay are relevant to them as well.

We have found the importance of power within a comedic situation, with those holding the power usually being those who are in control, or are attempting to regain control of, a situation. Whilst

Blackadder is forever attempting to gain more power, he loses more and more as he descends the social ladder between series. Stephen Badsey rightfully points out “The gradual slide of the scheming and ambitious Blackadder character down the social scale through history, from prince to harassed Army captain, was part of the humour.” (2001, p. 114).

Word Count: 8,587

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