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Grey Humour: The Comedy of Tedium in Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1955)*

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A darkly comic vein is often acknowledged in studies of Spanish neorealist cinema (c.1940s–1950s).¹ Yet the postwar social-realist novel is pigeonholed as dispassionate, solemn and sombre, featuring monotony, disgust, ‘note[s] of hunger’ and ‘fustiness’.² Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio’s *El Jarama* encapsulates the general mood of critics: ‘una vida que no tiene chiste’.³ By analysing that very novel, however, this article explores an undercurrent of sardonic humour that encourages laughter from the bleakest of situations, before immediately questioning the veracity and appropriateness of mirthful reactions. It grapples with humour theory such as that of Laura Salisbury on Samuel Beckett, Juan Ríos Carratalá on Spanish humour, Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett and Reginald Adam’s

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1 Marvin D’Lugo, *Guide to the Cinema of Spain* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1997), 16.

2 Arturo Barea, ‘Introduction’, in Camilo José Cela, *The Hive*, trans. J. M. Cohen in consultation with Arturo Barea, with an intro. by Arturo Barea (London: Victor Gollancz, 1953 [1st Spanish ed. 1950]), 7–16 (p. 9); Mario Vargas Llosa, ‘Introduction’, in Carmen Laforet, *Nada*, trans. Edith Grossman, with an intro. by Mario Vargas Llosa (London: Harvill Secker, 2007 [1st Spanish ed. 1945]), i–x (p. v).

3 Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, *El Jarama* (Barcelona: Planeta De Agostini, 1999 [1st ed. Destino, 1955]), 57. Further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the main text.

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cognitive approach, Caleb Warren and Peter McGraw on ‘benign violations’ and Nicholas Holm’s scrutiny of deadpan, considered alongside Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls’ study of *bathos* and Lauren Berlant’s reading of ‘flat affect’.⁴ Utilizing these studies, this article will ultimately coin fresh, interrelated ways of understanding ‘feel-bad’, postwar comedy:

- 1 ‘Grey humour’ or the comedy of comedown: sluggish amusement of hiatus, *bathos* and tedium, originating fundamentally, and paradoxically, in boredom.
- 2 ‘Hardship humour’: based on deprivation, difficulty and loss.
- 3 The ‘Comic-kazi’: a backfiring, debilitating, almost anti-comic funniness, where humour *once was*.

Next, it examines how grey humour destabilizes testimonial, realist frameworks, teasing ambiguities of ‘just joking’ narratorial personae (‘just’ as ‘fair’, but also as ‘only’ kidding), before exploring the degradation of *fiesta* atmosphere through the corruption of Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter, and the resultant comedy of failure and discontent. To treat *El Jarama* as dreadfully comic, thinking *from* the humour, unsettles existing readings of reception, interpretation and affect in the Spanish postwar novel. It establishes social realism as sufficiently capacious to encompass comedy, and *vice versa*, capturing the full flavour and complexity of experience through what Ríos Carratalá calls the typically-Spanish ‘sonrisa del inútil’.⁵ Finally, I interrogate failed funniness—abortive jokes—and the essential teleology of comedy, examining how amusement affects the representation of social conditions (and the reception of such representations), and whether hardship-humour is ultimately critical or collusive. Before cementing and close-reading *El Jarama*’s pestered, beleaguered, deliberately unfunny comedy, interwoven with theory, I contextualize grey humour within Humour Studies and criticism on deadpan and boredom, substantiating its versatility as a critical tool for

4 Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. P., 2012); Juan A. Ríos Carratalá, *La sonrisa del inútil: imágenes de un pasado cercano* (Alicante: Publicaciones de la Univ. de Alicante, 2008); Matthew M. Hurley, Daniel C. Dennett & Reginald B. Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); Caleb Warren & A. Peter McGraw, ‘Differentiating What Is Humorous From What Is Not’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 110:3 (2016), 407–30; Nicholas Holm, ‘The Politics of Deadpan in Australasian Satire’, in *Satire and Politics: The Interplay of Heritage and Practice*, ed. Jessica Milner Davies (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 103–24; Sara Crangle & Peter Nicholls, *On Bathos: Literature, Art, Music* (London/New York: Continuum, 2010); Lauren Berlant, ‘Structures of Unfeeling: *Mysterious Skin*’, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 28 (2015), 191–213.

5 Ríos Carratalá, *La sonrisa del inútil*, *passim*.

grasping narrative 'laughability'. A basic feature of postwar society is *abulia*: extreme boredom, listlessness or lack of ambition.⁶ My readings of humour do not negate this, but posit their conception of grey humour as inherent to the boredom of the novel and its characters.

Comprehending the Comic

Scholars often interpret black comedy as prevalent within postwar social-realist cinema (1940s–1950s), distinguishing Spanish neorealism from its Italian counterpart for its 'use of *esperpento*',⁷ which filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar calls 'más feroz, más divertido y menos sentimental'.⁸ By 1954, the Director General de Cinematografía y Teatro, José María García Escudero identified Spanish cinema's 'dark neorealism', further subdivided into 'sombre', 'bitter' and 'pink' variants (unobjectionable, *sainetesco*).⁹ However, a corresponding blend of the ferocious and the amusing in depictions of downtrodden, everyday individuals has seldom been explored within post-bellum novels. Instead, the 'novela social española' is circumscribed within other categories: 'La abulia', 'El campo', 'El obrero y el empleado', 'La vivienda', 'Libros de viajes' and 'La alienación'.¹⁰ While agreeing that these titles 'señalan con bastante claridad las distintas corrientes temáticas', I broaden such emphases on grimness, exploring recurrent aesthetics of fragmented, pathetic, low-spirited 'grey humour' through limping, vacillating gags that never pick up pace, caught in endless *cul-de-sacs*.¹¹ Though they are hardly 'comedy' at all, almost examples of anti-humour (or the 'comic-kazi'), such tones are none the less insistent, and fundamental to the genre.

6 David K. Herzberger, *Narrating the Past: Fiction and Historiography in Postwar Spain* (Durham, NC: Duke U. P., 1995), 57; Janet Pérez, 'Prose in Franco Spain', in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. David T. Gies (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2004), 628–42 (p. 639).

7 Tatjana Pavlović, *100 Years of Spanish Cinema* (Chichester/Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 89. *Esperpento* is a darkly-comic vein throughout Spanish culture, built on the distortion, exaggeration and inversion of hierarchies. Coined by Ramón del Valle-Inclán in his play *Luces de Bohemia* (1924), it is 'a radical form of literary and political dissidence', featuring 'the comic and the grotesque', 'ridicule and debasement', 'attraction to the decadent', 'profanation' and an 'erosion of the line dividing the serious from the comic' (Nil Santiáñez, 'Great Masters of Spanish Modernism', in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. Gies, 479–99 [p. 485]).

8 Núria Vidal, '¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto? ...', in her *El cine de Pedro Almodóvar* (Barcelona: Destino, 1989), 108–48 (p. 116).

9 Jorge Nieto Ferrando, *Cine en papel: cultura y crítica cinematográfica en España, 1939–1962* (Valencia: Generalitat Valenciana, Ediciones de La Filmoteca, 2009), 230.

10 Pablo Gil Casado, *La novela social española, 1942–1968* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1968).

11 Roberto Ruiz, review of Pablo Gil Casado, *La novela social española, 1942–1968*, *Symposium*, 24:2 (1970), 180.

Rejecting the *vanguardia*'s penchant for *deshumanización* (Ortega y Gasset's 1925 work advocated cultural 'art-for-art's-sake' approaches), social-realist novels generally foreground the immediate socio-political present, featuring upfront, unflinching language and harsh, daily realities.¹² Writers were influenced by postwar Italian neorealist cinema (such as that of Vittorio De Sica and Roberto Rossellini) and *verismo* (e.g., Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* [1948], adapted from Giovanni Verga's novel *I Malavoglia* [1881]), accentuating aimless drifters, derelicts and vagabonds lost—literally and figuratively—in sprawling metropolises. The archetypal image of the Spanish postwar novel is a grief-stricken have-not, ambling alone, hands in pockets.¹³ Accordingly, critics characterize the genre as dispassionate, strictly authentic and testimonial,¹⁴ featuring '[i]nsolidaridad, incertidumbre, incomunicación, violencia, rutina, ensimismamiento, angustia ciudadana, exploración de la tierra incógnita'.¹⁵ Elsewhere, Gonzalo Sobejano finds 'hollowness, repetition, nausea, guilt, struggle, agony', Barrero Pérez finds 'angustia y pesimismo' and Paul Preston describes '[s]tarvation, a massive increase of prostitution, and epidemic of diseases [*sic*]' (in the *años de hambre*).¹⁶ No laughing matter, we might assume; hardly the stuff of gags.

Overviews of postwar prose typically overlook funniness.¹⁷ When scholarship does identify humorous techniques within postwar Spanish

12 José Ortega y Gasset, *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos de estética* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1991 [1st ed. 1925]).

13 This exact image recurs throughout Laforet's *Nada* and Cela's *La colmena*. See Carmen Laforet, *Nada*, prólogo de Rosa Montero (Sant Vicenç des Horts: Bibliotex, 2001 [1st ed. 1945]), 7, 44, 50, 53, 67 & 97; and Camilo José Cela, *La colmena*, ed., con notas, de Julián Moreiro (Madrid: Mautalos, 2002 [1st ed. 1951]), 38–39, 45, 106, 132, 193, 231, 270, 335–36 & 362.

14 Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, 40–41.

15 Gonzalo Sobejano quoted in Óscar Barrero Pérez, *La novela existencial española de posguerra* (Madrid: Gredos, 1987), 60.

16 Gonzalo Sobejano, 'The Testimonial Novel and the Novel of Memory', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Spanish Novel: From 1600 to the Present*, ed. Harriet Turner & Adelaida López de Martínez (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2003), 172–92 (p. 176); Barrero Pérez, *La novela existencial española de posguerra*, 9; and Paul Preston, *Franco: A Biography* (London: Fontana, 1995), 345. Likewise, Silvia Burunat's *El monólogo interior como forma narrativa en la novela española (1940–1975)* (Madrid: J. Porrúa Turanzas, 1980) omits humour, although it briefly mentions Miguel Delibes' riotous *Cinco horas con Mario* (1966).

17 See Gonzalo Sobejano, *Novela española de nuestro tiempo: en busca del pueblo perdido* (Madrid: Editorial Prensa Española, 1975 [1st ed. 1970]); Darío Villanueva, 'El Jarama' de Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio (Santiago de Compostela: Univ. de Santiago de Compostela, 1973); Juan Villegas Morales, *La estructura mítica del héroe en la novela del siglo XX* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1973); Pablo Gil Casado, *La novela social española: 1920–1971* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1973); Ignacio Soldevila Durante, *La novela desde 1936: historia de la literatura española actual* (Madrid: Alhambra, 1980); Fernando Morán, *Explicación de una limitación:*

prose, it almost always begins in the 1960s, after the social-realist novel's 'discernible close', finding irony in Juan Goytisolo's *Juan sin tierra* (1975) and Luis Martín-Santos' *Tiempo de silencio* (1962).¹⁸ My analysis, heeding Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's warning of 'abuso de generacionismo' in Spanish literary criticism, illustrates that earlier postwar novels (and films) were already demonstrating generic unsteadiness, before Martín-Santos' famed *realismo dialéctico*.¹⁹ Recent studies have problematized social realism's purportedly detached, impassive stance, with Sarah Leggott and Ross Woods illustrating that many 1950s novels are 'pigeonholed as realist' mainly 'in an attempt to separate them from the more self-reflexive and non-realist texts of the 1960s and 1970s'.²⁰ Perriam *et al.* challenge the long-held commonplace, derived from Josep Maria Castellet and Juan Goytisolo, setting 'early tentative realism (1950s)' against 'openly critical realism (late 1950s to the mid 1960s)'.²¹ Elsewhere, dissident, subversive attitudes have been highlighted: 'el realismo fue una especie de subversión radical contra la censura',²² and '[t]hrough *paradox and irony*, socialrealistic novelists subvert the mythic and heroic ordering of history offered up by historians of the Regime'.²³ This article scrutinizes precisely how this 'paradox and irony' functions in *El Jarama*, developing understandings of the complex relationship between art and politics under Franco's dictatorship.

Let us recognize the boldness of finding humour where it has been consistently unnoticed, perhaps deriving from generic assumptions positing incompatibilities, even antitheses, between comedy and tragic dissatisfaction. However, such mutual exclusion is roundly refuted by humour scholars, and in *El Jarama*, pain/comedy symbioses are well-attuned and mutually

la novela realista de los años cincuenta en España (Madrid: Taurus, 1971); Fernando Morán, *Novela y semidesarrollo (una interpretación de la novela hispanoamericana y española)* (Madrid: Taurus, 1971); and Jo Labanyi, *Myth and History in the Contemporary Spanish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1989).

18 Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, 40. See also Manuel Durán, '“Así que pasen diez años”, la novela española de los setenta', *Anales de la Narrativa Española Contemporánea*, 5 (1980), 91–106 (p. 92); Jo Labanyi, *Ironía e historia en 'Tiempo de silencio'* (Madrid: Taurus, 1985); Bradley Epps, 'Questioning the Text', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Spanish Novel*, ed. Turner & López de Martínez, 193–211.

19 Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, *Tres novelas ejemplares* (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1988), 127.

20 Sarah Leggott & Ross Woods, 'Introduction', in *Memory and Trauma in the Postwar Spanish Novel: Revisiting the Past*, ed. Sarah Leggott & Ross Woods (Lewisburg: Bucknell U. P., 2015), 1–14 (p. 3).

21 Chris Perriam *et al.*, *A New History of Spanish Writing, 1939 to the 1990s* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2000), 135.

22 Fernando Larraz, *Letricidio español: censura y novela durante el franquismo* (Gijón: Ediciones Trea, 2014), 209.

23 Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, 12; my emphasis.

complementary, intensifying bathetic frustration.²⁴ Some theorists maintain that ‘comedy might be bad because it is sombre’, for, when applied to artworks *played for laughs*, the word ‘sombre [...] picks out a demerit’ (whereas in tragedy it ‘picks out a merit’), yet the Spanish postwar novel crafts enigmatic, unnerving humour out of (mock-)solemnity and gloom to highlight that fecund comedy is already and will always be a staple of everyday life.²⁵ Such humorousness makes the social-realist novel far more interesting and nuanced than is often acknowledged, particularly when contextualized within the Francoist dictatorship wherein ‘seeing the funny side’ was fraught with ambiguity. Contemporary critic José Mancisidor observed an

España de dos Españas: la del mito y la de la realidad, la que se hunde en su angustia y su martirio y la que germina, en un medio de tormento del nacer, con su eternal ilusión auestas.²⁶

Accuracy and exactitude are ambivalent: the goal is to represent reality as it really is because the reality already represented is false: *tal y como es*, and *tal y como parece* are two different things. Indeed, in his list of ‘los restantes medios para desactivar la censura’, Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer lists ‘[e]l chiste, la ironía, incluso el humor negro’ first, closely followed by ‘[e]l empleo de modelos de comunicación, textos y géneros literarios cotidianos y/o consagrados por la tradición como medio de banalización’.²⁷ This article examines that blend of ‘ironía’ and ‘banalización’, central to grey humour, but suggests that ashen funniness is more acquiescence than attack.

Grey Humour

Whilst black humour weaves amusement out of serious or taboo subject matter, grey humour signals the beleaguered decay of funniness, not in melodramatic extravagance or distorted grotesquerie but in boredom, vacillation and dawdling.²⁸ The comedy of entrapped vulnerability, nausea and irritation is far removed from good cheer and *bonhomie*; less dystopian or apocalyptic than jaded or jaundiced. Repeated, failed efforts to accomplish anything are fundamentally funny, and passing time or contending with

24 See Terry Eagleton, *Humour* (London/New Haven: Yale U. P., 2019); and Eva Dadlez & Daniel Luthi, ‘Comedy and Tragedy As Two Sides of the Same Coin: Reversal and Incongruity As Sources of Insight’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 52:2 (2018), 81–94.

25 Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion and Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2007), 36.

26 José Mancisidor, ‘La literatura española bajo el signo de Franco’, *Cuadernos Americanos*, 63:3 (1952), 26–48 (p. 48).

27 Hans-Jörg Neuschäfer, *Adiós a la España eterna: la dialéctica de la censura. Novela, teatro y cine bajo el franquismo* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1994), 77.

28 See Iulia Veronica Neagu, *Black Humour: A Stylistic Approach* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013), 8–10.

solitude brings greater solitude. Metronomic tones of relentless cynicism leave readers cold, eliciting disgruntled, embittered, enfeebled laughs as things—people, even—exist, persist, endure and die away. Humour theory has approached ‘greyness’, in the contexts of ageing (Alain Blayac’s work on the ‘grey comedy’ of Evelyn Waugh’s jokes) or of unnerving laughter (Bruce Friedman’s bilious humour as ‘black’ or ‘some fairly dark-hued color’), and both Robert Johnstone and Katrina Bachinger refer to the comedy of their respective studies as more ‘grey’ than black; however, the concept remains relatively undeveloped.²⁹ In 1972, Sanford Pinsker noted the ‘graying of black humor’ in contemporary American novels, yet analysed typical grotesquerie (through Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Berger).³⁰ Grey humour is distinct: haltingly comic, its pulverized specialists in failure build an aura of impending calamity, frustrated listlessness and perpetual stalling, wherein hollowed-out jokes sound the death-knell for contentment.

Furthermore, grey humour’s dependence on boredom destabilizes existing humour theory, which typically emphasizes either gallows humour or freewheeling, energizing, ‘white’ comedy: with its ‘comic view of life’, ‘comic spirit’, ‘vision of life’, ‘liberation or elevation’, whose ‘keynote [is] freedom from restraint’.³¹ Yet, as Elliot Oring insists, ‘[a] theory of humor cannot be a theory of only those examples a theorist happens to appreciate’.³² Humour theory often assumes comedy’s inherent reconciliation and ordering, life-affirming tendencies, linking laughter (the ‘best medicine’) and positive revolution, making chaotic circumstances more manageable.³³ Additionally, recent understandings, such as benign violation theory, recognize humour

29 See Alain Blayac, ‘Evelyn Waugh and Humour’, in *Evelyn Waugh: New Directions*, ed. Alain Blayac (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992), 112–32; Bruce Jay Friedman, ‘Foreword’, in *Black Humor*, ed., with an intro., by Bruce Jay Friedman (New York: Bantam Books, 1965), vii–xi (p. vii); Robert Johnstone, ‘Films: All Is Forgiven’, *Fortnight*, 142 (1977), 17–18; and Katrina E. Bachinger, ‘New Zealand’s Poetry of Death: Genre and Strategy’, *World Literature Written in English*, 24:1 (1984), 208–13.

30 Sanford Pinsker, ‘The Graying of Black Humor’, *Studies in the Twentieth Century*, 9 (1972), 15–33.

31 See, respectively: Robert Corrigan, ‘Introduction. Comedy and the Comic Spirit’, in *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 1–12 (p. 3); Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 2009), 36; Simon Critchley, ‘Did You Hear the Joke About the Philosopher Who Wrote a Book About Humour?’, in *When Humour Becomes Painful*, ed. Felicity Lunn & Heinke Munder, trans. James Rumball (Zürich: JRP/Ringier, 2006), 44–51 (p. 47); and T. G. A. Nelson, *Comedy: An Introduction to Comedy in Literature, Drama and Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1990), 71.

32 Elliott Oring, *Joking Asides: The Theory, Analysis, and Aesthetics of Humor* (Logan: Utah State U. P., 2016), 62.

33 See Brandyn Heppard, ‘The Revolution Must Be Funny: The Liberatory and Revolutionary Power of Comedy’, Doctoral thesis (The New School, New York, 2020); and Peter Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York/Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997).

resulting from two specific appraisals: (1) there is a violation of some rule or order that a given society holds sacred, and (2) this violation must, crucially, be *benign*.³⁴ Yet my coinage, wooden, deadened ‘grey humour’, reveals something altogether gloomier, refusing the distance from suffering that such theories imply. Instead of soothing reinforcement of shared values, it indicates the twitching, turgid titter, a trembling at laughter’s core. Always on the way out, it is funny without ever being fun. Truncated jokes are nearly there, always on the turn, not quite fully-fledged. As asphyxiation replaces anticipation, perpetually stalled, left-behind individuals say, ‘Look at how insignificant we (all) are’. Theorists insist that comedy requires a firm, stable ‘comic climate’,³⁵ ensuring fixed genre boundaries.³⁶ For Max Eastman, ‘things can be funny only when we’re in fun’, and humour is ‘dead’ if readers are ‘in dear earnest’.³⁷ Conversely, the comedy of comedown (particularly that of *El Jarama*) toys with tragicomic frontiers, blending miscarried comedy with sedateness and sombreness. Charles Gruner introduced the ‘game of humor’, interpreting comedy as ‘a succession of games’ implying ‘fun, leisure, entertainment, recreation’.³⁸ However, Spanish postwar humour conveys the message ‘Pack it away, it’s no use’, or ‘I can’t be bothered. Whatever’. Down for the count, it throws in the towel: ‘Game over. You win. I’m not playing anymore’. Moreover, as Johan Huizinga writes, ‘[p]lay begins and then at a certain moment it is “over”. It plays itself to an end’.³⁹ The trudge back to work is never far away. Grey humour is not a humour of ‘winning’, but of *losing*, sorely.⁴⁰

Moreover, whilst boredom and funniness may seem uneasy bedfellows, dullness is often a major generator of comedy since failure and discontent frequently spawn absurd, droll expressions of the damp squib, a rich seam running through, for instance, British television and radio.⁴¹ Circular efforts

34 Caleb Warren & A. Peter McGraw, ‘When Does Humorous Marketing Hurt Brands?’, *Journal of Marketing Behavior*, 2:1 (2016), 39–67 (p. 42).

35 Gerald Mast, *The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies* (Chicago/London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), 8.

36 Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*, 30.

37 Max Eastman, *The Enjoyment of Laughter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1937), 3.

38 Charles R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor: A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 2.

39 John Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2016 [1st Dutch ed. 1938]), 9.

40 Gruner, *The Game of Humor*, 7.

41 From *Hancock’s Half Hour* (BBC, 1954–1961), *Steptoe & Son* (BBC, 1962–1974), *Rising Damp* (ITV, 1974–1978), *Fawlty Towers* (BBC, 1975–1979), *Only Fools & Horses* (BBC, 1981–1991), *The Young Ones* (BBC, 1982–1984), *Bottom* (1991–1995), *The Office* (BBC, 2001–2003), to *This Country* (BBC, 2017–2020). In ‘Boring’, Series 1, Episode 3 (23 November 1982) of *The Young Ones*, Mike (played by Christopher Ryan) complains: ‘I think we’re overdoing the boredom motif in this conversation. It’s time for us to extend our vocabulary’. Further research might tackle ‘grey humour’ within British (national) humour.

to pass the time are emphatically miserable, and the dull itch of comedy ends not with a bang but with a whimper. A fair dose of self-deprecatory wit may be present, but it serves to conceal only temporarily the terror of silence: the creeping perception that, when all is said and done, there is just nothing to do. Although literary histories of *ennui* usually overlook humour, this article explores comedy-boredom dovetailing wherein suffering and death are part of larger, grimmer jokes, provoking the *risus sardonicus*.⁴² Grey humour resembles that self-reflexive, tedious comedy identified by nineteenth-century philosopher Karl Rosenkranz: 'Boredom is not comic in itself but a turn-around towards the comic occurs when the tautological and boring are produced as self-parody and irony'.⁴³ Through analysing laughless laughter, limping out of step, and humour bereft of 'authentic' amusement, I introduce the 'comic-kazi': the purposeful, self-sabotaging dimming of comic effect, adrift between anticomedry, tedium and tragedy.

My archive is local; my conclusions, global. Whilst my analysis relocates stale, desolate humour within Spanish social realism, enmeshed with Francoist policies limiting individual freedom, this new mode of reading is applicable more broadly to manifestations of humdrum humour of beige or plain vanilla: the suffocating, quivering funniness of languor that lays down its arms, raises the white flag and admits defeat.

***El Jarama*: (N)ever a Dull Moment**

Susan Sontag once questioned whether a 'work of art had [*sic*] the right to bore us', but Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama* (1955) offers an example of this taken to an agonizing extreme.⁴⁴ Equating the 'real' speed of the reader with the speed of the novel as narrated—à la Gérard Genette's 'isochronic' text—this excruciating work is replete with anodyne dialogue that continues, devoid of real action, until one day tripper, Lucita, accidentally drowns in the titular river.⁴⁵ Conversations are written so true to life that early reviewers assumed they were 'genuine' exchanges, taped and transcribed from real people.⁴⁶ We feel the weight of its trudge, and,

42 Reinhard Clifford Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1976); Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago/London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995). Spacks, for her part, touches upon Jane Austen's funniness (118).

43 Karl Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Häßlichen* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990 [1st ed. 1853]), 240–41; my translation.

44 Susan Sontag, *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to Flesh: Diaries, 1964–1980*, ed., with notes, by David Rieff (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), Entry 11/20/1965, p. 131.

45 Gérard Genette, *Figures ii* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1979 [1st ed. 1969]), 123.

46 Janet Pérez, 'From Experiment to Experience: The Social Realist Novel', in *A Companion to the Twentieth Century Spanish Novel*, ed. Marta E. Altisent (Rochester, NY: Tamesis, 2008), 60–74 (p. 70).

unsurprisingly, critics emphasize ‘invariabilidad’, deeming it ‘la gran epopeya de la vulgaridad’.⁴⁷ From grim portrayals of postwar *años de hambre* (Laforet’s *Nada*) and atomized, directionless existence (Cela’s *La colmena*), by 1955 the social-realist novel had shifted to the tentative beginnings of *desarrollo*, wherein war-based horror and postwar destitution slip into the background, only vaguely acknowledged by an impatient youth. Spain joined the United Nations in 1950 and, towards the end of the decade, was admitted to institutions such as the International Labour Organization (1956), the European Atomic Energy Community (1957) and the International Monetary Fund (1958). However, tedium—as reflected in literature—abounds in the absence of any significant social or economic change. Ceaseless *epimone* tests the reader’s patience, persevering laboriously and remorselessly, through page after page of insipid chit-chat, as though stuck in the most strenuous, colourless conversation. Familiarity breeds contempt: what we initially perceive as unworthy of our interest may well be just that. Freightened by its own despair, is *El Jarama* worth our attention? Thinking *from* the humour amidst Francoist atmospheres of repressive stagnation, I analyse laughter as liability, exploring moments when readers are encouraged to half-laugh, laugh badly, laugh at the wrong time, laugh at victims’ expense or gasp at scenes that laughter has already evacuated.

Firstly, the social-realist pledge necessitates a lack of authorial intrusion, let alone reactive interpretation.⁴⁸ However, *El Jarama*’s slippery humour shows the hazard and indeterminacy of such aspirations; as Sánchez Ferlosio admitted, ‘[l]a dificultad está en saber prescindir de los puntos de vista propios’.⁴⁹ Indeed, the critical history of *El Jarama* reflects a certain ambiguity regarding its essential tenor, with early commentators emphasizing objectivity: ‘es una novela realista cien por cien’; ‘[d]escribe con morosidad y exactitud [...]. La fidelidad se parece a la del pintor que retrata con el realismo puntual de un fotógrafo’.⁵⁰ Others went further (‘hecho estadístico’), or located ‘excesiva autenticidad’.⁵¹ Conversely, I show

47 Sobejano, *Novela española de nuestro tiempo*, 51; Pedro Carrero Eras, ‘“El Jarama”, de Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, medio siglo después’, *Ínsula. Revista de Letras y Ciencias Humanas*, 720 (2006), 4–8 (p. 6).

48 Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, 40–42.

49 Mauro Muñiz, ‘“El Jarama”, una novela hecha con calculo infinitesimal. Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, fiel a su mundo novelístico’, *La Estafeta Literaria*, 41 (1956), 4.

50 José Luis Caño, ‘El Jarama de Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio’, *Arbor*, 126 (1956), 313–14 (p. 313); José Luis Vázquez Doderó, ‘El Jarama’, *Nuestro Tiempo*, 22 (1956), 106–09 (p. 109).

51 Alberto Gil Novales, ‘Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio: *El Jarama*’, *Clavileño*, 7 (1956), 71–73 (p. 71); José Corrales Egea, *La novela española actual: ensayo de ordenación* (Madrid: Editorial Cuadernos para el Diálogo), 34. Similarly, Sánchez Ferlosio described the novel as ‘los pequeños motivos, la vida cotidiana’ (Muñiz, ‘“El Jarama”, una novela hecha con calculo infinitesimal’, 4).

that social-realist disrelish is riddled with suspicion; after all, as Epps insists, 'something else and extra is required, something that will keep readers busy, if not entertained'.⁵² I propose that the grey comedy of languor and disgruntlement, the disheartening drollness of doldrums, supplies just such a 'diversion', embracing the paradox of a genre intrinsically 'highly intentional', 'provocative' and politicized,⁵³ yet simultaneously stripped back, disinclined and deprived of personal intensity.

Indeed, following Edward Riley's seminal article (1963), critical focus shifted onto *El Jarama*'s mythical, tragic elements.⁵⁴ Robert Spires argued that Lucita's death 'para el lector representa la universal tragedia del hombre temporal frente a las fuerzas atemporales del universo', and Maria Vittoria Calvi maintained that innocent-victim sacrifice represents the destruction of humanity by nature.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the wider, draining humour of tedium has long been under-appreciated. Criticism sometimes destabilizes social-realist 'neutrality', describing 1950s 'objetivismo' as 'una manera de enfocar la narración y afecta la relación del autor con su obra' (leaving space for potentially fraught relationships),⁵⁶ or finding *El Jarama*'s 'técnica objetiva' less 'experimento' than 'vehículo expresivo para la finalidad del autor'.⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Carrero Eras calls its narrator 'ese pequeño dios', delighting in 'sembrando su novela de toda clase de indicios y pistas'.⁵⁸ Gonzalo Sobejano described Sánchez Ferlosio's primary challenge as 'abordar extremos contrapuestos: la infinita polifonía de lo posible y la perpetua monotonía de lo "real"'.⁵⁹ The scare-quotes are crucial, for it is precisely such unnerving, titillating inconsistency that drives *El Jarama*, retaining dramatic tension for the reader. '[T]he best example of the testimonial novel' is also a grinning tragedy, toying with that ironic, interstitial space between 'posible' and 'real'.⁶⁰

52 Epps, 'Questioning the Text', 199.

53 Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, 40.

54 Edward C. Riley, 'Sobre el arte de Sánchez Ferlosio: aspectos de *El Jarama*', *Filología*, 9 (1963), 201–21.

55 Robert Spires, 'El papel del lector implícito en la novela de posguerra', *Revista Hispanoamericana Moderna*, 38 (1974–1975), 94–102 (p. 98); Maria Vittoria Calvi, 'Funzione e significato del flume ne *El Jarama* di Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio', *Annali-Istituto Universitario. Orientale Napoli Sezione Romana*, 23 (1981), 483–508 (p. 496).

56 Ramón Buckley, *Problemas formales en la novela española contemporánea* (Barcelona: Península, 1973), 40.

57 Santos Sanz Villanueva, *Historia de la novela española (1942–1975)*, 2 vols (Madrid: Alhambra, 1980), I, 596.

58 Carrero Eras, 'El Jarama', 7. For an analysis of its interweaving registers, see Adam L. Winkel, '“Ya se aburren de tanta capital”: Leisure, Language and Law in *El Jarama*', *BSS, XCVI:3* (2019), 425–45.

59 Sobejano, *Novela española de nuestro tiempo*, 318.

60 Sobejano, 'The Testimonial Novel and the Novel of Memory', 183.

The text begins ‘Describiré’, any first-person intent unattributable to any character, and when Lucio, at the bar, asks ‘[m]e dejas que descorra la cortina?’ (7), theatricality, artificiality and angles of refraction are foregrounded. In later editions, authorial prefatory remarks—particularly those originally appended to the sixth edition (1965)—imply fabrication: ‘el comienzo y el final de un libro son lugares prosódicamente muy condicionados’ (4). Moreover, when Lucio’s question (‘¿... cortina?’) is repeated ten lines later, temporal ambiguity casts doubt on whether this is a reprise, or genuine reiteration. Perhaps the opening of Sánchez Ferlosio’s *Industrias y andanzas de Alfanhuí*, ‘esta historia castellana y llena de mentiras verdaderas’, describes *El Jarama*, too.⁶¹ Although Ricardo Gullón argues that the text reads ‘mostrenco’ (ownerless), the narrator’s reserved, distanced observations are frequently juxtaposed with staccato, precise dialogue.⁶² A typical exchange, between Mauricio and Lucio, reads thus:

- ¿Por qué dices esto?
- ¿El qué?
- Eso que acabas de decir.
- ¿Qué tierra esta? Pues será porque estoy mirando el campo.
- Ya.
- No, no te rías. ¿De que te ríes?
- De ti. Que estás un poco mocho esta mañana.
- ¿Te diviertes?
- La mar.
- No sabes cuanto me alegre. (12)

Despite stichomythia, stasis and inertia (even while drinking, at a bar) make for rich grey humour, featuring what Laura Salisbury, in an analysis of Beckett’s correspondingly plodding, insipid comedy, calls ‘deftly timed mistimings’.⁶³ Ostensibly, *El Jarama* seems too garrulous or irrelevant for gaiety, negating comedy’s implicit message, that ‘life is fun!’ Nevertheless, a distinctive, grumbling humour pervades through clipped, inexpressive conversation and grim, foreboding irony. This may be the thrill-seekers’ day off, but free time is just as—if not more—mind-numbing than the working week. Banal ‘Ya’ and wooden full-stop after ‘La mar’ form an ironic, dejected recognition of futility after what commenced as an exclamation at natural beauty: ‘¡Qué tierra esta!’ The narrator then

61 Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, *Industrias y andanzas de Alfanhuí* (Barcelona: Destino, 1961 [1st ed. Madrid: Hermosillas, 1951], 17.

62 Ricardo Gullón, ‘Recapitulación de *El Jarama*’, *Hispanic Review*, 43:1 (1975), 1–23 (p. 3).

63 Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett*, 12.

intervenes, providing a lyrical description of the landscape, yet semantic fields bespeak destruction, foreshadowing mortality, as 'ardiente', 'inhóspito', 'borroso', 'impalpable' and 'sucio' culminate in 'cáustico sol' (12). Is this just joking, an alibi or a 'get-out-of-jail-free' card from an otherwise detached narrator, and is this joking fundamentally *just* (acceptable, or doubly cruel), given the ostensibly dispassionate, slice-of-life framing? Critical (over)emphasis on solemnity often struggles with such uncertainties, insisting both that authorial interjections 'in [no] way interfere' with the 'reader's ready comprehension', yet simultaneously deeming them 'ironic and baffling'.⁶⁴ Grey humour actively courts colder responses by disengaging its audience, building abrasive funniness that readers may dislike, abhor, or simply be apathetic towards. Dialogue is crushing and comical:

—Nada; a disfrutar se ha dicho; pasarlo bien.

—Muchas gracias; adiós.

Lucio los vio perfilarse uno a uno a contraluz en el umbral y torcer a la izquierda hacia el camino. Luego quedó otra vez vacío el marco de la puerta; era un rectángulo amarillo y cegador. Se alejaron las voces.

—¡La juventud, a divertirse!—dijo Lucio; están en la edad. (16)

As weariness continues, style betrays content, with the lack of enthusiasm evident in 'disfrutar'/'divertirse'. Crucially, early reception was not universally positive *vis-à-vis* realism, with Rafael Manzano berating this 'receptor y vehículo de vulgaridades y mediocridades', asking '[e]s que estamos buscando, en España, premiar el "antiquijote"?' In particular, he disparaged mundanity: 'instalar la simple existencia sobre soportes mediocres'.⁶⁵ Might expressions of ostensibly unvarnished truth beget mere flatness and dullness? Decades later, Juan Goytisolo criticized social realism for demanding 'una novela tan real como la vida misma', unable to shape its desired social ends.⁶⁶ Accordingly, grey humour reinforces *El Jarama*'s status as ponderous drag, delighting in wasting (our) time, for failed, unfunny funniness plunges characters further into the mire. Both unbearable and irresistible, titillating through unnecessary prosaic detail, there is a certain charm and knowingness in the novel's confidence in its own mimesis. Willing us to give up, or put it down, this is the un-Divine Comedy, a novel of severe friction and attrition, accompanied by dry,

64 Jeremy Squires, 'Making Sense of Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio's *El Jarama*', *The Modern Language Review*, 86:3 (1991), 602–12 (p. 609).

65 Rafael Manzano, review of *El Jarama*, *La Estafeta Literaria*, 92, 20 April 1957, 'Un artículo comentado en Barcelona', p. 2; available online at <https://www.ateneodemadrid.com/biblioteca_digital/Estafeta_Literaria/n%C2%BA92_20IV.pdf> (accessed 15 December 2021).

66 Juan Goytisolo, *La saga de los Marx* (Barcelona: Mondadori, 1993), 83.

deadpan comedy. We need a joke, urgently, for there is something taunting about the novel's staleness and pace, already fossilized.

Failed *Fiestas*

Lucio believes that amusement is the sole preserve of youth, but juvenile day trippers are, ironically, spectacularly unsatisfied. This encapsulates my next manifestation of postwar feel-bad (anti)amusement: failed *fiestas*. Instead of Mikhail Bakhtin's heyday, outdoor carnival, an inside-out, upside-down festival with 'joyful relativity of all structure and order', 'opposed to official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change', *El Jarama*'s escapist 'celebration' is irksomely pedestrian.⁶⁷ Eschewing Bakhtin's 'free, familiar contact among people', a 'new modus of interrelationship [...] counterposed to the omnipotent hierarchical social relationships of non-carnival life', tedium and listlessness negate all prospect for unofficial, subversive, carnivalesque laughter of disruption.⁶⁸ Endlessly circular tedium could go on *ad infinitum*, provoking a pathetic, numbing comedy of forever un-realized potential. Social-realist humour of creeping annoyance—even at *fiestas*—curtails fun through angst-ridden decrescendo, the antithesis of a drum-roll. Unable to summon creativity even in atmospheres of merriment, characters suffer *thaasophobia* (fear of boredom), finding no entertainment in existence. Ready to explode, *El Jarama* never does, thwarting through squandered, nosedived opportunities:

—Anda, cuéntame algo, Tito.

—Que te cuente ¿el qué?

—Hombre, algo, lo que se te ocurra, mentiras, da igual. Algo que sea interesante.

—¿Interesante? Yo no sé contar nada, qué ocurrencia. ¿De qué tipo? ¿Qué es lo interesante para ti, vamos a ver?

—Tipo aventuras, por ejemplo, tipo amor.

—¡Huy, amor!—sonreía, sacudiendo los dedos—, ¡No has dicho nada! ¿Y de qué amor? Hay muchos amores distintos.

—De los que tú quieras, con que sea emocionante.

—Pero si no sé relatar cosas románticas, mujer, ¿de dónde quieres que lo saque? (227)

Dialogue continues for several lines, with Tito repeatedly delaying, deferring, choking, unable to provide 'algún suceso llamativo, aquí, en este rato' (227).

67 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. & trans. Caryl Emerson, with an intro. by Wayne C. Booth (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984 [1st Russian ed. 1963]), 124, 125 & 123.

68 Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. & trans. Emerson, 123.

Moreover, the fragment emerges just before Lucita's death, and this whole conversation was engineered bathetically 'por hacerte hablar' (227). *El Jarama*'s downplaying, discrediting humour is characterized by a lengthy build followed by a brief, flatlining pay-off, and its sheer endlessness becomes a meditation on its failures: a (non-)comedy of stalemates and stale mates. Grey humour's collective sigh, or, its shared, self-immolating chagrin at wasteful existence resembles Ríos Carratalá's identification of the 'sonrisa del inútil' throughout Spanish culture, a disheartening wit of ordinariness: 'Pueden ser absurdos, arbitrarios o fruto de una ignorancia que nos incapacita para desenvolvemos en el *quehacer cotidiano*'.⁶⁹

Theorists Hurley, Dennett & Adams, offering a cognitive analysis, argue that humour closes off exploration, saying '[n]othing down these alleys! Save your time and energy!'⁷⁰ Spanish social realism likewise terminates readers' search for enthusiasm, foregrounding utter hesitancy, and this tormenting, plodding funniness approaches Lauren Berlant's notion of 'flat affect' and 'recessive aesthetic': the underperformance of passion, and the withdrawal from energized engagement.⁷¹ Presentation is bland and *blasé*, so restrained as to appear aloof, and extremes of joy or grief are difficult to determine in a resolutely unflappable tone, yet still *comic* via poker-faced, straight-faced stances. Like Mark Twain's conception of the 'humorous story', *El Jarama* withholds comic cues and clearly categorizable 'nubs', 'points' and 'snappers', yet retains a bathetic, sinking amusement.⁷² Grey humour goes nowhere in particular, and fizzles out just as quickly as it begins.

The novel's focus is tight: one day of liberating rural party, escaping the city centre. As Daniel exclaims, '[c]hicos, aquí hay que divertirse', because '¡Somos ricos! ... ¡Millonarios casi!' (134). If *El Jarama* is about anything, it is merrymaking and revelry. Yet the sarcastic 'millonarios' references how much wine remains, and humour emerges because hedonistic pleasure-seeking brings only solitude, seclusion, disabling tedium and the reminder that, every year, one *bañista* dies in the river. Comedy perpetually lowers the bar, stifling any rising laugh. As critics acerbically note, this 'juventud cansada, aburrida, poco vital' bathe not 'para vivir más plenamente, sino para olvidar que no viven'.⁷³ Even carnival suggestions are deflating and stultifying, and the whirlwind soon abates:

69 Ríos Carratalá, *La sonrisa del inútil*, 88; my emphasis.

70 Hurley, Dennett & Adams, *Inside Jokes*, 107.

71 Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', 195.

72 Mark Twain, 'How to Tell a Story' (1895), in *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays*, ed., with notes, by Louis J. Budd, 2 vols (New York: Library of America, 1992), II, 1891–1910, 201–02.

73 See, respectively: J. M. Castellet, quoted in Francisco García Sarría, 'El Jarama: muerte y merienda de Lucita', *BHS*, LIII:4 (1976), 323–37 (pp. 336–37); and Gonzalo Sobejano, quoted in Tulia Gómez Ávila, 'Angustia y tedio en *El Jarama* de Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio', *Thesaurus. Boletín del Instituto Caro y Cuervo*, 43:1 (1988), 95–104 (p. 96).

- Luego dicen de Río. ¿Más carnaval?
 —Perpetuo. Ya lo sabes, Mely, Río de Janeiro, nada.
 —¿Nada, verdad? Ya guardarías hasta cola para ir. (127)

Through *abulia*, readers are bored to death, even to tears, but also, strangely, to *laughter*. Nevertheless, this is but the bitter jest of *horror vacui*, of characters locked in what Ortega y Gasset terms ‘convicciones negativas’ (his definition of post-crisis *aboulía*):

[...] el no sentirse en lo cierto sobre nada importante impide al hombre decidir lo que va a hacer con precisión, energía, confianza y entusiasmo sincero: no puede encajar su vida en nada, hincarla en un claro destino.⁷⁴

Caving in and bowing out, grey humour stems from paralysis, dissatisfaction, and defeat, as, throughout the novel, ‘la palabra esperanza sufre una reducción grotesca’.⁷⁵ Grey humour reveals an Achilles heel, a chink in the armour; when asked ‘¿Qué tal (ha ido)?’, it responds ‘Bueno, eso ... lo típico, sabes, ¡lo normal!’

Writing on *Anna Karenina* (Leo Tolstoy, 1877), Matthew Arnold denounced a scene wherein Levin is late for his wedding, unable to find his dress-shirt. ‘It turns out to import absolutely nothing’, because true-to-life intentions add no ‘significance’.⁷⁶ In *El Jarama*, this is the point, and such (anti)comedy resembles Von Wilpert’s ‘humorloser Scherz’, the joke *without* humour.⁷⁷ When Mely asks Dani about the ‘boda en algún pueblo’, this hangdog humour initially escalates, only to contract:

- Será una cosa divertida.
 —Divertida si tienes con quien reírte. Pero si, en cambio, te toca, como a mí me tocó, empotrada en la mesa entre dos paletitos que no hacían más que hacerme preguntas si yo iba a bailar a Casablanca y a Pasapoga, lo que te mueres es de asco, te lo digo yo. Te agarras un aburrimiento, hija mía, que no se te quita en un par de semanas. (57)

As implications of ‘cosa divertida’ capitulate into ‘asco’/‘aburrimiento’, the reader succumbs to a similar fate, almost willing the novel to stop. Dani

74 José Ortega y Gasset, *En torno a Galileo* (1933), in José Ortega y Gasset, *Obras completas*, 6th ed., 12 vols (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1946–1983), V (1964), 1933–1941, 9–164 (p. 70).

75 Gullón, ‘Recapitulación de *El Jarama*’, 15.

76 Matthew Arnold, *The Last Word*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1977), 285.

77 Patrick O’Neill, ‘The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour’, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 10:2 (1983), 145–66 (p. 147); reproduced in *Dark Humor* ed. Harold Bloom & Blake Hobby (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), 79–103 (p. 81).

complains about 'lo pesados que se ponían' and reiterates the forced humour at *fiestas*: 'quieren hacerte reír y no lo consiguen', 'los esfuerzos que hacen por divertirte' (57). In an absurd, bleak development, 'lo único que te pones es más violenta cada vez', for 'pobrecitos' have 'poquísimo humor' (57). In the final, absurd twist encapsulating social-realist hardship humour, we read '[e]n mi vida pasé más malo en una fiesta, ni lo pienso pasar' (57). Even when it is cavalier, jesting carries disturbing *memento mori* through *Gluckschmerz* (sadness at others' fortune). If the silent clowns (Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd) immortalized the dynamic comedy of jolts and pratfalls, Spanish postwar social realism offers the grey humour of aches and shrugs.

Although recent voices re-position *El Jarama* as 'objectivist', constituting 'el descubrimiento de la objetividad', enigmatic grey humour implies alternative viewpoints, as distorted, disarming amusement intensifies dialectical interplay between affected, disappointing hilarity and its inexorable conclusion: death.⁷⁸ When holiday-makers enjoy the water ('—No está nada fría, ¿verdad?—Está la mar de apetitosa' [174]), the narrator interrupts with lengthy environmental descriptions: 'Daba un poco de luna en lo alto de los árboles...' (174). However, pervasive blackness ('espejo negro', 'lo oscuro', 'ráfagas rasantes de luna' [174], symbolizing death), and the river's ominous portrayal ('un fluido y enorme y silencioso animal acariciante' [174]), clash with thrill-seekers' apparent joy. When buoyant dialogue returns ('—¡Qué gusto de sentir el agua, como te pasa por el cuerpo!' [174]), juxtaposed sentiments carry sinister undertones. As the shepherd grotesquely remarks, 'si un día se negara la gente a meterse en el río, saldría él a buscar a la gente' (206). This connects to earlier, grotesque conversations wherein the day trippers seek '¡Una mano inocente para sacar bola!' (47), looking around, 'riéndose':

Mely puso una cara maliciosa y dijo:

—¡Lucita! Lucita es la más inocente de todas.

—Pues claro, Luci—insistían entre risas— ... (47)

Despite onomastic connotations, Lucita, 'la más inocente de todas', perishes in darkness, couching 'risas' in ill-omened, distressing humour, one foot in the grave.

78 For Winkel ('—Ya se aburren de tanta capital''), the 'objectivist' (432, 433, 437, 440 & 442) narrator 'freez[es]' (433) real-life moments. (Later, potential subjectivities in the secretary's accounts are acknowledged [440]). See also María Luisa Burguera Nadal, 'Introducción', in Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio, *El Jarama*, ed., con intro., de María Luisa Burguera Nadal (Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 2006), ix–xlvii (p. xvii). Elsewhere Squires calls it 'objectivist', rather than 'behaviourist' (Jeremy Squires, *Experience and Objectivity in the Writings of Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio* [Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1998], 152).

Indeed, throughout the novel, Sánchez Ferlosio's political implications are potently evident, juxtaposing two generations: the younger, who brush aside the *Guerra Civil*, and the older, such as Lucio (Republican fighter, prisoner-of-war) and the *hombre de los zapatos blancos*, who fought with *franquistas* but possesses the gift of 'el seis doble en la vida' (70–71, 109). Fratricidal conflict haunts and undermines all striving for present excitement, replete with blackly-comic references to abattoirs and sheep led to slaughterhouses (deemed 'mala sin remisión' [202]). When Mely realizes 'esto era el frente', noting 'hubo tantos muertos', comedic underlay heightens both tragedy and torpor:

—Digo. Y nosotros que nos bañamos tan tranquilos.

—Como si nada; y a lo mejor donde te metes ha habido ya un muerto.

Lucita interrumpió:

—Ya vale. También son ganas de andar sacando cosas, ahora. (26)

Again, Lucita—refusing mortal contemplation—drowns in ridiculous, avoidable circumstances, her body exhumed ('saca[da]'). Miguel arrives, eagerly requesting updates, but responses are bathetically amusing ('Nada; Lucita, que no la gustan las historias de muertos'), absurdly matched by his own disinterestedness: 'Bueno, y a todo esto, ¿qué hora es?' Moving from grave, deathly tones to banal, quotidian concerns, any laughter becomes struggling, spluttering, dejected gasp. Grey, hollowed-out humour, sapping all energy, remains conservative and motionless; almost everyone, including the narrator, is fundamentally uninterested.

Comic-kazi: Unfunniness

Humour theory typically emphasizes *surprise*, but *El Jarama*'s listless comedy of sour-grapes enshrines its lack thereof.⁷⁹ 'Comic-kazi', I argue, constitutes a self-sabotaging, backfiring funniness, arising when characters are absurdly *aware* of their misfortunes, yet keep striving regardless, pursuing happiness in full knowledge of its unobtainability. Self-knowledge is fundamental: as philosopher Thomas Nagel posits, building on Albert Camus, a mouse is never absurd 'because he lacks the capacities for self-consciousness and self-transcendence that would enable him to see that he is only a mouse.'⁸⁰ Miguel admits 'no sé distinguir cuando me aburro de cuando me divierto, te lo juro' (204), which recalls Juan Goytisolo's *Juegos de manos*: 'Me siento muerto. O lo que es lo mismo, me aburro'.⁸¹ Diluted,

79 Hurley, Dennett & Adams, *Inside Jokes*, 53; Graeme Ritchie, 'Surprise', in his *The Comprehension of Jokes: A Cognitive Science Framework* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 111–26.

80 Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (London: Canto, 1991), 21.

81 Juan Goytisolo, *Juegos de manos* (Barcelona: Destino, 1965 [1st ed. 1954], 151–52.

diminished, and de-fanged, comedic cop outs never aim for correctives, presenting entertainment and boredom as indistinguishable. Moreover, the 'comic-kazi' enshrines *bathos*, which, as Crangle and Nicholls show, necessitates aesthetics of 'sinking', becoming 'the most deliberate of arts and perhaps the only one we have [in the twentieth century]'.⁸² Correspondingly, *El Jarama's* impotence, world-weariness and *ennui* progress anti-climactically from initial tedium, to faint hint of desire or optimism, to final, bone-weary denial. Even the dullest dialogue must be maintained, their only defence against encroaching *ennui*. Celia is hilariously confused, for lacklustre laughter drives further stasis:

- Pero, bueno, ¿y la gente, dónde está?
 —¿Dónde va a estar? En su casa ...
 —¿Y qué hacen en su casa a las nueve de la noche?
 —¡Yo qué sé! Cenar ... ver la televisión, leer el periódico.
 —¿Y luego?
 —Luego, irse a la cama.
 —¡Vaya vida! No sé cómo no tienen más niños, con lo aburrido que debe ser acostarse a las diez. (72)

For Crangle and Nicholls, anti-climax refashions potential interest into 'bland, workable order', with 'perpetual sinking', as *bathos* promises ... then capitulates ('must [...] aspire and fail').⁸³ Alicia loves the *pueblos* 'vida tranquila', where 'todo el mundo se conoce' ... but Mely promptly disagrees:

- A mí me aburre lo tranquilo—dijo Mely—, me crispa; la tranquilidad es lo que más intranquila me pone. Y eso de conocerse todo el mundo, ¡vaya una gracia! [...]; debe ser el tostón número uno. (57)

'¡Vaya una gracia!' indeed. Log jams continue, unbroken, as Sánchez Ferlosio finds a falling, failing funniness—milquetoast mirth—in everyday trivialities. Ironically, *El Jarama's* 'tranquilidad', as novel ('tostón número uno'), leaves readers equally 'intraquil[os]'. Exemplifying 'comic-kazi', Mely is absurdly conscious of her own dullness and powerlessness, despite longing for excitement and motivation. Fernando agrees: 'no puede hacerte ilusión ninguna cosa, si sabes que mañana y pasado y el otro y el otro y todo el año vas a hacer lo mismo, las mismas caras, los mismos sitios, todo igual. Es una vida que no tiene chiste' (57). The *ne plus ultra* of grey humour: benumbed existence is patently cheerless, no laughing matter. Yet, from intense, miserable boredom comes woebegone funniness:

82 Crangle & Nicholls, *On Bathos*, 6.

83 Crangle & Nicholls, *On Bathos*, 11, 6 & 74.

—[...] ¿Es que hace falta tener ganas de algo? Estás tranquila y a gusto con lo que tienes y se acabó.

—Sí, sentadita en una silla y mirando al cielo raso. Ideal. (57)

Mely's dry, crucially po-faced wit proceeds despite reassurance ('la gente se divierte en todas partes' [57]), illustrating disgruntled, paradoxically ill-humoured humour.

Deadpan Drollness

Having discussed manifestations of grey humour, literary histories of boredom, narratorial ambiguities and failed *fiestas*, this article will now examine pertinent theoretical underpinnings, beginning with abstruse deadpan. For Nick Holm, writing on Australasian satire, the form's essential 'schtick' is to seem unaware of, or uninterested in, any potential amusement. Performance works 'against—or at least not with—the comic grain of the underlying content', denying or delaying confirmation of textual comic status.⁸⁴ Deadpan signifies the 'muting and flattening of those formal, aesthetic elements' rendering it 'recognisably comic'; likewise, throughout Spanish social realism, narratives resist their own humorousness ('comic-kazi'), violating readers' accustomed sense of (suitable) comicality.⁸⁵ Similarly, Lauren Berlant's work on 'flat affect' identifies suppressed forms ('stuck, neutral, or withheld') refusing to certify concrete meaning, rebuffing aesthetic endorsement through 'underperformed emotion', withdrawing and snubbing interpretive information.⁸⁶ Such readings bolster grey humour, founded on *bathos*, disgruntlement, purloined punchlines, and 'stifled laugh[s]'.⁸⁷ Moreover, turning unrelenting, unremarkable tedium into (non-)amusement resembles Bergson's understanding of comedy's 'systematic absentmindedness', observable especially in *Don Quijote*: 'the comic itself, drawn as nearly as possible from its very source'.⁸⁸ Abstracted, preoccupied individuals are distanced from their surroundings, 'as though the soul has allowed itself to be fascinated and hypnotized by the materiality of a simple action'.⁸⁹ Throughout *El Jarama*'s lose-lose situations, characters

84 Holm, 'The Politics of Deadpan in Australasian Satire', 104.

85 Holm, 'The Politics of Deadpan in Australasian Satire', 105.

86 Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', 197 & 191.

87 Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (London: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1993), 152–96.

88 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton & Fred Rothwell (Copenhagen/Los Angeles: Green Integer Books, 1999 [1st French ed. 1900]), 146.

89 Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Brereton & Rothwell, 25.

are abstracted and inattentive during simple tasks, building a disheartening, low-spirited laughter of routine.

Furthermore, realism and deadpan comedy exhibit surprising similarities. The former's inherent tendency to dehumanize and flatten the ambitions of already motiveless, aimless figures, through generic, stock characters, resembles comedy's *modus operandi*, which thrives on standardized types.⁹⁰ For Bergson, comedy derives from inflexibility and rigidity: 'we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing'; 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living'. Repetition is laughable because reiterations are both monotonous and ceaselessly *worsening, ageing*: a 'continuous evolution of a being growing ever older; it never goes backwards and never repeats anything'.⁹¹ Grey humour finds nothing new in dehumanized, passive, gradual downturn, and my insistence on nothingness and emptiness—literalized in Laforet's *Nada*—is well-established within Humour Studies. For Marcel Gutwirth, humour constitutes the disappointment and disproportion of being 'set' to apprehend 'something', only to hold 'nothing', and Arthur Schopenhauer writes of laughter 'occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption'.⁹² Faded 'comic-kazi' is comedy's wasteland, entropic vacuity at the heart of humour. Theorist Jean-Luc Nancy identified laughter's characteristic 'disappearing in its coming', and, for Immanuel Kant, humour stems from 'the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing'.⁹³ We laugh into the void, and persevere—but a tear is always near.

Lastly, ambiguities of grey humour, 'comic-kazi' and 'just-joking' equivocality manifest through failed funniness, for even joke-telling and anecdote-sharing bring discontent. Don Marcial tells Manolo 'funny' stories about a 'tío [...] con el vehículo ese que se gasta para circular por el mundo, junto a otro carrito de esos de coca-cola' (103) who approached the group joking 'Si esto es la coca-cola, yo entonces lo menos soy la Coca-Coña'. Marcial guffaws:

—[...] la pechada de reír ... Y es que se llama Coca de apellido; la doble coincidencia. ¿Qué le parece?

—Es humor, es humor—asentía Manolo. (103)

90 Linda Nochlin, *Realism* (London: Penguin, 1991), 80–87. See also Janet Pérez, 'From Experiment to Experience', 64.

91 Bergson, *Laughter*, trans. Brereton & Rothwell, 28, 22 & 88.

92 Marcel Gutwirth, *Laughing Matter: An Essay on the Comic* (London/Ithaca: Cornell U. P., 1993), 85; Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World As Will and Idea*, ed., with an intro., by David Berman, trans. Jill Berman (London: J. M. Dent, 1995 [1st German ed. 1819]), 154.

93 Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes *et al.* (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1993), 388; Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952 [1st German ed. 1790]), 196.

This craving for comedy, and Marcial's absurd, protracted efforts to *explain* jibes ('la doble coincidencia'), create a devastating, melancholy conflation of wretchedness and humorousness. Jesters bears their scars, with no comic consolations, and laughter laughs 'into the gaping maw of grim reality'.⁹⁴ Comedian Mike Myers observed that '[c]omedy characters tend to be a _____ machine; i.e., Clouseau was a smug machine, Pepe Le Pew was a love machine, Felix Unger was a clean machine, and Austin Powers is a sex machine'.⁹⁵ Social-realist time-wasters are boredom machines, suffering 'quiplash' from jokes beyond their 'tell-by' dates—even at parties. Grey humour resembles Salisbury's description of Beckettian gags, which 'either go on too long or never really get going at all', describing not temporal 'flight' but its 'slow and arduous passage':

[...] incongruities and running gags may be funny, but this comedy already seems a little past its sell by date, or on the turn, as it were. And comedy that is going off, slapstick that doesn't really work, comes, like a slow hand clap, to beat out elapse rather than contract it; it becomes a form of walking on the spot in which waiting is first sloughed off, then measured and finally increased.⁹⁶

El Jarama's joking-attempts wear thin from unending prolixity, while readerly tension, friction, resistance and hindrance build mounting pressure, never fully or meaningfully released into mirth. As Beckett once told director Sir Peter Hall ahead of the 1955 production of *Waiting for Godot*, '[m]ake them wait longer. Make the pauses longer. You should bore them'.⁹⁷ If brevity is the soul of wit, grey humour is the reverse. When Manolo orders water, his register is absurdly proper: '¿Tiene usted la bondad de ponerme un buen vaso de agua fresquita?' (101). Resulting misunderstandings with barman Mauricio cause great consternation, escalating—yet simultaneously stifling—comedically. 'Agua fresca no hay', and Manolo laughs 'forzadamente', explaining 'no era más que un decir' (101). Formal language is a preposterous sham, and dampening *bathos* emphasizes poverty in the manner of hardship humour. Yet Mauricio persists, amusingly banal:

94 Lisa Colletta, *Dark Humor and Social Satire in the Modern British Novel* (New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 30.

95 Tad Friend, 'You Can't Say That', *The New Yorker*, 11 November 2001, n.p.; available online at <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/11/19/you-cant-say-that>> (accessed 23 March 2020).

96 Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett*, 186–87.

97 Katherine Worth, *'Waiting for Godot' and 'Happy Days'* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 57–58. *Waiting for Godot* was first performed in 1953.

—Pues yo a lo que no es una cosa no lo llamo esa cosa. ¿Tiene sentido? Será una frase hecha o lo que quieras, pero yo cuando digo agua fresca es que la quiero fresca de verdad. Lo demás me parece como hablar un poquito a lo tontuno, la verdad sea dicha.

—Bueno, que quiere usted liarme, está visto.

After playful quarrelling, Manolo stresses light-heartedness. No agelast, he can take a joke: 'ya no me afecta la broma en absoluto [...] yo también sé divertirme cuando quiero' (101). A fruitless cascade of empty, abating points, certainly, yet Mauricio absurdly agrees:

—Pues yo me alegro, mozo. Más vale así. Tener uno un poquito picardía, para saberle hacer frente a los trances escabrosos del trato con los demás. ¿No es verdad? ¡Pero mucha! Un rato largo de correa hay que tener. (101)

This 'un poquito picardía' and '[u]n rato largo de correa' are central to social-realist idlers, coping mechanisms against daily trials and tribulations. However, the suggestion that humour offers respite is immediately undermined: Manolo 'puso de súbito una cara prevenida' (101). He needs no 'correa', simply *ignoring* 'las situaciones escabrosas [...] vamos, que me las paso por debajo de la pierna ...' (102). Typically for postwar social realism, *not thinking* is the only—bathetic—solution. Manolo warns 'creerse uno estar por encima de las cosas' is dangerous because one may suddenly be 'de pronto debajo de los pies' (102), darkly ironic given that Lucita, currently on land ('encima'), soon *drowns* in the Jarama, fulfilling early, grotesquely ominous conversations between unindividuated 'Alguien[s]': '—¿Y adónde va este río? [...] —A la mar, como todos' (26). All conversation ends thus, between characters resembling 'muertos-vivos'.⁹⁸ Following Lucita's death, Marialuisa injects energy: 'el domingo que viene nos venimos otra vez y armamos aquí un gatuperio de esos que hacen época' (177). However, deflating, atrabilious humour undermines encouragement: 'Pues igual, hija mia, ¿qué más dará?; el domingo que viene pasará lo mismo, parejo a lo de hoy. ¿Por qué iba a ser más largo?' (177). Moreover, the narrator observes the menacing moon 'como una gran cara muerta' (177). If Civil War battles can be easily forgotten, 'so can a drowning'.⁹⁹ With hollow inarticulacy, the emotional significance of death and mourning does *not* exceed anodyne discussion about the weather. We are oddly—grotesquely—*glad* for demise: at long last, something has broken the tedium.

98 Sarrià, 'El Jarama. Muerte y merienda de Lucita', 328.

99 Epps, 'Questioning the Text', 197.

Just Joking: Ambiguous Narration

Following Lucita's departure, *El Jarama* interrogates re-inscriptions and re-viewings of experience through multiple lenses, asking how much 'reality' readers can bear. When the judge examines Lucita's cadaver, darkly-comic language dehumanizes her in ludicrous, unemotional, 'fish-like' metaphors: '... un brillo turbio, como añicos de espejo manchados de polvo, o pequeños recortes de hojalata. La boca estaba abierta. Recordaba la boca de un pez, en el gesto de los labios' (213). Funniness catches us off-guard, surely at odds with realist auras. Narrative long-windedness works to 'distanciarle [al lector] del personaje', yet such detachment is fundamentally amusing.¹⁰⁰ The judge is already upset and absurdly frustrated at having left a party to fulfil this obligation, and concludes the investigation with incongruously formal summaries: 'distinguiendo acto seguido desde la orilla el bulto; 'se hallaba el declarante'; 'proferían las susodichas llamadas de socorro'; 'lo azaroso de la situación, arrojáronse al agua sin más demora'; 'en tal riesgo se hallaba'; 'fue finalmente hallada'; 'el anterior declarante'; 'a cuyo aviso al punto acudía el que aquí comparece'; 'se encontraba exánime' (219). Repeated use of the flaccid, passive tense keeps emotion at arm's length, contrasting with the day trippers' vivacious reactions: 'Mely se había cogido la cabeza entre las manos: "¡Lo sabía, lo sabía que había sido Lucita! ¡Lo sabía que había sido Lucita ...!" ' (198). Correctly identifying the corpse is more important than her friend's drowning, and the visitors squabble over preferred name(s): 'Luci'? 'Lucita'? Other? Her dignity is wilfully destroyed, death is comically unheroic, heavy-hearted humour is perennially linked with death and *El Jarama* complicates realism by illustrating how plentiful voices interpret identical events dissimilarly. While playing cards, one man observes 'una vez pierde, otra gana. Esto, pues como la vida', and the *hombre de los zapatos blancos* responds, 'Salvo que menos arriesgado' (162). Ironically, Lucita's rotten luck sees her trounced at the game of life, with no attainable rematch.

In destabilizing realism, it is veritably Hitchcockian that the first person to touch Lucita's corpse should be medical student Soriano Fernández, in an example of reverse-rhyming authorial *chiasmus*.¹⁰¹ When questioned by the authorities, his response is incongruously stoic: 'En lo que yo he presenciado, tengo sobradas razones para asegurar que se trata de un accidente' (218). Even though it is a subtle intervention, a guileful disclaimer of intentionality from the narrator/witness, abrasive irony is evident; indeed, Squires finds a 'veiled clue warning the reader against any transcendental interpretation of Luci's death'.¹⁰² Comedy spills its borders, as the

100 Spires, 'El papel del lector implícito en la novela de posguerra', 99.

101 See Riley, 'Sobre el arte de Sánchez Ferlosio', 208.

102 Squires, *Experience and Objectivity in the Writings of Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio*, 209.

narrator, exploiting *honnête homme* ruses, by turns cajoles, lectures, backpedals, saves face and shirks responsibility. *El Jarama* presents no stable, objective, historical monolith but a living, breathing negotiation of the present. When Amalio describes '[a]guas estas', with 'siete capas' and several 'recovecos y [...] entretelas', alarming descriptions liken the river to

[...] una cosa viva; con más engaños que el jopo de una zorra y más perversidades que si fuesen manojos de culebras, en vez de ser agua, lo que viene corriendo por el lecho. Que no es persona este río. No es persona ninguna de fiar. Con una cantidad de hipocresía, que le tiembla el misterio—se reía. (204)

Amalio unearths hidden verities via comedy, yet slippery humour complicates stable, realist interpretations, for Lucio ridicules the fantasy: 'Vamos, ya me parece que quiere usted crecerlo más que nunca no fueron capaces de crecerlo las tormentas' (204). The *hombre de los zapatos blancos* insists, '[u]sted nos hace pasar buenos ratos, Amalio, con todas esas cosas que nos pinta del río; pero hoy le está costando muchas lágrimas a algunas personas' (206). Desperation to 'mythicize' death through laughter, imposing comic harmony onto miserable, arbitrary disorder, only exacerbates grief. Laughing continually, Amalio transforms the Jarama into a fabulous beast:

Igual te quita una oveja en San Fernando y organiza una merendola de amigotes en Vaciamadrid; [...] ¡Y vete tú a olerles la boca y los eructos, después que se la han comido, a ver si era tu oveja o si era otra. (205)

Yet, when this embellishment is again criticized by Lucio ('[m]ucho veo que le gusta engordarlo') and Mauricio ('me estaba resultando ya mucha llena'), Amalio responds amusingly:

El pastor se reía.

—Viene siendo por las trazas. Se le añadían un par de ceros; la cosa es relatar. (205)

If 'la cosa es relatar', can *El Jarama*'s supposed authenticity be reconciled with its fictional status? Where might its 'par de ceros' be? Realism wishes to represent all groups from all angles, to be everything to everyone—'*pouvoir tout dire*', in Paul Éluard's words.¹⁰³ Yet it must cherry-pick its 'slice-of-life' profiles, and exaggeration—particularly of grotesquerie—shifts focus onto principles of selection and figures who overstate. As Wolfgang Iser writes of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), 'unstructured material [...] is taken directly from life itself, but ... it cannot be taken for life itself', for 'details no longer

103 Paul Éluard, *Pouvoir tout dire* (Paris: Raisons d'Être, 1951).

serve to reinforce probability or to stabilize the illusion of reality'.¹⁰⁴ Accordingly, *El Jarama* interrogates the sincerity of any novelistic truth-claims, far more complex than apathetic, slice-of-life, freeze-frame reportage.

Amalio defends the account of sheep washed down the river 'por lo flacas que están todas, que un saltamontes un poquito gordo ya pesa más', yet his follow-up hysterically undermines dependability, couched in laughter ('[lo] decía riendo'): 'porque se trata de un invento. Verá usted, no es más que un cuento mío ...' (205). Ultimately, attempts to wrench pleasure out of tragedy end in further 'lágrimas' (206). As Santos Juliá Díaz and Paloma Aguilar Fernández observe of Civil War remembrance, whilst History seeks to 'conocer, comprender, interpretar o explicar bajo la exigencia de totalidad y objetividad', memory serves to 'legitimar, rehabilitar, honrar o condenar y actúa siempre de manera selectiva y subjetiva'.¹⁰⁵ We expect post-mortem 'Actas' eyewitness accounts to be more loose, discursive and subjective than the (ostensibly detached) narratorial coverage (220), but the opposite is true. Mauricio's 'aquí no se cuenta nada a espaldas de nadie' (230) and Lucita's 'me gusta que sea en mis manos; ser yo la que lo enseñe, únicamente' (79) are ironic because the narrator—despite purporting to be diffident, dignified, reticent—frequently 'gossips' about both, reworking Lucita's desire for privacy and agency into hugely public cadaver-extraction: the novel's only interest, and fodder for dark humour. Indifference expands to *ennui*, leaving no escape from listlessness, no pay-off from utter fatigue. There are no peaks but one, unending trough.

After Laughter

Reviewing the entire novel, criticism works hard to avoid pessimism. Gómez Ávila acknowledges despair ('existencia [...] vacía') but stresses hope ('futuro progresista'), Mainer locates 'tanta vida y tanta esperanza' and Perriam *et al.* perceive 'tentative renewal of optimism' in Lucio's decision to seek employment as baker's assistant the following day.¹⁰⁶ However, subdued,

104 Wolfgang Iser, 'Patterns of Communication in Joyce's *Ulysses*' [1974], in *New Perspectives in German Literary Criticism: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Richard E. Amacher & Victor Lange, trans. David Henry Wilson *et al.* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1979), 320–56 (p. 322).

105 Santos Juliá Díaz & Paloma Aguilar Fernández, *Memoria de la guerra y del franquismo* (Madrid: Taurus, 2006), 17.

106 Gómez Ávila, 'Angustia y tedio', 95; José-Carlos Mainer, *De postguerra (1951–1990)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 1994), 42; Perriam *et al.*, *A New History of Spanish Writing*, 143. Elsewhere, it incites readers to 'buscar' a 'remedio' to this 'sociedad estancada', and, portraying the 'insensibilidad de esta generación de gente resignada a su propia pequeñez', reaffirms the reader's 'propia sensibilidad' (Spires, 'El papel del lector implícito en la novela de posguerra', 99–100). Elsewhere, readers are spurred to '[e]l compromiso, la confrontación,

scatological humour destabilizes buoyancy. At the close, after a short dialogue with Mauricio, middle-aged sourpuss Lucio 'salió al camino y orinó interminablemente, a la luz de la luna, que allí casi tocaba el horizonte sobre las lomas de Coslada' (231). Whilst arguably 'gain[ing] physical and symbolic release in prolonged urination', there remains a comical incongruity between lyrical landscape-portrayal and prosaic action, literally muddying—not exalting—nature.¹⁰⁷ Immediately before this 'discharge', Sánchez Ferlosio telegraphs a 'comic climate'—in Mast's understanding—when hemming-and-hawing Lucio 'estiraba el cuerpo; ahuecaba los arrugados pantalones, que se le habían adherido a la piel; alzaba varias veces una y otra rodilla, alternativamente, para desentumecerse las piernas' (231).¹⁰⁸ Far from a physical warm-up (for but a day's labour), he merely prepares to urinate. For this tiny triumph, a solitary act of freedom, must we congratulate Lucio for the mundane act of relieving himself, which, like every chore in his life, is *never-ending*? If he fashions his own river—potentially the subject of the final lines '[e]ntra de nuevo en terreno terciario ...' (232)—it is made of urine.

Lucio begins tentative contract-talks ('masar para las fiestas' [231]); however, given the lifeless *fiesta*-carousing to date, such diversions will be worrisomely disappointing. Moreover, the six-week role is precarious and itinerant, dependent on fickle weather, interest and customer-base, signalled by hesitant language: 'de por aquí', 'de fiesta en fiesta', 'de cinco días a una semana', 'de pueblo en pueblo', 'tres o cuatro pueblerinos' (231). Lucio repeatedly downplays the post ('una chapucilla eventual', 'nada más a lo que voy es a hablar', 'cosita reducida', 'pequeña escala', 'cuestión monetaria no será nada muy allá'), is too old ('único temor mío', 'ni le han dicho los años que tengo', 'miedo mío; que a lo mejor el hombre me rechace, por parecerle que uno joven le rinda más') (231), and has never met his employer. Bathetically, we march up the hill and march down again. Indeed, when Lucio first announces 'Mañana tengo que hacer', Mauricio is baffled:

—¿Tú?

—¿Tanto te extraña? (231)

Mauricio wishes (crucially diminutive) 'suertecilla', but it will be short-lived. There is no happily ever after (the laughter). Lucio's comic potential lies

el cambio, es decir, en el orden de la subversión de las ideas impuestas por el poder', even to 'una nueva nación construida a partir de unos valores muy diferentes de los propuestos por el poder' (Joseba Pérez Moreno, 'El nacionalismo de una nueva España a través de la desmitificación en *El Jarama*', *Letras de Deusto* 35:108 [2005], 115–36 [pp. 122 & 126]).

107 Perriam *et al.*, *A New History of Spanish Writing*, 143.

108 See Mast, *The Comic Mind*, 79.

precisely in the fact that ambition, hope, vision and purpose have never been his defining features, or, if they once were, they are no longer because life's hard knocks and seemingly arbitrary cruelties have extinguished them along the way. He employs the idiom 'se queda todo en agua de borrajas' (231), aware that all may collapse. As 'agua' fuses with urine, perhaps dreams, too, will leak away without a trace.

* * * * *

To conclude, let us consider the teleology of grey humour: seditious, or conservative? Humour Studies traditionally underscore *defiance*: 'liberation or elevation'; 'limitations of the human condition miraculously overcome'; 'protective filter of humour through which readers are capable] once again—if only momentarily—of handling it and soldiering on'.¹⁰⁹ Conversely, rejecting comedy's vitality ('comic rhythm' of 'human life-feeling', 'felt life'), *El Jarama*'s morose, clouded comedy of comedown, previously unexplored, generates submissive nihilism and hollowness at odds with optimistic sentiments.¹¹⁰ Jokers are traditionally considered rebels or heroes, 'icon[s] of human resourcefulness in the face of impossible odds' for their 'ingenuity in freeing [themselves] from the predicaments that threaten [their] existence'.¹¹¹ However, these failed, self-aware jesters ('comic-kazi') are unadventurous. Indeed, Michael Ugarte concludes that it is 'reductive' to suggest that all postwar literature demonstrated 'committed resistance to the government's impositions'.¹¹² André Breton argued for humour's 'liberating element' and 'elevating effect', calling it the 'superior revolt of the mind'; however, grey humour cannot fend off its own *ennui*, let alone subvert repressive regimes.¹¹³ After all, Rudolph Herzog concluded that whispered jokes during Nazi Germany were a 'surrogate for', not a 'manifestation of, social conscience and personal courage', and Christie Davies, analysing myriad cross-cultural jokes, found no 'significant social consequences', expressing no 'profound moral or existential truths'.¹¹⁴ Grey humour's stony-

109 Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 67; Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 210; Patrick O'Neill, *The Comedy of Entropy: Humour, Narrative, Reading* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1990), 154.

110 Susanne Langer, 'The Comic Rhythm', in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, ed. Corrigan, 119–40 (pp. 119–20).

111 Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 1.

112 Michael Ugarte. 'The Literature of Franco Spain: 1949–1975', in *The Cambridge History of Spanish Literature*, ed. Gies, 611–19 (p. 611).

113 André Breton, 'Lightning Rod', Foreword to *Anthology of Black Humour*, ed. André Breton, trans., with an intro., by Mark Polizzotti (London: Telegram, 2009 [1st French ed. 1940]), xiii–xix (pp. xviii & xvi).

114 See Rudolph Herzog, *Dead Funny: Humor in Hitler's Germany* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 3; and Christie Davies, *Jokes and Targets* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2011), 2.

faced sobriety is lugubrious and heavy going, disclosing but soulless shells of existence. Fernando Larraz concludes that Francoist censorship 'no reaccionó con radicalidad ante [postwar novels] que refutaban el triunfalismo de la victoria', and 'la abulia, la hipocresía ambiental, la fractura social, el trauma interno, solo importaba mientras quedaran limpios de culpa individual los curas, los políticos y los militares'.¹¹⁵ I argue that social realism flourished because its prevalent grey humour revealed but stifling hollowness, eroding fervencies that might actively decry or assuage hardship.

This article examined deadpan humour of pedestrianism and vapidness, paradoxically successful when *failing* to raise full-throated laughs, leaving but ghosts of gags. Reducing its material scope, Sánchez Ferlosio builds art concealing art, resembling American humorists like the late Norm Macdonald, planning 'a book about how to be a stand-up without being funny', and satirist Nathanael West, emphasizing his novels' 'private and unfunny jokes'.¹¹⁶ Comedy scholar Oliver Double shows how comedians ultimately lose patience with deadpan, an unbearable comedic form.¹¹⁷ Nick Holm calls it 'aggressively unremarkable', 'nothing glamorous or ostentatious'.¹¹⁸ Its 'aesthetic withdrawal', eschewing 'clear attribution' of overtly comic qualities, often implicitly supports the *status quo*.¹¹⁹ While Berlant calls deadpan subversive, defying melodramatic overdetermination by privileging importance over intensity, *El Jarama*'s grey humour never crescendos or escalates, instead exhausting and exasperating at an impasse, dimming comic effects.¹²⁰ Might readers grow ironically accustomed to wry pessimism? We do not laugh, but laugh *anyway*—regardless, nevertheless, despite everything. Grey humour offers peculiar challenges, for comedy failing to draw amusement is not by definition tragedy or solemnity, but something else: botched humour once intended as—albeit never truly—humorous. Last-ditch laughter, once wavering, has already evacuated the scene. We must expand generic boundaries to encompass 'comic-kazi', comedy *about the failure of comedy*, for social realism's narrative drag illustrates laughter's laughlessness, and humour's humourlessness. If the 'mission of mirth' is 'replace fear with faith', social realism accentuates the dearth of mirth.¹²¹

115 Larraz, *Letricidio español*, 209.

116 David Marchese, 'Norm Macdonald on Why He's Tired of Trump Satire and the Joke He'll Never Tell Again', *Slate*, 6 June 2017 (<<https://slate.com/culture/2017/06/norm-macdonald-on-trump-satire-and-his-netflix-special.html>> [accessed 4 July 2020]); Nathanael West, letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, 5 April 1939, quoted in Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1970), 334.

117 Oliver Double, *Getting the Joke* (London: Methuen, 2005), 383–84.

118 Holm, 'The Politics of Deadpan in Australasian Satire', 118.

119 Holm, 'The Politics of Deadpan in Australasian Satire', 119 & 114.

120 Berlant, 'Structures of Unfeeling', 197.

121 Stewart Harral, *When It's Laughter You're After* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 31.

Since its release, *El Jarama* has been variously ‘recuperated, tragedized, allegorized’, and read as historical parable.¹²² My humour-based approach offers fresh, divergent readings, creating space for scholarship locating analogous currents across postwar literature; a savagely-funny obituary to Francoist dreams of national flourishing, showing that only *grey* humour was possible in brutal, 1950s Spain.¹²³ The basic disgruntled joke presents itself: why are characters so leaden and dull? Because postwar circumstances offer no alternative. Indeed, despite pervasive tedium, the fact that *El Jarama* remains canonical, in print more than sixty years after its first edition, suggests something rather captivating about its forensic capture of everyday existence. One must caution against elitist implications that the mundane goings-on of ‘unremarkable’ folk should not be the substance of serious fiction.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, I argue that its overwhelming confinement signals but the *cul-de-sac* of comedy, a humour of exhaustive enumeration and agonizingly dull minutiae. Formal circularity marches on the spot, bringing cheerfulness to a deflating, dragging halt. As Herzberger summarizes, ‘the social realists realign the static structures of myth in order to alter the meaning associated with them, but do so without undoing the mythic paradigm itself’.¹²⁵ Despite an ostensibly detached, reassuringly unruffled narrator, laughter at plight is muffled and fractured, and the comedy of qualm and comedown offers nought but accommodation under repression. One early reader suggested that Sánchez Ferlosio only killed Lucita out of boredom.¹²⁶ Ironies of tiresomeness abound, for he would abandon the novel for over four decades.

Bringing new perspectives to a canonical work in Spanish literary history, this article contributes to scholarship on the Spanish novel, social realism, and Humour Studies by introducing grey humour, hardship humour and self-sabotaging ‘comic-kazi’.¹²⁷ Humour of hiatus, hindrance, and hold-up

122 Squires, ‘Making Sense of Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio’s *El Jarama*’, 602. Recently, exemplifying the diversity of scholarly interpretations, Winkel (‘“Ya se aburren de tanta capital”’) considers standardized language and juridical practices.

123 For an overview of Francoist nationalist propaganda, distorting narratives of postwar gloom, see Peter Anderson & Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco, ‘Introduction: Grappling with Spain’s Dark Past’, in *Mass Killings and Violence in Spain, 1936–1952: Grappling with the Past*, ed. Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco & Peter Anderson (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–22 (pp. 4–6).

124 This recalls controversial, pompous critical responses to the ‘Angry Young Men’: British writers of the 1950s similarly dissatisfied with the *status quo*. See Jeffrey S. Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis/London: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2000), 14–16.

125 Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, 44.

126 Pérez, ‘From Experiment to Experience’, 70.

127 My MA thesis, ‘“A pesar de todo, hubo algo cómico en aquello”: Humour in the Postwar Spanish Social Realist Novel’ (Durham University, 2019) (available at <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/13187/>> [accessed 26 November 2021]) analyses grey humour in the

leaves the pitiable funniness of what might have been, accentuating tedium. Vivacious turns vacillating, passionate turns perfunctory, unfolding bathetically:

- 1 Resigned monotony threatens to absorb readers into world-weariness.
- 2 A dash of humour, however deflating, encourages defiance and delight.
- 3 After initial fizz, hopeful 'Yes!', enthusiasm crumbles and implodes, lurching back to tedium:
'Lo and behold ... ! Ah. No. False alarm.'
'Oh, right. No matter, then ... I'll see myself out.'
- 4 Renewed emphasis on grim, low-spirited cheerlessness.

Grey humour abandons wide-eyed passion for lacklustre laughter, resigned Bronx cheer, and drowsy yawn: an amusement of snags, suspensions and stumbling-blocks. Gruner's 'game of humor' posits 'laughter equals winning',¹²⁸ but this is comedy of comedown, defeat and dull ache, saying not 'Come on!' but 'Come away', 'Playtime's over', 'That's enough', 'Call it off'. Defined far more by failure than victory, *El Jarama*'s characters do time, like prisoners, but it would have passed anyway. The rumour of humour says, 'We're all in the same boat—and it's sinking'.*

social-realist novels *Nada*, *La colmena*, *La noria* (Luis Romero, 1951), *La mina* (Armando López Salinas, 1960), *Hemos perdido el sol* (Angel María de Lera, 1964), *Central eléctrica* (Jesús López Pacheco, 1957), *Fiesta al noroeste* (Ana María Matute) and the *oeuvre* of Luis Fernández Santos and Ignacio Aldecoa. Further work might examine bittersweet comedy of failure in Orwell (such as in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* [1936] and *Coming Up for Air* [1939]) and Beckett's aforementioned prose.

128 Gruner, *The Game of Humor*, 8.

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