

**Alison Moore, University of Lincoln, 16<sup>th</sup> Feb, 2011. Humanities Research Seminar**

**"Representations of the Laboratory Animal in Popular Media Forms" <sup>1</sup>**

Steve Baker argued back in 1993 that attitudes to animals are in part formed through engagement with popular culture (1993/2001:25) so we should therefore not ignore the potential of this domain for shaping animal lives. But how can popular culture really do anything for the 'laboratory' animal? Particularly, how can comedic representations do anything to shape their lives?

As we all know, animal experiment is the subject of often passionately held beliefs. And even if you don't feel passionately about it, as it's understood that it *might* involve deliberate harm to living creatures, but for what it is argued are good reasons, thinking about it is enough to bring on a headache. So it's one of those things it's preferable not to think about at all. As Jacky Turner points out, animal rights campaigners often find that people 'don't want to see pictures' as they upset them too much (1998: 28). Even in scientific journals, Turner maintains, animal experiment is distanced in language and image (1998: 36 - 7), making the animal experience close to invisible. It's also difficult to engage with fictional texts which address the issue overtly – and I've been discussing this with Kate Hill – because choosing to *deliberately* read about or view animal experiment for leisure and entertainment can engender a strong sense of transgression, as well as distress. The issue is then, tabooed.

So, when it's so difficult to be serious about it, should we really be laughing at it? I argue that we should, and, moreover, propose that the conjunction of comedy and animal experiment comprises an underestimated area in terms of potential for animal experiment discussion by those who represent animals. I'm going to demonstrate first how, popping up in all kinds of humorous contexts, the lab animals has developed into a familiar comedic concept over the years, one that at times appears to have lost its own identity. I will then argue that this need not be the case, depending on how the opportunity to respond is used.

Representation of the laboratory animal in non-scientific forms is not new. Indeed there are examples from the 1600s; however, they really begin to proliferate in the mid 1800s as a result of the increasingly common use of animal experiment, and the equally increasing

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper represents a working-through of my responses to some of the materials I have encountered while researching animal experiment texts. As such, it is a development of my own position in relation to the contexts in which animal experiment is depicted and discussed, rather than 'results'.

opposition to it. And the purpose of all the early texts is simply to show and tell; whether in praise or protest, or fact or fiction. And while show and tell remains initially the main driver, it's not long before humour starts to appear. For instance, *The Gland Stealers*, which has been called a 'bitter-sweet comedy' arrived in 1922; author Bernard Gayton's response to the neurosurgical practice of implanting pieces of monkey glands in men in order to restore the latters' youth (Fudge, 2009:18). The earliest cartoon I've located so far is one from 1927 which takes animal experimentation literally (it depicts animals experimenting on a scientist).

Within the humour, gradually there appear changes in the reason for animal experiment appearing in the text. For instance, the 1925 novel *Heart of a Dog*, in which a stray dog is the victim of an experiment where his testicles and pituitary gland are replaced with those of a man, is argued to use the concept not to critique animal experiment, but as a metaphor for political change in Russia (Haber, 1998: 216 - 7). We see this same metaphor use much more recently in the 2004 animation *I Am Not an Animal*, a satire on consumer culture which I will discuss later.

It isn't long before we also begin to see the lab animal used simply as a plot vehicle, an early example for instance is the unlikely Bugs Bunny. In the 1946 cartoon *Hare Remover*, Elmer Fudd takes to the role of experimenter, using his own animals, and when they quite literally run out, trying to capture and use Bugs. There is no purposive critique of animal experiment here - this is simply a tool for high jinks. Lab animal as a plot device appears repeatedly up to the present day, for instance in *The Year of the Angry Rabbit, 1964*, an Australian novel involving giant genetically modified bunnies, which lampoons empire building, brinkmanship, and capitalism in equal measures. The roll call also includes *Garfield*, where in this 1986 text which documents his nine lives he is experimented upon by the military before escaping (giving him a life-long aversion to needles). Although we are discussing comedy here, paradoxically, while this Garfield caper appears in a funny cartoon book, it is one of only two 'lives' in the book that one cannot find humour within. Other plot device examples are the long-running *Pinky and the Brain* (1995) whose intention on every show was to escape from their cage and try to take over the world; and the recent *G-Force* wherein guinea pigs are not only subject to experiment in the form of superspy training (at the hands of a *kindly* FBI agent by the way), but subsequently are deemed dangerous, and scheduled for experimentation and death. Needless to say as it's a family film, this they avoid.

An extension to the plot device use is animal experiment as consumer concept, for instance in the 2005 Egg Money advert, which will be discussed later. It has also appeared very recently on the TV channel VIVA's inserts wherein Tyrone the cat has programmes tested upon him, upon which he in turn passes comment. His opening comments are that what he is doing is preferable to testing nicotine patches.

Through these extensions from representation as statement about itself to metaphor, plot vehicle and finally consumer concept, animal experiment has in these humorous texts, transformed from an issue significant for itself to something incorporated as a normal part of the fabric of society. Certainly the texts all the way back to Bugs which just use the lab animal for convenience, seem to indicate that it's simply an off-the-peg trope which serves a purpose, providing protagonists with something to react to and providing humour – it rarely merits reaction or comment. By the time we reach the Egg Money advert, the makers' confidence in so overtly using the lab setting indicates that they understand this representation will not be an issue at all for their audiences. It is simply part of the commodity package. So these texts seem to mark an increasing depoliticisation, where from a Barthesian perspective one could argue that the lab animal becomes increasingly emptied of its significance (in a similar way to the science journals mentioned earlier).

As always in media and cultural studies, I think it's a bit more complicated than that. Even though it seems counterintuitive, the humour is doing useful work here. In humour we find those things that society is uncomfortable with worked out: taboos like animal experiment for instance - even if in an incidental manner. So I want to concentrate on this now and deliberate on what purposes humour is serving here, and then move to consider how it could be more productive, if responded to differently.

If, as has been claimed by Anton Zijderveld, "Jokes provide a mirror image of a culture's sense of morality" (1982, in Billig, 2005: 152), then it seems the bulk of comedic texts which feature lab animals express a sense that animal experiment is wrong: one may not agree that they should express that idea, but that's not the point here. The Egg Money advert is one of very few popular media texts that have an obviously pro- (or at least not anti-) experiment bias: most comedic and indeed non-comedic texts, on balance, appear to have an anti-experiment disposition. Garfield, Bugs Bunny, Sharik in *Heart of a Dog*, Pinky and Brain, Paulie the Parrot and the many other Hollywood animal experiment representatives I haven't

listed, even the rats on this birthday card (demonstrated), are all shown to be subject to things that ultimately are bad for them.

So what? First, in “real” life, the dominant discourse is that animal experiment is benevolent, a ‘good thing’ for people, and, particularly in the case of medical research, opinion polls suggest that many people agree. Agreeing does not, however, relieve the conceptual headache-giving difficulties I mentioned at the start. Second, animal experiment is usually unseen. So these highly accessible popular cultural texts make present and seen an opposing argument, offering a loud, visible animal howl of ‘not fair!’ Here they act as an outlet for the undercurrent of conscience, using what Freud might term as ‘tendentious’ jokes (in Billig, 2005: 153) to express “something that cannot directly be uttered because there are social restrictions against such expression” (Billig, 2005: 154). Taken as a whole then, comic popular culture representations arguably act on a macro level to speak from what is imagined to be an animal perspective which says, ‘We do not want to be experimented upon’. Now of course, once inside a text, the issue becomes messy and it’s not so clear what meaning may be taken from it, as I will demonstrate. Nonetheless there is a sustained voice here from the animal end of things which, while prodding us with tension-easing humour, inevitably functions to remind the public of that tension. Jokes, according to Critchley, are acts of “everyday anamnesis” reminding us of what we already know, but in a new way (2002: 86). If humour allows lab animal to keep turning up then, to break free of the earnest and zealous texts we don’t want to read or see, whether part of a plot, a consumer concept or indeed as metaphor, their appearance is a reminder of the animals that we choose not to see, or cannot (as Claire Molloy suggests – the ‘absent referents’ are made visible (2009: 24)).

Yet there is a difficulty. Reminding is one thing, but moving the debate forwards another. Yes, some kinds of humour, like parody, “are good for demolishing dogma, but not for constructively offering alternatives to it” (Stott 2005:118). So audiences may be prodded into thinking but not rethinking about lab animals. And this is where I think there is a gap that could be filled by those who act as intermediaries: those who speak on behalf of animals themselves. To demonstrate why I think this way, I’m going to discuss briefly some examples of texts where laughing at lab animals has been seen as a problem, and contrast with one where it hasn’t.

The first text is *Whiplash*, a Playstation 2 game, in which a weasel and a rabbit, manacled together, escape from a seemingly impenetrable animal lab; however, the only weapon the weasel has to bash enemies with is the rabbit. This game received much fuss in the press, drawing complaints from the RSPCA who said it trivialised animal suffering and that it was wrong to make a joke out of it; the Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology and the Research Defense Society complained too, on the grounds that it gave a warped view of animal experiment (McComb and Mickleburgh, 2004). The game's makers claimed they wanted to raise awareness of animal testing (*ibid*), although the internet developer release (e.g. see Gamezone, 2003) suggests to me it was as much about creating the winning formula of children plus animals versus nasty adults equals success. This text is more complex though than the headlines and soundbite statements imply. For instance, Redmond the indestructible bunny is used as a weapon, but after a while it's easy to forget it's a rabbit and it just becomes a tool. The rabbit wisecracks his way through continuous violent abuse, joking about both experiments and pain. The guards inflict hair-raising violence on the creatures frequently, but the animals do likewise to humans. These animated animals have agency, intent, a sense of their own being, but nevertheless are yours to control. Sometimes, as a calm in the mayhem, the action stops totally for statements about the wrongness of animal experimentation to be made by a god-like character. On the other hand, this *is a game*, so why would anyone take a 'hamster cannon' experiment seriously anyway: aren't they likely to think that things like that aren't done in real life? We can see in these few quite easy to pick, fairly superficial examples that the humorous context extends the range of things that can be seen and said about lab animals. Rather than being a dismissable trivialisation, there are multiple ideas available here clamouring for attention.

A text which raised similar complaint was the BBC animation *I Am Not an Animal* referred to earlier, in which the world's only talking animals, who live a pampered, blissfully ignorant existence in the luxury wing of a secluded animal testing lab, are set free by a bungling animal rights group. In their sealed off life, the animals have their every whim catered for, including the provision of celebrity magazines and haute cuisine, and they spend their time obsessing about fashion, stardom and culture, and dreaming of going to London. When they are freed, the real world turns out to be much at odds with what they imagined. The text is a satire on people's preoccupation with lifestyle, celebrity, consumerism and their ability to opine on things they know nothing about. Again, criticism came, this time from the British

Union of Anti-Vivisectionists, the group's spokesperson maintaining that it was not a responsible act to broadcast this kind of representation of the lives of lab animals (Burrell, 2004)<sup>2</sup>. But again, this text is a web of competing messages. True, these creatures are depicted as pampered, but the rest of the facility is full of cramped cages and disturbed animals. True, fun is made of animal experiments, for instance there is a rabbit with a head implant that means he can only speak call-centre jargon. There are also moments where the ideas are so awful, that situated within a sandwich of comedy, they emerge as strange silences which shock in the otherwise noisy animation. Simon Critchley identifies a coldness at the heart of humour; when a joke is presented with "a lack of sentimentality [...] it has the effect of emphasising the sheer horror of the events being depicted" (2002: 88). We can see this very clearly here (PP slide shows experimented-upon cows being milked for face cream and paint). And finally, on the other, other hand the whole narrative is driven by the idea that the animals want to go back to the lab as they are unable to cope in the real world. Again this is too internally riven to be dismissed.

I want to now contrast these with another recent fun-poking context which raised no concerns.

The Egg Money campaign in a jokey way set humanised guinea pigs in a lab as their credit card spending was observed. Despite the lack of gore and violence, there is room to say that the Egg campaign trivialises animal experiment just as much as either of the two other texts; after all, the intention is that we do laugh at this 'experiment'. There is also room to say that it's quite complex in its discourse: after all, it seems to imply that lab guinea pigs live a life of comfort, and that lab animals can do as they please, but cannot cope without the help of science. It offers openings for much to be said about appropriate living environments, and once more, it frames the animals as being self-determined. A rare plus for the pro-experiment lobby is that it also offers up the argument that not every experiment is painful and that scientists are quite nice really. On the other hand, it sets the experiment in a fairly impenetrable-looking building – not the usual sinister lair by any means, but all the same seeming to recognise the conventional secrecy of animal experiment. Yet this advert series saw no objection or indeed mention from animal rights groups nor indeed scientists. And I'm fairly sure, though I haven't yet been able to confirm this, that no one has complained about

---

<sup>2</sup> After writing the paper, it emerged that one of the major animal rights groups (PETA) had written a letter of support to *I Am Not an Animal's* makers, comparing this to aspects of the film *Life is Beautiful* (1997) (Searle, 2011). There appears to have been no public discussion of this view though.

VIVA's Tyrone the cat and trivialisation of animal experiment there either. Incidentally, importantly, the Egg series was shown in prime-time slots between programmes such as *Coronation St*, and *Lost*, *Hollyoaks*, *X Factor* and *The Simpsons* (Thinkbox, 2011) so would have had greater reach than the niche IANAA and indeed the PS2 game.

Why are these complexities worth pointing out? As mentioned earlier, while comedy can raise a profile or demolish ideas, it has been argued to be unable to change things. Yet, for me, at least it starts the discussion ball rolling. Humour like the famous beer, can reach the parts other genres cannot reach; offering a negotiation strategy wherein taboo can be put on the agenda, in order to be dealt with seriously even after the actual joke is over (Emerson, 1969, in Palmer 1994: 60). This has been a very quick flick through a few texts, but even so, enough to see that there are potentially rich pickings amongst the ideas expressed that could be responded to; they do indeed signal complex issues that may not be seen at all otherwise. So my issue is not with the texts themselves but responses to them. My first problem is with statements that *only* denounce and condemn, which practice, I'd argue, closes doors rather than open them. The joke in the first pair of texts shown here is to a great extent embedded in violence, the humour sometimes of the 'gross-out' variety; but the kinds of 'experiment', the living conditions, the secrecy and the agency which are part of the fabric of these texts surely open avenues not for claims of trivialisation but for comparison with and sustained discussion about the real lives of lab animals. My second problem, the thing that disturbs me more, is with non-reactions: those silences where it seems to me that there are opportunities. What about texts like the Egg ad, which offers much potential in thinking through the cute pet/lab animal divide, that engender no 'official' response at all? What about the raft of other untransgressive, gently funny equally potentially rich texts (only a few of which I've mentioned) which pass by quietly? Outraged reactions at least say something; silence suggests, albeit unintentionally, that there is nothing here to comment upon.

For me, neither state of affairs is satisfactory. These kinds of texts potentially offer openings to discuss rationally the multiple and sometimes contradictory messages within. It isn't enough to refrain from comment because a text is *not* shocking, or because it's too populist: indeed it would seem to be more necessary, for if those who speak for animals don't respond to apparently benign but erroneous representation, who will? And it isn't enough to be sidetracked into dismissal either. This is to dishonour the internal labyrinth of the popular cultural text. In the first case, the workings of popular media are not taken seriously enough;

in the second, too seriously. Stott argues that, “the interaction of two categories that common sense tell us are diametrically opposed” may have potential to deepen or widen understanding of the issue at hand (2005: 113). In this case the opposition between humour and animal experiment is clear, but potential is wasted if someone isn’t there to open the door, shove a foot through and start to engage with the public who consume these popular texts, in relation to the multiple issues raised therein. It is quite possible that that more discussion of these texts *is* made in magazines and websites of animal-related organisations. However, these tend to speak to those who are already supporters, and so a wider possible impact may not be facilitated. Engagement with the public using these kinds of texts as start point, through the media and educational materials, is possible. Of course, one still has, at some point, to start getting down to the detail, where even those who consume gross-out animations may not want to go. But more awareness of the many points of entry to debate here by those who speak for animals, might engage more ears and eyes. So yes, we can and we should laugh loud and openly at this strange and difficult issue of animal experiment – but also expect those who have the means, to see the complex popular cultural text as a tool, then respond to the issues and not the emotion, wherever and however it is presented.



## Bibliography

- Billig, M. (2005) *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, London: Sage
- Baker, S. (1993/2001) *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press
- Burrell, I. (2004) “Coogan in trouble over cartoon’s pampered lab animals”. *The Independent*, 24/3/4 [online]. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/coogan-in-trouble-over-cartoons-pampered-lab-animals-567460.html>> [Accessed 12/12/10]
- Critchley, S. (2002) *On Humour*, London: Routledge
- Fudge, Erica (2009) “At the Heart of the Home: An Animal Reading of Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Heart of a Dog*”, *Humanimalia*, 1:1, pp. 10 – 23
- Gamezone (2003) “Whiplash Developer Diary – News”, 6/11/3. <[http://www.gamezone.com/news/item/whiplash\\_developer\\_diary/](http://www.gamezone.com/news/item/whiplash_developer_diary/)> [accessed 21/12/10]
- Haber, E. C. (1998) *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Early Years*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- McComb, R. and Mickleburgh, R. (2004) “Free the animals, smash up the lab and chain whip policemen: this is the latest video game for children”. *The Telegraph*, 15/2/4 [online]. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1454393/.html>> [accessed 21/12/10]
- Molloy, C. (2009) “Experimental: The visibility of experimental animals”, in *Popular Media and Animal Ethics*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (in press)
- Palmer, J. (1994) *Taking Humour Seriously*, London: Routledge
- Searle, T. (2011) Peter Baynham Enquiry. 2/2/11. Email to A. Moore (almoore@lincoln.ac.uk)
- Stott, A. (2005) *Comedy: The New Critical Idiom*, London: Routledge
- Thinkbox (2011) “Egg puts its guinea pigs on TV”. Thinkbox <<http://www.thinkbox.tv/server/show/ConCaseStudy.276>> [Accessed 21/12/10]
- Turner, J. (1998) “ ‘I don’t want to see the pictures’: science writings and the visibility of animal experiments”, *Public Understanding of Science*, 7.1: 27 - 40