

Research In Practice

Humour, Loss & Togetherness

Proposed question for Independent Project (Part One in Independent Project in Year Three)

‘Does Graphic Design impact the outlook of death within British Culture’

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Ba (Hons) Graphic Designer

Word Count: 2485

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Introduction

Within this written piece I will be discussing and engaging with the three keywords of Humour, Loss & Togetherness. Using these words as a guide, I will be exploring how they can be connected to one another; and analyse topics within these keywords to form a research question that will be used as a catalyst for the creation of my Independent Inquiry. I will be looking at the following artists: David Shrigley (Humour), José Guadalupe Posada (Loss) & Jean Honore Fragonard (Togetherness) whilst also including the following thinkers; Ricky Gervais (Humour), Dr. Yasmin Gunaratnam (Loss) & Celine Dion (Togetherness), to support my writing.

Humour

“The ability to find things funny, the way in which people see that some things are funny, or the quality of being funny” – Cambridge Dictionary Online (2022)

Humour is a subject that is entirely simple to understand, and yet, an in-depth look at this topic shows us how expansive it can be. Humour can be diverse across nations, political views, gender, race and individual households; Personally, my family have an in-joke that others just frankly wouldn't understand. Even as we grow older, we begin to understand further complex types of humour, peek-a-boo to knock-knock jokes, sarcasm, puns, double entendre, the list goes on and on. Marianne Jackson (2021) notes that the understanding of Humour is a capability that begins to emerge between the ages of 7 and 11 years, this is in tune with a child's level of cognitive growth. The subjective beauty of humour gives life to a plethora of jokes each with its own history and evolution, humour's branches and stems stretch far and wide.

However, with some of these branches come nasty spores, arguably, a recent spark of political correctness within the world of comedy has shaken the industry. A new revolution has stepped forth asking comedians take responsibility for their jokes and be more aware at sensitive subjects they may target. Although, there are jokes that have always been grey areas, I think it is fair to say that socially we are significantly more careful when expressing gags, as the construct of political correctness makes us situationally more aware of those around us. This recent surge of political correctness has also caused comics to even debate one another. Comedian, James Acaster (2021), called out Ricky Gervais in his 'Cold Lasagne

Hate Myself 1999' live set stating that comics that are described as 'Edgy' use the term as a leg to stand on to target controversial subject matter, in this case, the transgender community. From this perspective, Paul Clements argues that "Humour is employed to malign, ridicule and belittle the excluded in a superior fashion and there is some degree of determinism, with social inequalities reproduced through its use." (Paul Clements, 2021, p184)

Whilst Gervais has been a favourite comedian of mine for many years, it's clear to say that Acaster and Clements are correct and the scrutiny that some of these comics are facing is justified. However, I'd like to call back to a Q&A that was held in Oxford Union, 2017, where Gervais was center stage. In this Q&A, when being asked if comedians need to be more sensitive and hold back during the modern-day; Gervais (2017) states that people seem to stick him in a similar box of shock comedians who purposefully go out of their way to hurt people's feelings to make others laugh as well as internet trolls that run rampant harassing and target people with no rhyme or reason. He is never trying to offend and doesn't consider himself a controversial comedian, this is due to the fact that he touches on taboo subjects and people often confuse the subject of the joke with the target.

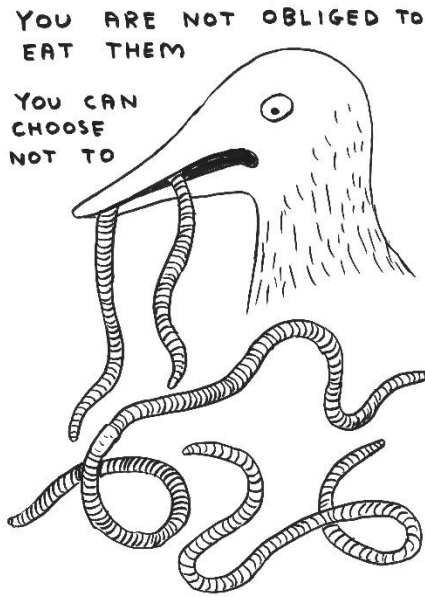


Figure. 1 Shrigley D. (2018)
Untitled (Not obliged to eat them)

Sometimes however, the subject and target of a joke is necessary no matter how controversial. Respectfully, David Shrigley's artwork can easily be compared to the modern-day internet act of 'Shitposting' which is defined by Cambridge Dictionary as

"Something put on the internet that is not especially funny or interesting and does not make much sense, or does not have anything to do with what is being discussed, especially in order to make it difficult for other people to discuss something"

(Cambridge Dictionary Online, 2022)

The direction of Shrigley's work is entirely random although, he has previously targeted politicians and controversial topics such as additional troops sent to the War in Afghanistan 2009. In an interview with Mono Kultur, Shrigley (2007) notes that he may step over a certain line but sometimes it's a risk worth taking. For example, the way in which that the war in the Middle East is accounted for, shows a real lack of empathy with other human beings, this thought process is what led him to create his controversial cartoon, '*More US Troops to Afghanistan*'



Figure. 2 Shrigley D. (2009)
More US Troops to Afghanistan

After analysing the word Humour, I have learnt that humour can be more than just a joke, it can be used as a great tool when tackling topics that may be considered political and taboo. On the other hand I have also discovered that many use Humour as a destructive tool, this is done when Humour is used with no main subject or point of interest and focusses on a target, it is then disguised as edgy humour. This could influence me by using terms such as taboo, political correctness and edgy humour when coming up with my research question

Loss

“The fact that you no longer have something or have less of something” – Cambridge Dictionary Online (2022)

Breaking down and contextualising Loss I will be focussing on the subject relative to the loss of 'someone' opposed to 'something'. I have a great interest in how different cultures have evolved to 'celebrate' the death of loved ones, from this point I will draw upon the stark differences between these cultures. Firstly, I will be taking a look at Día de Muertos also known as the Day of the Dead. A glance at the official Mexican Museum website, page author, Blanca Bercial (2022), tells us that although the tradition originated within Mexico but is celebrated across the globe in Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru, Guatemala & Haiti. Day of the Dead is traditionally celebrated by Altars, these Altars are made "to honour the returning souls" on the two days in which the holiday takes place, each Alter is personalised to cater to the lost souls it intends to reach. The holiday is significant for its awareness of the symbiotic partnership that coincides between life and death. This outlook dates back more than 3000 years ago. This is proven when looking at the 'Day of the Dead Curriculum handbook for teachers' written by Bea Carillo Hocker (1988) and published by the Mexican



Figure. 3 Sculpture of Life and Death, Zapotec Culture, A.D. 600 – 900, Oaxaca, Mexico

Museum, she presents us with a sculpture created by the Zapotec Culture, the sculpture is said to date back to 600-900 A.D. Carillo Hocker explains in this passage that:

"One side represents a human face and the other the fleshless face of death. In the pre-Hispanic mind, life and death were perceived not as opposites but as two complementary parts which formed the complete cycle of life"

(Carillo Hocker, 1988, p.8)

This celebratory outlook on the cycle of life even continues with those that pass prematurely, within the book 'Death in America' written by Patricia Fernandez Kelly (1974) it states that in the unfortunate event in which a child becomes deceased, the burial of that child is not often met with expressions of pain or sadness, this is due to the fact that the child, likely, has never sinned, thus they are immediately sent to God. They are then given a new life and a new role in the family as a protector labelled as 'angelitos' that are noted as saints. The atmosphere of funerals within Mexico is vastly contrasting to those that take place within European countries, Fernandez Kelly expresses to us that "death is to be seen with a touch of humour in order that the psychological burden it implies may be lessened." (Fernandez Kelly, 1974, p.109)

When we take this information into account, we further understand the reasoning and logic behind this tradition and can now fully dive into its imagery inspired by José Guadalupe Posada who Juan Fuentes (2019) describes as "the most important and celebrated Mexican printmaker to take the pulse of Mexico's daily life from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century" (Fuentes, 2019, pp.44-46). Referencing back to Bercial (2022), The skull imagery that dominates Día de Muertos, is heavily influenced by Guadalupe Posada's satirical cartoons made throughout The Mexican Revolution until his death in 1913, of these was the Calavera Catrina. Each calavera was followed by a literary

calavera which were poems that draw comparisons of social classes highlighting that death is the only certainty. The most notable of these was 'La Calavera Catrina'.



Figure. 4 La Calavera Catrina, José Guadalupe Posada (1910-13) Zinc

Reading the article 'Death matters – so why do the British hate talking about it?', written by Dr Yasmin Gunaratnam (2015) we can achieve a general idea as to what separates these cultures when it comes to loss. Within Dr Gunaratnam's (2015) article, it is stated that 83% of people thought that the British were uncomfortable talking about dying and death, in Gunaratnam's own experiences, she found that pain and pain relief is variable in faith, generation and ethnicity. From this we can debate that a history of British culture in terms of faith has indefinitely impacted our outlook on death as a nation. Attempts at a more spiritual approach has also become trivial when analysing the novel 'Death in the Victorian

family' written by Patricia Jalland (1996) it reveals to us that the belief of Spiritualism rose through 1900 to the 1950's, mostly due to the impact of 2 World War's, and joining members of spiritualist groups has been on a steady decline ever since.

After analysing the word Loss, I can conclude that death is viewed predominantly differently across a board range of cultures, most notably in this body of writing, British and Mexican culture. I can use this information to explore avenues in which death can be viewed more casually by way of visual communication.

Togetherness

"The pleasant feeling of being united with other people in friendship and understanding" – Cambridge Dictionary Online (2022)

Examining the definition of togetherness, it's easy to correlate such a term with Family, as Thomas Jefferson once said in a letter to his daughter, "I know no happiness but when we are all together" (Jefferson, 1800). I agree with this statement as I've had a significant bond with my family and extended family that has only grown stronger as the years grow. This, in turn, is what inspired me to write about this keyword. Breaking down this keyword, I will be

discussing how togetherness is unaffected regardless of situation. From this point, we can support this case with a painting by Jean Honoré Fragonard entitled 'The Happy Family'.



Figure. 5 The Happy Family, Jean Honoré Fragonard, 1775

As you can see, within this painting a family portrayed in a dim house with little to no lighting inside aside from what could be a fireplace on the lower right-hand side of the house. There also only appears to be a singular window that includes shutters, these are things that help us draw to the conclusions that this family is impoverished. This is reinforced in the book 'Economic and Social Conditions in France During the Eighteenth Century' by Henri Sée as he states:

“The material existence of the peasants was still quite miserable, even at the end of the ancien régime. Their dwelling-places were altogether inadequate. Most of them were built of mud, covered with thatch, and having only a single low room without a ceiling. The windows were small and had no glass.” (Sée, 1968, p.27)

We can see that the family is tight knit and happy despite their situation, they live a simple life and if they have each other that's all that matters. From this point, I would like to discuss my thinker for this keyword, Celine Dion. According to Dion's (2022) online biography, born in Québec, Dion was one of 14 children from her parents Thérèse Tanguay and Adhémar Dion. It states that Dion's family “was a humble one of modest means, but never lacked for love” (Dion, 2022). The family was heavily influenced by music and even formed a group that would perform concerts in the local area. In an interview with Ross King for *Lorraine*, Dion (2019) states that her childhood home was full of instruments such as a piano, drums, guitar and even an accordion. Her siblings were her first influences of the music industry growing up. This sense of togetherness was a catalyst for Celene Dion, and her career ambitions and her family's background was diminished in terms of what was possible.

It's hard to debate togetherness, we all feel it even when we're with people other than family, and the term is unifying regardless of emotional circumstances. Togetherness is the perfect word to tie into this piece of writing, alongside both Humour and Loss. These topics coincide with another, and when we look at these words with a wider perspective you could argue that they could all come under the meaning as an expression of Love.

Closing on the keyword of Togetherness, I have learnt that togetherness is unaltered by the state of a family's living conditions and can even increase the bond of some families.

Through visual communication it would be very powerful to answer a question that follows the basis of Love, Background and Family.

Conclusion

Through my analysis of my keywords Humour, Loss and Togetherness, I have found additional key words that can help me pursue my research question. As my question will be answered through the means of Graphic Design it would be beneficial to me research into a question that proposes visual communication as an answer. For that reason, my chosen research question is 'Does Graphic Design impact the outlook of death within British Culture?'. To answer this question, I can look at how Humour may be used as a catalyst to change the mentality of the public eye when it comes to the passing of their loved ones. This could come in the form of a sub-question like 'How can Visual Communication & Humour be used to alter perspective?'. It will also be worth to research into how Togetherness through Loss may be strengthened or even broken down through Humour. Furthermore, it will be beneficial to further analyse key words such as Religion, Satire, Taboo, Generations, Love and Political Correctness when exploring my research question further next year.

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Image reference:

Fig. 1 Shrigley. D. (2018) *Unknown (Not obliged to eat them)* Available at: <http://davidshrigley.com/category/drawing-painting/> (Accessed: 22/04/22)

Fig. 2 Shrigley. D. (2009) *More US Troops to Afghanistan* Available at: <http://davidshrigley.com/political-cartoons/> (Accessed: 22/04/22)

Fig. 3 Unknown (600-900) *Sculpture of Life and Death*, Zapotec Culture, A.D. 600 – 900, Available at: https://www.mexicanmuseum.org/files/ugd/3c65c2_96f02656a6294a7d9fbc830a5b6fb782.pdf (Accessed: 23/04/22)

Fig. 4 Posada, J. G. (1920), *La Calavera Catrina*, Lithograph, Available at: <https://www.thegracemuseum.org/online-learning-blog/2020/11/2/la-catrina-a-history> (Accessed: 23/04/22)

Fig. 5 Fragonard, J. H. (1775) *The Happy Family* [Oil On Canvas] Available at: <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46036.html> (Accessed: 24/04/22)