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The Rise and Fall of 'Naked Man'

Abstract

'The Adventures of Naked Man' made the transition from a newspaper in Melbourne, to one in Wellington, in late 1999. The competition's protagonist is the sole naked person in a drawn setting where, because of some convenient object or body position, his penis is obscured from sight. The newspaper's readers were invited to submit a caption to accompany the weekly adventure, the goal being to produce humour. Very quickly, Naked Man built up a devoted following; nevertheless, a little over a year later he met his demise, simply failing to reappear in the newspaper after the Christmas break. This article draws on the full corpus of Naked Man settings and captions, describing the variety of ways in which humour is made from this relatively simple resource. Although a great deal of the article is descriptive, there are theoretical points to the inquiry: first, it shows intricate connections between visual and language realms; second, it has interesting relevance to renewed calls for a social critique of humour.

Introduction

Within the human studies, humour has been approached in three main ways: we have sought to collect, explain, or critique. There is substantial overlap, nevertheless various disciplines can be easily positioned within each category. Folklorists are the best example of the will to collect humour, psychologists and linguists are predominant in the will to explain, and a much wider range of disciplines have engaged a will to critique humour. The latter includes sociologists, critical discourse analysts, feminists, and cultural/media studies scholars. Because of the diversity of social critics there is as yet no consensus on exactly how humour should be critiqued, just a strong agreement that in principle humour can be a negative force that deserves criticism. This general and somewhat speculative outlook from the social critics of humour has more recently been supplemented by work that pays close

attention to how humour is produced, interpreted, and coordinated in naturally occurring situations. In short, work that attempts to link theory with detailed empirical analysis of the complexities of humour. Much of this new work stems from the 'linguistic' (Rorty 1967) or 'practice' (Schatzki, Knorr Cetina & von Savigny 2001) turns in the social sciences. For example, Billig has recently utilised a critical discourse analysis approach in studying racist humour (2001b) and the relationship between humour and shame/embarrassment (2001a). Others similarly argue that humour researchers must pay close attention to the specifics of discourse (for example, see Glenn's (2003a; 2003b) conversation analytic studies of laughter in interaction, and Crawford (2003), Fish (2002), Greatbatch & Clark (2003), Kothoff (2006), Holmes (2000), and Norrick (1993)). Studies like these constitute an important addition to the predominantly speculative nature of most critical studies of humour.

My aim here is to make a modest contribution to this newly emerging strand of humour research. Reflecting the need for greater attention to empirical detail, the article centres upon the description and analysis of a text-based humorous corpus – 'The Adventures of Naked Man'. In brief, this was a newspaper competition where readers submitted captions to fit a previously presented drawn scenario featuring one naked man amongst clothed others. Naked Man's penis was never drawn as it was always obscured by some other object, this 'absent presence', to borrow a term from Shilling (1993: 113), being a key means by which the competition became a 'dick joke'. As one commentator noted it was 'perhaps the longest running dick joke in publishing history' (Maloney 2005). The discourse of the competition will be described more fully below, but as a beginning point it should be clear that this competition invites social critique. The display of the penis can be a familiar power-play in contemporary culture, whether as 'flashing', or the more common addition of penis-graffiti onto readily available media like billboards, walls, or signposts. And as Morgan is careful to note, even if modern man is more concerned to hide his penis, this 'does not necessarily signify a straightforward reduction of embodied power ... [for] power as much resides in the control of bodily activities as it does in the overt deployment of the body' (1993: 76).

Thus, questions to do with gender, embodiment, and power seem to demand attention when considering the Naked Man competition.

Given this context I want to make it very clear what approach I am adopting here. I follow very closely a research strategy recommended by Miller and McHoul who argue that

[we] can benefit most from beginning with actual cultural texts in their ordinary historical and everyday places *before* political and theoretical speculations are brought to bear upon them, *before* they are turned into mere artefacts of social criticism.

And we even suspect that, once treated in this way, the value to them of critical speculations will often seem quite minimal in the light of their own complexities and peculiarities. (1998: 180, original emphasis)

To do justice to the view that the everyday humour presented here has its own 'complexities and peculiarities' considerable attention to detail is required. In order to understand the popularity of Naked Man (hereafter abbreviated to NM), we need to closely interrogate the materials of the competition itself. Many within the social sciences would take this to be a 'micro' perspective, however, it is no longer adequate to trot out the 'macro-micro' distinction as a good way to understand differences of social scale (see Latour 2005). Of course, the NM competition is situated in a particular society of a particular kind, and this could be important, but we need to be careful about using this to impose interpretations upon the material. As Latour has recently put it

To be a good sociologist one should refuse to go up, to take a larger view, to compile huge vistas! Look down, you sociologists. Be even more blind, even more narrow, even more down to earth, even more myopic. ...The 'big picture', the one that is provided by that typical gesture of sociologists – drawing with their hands in the air a shape no bigger than a pumpkin – is always simpler and more localised than the myriad monads it expresses only in part: it could not be without them, but without it, they would still be something. (2002: 124)

Armed with such a view, I want to describe the details of the NM competition. Given space constraints, there has to be a limit to this description, but it is only once some description is provided that I want

to move on to broach the issue of whether a social analysis of this material has to be critical in nature.

Background: A short history, and how it works

The story of NM begins in Melbourne in 1998 with Robert Gott, a schoolteacher with strong artistic skills. He explains that he was looking for a pop drawing to put on his wall:

I loved those drawings from the 20s and 30s from boys' and girls' annuals. I did one and blew it up very large. It looked good but there was something missing. I just thought, what if I take the clothes off one of the figures? Maybe that will breathe some new life into those drawings. And it did. So I did half a dozen of them. They just looked funny. (Hawkins 2000)

Gott felt the drawings cried out for a caption, so he took them to his local newspaper - *The Melbourne Age* - which used them in the form of a competition where readers submitted a caption to go with each drawing. It was so successful it became a regular weekly offering and is still carried by *The Age*, eight years later.

However, this Australian beginning is not the material that forms the empirical corpus discussed here. Tom Gott, living in Wellington, heard of the success of the NM competition and suggested to his brother that they take NM to a local newspaper. Shortly thereafter the New Zealand version began: 'The Adventures of Naked Man' first appeared in *The Evening Post* in late 1999. On the front page of the October 2nd Saturday edition, in a boxed-guide to contents, there was a small drawing of a naked man and a football. The following invitation was issued:

TALLY HO! It's time for the Adventures of Naked Man.

Today in Saturday Magazine we introduce Naked Man, and you'll be seeing a lot of him over the coming weeks. Naked Man is an all-action chap who moves in his Boys' Own-style world untroubled by the fact that a hat and pair of shoes are his only nod to modesty. From having fun with his chums at school

to his adult adventures, Naked Man has refused to surrender to the tyranny of wearing trousers. The Evening Post invites its readers to provide a caption for each of his adventures, the first of which appears on p.12.

On page 12 the sketch depicted NM and three schoolgirls walking up some steps towards a building entrance. None of the schoolgirls look directly at him. Accompanying the sketch are the editors' instructions (reproducing much of the extract above), a note that the competition winner receives a \$50 book voucher, and a one-sentence guide for approaching the scenario: 'For his first outing in The Post, Naked Man joins the girls of St Trinians'. The following week the winning caption - 'I say Isabelle. He can't come in here. He's not wearing the school tie!' - was announced, along with the captions of three runners-up, the editor noting how successful the first game had been. Included was the sketch for the next competition: NM striding to bat in a game of cricket. Thus, the weekly routine of the NM Competition was established, continuing in this way for over a year before mysteriously disappearing from the newspaper.

In conversation analysis terms the competition utilises a 'puzzle-solution' adjacency pair (see Sacks 1992): the drawn setting is the first pair part - the puzzle - asking readers to submit the second pair part - the caption - that 'solves' the puzzle. Note though, that the solution is *not* to the quotidian question 'what is going on here?', rather it is to the more specific 'what is it here that can be made humorous?' Answers to the former question are unproblematic: in episode 1, NM is with 3 St Trinians schoolgirls, in episode 2 it is abundantly clear that he is about to bat in a game of cricket, in episode 3 he is in a barroom brawl, and so on (see Figures 1-3 below for examples of the 'clarity' of the settings). The drawn settings make use of what Schutz (1962) called the 'natural attitude', that is, they present readily identifiable types of people and settings - what any competent cultural member knows to be part of the 'world in common' (see Sharrock 1999).

A further aspect of everyday knowledge that the NM competition draws upon is made more explicit by the competition's editors: they mention a 'taste test' governing their judging and publication of submitted captions. That is, because the newspaper has a 'family' readership there are limits to what is publishable in terms of the lexical content of the captions and their sexual allusions. This 'taste test' clearly points to the importance of 'framing'. Whereas there is a great deal of academic commentary on framing, here I find it useful to draw upon Goffman's notion of 'keying'. In *Frame Analysis* (1974) he defines keying as the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying. A rough musical analogy is intended. (1974: 43-44)

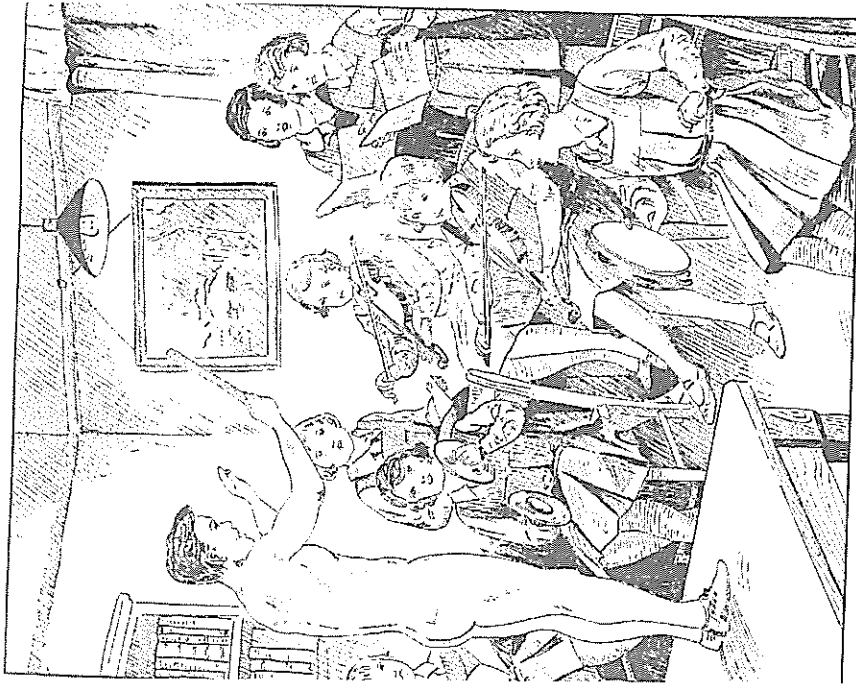
In the NM competition the primary framework is that 'in reality' the drawn settings portray acts of indecent exposure. That is, in general, to be naked amongst clothed others in public places is prohibited and morally censured behaviour. Thus, the keying the competition establishes is to move from the frame of the seriousness of indecent exposure, to the frame of light-hearted wordplay and other forms of humour. Right from its outset the competition editors were careful to establish this keying, continually reiterating it throughout the life of NM. If readers did not accept this keying then the simple option would be to ignore the competition, however, it is also clear that for some this option was insufficient and complaint was required, as the following letter to the editor exemplifies (the setting this letter refers to is reproduced in Figure 1 below):

Naked Man appals

I have seen your competition, Adventures of A Naked Man, for the first time in the newspaper (The Post, Nov 13) and I have to say that I am appalled by the inappropriateness of this competition, and in particular, next weekend's caption. What message are you giving to the public? That it is OK for men in

positions of authority to display themselves to young female students? We have more than enough problems in today's society without a well respected newspaper adding to them ...
ROBYN RADOMSKI
 (Radomski 1999)

Figure 1



Once again the ensemble did not require a metronome.

- Bob Dawson, Kurmali Beach, Kapiti Coast

Even though NM exists only as a drawing, Robyn Radomski is 'appalled' by it and wants to question the 'message' behind the competition. In effect, she wishes to re-establish the primary

framework that it is certainly not 'OK for men in positions of authority to display themselves to young female students'. Radomski is not singing in the same key as those who appreciate and enter the NM competition.

There is a further element of framing that we need to detail before considering the specifics of NM discourse. In terms of the puzzle, 'what is it here that can be made humorous?' there seems to be a virtual instruction to focus on the penis. This 'instruction' derives from what the NM competition provides as a resource for making humour: the drawn settings. First, without exception, in every setting NM is the *only* person naked. He may be wearing a hat and shoes, riding a bicycle, or holding an umbrella, but he is observably naked. Harvey Sacks has an important point about such observability:

For Western societies, at least, being noticeable and being deviant seem intimately related. The notions that one is suspect whose appearance is such that he stands out, and correlatively that the sinner can be seen, have the deepest of foundations. Indeed, in Judeo-Christian mythology, human history *proper* begins with the awareness by Adam and Eve that they are observables. The next bit of social information they thereupon learn is: To be observable is to be embarrassing. (Sacks 1972: 280-81, original emphasis)

Again, this connection between observability and deviance is, in Goffman's terms, a 'primary framework'. NM rekeys this, as, in contrast to Adam and Eve, NM's observable difference does not render him 'deviant' or 'embarrassable'. It was emphasised in the set-up statement for the competition that NM 'moves in his Boys' Own-style world *untroubled* by the fact that a hat and a pair of shoes are his only nod to modesty'. This is consistent with the 'incongruity theory' of humour (see Billig 2005: 57-85; Mulkey 1988), that is, NM being 'observable' but not embarrassing is incongruous with 'real' life, thus providing part of the grounds for humour.

This 'observability' is accomplished materially, and is particularly shown by NM always being drawn in a full, or near full body-shot, that

is, he has to be *seen* to be naked so we have to see *most* of his body. Building upon this, a second material focusing occurs. While there is a full or near full body-shot drawing of NM, his penis is *never* drawn. There is always some convenient object or the direction of his body obscuring it from view (see Figure 1 above, and 2, 3 below, for examples). Of course, we know, or can reasonably infer, that as a named man - Naked Man - he will have a penis. So, its invisibility acts as a virtual instruction: centre the textual caption around this invisible but known-to-be-there object. Hence, it is no surprise that the penis becomes the central resource for answering the question 'what is it here that can be made humorous?'

Humour Devices in Naked Man

Consider some examples of how entrants construct humour using the basic resources I have detailed above. Table 1 presents some examples of humour mechanisms.

Some explanation of the terms used in Table 1 is required. While all examples work with a setting, I use 'setting-context' to refer to captions where the humour is solely or heavily dependent on the context provided in the setting; in contrast 'events-context' is humour that draws upon topical events of the day. Episode 18 partly uses such a mechanism in its reference to East Timor, undergoing civil war at the time this appeared. The double entendre mechanism can be usefully broken down into sub-types of punning around, 'name', 'penis-size', 'penis-erection', and 'sexual activity' (these should be easily understandable from the winning captions). The 'penis-injury implication' category (see 60) is also a frequently used mechanism, but just how and why this is used deserves its own analysis and will not be discussed here.

It can be seen that the examples often employ combinations of devices. It does seem fair to say, though, that there is a reliance on double entendre as the standard mechanism for making humour (this is discussed in more detail below). There are also episodes (not listed above) where the humour mechanism, or part of it, is more idiosyncratic, where it is actually hard to decipher the humour. Mostly though, the humour is achieved with remarkable economy, focusing on one or two devices, repeated from episode to episode. In terms of the accomplishment of humour, such repetition is perhaps a weak point of the NM competition; at other times, one cannot help but marvel at the wit and wordplay abilities of the entrants, all successfully treading the fine line between delicate humour and too-risqué offensiveness.

Table 1 gives us an initial glimpse of the 'peculiarities and complexities' of the NM competition, but there are extra features that the table does not capture. One such point is the fact that each competition episode, as well as having a winner (who is named) has several 'runner up' captions. Sometimes the latter are as few as three, sometimes as many as ten. After episode 4 runners up were also named, and the naming is clearly sociologically significant: it makes competition players identifiable and accountable (at one stage, the editor apologised to one entrant for 'dropping him in it' as he had been named along with a workplace address).

Table 1 here

Table 1 Selected Examples of Naked Man Humour

Episode	Setting Cohort (NM + ...)	Setting Description	Winning caption	Humour Mechanism
18	1 Male	NM in uniform with gun, officer interacting	"The colonel informed the new officer that while on active service in East Timor, 'casual Fridays' had been suspended."	setting context (uniforms, guns); events context (East Timor)
54	1 Male	NM raising fist to driver of departing racing car	The baron waved and called mockingly back at Dick. "I do not think you will win the grand prix now, Monsieur, but I think perhaps you have the petite prix, n'est ce pas?"	name pun (Dick); penis-size pun (petite prix)
31	2 Males	NM having tea and biscuits with two men	"Strong with two lumps, please - just like your friend, "Roger called out from behind his newspaper.	setting context; penis-pun (two lumps)
3	8 Males	NM is a mountie in a bar laying down the law	Hang on - he's bigger than all of us	penis-size pun
58	7 Males	NM playing rugby, in front of boy on ground, boy approaching with fists drawn	"Dan had a reputation as one of the hard men of the team."	penis-erection pun (hard man)
40	1 Female	NM adolescent, with adolescent female in a sailboat	"Vanessa left Edward in no doubt that this was not what she had in mind when she'd suggested they spend an afternoon together with barely a sheet between them."	setting context (sheet - sailing); sexual activity pun
51	4 Females	NM finds himself in the girls' dorm	"Mmm," thought Miss Alcott. Perhaps Little Men was not such a bad title after all."	penis-size pun
28	1 Male, 1 Female	NM and well dressed young man, with an upright old lady	"Mrs Perkins almost had a stroke, but found she couldn't reach."	sexual activity pun (stroke)
60	1 Male, 1 Female, 1 large dog	NM is the butler, young woman pats big dog, master of the house in discussion	"Smithers looked on anxiously as Mabel told her father that Rufus had acquired a taste for sausages."	penis injury implication
57	fairground crowd	NM racing against girls, pipped at line by girl, 3 girls watching, plus mixed crowd in close background	"With Roger hard on her heels, it wasn't difficult to see why Phyllis was considered to be the fastest girl in her class."	penis-erection pun (hard on heels)

Additionally, I want to suggest that the difference between 'winning caption' and 'runner up' should interest us. The former is 'preferred', it is the legitimated winning entry. We could say it is a cultural representative; literally, it is the caption the editors have chosen, in light of all their strictures about 'what can be said in a family newspaper' and not failing the 'taste test', of what is taken to be the most appropriate humorous caption. This naming feature of the NM competition is also analytically useful: it gives, in most cases, the gender of the winner, something incorporated in the descriptive summary below.

Table 2

Table 2. Gender Composition of Setting Cohort

Gender Composition (excluding NM)	Numbers (% of total settings)				Gender Composition Component of total Settings (N=58)
	NM+1	NM+2-5	NM+6 or more		
Male	6 (10.3%)	24 (41.4%)	9 (15.5%)	39	(67.2%)
Female	2 (3.4%)	6 (10.3%)	1 (1.7%)	9	(15.5%)
Bivocal	N/A	6 (10.3%)	4 (6.9%)	10	(17.2%)
Column Total (%)	8 (13.8%)	36 (62.1%)	14 (24.1%)	58	(100%)

This table has been compiled not to explain individual episode entries by the larger distribution, rather, it provides some important points of general interest, and suggests some specifics worth further attention. Some initial points to take from the table are:

- Just over two-thirds of setting cohorts are composed of NM and all males
- 17.2% are composed of NM and mixed gender groups, with only 15.5% composed of NM and all females
- In terms of individual cell counts, just over 40% of the total settings (58) are accounted for by NM and between two to five males; the only other cell count to get over 10% is that for NM plus 6 or more males

Descriptive Summary

The New Zealand NM competition first began on October 2, 1999. The last setting was presented on December 19, 2000, with the editor noting January 23, 2001 as the date of the continuation of the NM competition. Interestingly, however, when that date arrived NM never reappeared. There was never any explicit statement as to why this demise had occurred. Given that the number of episodes analysed here is 58, the gender of episode winners can be calculated as 77 percent male and 23 percent female (5 cases where gender could not be determined are excluded when calculating these percentages). Following on from Table 1, Table 2 offers a summary of some basic features of the data.

- The two smallest cell counts are for NM plus 6 or more females (1), and NM plus 1 female (2)
- Irrespective of gender, the most common setting cohort composition is NM plus 2 to 5 others (62.1%); the display of NM plus six or more is nearly twice as common (24.1% vs 13.8%) as NM plus a single other.

Clearly, some interesting elements appear in this descriptive summary. Without doubt, the basic material - the setting and its cohort - that NM entrants are presented with is mostly an all-male environment. Even though the very first NM setting featured NM and a solely female cohort (3 schoolgirls), such a composition is a very infrequent

occurrence across the NM episodes. Of related interest is the fact that it is not until episode 19 that NM and a mixed cohort first appeared, and not until episode 40 that a setting featuring NM and a single female appeared. The point of noting these details is this: it is clear that in all ways the NM competition is suffused with issues of gender. But just how, and what this means, requires some careful thinking. In the final empirical section of this paper I want to exemplify this point by taking a closer look at the wordplay of the competition.

Sexual and non-sexual organisation of punning
 A quick glance through Table 1 might lead to the conclusion that risqué penis puns dominate the competition. However, closer inspection reveals that this is too simplistic. In order to see this, though, it is useful to first look at the relatively standard kinds of double entendres that appear. Table 3 presents a selection from both winning and runner-up captions.

Table 3

Table 3 Examples of Naked Man Double Entendre

Episode	Setting Description	Caption (pun words in bold)
17	NM is the conductor at a train station	Yes, sir. It will pull out on time. RU
26	NM parachuting above native huts	Dick hung limply beneath his parachute and thought that the huts below were the strangest erections he'd ever seen. RU
27	schoolboy NM, bends looking at a fallen pig in presence of farmer	We're awfully sorry about this, monsieur, but we had to stop it from rooting for Dick's truffles. W
28	NM and well dressed young man and an elderly lady	Mrs Perkins almost had a stroke , but found she couldn't reach. W
29	NM above girls in a hot air balloon, plane crashed in the sea	Jane and Victoria gasped when they saw how well Peter hung in the stiffening breeze. W
34	NM in an altercation with three other males	Displaying the traditional reluctance, the new Speaker was soon confronted by a member raising his point of order. W
40	NM and woman in a sailboat	Dickson was having an awfully difficult time convincing Mrs Connor that his bowsprit was compliant and well within regulation dimensions . RU
43	NM and girl shake hands by tennis court net	After pounding his balls , Sophie was only too keen to give Willie some advice on his grip . RU
45	Youngish MN holds bottle in front of himself, talks to father	Listen to me, boy. I don't care that you just want to make the genie come out. If you keep rubbing that thing , you'll go blind! RU
47	NM on the ball in a game of hockey	Smythe was about to equalise on full-time. Gilly shuddered at the thought of the game coming down to strokes . RU
50	NM in a fight with another boy	Charles found that Dick was putting up some stiff opposition. RU
57	NM pipped at the line in a running race	Unfortunately, Nigel developed a limp and lost by a short head . RU

Notes

W = winning caption; RU = runner-up caption

What we see in these captions is that the medical terms for NM's unseen parts – penis and testicles – is entirely absent, instead there are many other words used to name these parts: Dick, truffles, member, point, bowsprit, balls, head and thing. Alongside these penis puns there are other puns based on the state of the penis, or activities associated with sexual practices: pull out, hung limply, rooting, stroke, stiffening, raising, grip, stiff, and stroke.

The double entendres presented in Table 3 are relatively simple, that is, they are not hard to understand, nor one would think, particularly hard to devise. In this there is some connection with the popular notion that puns are the lowest form of wit (see Carter 2004). Indeed, Sherzer comments that 'In North American speech communities, in English, the groan is the conventional way of showing, for both puns and jokes, that a recipient-listener has understood the point or source of humour and that at the same time is intellectually or socially superior to it' (1985:

219). Although, as I will develop below, there can be great skill and humour in well-constructed puns, those shown in Table 3 seem relatively easily made and more likely to produce a groan or smile rather than outright laughter in their audience.

Deborah Cameron's (2000) well known research on the 'naming of parts' suggests that there are numerous words that can be employed to form these double entendres. She found that a group of four male university students generated 144 terms for the penis in a period of 30 minutes, whereas a group of females generated 50 terms (1995: 207). In an article titled 'Dick-tionaries', Jonathan Green comments that there are virtually equal numbers of synonyms for male and female genitals - about a thousand - but in comparison to the 'fear and loathing' associated with female terms, the male genitals are synonymous with 'action':

But the penis - what a regular boy's toy it is: it is cock ... a prick and a tool; it is a member, a weapon, a knife, a dagger, a gun, a stick, a hunter; it is food; it rejoices in pet names and nursery terms. It extends to cover erections, size, circumcision and jeeringly, impotence. It comes team-handed, accompanied by a whole new list, for the testicles. Intercourse - a thousand more synonyms - is another ripping yarn of boy's adventures. Those guns, sticks and daggers do their job. (Green 2005: 110-111)

These linguistic resources, and it must be noted, the visual element of the drawn settings, offer an almost inexhaustible potential for double entendres in the NM competition.

Whereas the NM competition is not talk-in-interaction, an interesting point here is that such resort to punning is a common feature of *any* talk on sexual practices. Sex talk is hedged about with ambiguities - we often use euphemisms instead of direct language - and puns fit neatly within this rubric of indirectness. This point was well made by Harvey Sacks (1992; also see 1973), worth quoting at length:

there is the fact that obscene puns seem to have no particular locus, in the sense that there seems to be no particular topical

talk that has, more than or less than any other topical talk, the possibility of having obscene puns emerge in it. ... It looks as though our language is one in which the possibility of obscenity is the ambiguity to be avoided in talk anywhere, such that sex is always latent in a way different than, say, politics or any general topic that one might get into is always latent. The pun organization is, then, sexual. ... [thus] it takes no particular wit of somebody's to use the particular resources of an ambiguity in order to invoke sex as the topic that's being alluded to ... In using the ambiguities of a term to invoke sex, he's done it in just the way that it's altogether easy to do. (Sacks 1992: 435)

Sacks suggests that the language for talking about sex is 'specifically allusive': 'to put it in a slightly paradoxical fashion - ... the proper literal way to talk about sex is to talk about it allusively' (1992: 434). Hence, Sacks' useful point that 'pun organization is sexual'.

I take it by this term that Sacks means we can expect to see puns deployed to achieve reference to sexuality: they will be positioned within talk in places where we need to do sexual talk but do not wish to, or cannot, be more direct. And they fulfil this task admirably because they are 'altogether easy to do'. This has a possible connection to an aggression or embarrassment theory of humour (see Billig, 2005). It can be suggested that while puns are very useful for achieving sexual talk, the other side of their functionality is that through their ready availability they can also be used 'aggressively' or indelicately. The 'aggression theory' of humour has a long history, being particularly associated with Freud's early work (1960) where he noted that many jokes have a victim within the text of the joke itself, but the listener can also be considered a kind of victim. As Legman notes, 'The smutty joke,' says Freud, 'is like a denudation of a person of the opposite sex toward whom the joke is directed. Through the utterance of obscene words, the person is forced to picture the parts of the body in question, or the sexual act, and is shown that the aggressor himself pictures the same thing' (1968: 12). Even though punning is by its very nature indirect, it is not difficult to see it fitting within the aggression theory rubric.

This possible aggressive feature of wordplay can be exacerbated by the ready way puns can be collected together. Here is a good example from the NM corpus: '... thanks to Jim Coad of Brooklyn. I'm sure it does get harder every week. It certainly does for me. Sometimes, anyway. Now to the business at hand (or not, as the case may be). In fact, it's really a question of turning one's attention to the holster. Remember, it doesn't matter how often you enter. It's the quality that counts' (Editor's comments, episode 46). In this case, the editor is female, and of course we do not have a listener but a reader; either way this little pun-fest nicely illustrates the ready way puns can be piled one upon another to create very clear sexual allusions. They may well be interpreted as humorous, but equally they may be taken to be excessive, invoking an 'oh, do grow up' response. Perhaps this is the tenor of many of the complaints to the NM competition editors, a 'do we really need this in an adult newspaper?' reaction.

Such possibilities are part of what makes the NM competition so interesting from a social-discursive point of view. There is little doubt that much of the wordplay seems to delight in pushing the boundaries of responsible adult discourse, also partaking of a trend towards anti-political-correctness. However, if NM consisted of *only* double entendres of the kind displayed in Table 3 I do not think it would have been so popular. On closer inspection, the NM corpus displays a good many puns that do not have clear sexual allusions; that seem instead to be more focused on displaying skill in wordplay whilst simultaneously avoiding the 'altogether easy' sexual inferences. The competition's editors also have the option of mixing up the wordplay types in their choices of winners versus runner-ups. Moreover, the wordplay that is contained in the captions always has to fit with the first pair part, that is, the drawn setting. These points are developed in the following section.

Punning against the grain of the sexual

It is worth emphasising here that the 'Adventures of Naked Man' is a *competition*. Hence, while it is indeed 'altogether easy' to devise a caption using a double entendre, it is not so easy to devise a *winning* caption - some creative nuance might be required to carry off the \$50

book voucher prize. In this process we witness some interesting adaptations of the basic dependence of pun organisation being sexual. A very good example is illustrated in Figure 2.

The previous week's episode ended with this drawing and the guiding statement 'This week Naked Man has an arresting moment at the frontier. Surely, it's a case of mistaken identity.' The winning caption - 'With a sinking feeling, Dick realised he was going to find out what 'well hung' really meant' - takes up the 'arrest' theme and skilfully works on the sexual slang meaning of 'well hung' to turn it into the alternative meaning of being 'hung by the neck until dead'. Thus, the caption inverts the risqué pun, creating multiple levels of meaning, significantly contributing to a humorous effect. It could be called an inverted sexual allusion pun. The sexual connotation of the caption is still there in that for the caption to work readers must know the sexual meaning of 'well hung', but the cleverness of the caption lies in its ability to add to this 'altogether easy' pun another non-sexual meaning.

There are other examples of a similar nature, and a selection of these is collected in Table 4, where in keeping with the French double entendre, the term *bon mot* (clever words) is chosen to describe these puns.

In various ways the captions in Table 4 show that humour can be made from the NM settings without engaging in risqué double entendre. These examples show that manipulating language, in itself, can be pleasurable, and there is no requirement to use sexual allusion that some people may find offensive. Episode 18's 'As brigade padre, he saw troubled privates almost every day', is a clever play on army 'private' as opposed to the genital version. But if limericks are more to your taste it is hard to go past episode 26's 'There was a young man from Bordeaux, Who thought he'd give flying a go, But with sudden ejection, Took the wrong direction, "Hmm, this doesn't look much like Soho"'.

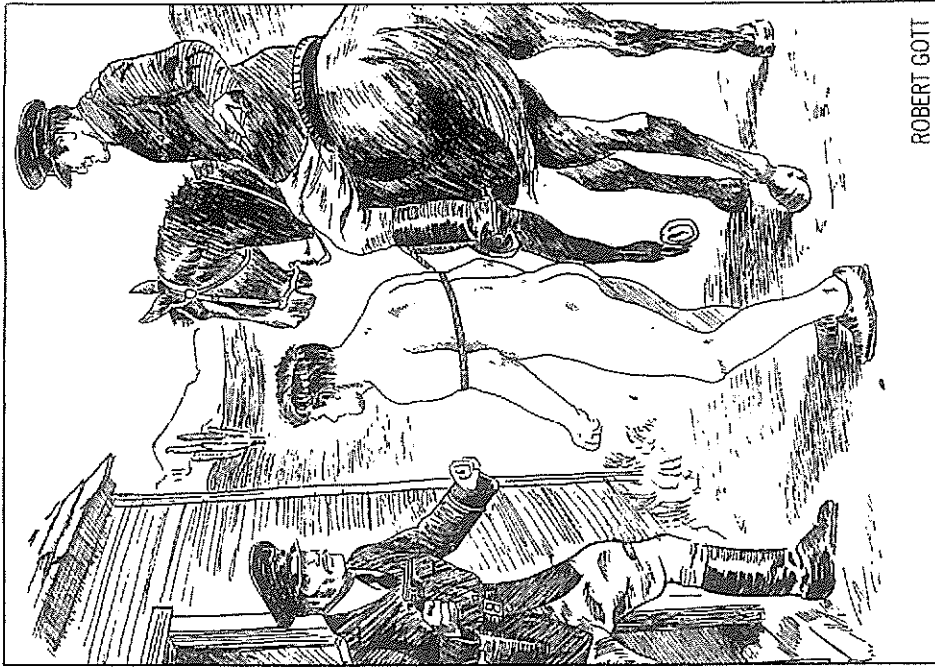


Figure 2

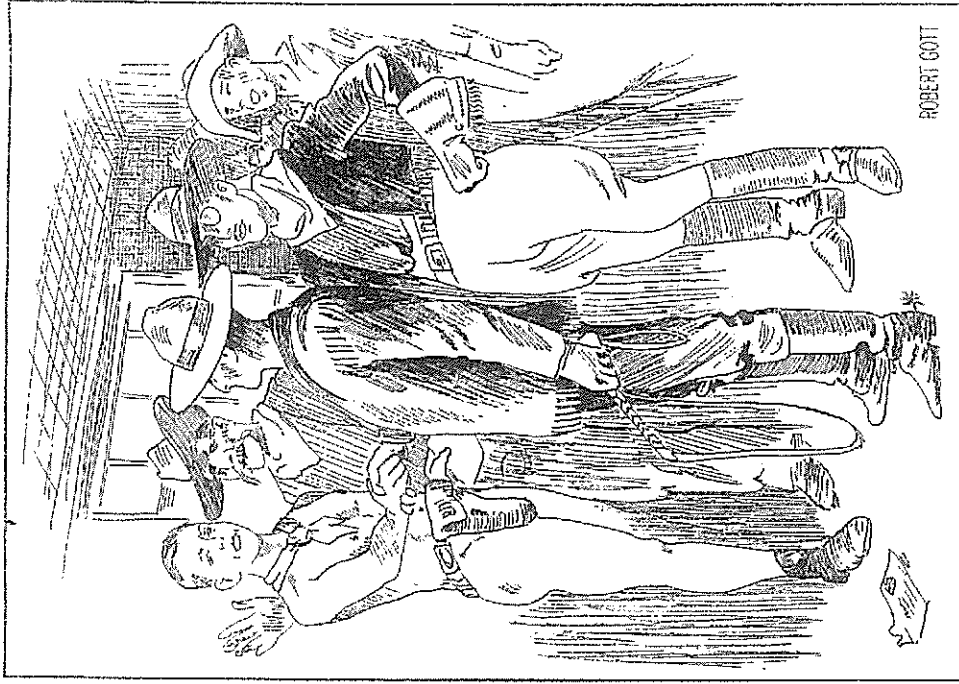


Figure 3

Table 4 here

Table 2 Examples of Bon Mots in Naked Man

Episode	Setting Description	Caption
3	NM in a mountie's hat, upholds the law in a barroom	Callahan was forced to administer the treatment reserved for only the toughest rednecks - the treatment known as "The Full Mountie". RU
4	NM is plucked from behind enemy lines, he scrambles into a plane	Algy hoped there were no rear gunners in the vicinity. RU
8	NM held up by two masked gunmen	The media finally identified the swinging voter. RU
14	NM jumps into a punt chased by a bull	Mavis and Harriet hurried to the man's rescue - after all, he'd just been given a bum steer. RU
17	NM is the conductor at a train station	Suddenly the mad conductor began wearing no clothes. What was the loco's motive? RU
18	NM talking to uniformed officer	As brigade padre, he saw troubled privates almost every day. RU
20	NM playing bicycle polo	Attendances at polo matches had been poor but this was hardly what the president meant when he said he wanted to see more bums on seats. RU
26	NM parachuting above native huts	There was a young man from Bordeaux, Who thought he'd give flying a go, But with sudden ejection, Took the wrong direction, "Hmmm, this doesn't look much like Soho." RU
44	NM flees with bag, two men give chase	Later, the police would be amazed at the ability of the old man to pick out the young man from a reverse lineup. RU
45	Youngish NM holds bottle in front of himself, talks to father	Lord William suddenly realised his son's problems with sex and alcohol were much bigger than he'd thought. RU
46	see figure 3	At last Rupert felt among friends. He had no foot, Charles had a glass eye and now he'd met Harold who had no fips. RU
50	NM in a fight with another boy	It was easy to tell who was who when young Tom Brown fought the cad Flashman. RU

Notes

W = winning caption; RU = runner-up caption

Additionally, many captions rely very heavily on the visual setting. A good example is episode 46's runner up caption, 'At last Rupert felt among friends. He had no foot, Charles had a glass eye and now he'd met Harold who had no lips', that cannot be understood until the drawn setting (see Figure 3 above) is closely inspected. It is of course possible that even these bon mots with no direct sexual allusion can be 'infected', as it were, by the quite clear sexual organisation of punning in the competition. For example, the word 'ejecion' in the limerick only takes a slight change in emphasis to be transformed into a risqué utterance, likewise the categorisation of a 'padre' seeing troubled privates is not beyond a 'knowing wink' rendering it sexually allusive, and so on. This is the risk that any wordplay humour of a mildly sexual nature takes, that is, in its challenge to serious discourse there may be no end to the inversions and allusions that are created and set loose.

Conclusion

The NM competition works with relatively simple resources, but I hope to have shown here that these resources are employed in complex ways to produce many types of humour. It has not been possible to show the full range of humorous devices that are used in the NM competition. There are for example captions that create what approximates to a visual pun, and there are several captions that rely on contemporaneous events to construct their humour. Nevertheless, there does seem to be great utility in Sacks' notion that the organisation of puns is sexual - the frequency of double entendres in the competition attests to this. I spent some time above detailing the material means whereby the 'dick joke' aspect of the competition was achieved. The conversation analysis concept of adjacency pair has been traditionally used to refer to the pairing of conversational objects, but it is perfectly applicable to the relationship between the drawn setting and the 'fitted' caption. Thus, one of the basic conversation analysis questions applies very well to how the competition works, that is, as Sacks puts it, 'does it [the caption], as something one understands with, understand what it applies to [the drawn setting]?' (1992: 422). This is a key question that any entrant to the competition has to answer to construct humour understandable by any ordinary, everyday, competent, cultural member.

This visual element of the competition, particularly the interaction with the textual captions, deserves more attention, however, I hope to have established enough interest to now reflect on the argument that we must approach humour with a critical lens.

It is not hard to suggest the general contours of a critique of the NM competition. Consistent with Green, and other research on the 'naming of parts' (eg. Braun and Kitzinger, 2001) we see that the penis puns commonly employed in the competition connect the penis with action. This action orientation can be taken to both reflect and reproduce the 'heteronormative' assumption that the penis is the proper site of 'normal' sexuality. In still other terms, it could be argued that within patriarchal societies dick jokes, like the NM competition, function to further the dominance of phallic masculinity. Obviously, the specifics of this argument have not been developed here, leaving my presentation of it looking crudely drawn. However, there are examples of work on other topics suggesting that such a presentation is not fanciful. Lehman, for example, has written on penis-size jokes in film, with the following passage being a fair indication of his general argument:

Women in our culture may have no jokes about their bodies equivalent to penis-size jokes, which may indicate just how phallicentric such jokes are. Even when told by men to men in contexts that clearly articulate male anxiety, the jokes affirm the importance and centrality of the very thing they seem to question. ... Contrary to appearances, women who look, evaluate, and joke about penises in most films pose no threat to male pleasure; these women simply tell men what they have always told themselves about the importance of the penis. (1991: 58)

Depending on how far you want to take the argument, it is but then a minor step to link penis size jokes to heteronormativity, the worst excesses of pornography, rape and so on. In short, there is no such thing as 'just a joke' about 'dicks'. If we agree with this then we admit the applicability and importance of a critical approach to the NM humour.

Billig's work (2005), at first glance, is the most important example of a blanket condemnation of humour, or at least an agenda to always critique humour. However, even his argument involves space for humour. In an important summary passage he states:

The goal of criticism is neither to increase seriousness at the expense of laughter, nor vice versa. It is not as if the two are in opposition [instead] ... humour and seriousness are necessarily linked. The world of serious meaning requires the disciplinary use of mockery. In return, mockery can be turned rebelliously against seriousness. Neither move is intrinsically meritorious. ... the outward form of humour can serve different tendentious purposes. *The morality comes not from the humour itself but from the purposes to which it is put.* (Billig 2005: 242, emphasis added)

I am in full agreement with Billig on the interconnectedness of humour and seriousness, but it seems to me that in the italicised statement lies an important amelioration of Billig's desire for an overarching critical approach to humour. This can be seen very clearly from the example of the NM competition. The key point is that there is seldom only one type of humour on offer, instead, each episode gathers together captions that use different humour mechanisms. There are many double entendres with clear sexual allusions, but equally there are *bon mots* and other mechanisms that do not depend on sexually allusive wordplay. This might suggest that what we see in the NM competition captions is a continuum extending from crude to clever. However, I think this view should be avoided. As Legman noted some time ago, double entendres have to employ some element of cleverness or else they become stupid:

The ordinary dirty joke (or limerick or ballad) engages directly and apparently therefore pleasurable with taboo themes: sex, scatology, incest, and the sexual mocking of authority figures ... The telling of dirty jokes ... serves in its simplest form – as shown by Freud – as a sort of vocal and inescapable sexual relationship with other persons of the desired sex. It is for this reason that listeners not wanting such relationships will agree to listen to dirty jokes only with the proviso '... if they're clever.' 'Clever' means that all taboo words and graphic descriptions will

be avoided in the telling, thus allowing the listener either to accept, or (by not laughing or 'not understanding') to refuse to accept, the intimacy of any particular *double entendre*. Jokes not conforming to this rule are the opposite of clever: they are 'stupid'. (1968: 13)

To argue that even the most easily available double entendres involve cleverness should not take us into some kind of inquiry into 'private' skill in wordplay. Once again, Sacks is a remarkably useful guide here: 'Does one, finding something neat and delicate, need to try to build into the particular person who uses it some sort of virtuosity which we suppose is unusual. Or is it that it's a virtuosity that maybe anyone has, or the language gives them' (1992: 431).

Here it would be tempting to read Sacks' focus on what 'language gives' in terms of the structuralist type question 'do people use language, or does it use them?' where the point is to emphasise the autonomous power of language. However, instead of being tempted by such an approach, we might be able to focus on different mechanisms that generate particular socio-cultural worlds. For example, with the NM competition I would like to suggest that much of the humour revolves around an 'economy principle'. Something very useful for what I mean comes in Nippert-Eng's recent work on 'boundary play'. She defines this as 'the visible, imaginative manipulation of shared cultural-cognitive categories for the purpose of amusement' (2005: 302). Nippert-Eng's particular focus is the definition and use of space for boundary play, and she provides a lovely example of children playing in a dog crate. She details how a 5-year old and two 12-year olds play inside a large dog crate, gaining much pleasure in pretending to be dogs, suggesting that the children's fun

stems in large part from the fact that the crate manifests any of a number of categorical boundaries. This includes the lines dividing such meaningful cultural pairings as person-dog, owner-pet, ours-yours, inside-outside, confined-free, powerless-powerful, and real-pretend. It is their shared ability to quickly recognise and make the connection between the act of climbing into the dog's crate and the simultaneous redrawing, perhaps

even inverting, of at least some of these categorical contents (albeit temporarily) that so effectively provoked, defined and facilitated this particular session of play. (2005: 304)

Categorical boundaries are also central to the NM competition, but these are instantiated not by physical materials like a dog crate, but by a drawn setting and its relation to the caption words. Moreover, Nippert-Eng makes exactly the point about economy that I want to emphasise: 'dichotomies, alone, do not preclude play. I suspect they are especially good at inviting it. As in a good game of any kind, dichotomous conceptual pairings simply mean that the possibilities *for play are basic, easily understood, and endlessly workable*' (2005: 309, emphasis added). While there are a variety of ways the NM competitors make humour using the drawn scenarios, it is clear that the contrast between sexual and non-sexual wordplay is a basic feature of the competition. As I have suggested, the materiality of the competition focuses attention on the penis, which is then available to be punned on. This punning has, as Sacks noted, a 'sexual organisation', but it is also clear from the discourse of the captions that there are equally available non-sexual wordplay devices. So, we do have a binary of sorts – sexual/non-sexual - where particular uses of devices that instantiate either side are *mixed* up in every NM episode. That is, the editors who judge the competition make sure there is neither too much of one or the other. The mixture of sexual and non-sexual 'solving' captions produces an economical mix. Too much risqué double entendre risks being seen as tasteless and no longer 'clever', whereas, too much in the way of clever *bon mot* seems strange and out of keeping with the competition's dominant sexual framing (it remains a dick joke).

This leaves me with the following brief conclusion. Critique, while not exactly internal to the competition in any explicit manner, is nonetheless an ongoing feature of its framing and keying. Possible offence is carefully managed through the 'cleverness' of wordplay, firstly, in that even 'altogether easy' double entendres have to employ some work on language, and secondly, by contrasting the sexual theme with wordplay without sexual allusion. In the competition episodes the distinction between winner and runner-up captions is almost arbitrary,

as they are always mixed together; they are a collective offering that provide a variety of ways of making humour using the basic framing of NM's unashamed appearances in public. This is not to say that some form of social critique of the NM competition could not be developed; it is to say that such critique should first consider the evidence of just how carefully sexual humour has to be framed and keyed within the first-order construction of discourse. We should be careful about theoretically specifying what we take to be the functions of sexually related humour, with the aim of developing a critique of it. Instead, each particular site of such humour begs its own detailed analysis, then and only then can critique proceed. This is a familiar conversation and analysis type stance on the question of how to approach discourse, however, it is also being made by others in the social scientific community increasingly tired of the rhetoric of critique. Many are now asking whether 'critique has run out of steam' (Latour 2004). If Billig is right, a critique of humour is yet to develop a head of steam, but perhaps this is not such a bad thing?

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