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'Now, what's my schtick?'

A wandering taxonomy of the experiences of cringe comedy in *Peep Show* Season One, Episode One

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an extended musing on Season 1, Episode 1 of Channel 4's *Peep Show*. It follows the plot of the episode, and depicts my varied associations and learnings on the different types of humour and cringe deployed throughout the show, exploring the ways in which they affect me as the viewer. It also considers the role of memory and history in the production and evolution of cringe humour.

*For my neighbour Tom,
With thanks for the formal introduction to Mark and Jez.*

I cringe. You cringe. He/she/we cringe. Our fatty lips push forward, puckering, as if we were to inhale sharply, then muscles contract. They draw inward, back into the centre of my mouth, pressing up against the ridges of my tongue. My head cowers; shrinks down into the hollow spaces between my cervical spine. Teeth grit hard together and muscles freeze, jaw aching. The corners of my mouth have ended up hooked around the tops of my ears. The social faux pas of another have contorted my face. This is vicarious cringe, and I love it.

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Cringe is the physical embodiment of embarrassment, be it self or external. It is the punishment for being awkward. The clash between self perception and the way you are perceived by others. We cringe at ourselves and we cringe at other people, suffering by proxy as a way to reinforce the unwritten laws of social interaction, aiming to ensure that we the viewer never have to suffer the same embarrassment.

Cringe can be a difficult thing to pin down. When you ask Google for its definition, you are first met with the effect that it has on your physical appearance.

'(Verb) Bend one's head and body in fear or apprehension or in a servile manner.
"he **cringed away** from the blow"¹

Whilst this use of cringe as a verb is still in use in this context, it has now evolved into the specific meaning that I am interested in as both a verb and an adjective.

'(Verb) Have an inward feeling of acute embarrassment or awkwardness.
"I **cringed at** his stupidity"
(Adj.) Causing feelings of acute embarrassment or awkwardness.
"learning about sex and sexuality can be seriously cringe"²

Nowadays the word 'cringe' appears to have become synonymous with the word 'awkward' - a catch all for any experience we either feel that makes us feel uneasy or any degree of embarrassment. I do, however, think that the two are distinct but overlapping - awkwardness is the feeling, cringe is the physical reaction.

Melissa Dahl feels similarly. In her book *Cringeworthy*, Dahl delves into the distinction between awkwardness and cringe. She suggests that awkwardness works as an alarm system to let us know when something about a social situation has gone awry. It sounds in a moment you might risk revealing too much of yourself either through ignorance, earnestness or your lack of social fluency. Cringe is the effect of the awkwardness alarm going off, where a visceral reaction is produced due to a forced moment of self awareness that you aren't measuring up to your own self concept.³

In his essay *Awkwardness* Adam Kotsko performed an in depth analysis on the subject, utilising philosophy, etymology and examples from popular media to examine the phenomenon. Awkwardness is an essential component to cringe. In his study on awkwardness Kotsko writes:

¹ Oxford Languages

² Oxford Languages

³ Dahl, 2018b, pp.8–9

'So awkwardness is not a property of a situation that could be objectively observed as though from the outside - if you are observing awkwardness as awkwardness, then you are drawn into the awkward situation yourself. At the same time, the spread of awkwardness makes it seem different from an emotion, which we normally think of as being located somehow inside an individual. We lack a clear word for something that is somehow between the objective and the subjective, between the status of an external situation and an emotion, a difficulty that should be unsurprising given we're dealing with awkwardness. For the time being, we could define it as a "feeling", playing off of the association with emotion and with the fact that a given situation or location can be said to have a certain "feel" to it, a certain *je ne sais quoi* in excess of the objective facts yet not easily dismissed as all in the observer's head.'⁴

Replace every use of 'awkwardness' with the word 'cringe' and it's easy to see why cringe can be such a difficult thing to get a grasp of.

But how exactly does cringe work? In an interview, psychologist Dr Tara Quinn-Cirillo explains that the stimulus prompting a feeling of cringe can be quite varied, from embarrassment, disgust, shame around past behaviours, or discomfort from a particular subject or intimacy. It is fairly common for people's emotional states to manifest physically. In the case of cringe, our reaction allows us to 'move away' from the topic or situation which you find uncomfortable.⁵

Cringe's ability to function is entirely hinged upon the fact that humans are 'ultra-social' and so capable of feeling vicarious emotions. This allows us to predict the behaviour of others and reflect on our own behaviour, as well as the behaviour of people, and its appropriateness in an ever changing social landscape. This ability to be cognisant of social rules means that we have developed the ability to feel embarrassment and shame, emotions which are described as 'social' or 'self-conscious emotions'. These emotions require us to have the ability to evaluate our own behaviour within social contexts and therefore serve the specific goal of regulating interpersonal behaviour within a group. It is an inherently negative emotional reaction, as it produces discomfort and is something we seek to alleviate.⁶

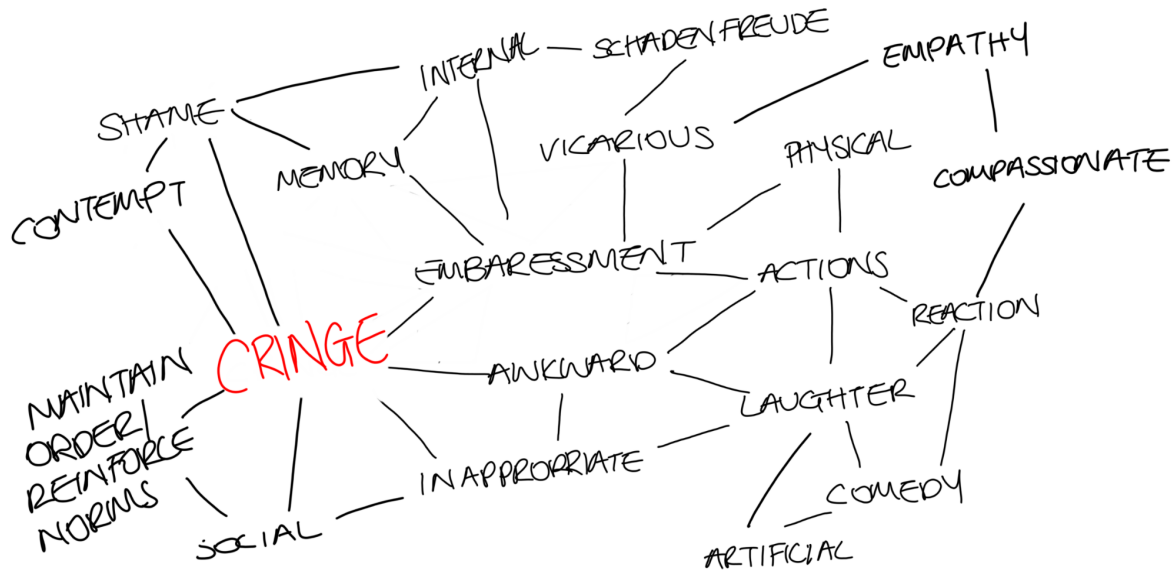
While spending many hours thinking about the meaning of cringe and its instances throughout this essay, I began to wonder if the dictionary supplied definition of cringe was nuanced enough, especially in relation to cringe comedy. I felt there were more emotions utilised in the feeling of 'cringe' than just the negative feelings of embarrassment or awkwardness. Unable to put my finger on it exactly, I took a lesson out of Rebecca May Johnson's book *Small Fires*⁷ and attempted to draw my learned associations.

⁴ Kotsko, 2010, p.9

⁵ Groves, 2022

⁶ Valpuri Mayer, Michel Paulus and Krach, 2021

⁷ Johnson, 2022



This is by no means a particularly extensive diagram, but in attempting to draw this I was continually struck by the difficulty of being able to place the words so that there would be enough space to make all the connections that I wanted to. I drew and redrew several times and it still wasn't perfect; there were too many components I felt integral to the understanding of cringe.

During the Lockdowns of 2020, we entered a state of 'morbid cringe'. Deprived of our regular social interactions, and daily dose of norm enforcing cringe to keep us towing the socially acceptable behavioural line, we turned to the fabricated cringe of comedy to satiate the hole left behind by our solitude, bingeing on hours of 'humilitainment' - content deliberately framed to be embarrassing and humiliating for one party, and entertaining to another.⁸ Streaming sites including Netflix saw a surge in the popularity of cringe comedy shows such as *The Office* and *Peep Show*, and in our now unmoving state we began to relish in watching the uncomfortable romantic pursuits by Mark of Sophie, and the attempts of the stagnant and almost talentless musician Jez at making it big, for hours upon end.⁹

I, like so many other people, am an avid consumer of cringe. I am a serial watcher and re-watcher of *The Inbetweeners*. Having reentered the "normal" world post-lockdown, my day to day life seems to be filled to the brim with real world cringe; I'm not quite sure if the world became cringier whilst we were isolating, or I became more sensitive to it having spent two years in very limited company, but having been let back out of my house, the world's cringe factor appeared to have gone up. I actively seek it out in my writing, revelling in writing descriptions of things that make people have to avert their eyes from the page. I chase it around the internet in its ever amorphous forms. It is everywhere; I barely have to look for it. In fact, here is a list of things in my life I have found 'cringe' in the last 48 hours:

Working an event in a wine bar and listening to a drunken customer warble Jeff Buckley's *Hallelujah* to a completely silent room full of customers with no backing

⁸ ContraPoints, 2020

⁹ Fenwick, 2020

track. She even took the harmony line over the top of the chorus, as I attempted to bury myself in the glasswasher to avoid watching.

Finishing my shift and watching a pub regular try and chat up a woman by pretending to read her future from her palm - any excuse to touch her.

Watching this woman actually buy into it.

Most things that pop up on the @mycriinge account.

One of my coworkers posting a scantily clad selfie on her work profile with a caption not so subtly referencing her most recent ex, clearly an attempt for them to take notice.

Watching the Instagram handle of my boss appear underneath saucy pictures of girls less than half his age as he's liking them over the course of several hours, not thinking that anyone he works with would notice.

Being shown a video of someone who has taught themselves to tattoo open needles without gloves on, and proceed to scar the shit out of their boyfriends skin with wobbly line work, all the while claiming to be doing a good job.

Watching my fiancé be greeted with great gusto by someone I know he actively despises.

Smiling awkwardly at a woman in the tattoo studio where I work as she rants loudly and extensively about how she doesn't think girls with lots of tattoos "look pretty any more", whilst surrounded by my mostly all-female coworkers who are head to toe in tattoos.

Applying to a new job, and filling in the application form with all too generic, disingenuous answers which feel nothing like myself, but there's no other way to answer them - I want the job after all.

All of the instances above have several things in common. They are all examples of other people embarrassing themselves in some way, whether knowingly or unknowingly and feeling embarrassment on their behalf. They are frequently about missed social cues. They are all about me watching other people. And similar examples are all easily found in cringe comedy.

Cringe comedy is a specific genre of humour where the focus is on people mortifyingly embarrassing themselves for our entertainment. Creating comedic value through cringe has become so prevalent in the media that it's difficult to remember laughing at anything else. Cringe comedy exists on the boundaries of current societal norms and political correctness, with the protagonists of cringe comic shows violating norms to produce humour. Kotsko suggests that this kind of humour works as a way for people to let off steam from maintaining the social order in their own lives, with little to no societal repercussions.¹⁰ Audiences both cringe in condemnation at fictional perpetrators transgressing social norms, or cringe in compassion while watching characters embarrass themselves in ways the audience have done previously in their lives.

¹⁰ Kotsko, 2010, p.27

Rising to popularity in the 2000s with Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the repertoire of cringe comedy proceeded to grow on both sides of the Atlantic.¹¹ Cringe comedy shows often employ a documentary style of filming despite being fictional, coming to be known as mockumentary, increasing the naturalism of the show and therefore the cringe factor. *Peep Show* is a prime example of this.

Peep Show appeared to me as a guiding eyeball shaped light when I was attempting to formulate a plan for this project. I knew that I wanted to write about cringe, but I wasn't sure how to frame it. It was precisely at this point that *Peep Show* was formally introduced to me by my neighbour. It's not that I was totally unaware of its existence, I had observed *Peep Show*'s imprint on society for many years, but it wasn't something I had ever sat down to watch. I felt that I knew enough about it from its legacy, without ever experiencing the show. Created in 2003, *Peep Show* is a British mockumentary style SitCom following two men in their twenties as they go about their day to day activities. The two main characters, Jez and Mark, frequently miss social cues, often from women, they are often unaware of the embarrassment they are causing, and they are viewed by thousands on TV, myself now included.

It is now twenty years since Jesse Armstrong, Sam Bain and Andrew O'Connor wrote *Peep Show* and it first aired. Despite the obviously aged quality of the filming, most of its themes are still concerns today - house sharing as an older adult due to money problems and the interpersonal clashes that come with that dynamic, romance, and lack of progression socially and in the workplace, to name a few. People continue to enjoy the intense discomfort it produces despite the trope of TV cringe seemingly going out of style (there are nowhere near as many shows labelled as 'cringe' being produced in 2023 as there were in the cringe heyday of the early 2000's).

This essay seeks to document my experience of my very first time watching *Peep Show* with my neighbour, my assorted associations, and the interplay of the cringe and the comic in Episode One, Season One of *Peep Show*.

¹¹ IMDb, 2017

Warring Factions

Cringe versus comedy, and my almost inability to watch

The days off are slow when he is on tour. He's on his fourth week away already and the choice of activities to fill the empty time rattling around the walls of this house are rapidly running out. He's somewhere in Germany at the moment I think, or maybe he's in Amsterdam. Not yet in Finland as Finland means he's coming home. He's working and can't talk; the noise of the kitchen and the thrumming bass from the stage overwhelms any attempt at a phone call, and the signal is crap in the venue. I check my phone regardless; no messages.

You should do something.

I'm in need of some human interaction that isn't forced upon me through a job in customer service. At work I hear the fake optimism escape my mouth without me consciously producing it when speaking to customers, barely audible over the screams of the milk steaming wand and it makes me recoil. The smile I don't know I'm making is reflected back in the chrome of the espresso machine. I never speak like that in my real life, only when I'm pretending to be someone else, someone more lively, someone deeply interested in the extra hot americano that I've been asked for that is impossible to make. I've become a customer facing person. It's a skin that feels awkward to wear, just slightly too small and catching under the arms when I try to move around, but it's something I put on when I need things to be done. I slip into the skin of the more productive version of myself. I become a mirror of the person I'm serving, and somewhere along the line have forgotten how to be myself, or at the very least I have forgotten where my self ends and where my constructed working personality begins. Wallowing in self pity at this realisation I decided to take some time off to reconstruct myself away from the eye of the public. This is where I currently find myself.

Doom Scrolling has become my time consuming activity of choice this last week. I watch myself endlessly flick through videos without being truly present. At one point TikTok's 'For You Page' couldn't keep up with my insatiable appetite for distraction, the previous video hanging in state of perpetual play two inches above the bottom of the screen while the buffering white dots chased their own tail, trying to conjure up a barrage of new videos. I had inadvertently fallen into the depths of "CringeTok", and scrolled for what seemed like miles, with compilation videos of individuals designated as 'cringe', fairly or not, filling my screen for 30 seconds at a time for me to denigrate.

This new social media addiction is nauseating, my eyes swim constantly in a sea of pixels without ever really focusing; I've been transformed into a screen-ager. I swore this would never happen to me. I cringed at other people having to stare at the back of friends' phones in public, and yet here I am engaging in that same behaviour, repulsed by the steep incline on my screen time graph and yet still making it climb ever steeper. At least no one is home to witness it.

I've tried to watch the TV, to force my attention onto something more substantial than 30 seconds long but as of yet it's been unsuccessful. I find myself endlessly starting and stopping Netflix shows I've already watched, in a constant lurch between title screens with

nothing to hold my interest, only viewing parts of trailers as the invisible cursor hangs over brightly coloured titles in a pseudo act of choosing. I keep trying to read, or to write my essay, but the temptation to check my messages drowns any will power I have to reach the end of a page. Constantly gawking at something backlit gives me migraines. I should try something else. I open and close my books as quickly as I change TV titles. I pick up the closest book to me - *Lorem Ipsum* by Oli Hazzard. I've already read this once this year. I enjoyed it. *You enjoyed it first time round. You could enjoy it again. Just got to focus and get into a page.* This is the third time I've tried this today, but once again my eyes glaze over as I stare blankly at the swathes of text filling wall to wall of the page. I land on a section discussing the same phenomenon I face currently - Hazzard documenting his inability to choose something to occupy his time in an attempt to distract himself. He thinks that the act of pretending to choose something is just as gratifying as the act of choosing when you're in a mood such as this, if not more so.¹² I think he's right - especially today. *At least you're not the only one.*

My eyes resurface from the page and refuse to go back in. I close its cover again. The phone sits heavy on the sofa cushion beside the book. I check again, still nothing.

You can hear my neighbour through the dividing wall between our kitchens. He sounds like he's doing the washing up. The rattling noise of empty dinner plates and scorching water is pounding through the pipes between houses. *I'm sure I wouldn't be interrupting anything if I called round. Speak to someone and it will restart the human feedback loop. Maybe you could show him some of those videos. Have a chat.*

The communal sharing of cringe content is something I partake in in my real life too, not just online via an anonymous curator. During a slow day at work I often find myself and my friends suckered into conversations, showing each other videos of young men thinking they are appealing to women through their lick lipping and body rolling published online for all to see, but in reality sending us into piles of cackling laughter at their expense, or staging dramatic readings of the worst written sex scenes we can get our hands on, either through the saucy exchanges of a latest Tinder match gone wrong or things that somehow managed to make it to print, squealing in equal amounts of horror and laughter at their incredible lack of knowledge of the female body - 'Noelle rolls her eyes. Her breasts roll in synch with them. Girls' breasts are so amazing' is the first quote which springs to mind.¹³

I roll a cigarette standing at the open front door and idly try to mutter about the weather to my now soaking cat who has just walked in. It's not really words, its wordsounds stuck in the cotton wool and licked onto the glued edge of a rizla. The cat isn't listening. The rain is bucketing down. I step outside and light the cigarette. Its paper skin is turned transparent by the wet air and the end droops down in resignation; no sign to the end of the summer rain tonight. The air smells hot and heavy. Next Door's window is open. I knock on it. There are no lights on inside the house, but his pale cheerful face swims out of the grey of the living room and he greets me. There's an awkward pause filled with rain as I remember how to speak. I try to cover up the crack in my voice with a long toke on the cigarette, covering my flush of embarrassment with a plume of smoke. *Ooo, voice crack.* The quote from *The*

¹² Hazzard, 2021

¹³ feistyguava, 2019

Inbetweeners immediately surfaces in my brain. I ask if he's free. He tells me he is. He tells me he'll be over in a few minutes. He tells me we're not spending time in his house as its rapidly deteriorated into the stereotypical image of a bachelor pad over the course of this week and he's embarrassed, but too hungover to do much about it today, a statement backed up by the half crumpled Stella cans crawling their way across the thinning carpet of the living room into the kitchen, and his pale puffy complexion. I tell him okay. I go back toward my doorway to finish my cigarette under the birch tree and stare out in the sea of drizzle and forest behind the garden fence. He arrives a few minutes later.

I spend a lot of time with my neighbour. It feels a bit like living in student housing, or at least what I imagine student housing might have been like had I lived in it. Despite how much time we've spent in each other's houses, it always feels a little awkward at first having him here. I'm not sure what to do, or where to sit in my own house when he's there. It feels as though our interactions are watched by someone to check there's nothing untoward going on, nothing that I shouldn't be doing. *This shouldn't be awkward. It's you making it awkward Shrub.* I shuffle in my seat, not looking at him as he tells me about last night's football game with friends. I can't even offer him a beer to break the initial awkwardness of having him over, he brought his own. I resort back to the television for something to break the silence, the dull click of the Xbox buttons breaking the uncomfortable quiet as we slide through titles on Netflix's *Trending Now* rail sat side by side but not looking at each other. "Have you ever watched that?" my neighbour asks, "it's my favourite show" as the cursor lands on *Peep Show*. "No, never. I've seen bits of it when it's recycled as memes on Facebook or whatever, but not actually watched it. I was a bit young when it first came out, I think" I reply, cursor on the title screen, still not looking at my neighbour, but with the stark white unblinking eye shape of *Peep Show's* logo staring at me. I ask him if we should watch that. He says sure, he's happy with whatever (he always says this). We start at the beginning for my benefit. My neighbour has watched the entirety of the show several times, he tells me he owns the box set so he doesn't mind where we start. Owning box sets seems strangely old fashioned. He asks me if I want a beer (he always says this). I hit play.

*

Plunged in through the iris immediately. The pasty, doughy body of Jez flailing around on my screen, dancing stiffly in the mirror. Oh god, I know I've done that before. Shaking my hips to my favourite song while hoovering, only to catch a glimpse of my arseless square hips tessellating around the axis of my spine, in a way that is not at all bump n' grind and more like the ancient Microsoft logo bouncing around the almost corners of the loading screen. I hope my neighbour hasn't caught me doing that. I check out of the corner of my eye to make sure he's not staring at me having noticed the resemblance. He isn't, he's cackling into the top of his beer can knowing what's to come. Good.

She's on there. She's on there. I've got to get the same bus home. I feel sea sick. Is he stalking her? The sepia pixels of 2003 writhe around on a television too large for its original format. *I am the lord of the bus* said he in an instantly irritating and nasally voice, staring at his jawless reflection with large owl-like eyes in the bus's wing mirror. That voice is like nails on a chalkboard made of my spine.

Peep Show is not something I had ever thought to watch until now, but in watching it for the first time, I felt like I had already seen it. It is one of the most highly acclaimed British comedies,¹⁴ and since its first airing in 2003 its quips have entered into the cultural sphere to be recycled in a variety of ways. From Twitter accounts reacting to real time political affairs using screen grabs from the show¹⁵ to cider companies naming their newest drinks after them,¹⁶ I had unknowingly been consuming *Peep Shows'* uncomfortable content for years. Some of the most iconic lines from the show had surfaced over the course of the last two years on TikTok, with content creators lip syncing lines from a programme most of them, I have no doubt, have never watched; some of these sound clips have been used in thousands of individual videos¹⁷. In fact, whilst watching *Peep Show* for the first time, I quickly realised I already knew parts of the script.

The familiarity of *Peep Show* plays a major role in its ongoing appeal. For many people it has become a kind of “comfort show”, something to be watched and rewatched again and again until you can quote every word. Created by Jesse Armstrong, Sam Bain and Andrew O'Connor, the show's main characters are so innocuous, every viewer undoubtedly knows someone just like them. *Peep Show* centres around two hapless twenty-something year old roommates, Mark Corrigan (played by David Mitchell) and Jeremy ‘Jez’ Osborne (Robert Webb). We follow them through the day to day trials of their purgatory existence in South London. Mark is an anxiety riddled and intensely pessimistic, obsessive loan manager, whose social awkwardness seems to know almost no bounds and appears to take a ‘no pain, no gain’ outlook on life; his strangely intense interest in the Second World War would be concerning if he weren't such an innocuous looking sop. Jez is Mark's total opposite - a boisterous, narcissistic musician (term used loosely) who's musical career goes nowhere and free loads off of roommate Mark; his deluded belief that he is extremely good looking and able to attract any woman of his choosing frequently causes the two to be at odds with one another due to jealousy. There doesn't appear to be an overarching plot to the show, with episodes starting at some indeterminate point in the future following the previous episode, so we watch as monotonous days roll into one another, punctuated by their failed attempts at romance and the stark white of Mark's office environment, an almost alarming colour change in comparison to the muddy urban tones of South London and Mark and Jez's cramped Croydon flat.

The ‘Point of View’ filming technique which gave the show its name, is also that which helped propel *Peep Show* to its current cult status. Utilising new filming technology, both Mitchell and Webb wear cameras attached to their heads in order to produce uncomfortably close shots of the people they are interacting with, including each other, as their internal thoughts are heard as monologues over the top.¹⁸ When asked what *Peep Show* was ultimately about, co-creator Sam Baine stated it portrays ‘the stubborn persistence of human suffering’¹⁹ created through the veristic portrayal of the show's protagonists, and their lack of any notable kind of character development throughout the show. The characters eyes become that of the viewer, producing an unrivalled kind of realism as we are drawn into

¹⁴ www.imdb.com

¹⁵ Twitter @DobbyClub06, 2022

¹⁶ Untappd

¹⁷ TikTok, 2021

¹⁸ British Comedy Guide, n.d.

¹⁹ Sam Baine, 2015

conspiring with the desires of the characters, and watch as Mark and Jez fumble through their lives accumulating regrets.²⁰ It is precisely this pseudo-realism that gives *Peep Show* its ability to produce such a high level of cringe within the viewer; it is almost painful, in an intensely mundane way.

Given that *Peep Show* is famed for being the epitome of British cringe, the idea that such a pain inducing show could become comforting is strange. How could something that reduces its viewers to squirming tangles of second hand embarrassment be comforting? The very point of the thing is to produce discomfort. Yet people, such as my neighbour, return to it time and time again when they need some sort of stability in their life. In fact, he rewatched the entire show during the 2020 Lockdown when he was no longer allowed into the office, and again when his father died. Perhaps this feeling of 'comfort' is born out of knowing what to anticipate from the show - not only have you watched the entire thing before so there are no surprises, but the overarching storyline is pretty similar between episodes; Mark and Jez interact with other people, inevitably mess it up in some form or other, embarrassing themselves on screen, and as a result, us as the viewer off screen. Or perhaps it is the knowledge that there are people out there who are more embarrassing than you could ever be; you become safe in the knowledge that no matter how badly you fumble your day to day interactions with others, at least you aren't Jez and Mark.

And so we join Mark on his journey home, desperately trying to catch his love interest Sophie on the bus home to force an interaction between them. Oh god and she's sat on his HAND.

I was gonna say... I just... Sorry. My neighbour has just projected Stella and sputum halfway across my living room. Ten seconds later and I nearly can't look, so instead I send groans straight into the open mouth of my can of beer using the end of it to half hide my eyes from the television screen, listening to my own cringe echo around in the aluminium. I don't blame you Sophie, I too would try and bury myself in a book hoping that this bloke took the hint. They rarely do though.

My neighbour and I are on two different sides of this cringe coin - me knowing exactly how awful it is for a man to try and seduce you with no idea how to do it, and for him to try and touch you without invitation (they'll say it's an accident, but sometimes you never can tell), and him on the side of imagining what it is to try and seduce a woman using nothing but utter social ineptitude. To him this is probably just pure comedy, showing how awkward and incompetent Mark is where romance is concerned, but to me this cuts a little closer to home. It is pretty usual for men to make the first move when it comes to dating, some might still call it tradition.²¹ Although in 2023 women don't need to sit around and wait for a suitor to appear at their doorstep with a dowry, being a woman who makes romantic or sexual advances towards men still comes with a stigma. I can't count how many misogynistic conversations I've over heard from behind a bar from patrons and coworkers alike discussing how they perceive women making the first move as "desperate" and "attention seeking", how it makes them look like a "slut" going after men, and how they like women to entertain their advances

²⁰ Rensin, 2015

²¹ Institute for Family Studies, 2022

instead, be them warranted or otherwise. Horrifyingly, these comments are almost as likely to be from women as they are from men.

No, no, it's fine... I had immediately recognised the uncomfortable smile on Sophie's face as the same one I've used many times in an attempt to diffuse a similar situation. Every woman knows how terrifying it is to try and refuse an advance from a man you don't know, or do know in some cases, it's too dangerous to give an overt 'no' - you only need to take a short trip through the headlines of a major newspaper or scroll through When Women Refuse on Tumblr to find evidence of that, so the book-shield will have to do.²²

In the original pilot for the show, it was intended for Sophie to also have an audible internal monologue alongside Mark and Jez, but this was scrapped before the production of the first season.²³ I can imagine what her side might have sounded like had it been kept:

Oh my God, why was his hand there? What was he doing? I'm sure I didn't encourage this. I can't just move now, he might take that the wrong way. Don't make a scene. And he's on this bus every day on my way home. And he's everywhere I go in the office. How many more stops till I can get off?

The bulbous fisheye lens faces of the flirter and the unwitting flirtee engulf the pixels. The intensity of the eye contact produced from the Point of View filming makes me want to look anywhere but at them. Mark's sweaty jaundiced looking face lights up my living room from the bus light reflecting off of it. It's everywhere. It's swallowing my living room. And he's more concerned about his circulation than practically groping her? Jesus fucking wept. How is this only just two minutes in?

The proximity that I as the viewer have to the characters is integral to *Peep Show's* ability to create such high levels of cringe in its audience. Physically we are brought incredibly close to the characters, which is nauseating in itself. We can see every pit and dimple in the texture of their skin, represented as a squared off pixel; the sheen of Mark's greasy and gapping fringe; the way the make up settles into the bags under Sophie's eyes and into the lines on Jez's forehead; the spittle on Jeremy's lips; the way Mark and Jez's jewels fall directly into the skin of their neck, unbroken by any indication of a jawline. But it is the psychological proximity which Armstrong, Bain and O'Connor have constructed which is the key to the show's success as a pioneer of British cringe comedy. Jez and Mark are not larger than life characters, they are in fact painfully human - fallible, squishy and desperate. The actors are not outlandishly good looking, the background scenery appears fairly commonplace of any urbanised area, and they don't appear to have any windfalls of luck nor any form of a hero's journey. They are just two everyday people that you could walk past on the street.

When writing a comedy show, the psychological distance between the audience and your protagonists is key in determining how abstractly the viewer can construe the events, and therefore how intense of an emotional response we will have to the event - i.e. how much we will cringe at the situations the show presents us with. Psychological distance can be thought

²² <https://whenwomenrefuse.tumblr.com/>, 2024

²³ Gibson, 2008

of in four distinct categories - physical, temporal, hypothetical and social.²⁴ Through the Point of View filming and our ability to hear the internal monologues of Jez and Mark, the physical distance of the characters is lowered significantly. Additionally, because both Jez and Mark have been created to be such intentionally mundane characters, they feel very relatable to us as an audience, therefore lowering the social distance between the protagonists and the audience. The hypothetical distance between the audience and the characters is also very low, as both the setting (season one was filmed in an existing flat in Croydon, and it wasn't until later seasons that an artificial flat was created inside of a studio for ease of filming) and the prosaic day-to-day trials of Mark and Jez feel very close to real life. Combined, these ensure that the viewer is the most likely to elicit an intense vicarious emotional response of cringe.

Undoubtedly, when the show first aired in 2003, the temporal distance between the audience and the show was also very low, with fashions of the time and notable buildings able to be seen in the background of the filming. However, as I sit here watching it, I am 20 years into the future, thus increasing my temporal distance between myself and the characters, and therefore having the potential to lessen my cringe response. However, this has created a new, and unexpected layer of cringe for me - the cringe of memory. I'll be the first to admit that the fashions of the early 2000's weren't great; camouflage print on everything, sandblasted denim, low slung belts, handkerchief edges and batwing tops were all the range, hot pink and aqua was everywhere, and shimmery eyeshadow and eyebrows plucked to within an inch of their life were on every fashion forward person around, including my mum. As a child I remember reading Teen Vogue and turning glossy pages of the latest styles, dreaming of one day being able to buy my own clothes so I could dress like them, and being very sure that this style was so great it would still exist by the time I was old enough to embrace it fully. Now I look back and grimace wondering how I ever thought wearing two differently coloured, and different length vest tops or polo shirts at the same time was cool. So while I may not be cringing with the characters in a temporal sense, I am certainly cringing at them in certain instances.

However, terrifyingly, I can also look around me and grimace, seeing the trends of my youth walking the streets beside me producing a strange double vision - I can see the streets of 2023, but they are paraded around upon by Nike dunks, Uggs and chunky skate shoes that threaten to swallow your ankles whole. Cargos, wide leg and slouchy jeans, and butterfly tops are back to going hand in hand as the going out uniform of choice, and the arch nemesis of everyone who lived through the 1990's, low rise jeans, are back with force. Y2K has risen again.

It is well known that fashions come and go in trend cycles. James Laver, critic and fashion historian, suggested in *Taste and Fashion* (1937) that trends take 50 to 150 years to repeat themselves; this is known as Laver's Law. He describes how fashion trends are introduced, accepted, rejected and then eventually considered 'beautiful', chronologically depicting the framework through which a particular item or trend will go through stages of acceptance by its consumers.²⁵ Fashion trends are influenced by what is happening in the surrounding world, including social, political and economic factors, and therefore can be seen depicted in

²⁴ McGraw and Warren, 2014

²⁵ Potts and Reeves-DeArmond, 2014

the media output of the time period, as in *Peep Show*. The Hemline Index is often quoted to support this, suggesting that in times of economic boom hemlines become shorter, while in times of recession they become longer, with around a three year lag between economic change and fashion trends.²⁶ For example, silhouettes which were popular in the 1920s - shortened hemlines, dropped waist dresses, waifish physique and shorter boy-ish hair cuts resurfaced in the 1960s, 40-50 years later as a result of the introduction of youth fashion culture, and acting as a kind of rebellion against the fashions of the 1950s. Following this idea, when I think of the fashions of my youth, I wasn't expecting to see them again until I was much older, some 30 years into the future. However, they are already back and readily available - the trend cycle has sped up.

The increased speed of trend cycles, now repeating every twenty years or less, has been thought to be a result of the popularity of social media. Louisa Rogers explains that traditionally, trends would filter down from 'tastemakers', designers of haute couture garments that would walk the runway in the spring/summer and autumn/winter shows from large fashion houses, which would then later influence the clothes mass produced for consumption through high street stores for the following season. However, social media rewards novelty and spins on current trends, and now that everyone with a smartphone has the potential to go viral by posting up an image of their outfit, the role of the trendsetter has been dispersed. As such this has increased demand on clothing companies to keep up with the new trends being created, and so fast fashion companies release collections almost weekly. The process is repeated (new clothing release, worn novelly and seen on the internet, spurring yet newer clothing releases), thus rapidly speeding up the trend cycle.²⁷

Now that the fashions of the early 2000s are once again mainstream, this adds a strange new experience to my watching of *Peep Show*. The costumes seem both outdated and bang on trend. I am watching something I know is twenty years old, and it looks like it from the clothing and the filming quality, but yet it could almost be contemporary. The fashions are the same as today, the underlying themes of awkwardness, romance, social interaction and money troubles are eternal. Mark and Jez could very well be experiencing this in real time as I watch it.

Additionally, when *Peep Show* first hit the screens I was seven. I couldn't empathise with any of the struggles of being a twenty-something lost in the world of adults, and still not quite grown out of the teenage anxiety of not knowing how to conduct yourself in the wider world. Now, in 2023, I am. I have lived some of the experiences in the episode. I cringed when they happened to me, and I cringe again watching them be relived by someone else on my screen.

What does your sister do? Not much, she's got leukaemia.

I choke on my drink, a spluttering laugh. I think my face looks almost as mortified as Mark's. I can feel it going red. The nonchalant nature in which Toni divulges this information over a bowl of Alpen, the very same Alpen she was huffing and puffing over in the flat block lobby, a tirade of words spilling down on to Mark laying on the floor after having been sent flying by her entry through the front door, hooped earrings and slicked curls flying about her face

²⁶ van Baardwijk and Hans Franses, 2010

²⁷ Hampson, 2022

during her rant. She was more than ready to harass the local shop owner into getting it in just for her. This is unbelievable. It is as though the lack of cereals were more catastrophic news to her than Cancer. She looks less than bothered, completely at peace as she proceeds to cram spoonfuls of muesli between her frosted rose coloured lips. A perfectly innocuous conversation between neighbours has broken into total awkward silence.

Illness and death have never been very far away from comedy. Or perhaps it is comedy that has never been far away from death. Cracking a dark joke has often been used as a way to make others feel uncomfortable and ourselves feel better; I do it almost daily. Jokes about mortality, one's own or that of others, never fail to shock an audience due to their inherently incongruous nature - in this situation you would expect for the person dying to be saddened or at the very least fearful, but instead they are making jokes going against the witnesses expectations. Known as gallows humour, this grim and ironic form of witticism never fails to get me. In the face of death is the perfect place to make a joke in my opinion. I think of making light of the situation through humour as a way to deflate its importance - laughing in the face of death, or any other perilous situation, puts a pin prick in it, causing it to whistle around the room like a screaming balloon until it's small enough to ball up and stuff deep into a pocket; something to deal with much later when you are alone and have probably had a glass of wine. Thought to relieve tension and make those in mortal peril less afraid of dying, gallows humour can be found dating back as far as the Bible with David attempting to fend off the giant Goliath with nothing but a slingshot, a feat which was sure to fail and result in the death of David.²⁸ The term gallows humour itself refers to the wooden frames used to hang people in execution, with the first permanent fixture for public hangings erected in Tyburn known as the 'Tyburn tree'. Going to watch public hangings became a popular pastime in Elizabethan and Stuart England. Refreshments were sold, pamphlets handed out listing the day's executions and their crimes, and reserved seating was available for a small fee, not unlike going to a modern sports game. Members of the upper classes would be executed in private, whilst the public hanging trees were reserved for those of a lower social stature. It was not a form of 'theatre' but there were many fundamental similarities between the public executions and theatrical performance, including the criminals following a kind of 'script' whilst on the scaffold and both judges and those being judged performing speeches to the crowd as a kind of morbid monologue to the audience.²⁹ Whilst the term has broadened to mean jokes made about any bleak or macabre instance, in its most traditional sense, jokes following the trope of gallows humour are made from the perspective of the victim as a way for laughter to allow you to deal with your problems. Jokes made from other perspectives, such as those told to cause the audience to laugh at the victim, are more widely known as black humour.

As I get caught up in thinking about public executions whilst watching *Peep Show* I suddenly start to wonder if I am attending a modern take on one. As the episode progresses, I watch as Mark and Jez spin their own rope with which to hang themselves. Their frequent social faux pas and awkward interactions twist together under the momentum that we as the squirming audience create, spinning each fibre of the noose. Cringe exists as a form of vicarious embarrassment, and reinforces in us as the cringer what social crimes we should not commit in order to avoid an embarrassed execution in public. As I watch *Peep Show*, the

²⁸ Nilson and Nilson, 2014

²⁹ Redmond, 2007

social crimes of Mark and Jez are laid before me in plain sight to be viewed and reviewed, whenever I please. It is the fictitious gallows monologue of indictment.

Gallows humour can be used as a way to regain a sense of personal power. In conversation with Patient, Claire Brummel, an 'expert in human behaviour', suggests that, during illness or at a difficult time in one's life when you may be feeling a distinct lack of control, the use of dark humour can offer a way for you to control how you respond to the situation. It can serve to produce a connection with others. When experiencing a period of hardship, for instance due to a serious illness, those around you can sometimes pull away as a result of their own discomfort, leading to a sense of loneliness for the ill person. By making a dark joke, this can offer a superficial way of connecting to others to stop them from feeling so alone.³⁰ In the case of *Peep Show*, the delivery on this remark from Toni is perfect - short, snappy and offhand. These kinds of jokes are designed to make the dying joker feel better about their own mortal peril as a way of coping, while the witness squirms uncomfortably, unsure whether they are allowed to laugh at the other person's impending doom. In this instance, it serves to make Toni feel better about the potential loss of her sister, whilst it makes Mark and the audience choke.

In my real life, I might have let slip a panicked high pitch spat of paradoxical laughter to break the silence and ease the tension between the two of us, but Mark doesn't do that. The Point Of View camera is suddenly downcast - Mark's looking at the floor. I'm looking at him looking at the floor. Toni's munching on her Alpen, completely blank faced, looking at him looking at the floor. My neighbour is looking at me, looking at Mark, being looked at by Toni eating her cereals, looking at the floor, all in total silence, and revelling in the knowledge that I didn't see that one coming from anywhere. A knock-out stroke of incongruity based humour.

Incongruity plays a key role in comedy. The ability for something or someone to set up a situation which the punchline then violates is a phenomenon which has been studied in relation to humour by a number of philosophers, with Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer, and Kierkegaard among some of its most notable proponents³¹. The Incongruity Theory of Humour arose in the 18th century as an alternative to the Superiority Theory of Humour, suggesting that something could be humorous when it violates our expectations of a situation. It has since become the dominant theory of humour. This was first discussed by Aristotle, although he did not use the term 'incongruity'. In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle suggested that a way to enable a public speaker to elicit laughter from the audience is to create an expectation through your story, and then violate it by going against it. This suggestion was supported by Cicero, who writes that 'the most common kind of joke is that in which we expect one thing and another is said; here our own disappointed expectation makes us laugh.' This technique has continued to be used into the modern day, with many stand-up comedians utilising the technique of setting up a joke, creating an expectation in the audience, and then violating it with the punchline. The same ideas were discussed much later by James Beattie in 1779, where he coined the word 'incongruous' in relation to this type of humour, suggesting that humorous laughter is caused by 'two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex

³⁰ Bashforth, 2021

³¹ Hye-Knudsen, 2018

object or assemblage, as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them'. Later expanded upon by Schopenhauer during the 19th century, he locates this type of humour in space between our sense perception of things (i.e our understanding of things through our interactions with objects in the real world), and our abstract understanding of the knowledge of these same things. He illustrates how this can become humorous through the example of a joke about walkers - someone declared that they enjoyed walking alone, and so another person suggests 'you like walking alone, and so do I: therefore we can go together'. He starts with the real world idea that if two people enjoy doing the same activity, then they can do it together. But this becomes humorous because the essential part that they enjoy of this activity is being alone.³²

However, laughter is only one possible response to incongruity, as highlighted by Kierkegaard and Hazlitt. The comic and the tragic both stem from an instance of incongruity. Kierkegaard makes the distinction that the tragic is suffering produced by the aforementioned incongruity, whilst the comic is a painless contradiction.³³ Toni's comment to Mark that her sister has Cancer seems to come out of left field, so totally opposite to the previous conversation about happy childhood memories of skiing holidays that it had the potential to fall into the tragic. So why did I laugh? Why does this comment not fall into the category of the tragic? Cancer isn't funny, and this is where Incongruity Theory partly falls down. There are plenty of things which happen in day to day life, like this scene in *Peep Show*, which aren't traditionally funny, they just don't match up with the mental expectations we have developed, and therefore can just as easily be deemed tragic instead of comic.

To account for this, Incongruity Theory has been developed further by Warren and McGraw into the Benign Violation Theory. This theory suggests that there is a 'sweet-spot' in humour where the incongruous situation is simultaneously appraised by the viewer as a violation (something unexpected or bad, either physically or linguistically) and also benign. Warren and McGraw note that the violation must also be negative, which explains why something like winning the lottery is not humorous, despite it departing from day to day expectations, and slipping over on a banana peel is.³⁴ In the scene above, Toni's disclosure of her sister's illness works as the violation, therefore departing from the usual manner in which we would expect this small talk to go, but it is benign to us as the viewer due to the psychological distance created through watching this fictional scenario on the TV.

However, there is still a slick coating of constructed cringe plastered thickly all over this surface by the show's writers. We empathise with Mark. He is an unaware target who has stumbled unintentionally into this transgression - we've all been there and are able to identify with his awkward plight. We, as the viewer, cringe on his behalf and therefore suffer with him, suddenly recalling all the times we've accidentally fumbled a conversation that's been unexpectedly thrown towards tragedy.³⁵ I, for instance, am suddenly consumed by the memory of being fourteen and eating lunch with friends in the Spring, asking my friend who had lost her Mum several years before if she was doing anything nice for Mother's Day that weekend in an unconscious act of small talk making, whilst picking apart a sandwich. Obviously, she was not. Consequently, my laughter serves as a form of empathy; I am not

³² Morreall, 2020

³³ Morreall, 2020

³⁴ Kant, L. and Norman, E. (2019).

³⁵ Mayer, A.V., Paulus, F.M. and Krach, S. (2021).

laughing at Mark necessarily, but rather laughing with him, showing that I understand his current situation and that I too am embarrassed on his behalf - it is a compassionate form of cringing.³⁶

I know - I know something funny. You're going to love this.

However, any compassionate feeling towards Mark is thwarted as easily as it is created in the next scene. In an attempt to reenter himself into Toni's favour as a potential 'fuck buddy', and divert the conversation away from Toni's seriously ill sister, Mark seizes the opportunity to embarrass the currently absent Jez by showing her Jez's latest music track. We join Mark and Toni inside of Jez's cramped bedroom, both cackling with laughter, Mark making comments to egg Toni's laughter on, whilst blasting Jez's absurd song.

The song is objectively bad, yes. A car crash of flatly spoken words and vocalisations, drums and electronic sounds; the poorest attempt at a DIY Prodigy song you've ever heard - 'absurd' to use Jez's own words. We as the audience are undoubtedly meant to be laughing alongside Mark and Toni as they listen to Jez's demented tune. How could he possibly produce something this terrible, with so much expensive equipment and time on his hands? But we aren't laughing. We're cringing. We know that what Mark is doing is wrong, and so we cringe at him, displacing him to the out-group and therefore reinforcing our own sense of moral superiority, safe in the knowledge that we as the in group wouldn't do such a terrible thing as this. Then the obvious happens. Jez's key enters the lock. Simultaneously we're now cringing at Jez as he re-enters the flat practising his Grammy acceptance speech for this demented song - how deluded could he possibly be? We as the audience know what Jez is going to find when he walks in - his supposed friend throwing him and his apparent month of work under the bus in order to get closer to a girl that Jez has previously expressed an interest in, and we cringe again in anticipation. Mark and Toni suddenly stop laughing, having been caught in the act of making fun of a person who wasn't there. Toni pulls a face which is nowhere near sincerity. The silence that falls in Jez's bedroom is harder to listen to than the song. Just.

My enjoyment in watching this scene stemmed from a feeling of *schadenfreude*, an emotion with no direct translation into English, but one that can be seen in many cultures worldwide. Coming from the German 'schaden' meaning damage or harm, and 'freude' meaning joy or pleasure, *schadenfreude* is ultimately the enjoyment we feel when watching misfortune befall others. In her book *Schadenfreude: Why We Feel Better when Bad Things Happen to Other People*, Tiffany Watt Smith, an 'emotional historian', attempts to define and document the notion of *schadenfreude*, listing a variety of examples both historical and from her own life in which this phenomenon occurs. Having first appeared in English in 1853 in a book by RC Trench, Watt goes on to define the five key characteristics she feels *schadenfreude* possesses, having looked at its usage in a variety of English texts:

1. It is an opportunistic pleasure, whereby we happen across another's misfortune that we have not caused.
2. It is a furtive emotion, displayed through the use of smiles which are almost imperceptible to others and an internal sense of smugness.

³⁶ ContraPoints, 2020

3. It is a feeling of entitlement when the other person's suffering can be seen as a comeuppance of some kind.
4. It is a form of respite from our own feelings of failure and inadequacy, giving us a sense of superiority when surveying the failure of another.
5. It is a feeling of glee at the minor discomfort of another; it is not applicable to tragedies and deaths experienced by another person.

Its existence is a subject of contention for many people including Hobbes, who asks what strange combination of joy and pity could make people content to be a spectator in the misery of their friends. Schopenhauer claims in agreement that schadenfreude is 'an infallible sign of a thoroughly bad heart and profound moral worthlessness'. While Watt Smith does suggest that schadenfreude is 'a pleasure swirled through with shame', she also claims that its existence speaks to our need as humans to appreciate the absurdity of our attempts to have our lives appear to be within our control, and that it testifies to our need to not feel alone when we are disappointed, but instead to seek some kind of consolation in being a part of a community that has failed. Furthermore, it functions as a way to measure ourselves against others and make sense of our choices when we fall short in some way or other.³⁷ As such, when watching the endeavours of Mark and Jez in *Peep Show*, we may feel a sense of schadenfreude, as the events which befall them are relatively minor (there are no dramatic tragedies or deaths in the season), and we have no direct input into the events, as we are just observers. As an audience we are enabled to feel superior to Mark and Jez whilst watching their failures as in many instances the events which befall them are as a result of their own doing. In the scene above, Mark got his comeuppance by being a bad friend to Jez and exploiting his lack of musical talent to try and win romantic favour with their neighbour, someone Jez had previously expressed a romantic interest in. We are smug in the knowledge that Mark has been embarrassed in front of Toni by his own actions and has been caught doing so by Jez.

However, it's important to recognize that schadenfreude is distinct from cringe in many ways, and so incapable of capturing our entire experience of watching *Peep Show*. Cringe, at its heart, is a vicarious physical response evoked by the actions of another. Schadenfreude is a sense of pleasure derived from a feeling of superiority over another. What's more, schadenfreude is distinctly felt 'at' another person due to the feeling of superiority, whilst cringe can be felt both 'with' an individual (you are cringing at the same time that they are feeling embarrassed, as a form of sympathetic cringe), and 'at' an individual when they are unaware of their social faux pas.

Sitting in the discomfort of this on screen silence, I was led to think about laughter and its function in relation to cringe. One of the most notable and detailed studies of laughter comes from the 16th century French physician Laurent Joubert. In distinction to his contemporaries, Joubert's studies of laughter focussed not on the psychological causes of laughter, but on the physiological and the mechanical. By combining his understandings of Aristotelian and Platonic doctrines with the commonly held medical beliefs of Renaissance France, he determines that the source of laughter is bodily, coming from the heart as opposed to from the brain, apparently proven by colloquialisms - 'Now one commonly says 'he laughs heartily', and not 'brainily''. He goes on to suggest that the cause of the convulsions associated with the act of laughter come from the contrary emotions of joy and sorrow with

³⁷ Watt Smith, 2018, pp.1–18

are held in the heart, the seat of emotion within the body, causing a stirring motion in the heart which he put down to alternating contractions and dilations caused by this mixture of emotions - the contractions the sadness, and the dilations the joy. This movement was then transferred to the pericardium, an organ which had been shown through anatomical study to be attached to the diaphragm, thus causing the lungs to expel air in the same alterations as the heart's movements, producing the sounds and movements we associate with laughter. He also borrowed a definition of laughter from Aristotle's *Poetics*, suggesting that laughter was 'a defect or ugliness that is not painful or destructive'; for Joubert the aforementioned ugliness came from the laughing matter, and the absence of any strong emotion the joy.³⁸ By the standards of modern science, much of what Joubert claims seems absurd, however, his understanding of contrasting emotions in relation to the production of laughter does fall in line with our current understandings of the Incongruity Theory of Humour, and that of Benign Violation theory, and therefore I believe can be somewhat useful when thinking about laughter in relation to cringe comedy.

When we are embarrassed, either on behalf of someone or ourselves, we turn to humour and therefore laughter to try and negate the uncomfortable situation. If we are to continue with Joubert's analogy for the production of laughter, say for instance when someone embarrasses themselves on screen for our entertainment in the instance of *Peep Show*, the discomfort of the situation would be the sorrow, and the relief that you're not the one having been embarrassed publicly constitutes the lack of strong emotion, and therefore joy, thus producing laughter.

I then began to think about cued laughter and laughter tracks in TV shows. Often in a comedy show, a character caught in the act of doing something they shouldn't, would be accompanied by canned studio laughter, softening the blow of the character's transgressions, and reassuring the audience that their actions were all in the name of comedy and therefore done without malice. For example, in the episode *Chains* from season 2 of *Blackadder*, Edmund Blackadder refers to his captor Prince Ludwig as 'sausage breath' and mimics the terrible fake German accent which Tim McInnerny is using, claiming to have been 'inconweened'. This is then accompanied by a studio laugh track, thus reassuring the audience that the characters do not hold these views, and that the imitation accent and name calling is only to elicit laughter for the sake of the show, and not because the actors or writers harbour any kind of hatred towards the Germans.³⁹

However, in a 2011 study by sociologist Sam Friedman, it was found that the British public actually reacted unfavourably to the inclusion of a laughter track. In interviewing attendants of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, a significant proportion felt that laughter tracks were coercive and resented the implication that you are being told when you should be laughing. Many felt that 'something can be funny without you needing to laugh'.⁴⁰ I feel that this rather typifies the experience of watching a cringe comedy. It is inherently humorous, deriving its humour primarily from social awkwardness, but in a manner that doesn't necessarily make you laugh out loud. If *Peep Show* were to include a laugh track, it would undermine the cringe inducing elements and push it towards the comic genre of farce, with Jez and Mark

³⁸ De Rocher, 2016

³⁹ *Blackadder II*, 'Chains', 1986

⁴⁰ Friedman, 2011

merely becoming buffoon like caricatures of the typical twenty-something year old to be laughed at. Instead there is no canned laughter. There is very little laughter at all in the show. Witnessing this scene as the audience, I wasn't laughing, I was sitting in horrified silence, albeit broken by a few snorts from my neighbour. These three seconds of Mark's maniacally forced cackling are it, and they don't lighten the mood, it reinforces it - it is the wrong kind of laughter. This laughter does not reassure the audience that Mark is doing this merely for the sake of comedy. This laughter drips with spite and it's painful to listen to; it manages to reinforce the idea that Mark believes in this as a genuine course of action. These are his beliefs, not merely for the sake of comedy. The lack of any genuine sounding laughter causes me to cringe. I cringe on behalf of Jez, betrayed by his apparent friend, and I cringe at Mark - how could a fully grown man think that such juvenile behaviour is a good way to win over a romantic interest, or in any way to treat a friend? But nonetheless it is still humorous in an idiosyncratic way.

Jez storms out, I don't blame him.

Listening to Mark's cruel laughter, my mind wanders. I begin to think through a perceived relationship between Samuel Beckett, laughter and *Peep Show*. Mirthless laughter is a fundamental characteristic of Beckett's work. It is without a doubt that this forced laughter from Mark is indeed mirthless, the joy is stretched across his face in a wonky toothed grin, and escapes his lips in hysterical convulsions, but never truly reaches his eyes, and it's difficult to watch. In her paper, "*Strange Laughter*": *Post-Gothic Questions of Laughter and the Human in Samuel Beckett's Work*, Dr Hannah Simpson examined the types of laughter in Beckett's plays and noted that the laughter displayed is often unsettling, and does not prompt the reader or viewer to join in with the character, much like I am not encouraged to join in with Mark and Toni's laughter in this scene, in fact it is quite the opposite. While watching them laugh on my screen I want to do anything but laugh. Their laughter looks demented, in-human and unhinged. Simpson also comments that if the audience were to laugh, they would feel uncomfortable with their own laughter as a response, something I too can see in relation to the drama described above - if I were to laugh along with Mark and Toni it would be conspiratorial, I would be agreeing with their actions against Jez.⁴¹

My mind then moves to Simon Critchley's account of Beckett's ideas on mirthless laughter. In his book, *On Humour*, Critchley opens with a quote from Beckett's novel *Watt* on the different types of laughter:

"The bitter, the hollow and -haw! haw! - the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well, well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout - haw! - so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs - silence please - at that which is unhappy."

Critchley goes on to explain that through the inclusion of such mirthless laughter, Beckett causes the reader's defences to drop, allowing for a moment of weakness in which the laughter then rebounds upon the subject, and we as the reader realise that the object of the

⁴¹ Simpson, 2017

laughter is in fact the subject who is laughing.⁴² In this instance, it is Mark that is both the subject who is laughing and the object of our laughter; if we were to laugh, we would be laughing at his misguided actions and not with him.

In his work on Beckett, Martin Esslin has also examined this same quote from *Watt*. He writes that the most integral part to this quote is the word 'dianoetic'. Relating to Aristotle's poetics, the dianoia is the cathartic discovery of the truth by the protagonist in a Greek tragedy. This forms the basis of the characters' purging of emotions which enable the source of their suffering and misfortune to transform into something positive. In this instance, the protagonist may laugh the mirthless laugh - a laugh without pleasure or enjoyment, but instead of defiance and contempt for the meanness of the human condition as a form of liberation. It allows the laughter to transcend human wishes after having realised their vanity, ultimately resulting in the acceptance of life as it is, and an attitude of detachment toward human unhappiness and enables the participants to rise above the triviality of daily life and its suffering, rather than have it drive them into total withdrawal from life.⁴³ Mark's mirthless laughter can therefore be seen as an act of transformation, as would happen in a traditional Greek tragedy. Previously, I saw him as misguided and helplessly awkward, with his seemingly innate social ineptitude as the cause for the bulk of his misfortune. Typically in the tale of the Greek tragedy this act of mirthless laughter would enable the protagonist to overcome his very human difficulties by allowing them to see the bigger picture and becoming a hero. However, in the case of Mark, I do not believe that he becomes a hero, as he is too deeply flawed as a character - whilst he is a main character, he doesn't appear to have a great deal or moral integrity, doesn't prescribe to Joseph Campbell's model of the traditional hero's journey and the convention that the hero is someone to be aspired to. He acts selfishly. I might instead proffer that he becomes a kind of anti-hero; Mark has accepted his life as it is, he perceives the meanness of the human condition to be evident in his continual bad luck, the young children who taunt him several times throughout the episode, his roommate Jez, who apparently has far greater success when it comes to romance than Mark, and Mark believes he is suffering. Mark in this instance has chosen to combat the inconsequential goings on of his life in SitCom purgatory by using Jez as the butt of his joke to attain Toni's affections which elicits this mirthless laughter. Consequently, I am now inclined to view him through a lens more similar to that of Matt Lakeman, who describes Mark and Jez as 'evil', using his own definition of evil as to be that which 'creates bad outcomes not just out of malice, but instinct or carelessness.'⁴⁴ While Mark may not necessarily be evil in the traditional sense, he did certainly seem to choose this course of action with Toni instinctively, and without any care or forethought on behalf of Jez.

After a brief seconds pause to stare at the pebbledash exterior to their remarkably brown flat, we rejoin Mark in his kitchen desperately attempting to apologise to Jez, rattling off the assortment half shit gifts he's acquired by way of peace making - a sloppy looking chicken tikka cooking on a soiled hob, Dune on DVD, Bakewell slices, gin, Sara Lee cake, and a promise not to nag about the borrowed £30; wide eyed, nervously smiling and listed off with a kind of buoyancy that doesn't at all match those dark dead eyes that seem to swallow up his pasty face. These have all the tell tale signs of the kinds of gifts that panicked family

⁴² Critchley, 2011, pp.47-52

⁴³ Esslin, 1993

⁴⁴ Lakeman, 2020

members pick up at corner shops or garages on the way home when they've forgotten it's your birthday, or they upset you earlier in the day - nothing says 'I'm sorry, I love you' quite like a squashed bunch of petrol station flowers. *I'm just really, really, really sorry Jeremy.* Mark looks like a kid bargaining with their sibling to please not tell mum after having hit them too hard. He looks almost on the edge of tears. I am watching a fully grown man, reduced to the stature of a child, sweating on my screen. It's nauseating. It feels perverse. And it is the total opposite of the jeering man laughing from the previous scene - Mark has changed character.

In his essay *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman presented the idea that all social interaction is involved in the performance of the everyday, naming it Dramaturgy. Stemming from the Shakespearean play *As You Like It*, the famous quote

"All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts"⁴⁵

began the starting point for Goffman's proposed theory. He thought of dramaturgy as a theatrical model for examining social behaviour through use of the metaphor that life is the theatre stage, and human beings are the actors upon this stage; the performance is any person performing any activity throughout their lives. Goffman played particular interest to the idea of impression management within the players, whereby a person would use a series of different masks when interacting with others in order to act out the correct role for the specific setting, therefore controlling how we are seen by others. The true beliefs of the player would only become apparent to the others through involuntary expressive behaviours, such as laughter. Goffman also suggests that, unlike when studying interpersonal interaction through a psychological lens, there is no one true self, as each role the performer assumes in each new interaction, or scene if we're going along with his theatrical analogy, is a constituent part of the player.⁴⁶

While *Peep Show* is obviously a work of fiction on a kind of theatrical stage, as each setting is controlled and framed through the filming process, I still believe that Goffman's theories of dramaturgy can be helpful in examining the previous interaction between Mark and Jez. In the kitchen scene, it is clear that Mark has entirely changed his role, or his 'mask'. When speaking with Toni, Mark attempted to be charming and suave, offering her a solution to her great Alpen problem, and ridiculing Jez to make her laugh, a role which would seem to not come easily to him, as indicated by the neuroticism of his monologues. In this scene, he plays a new part. He is no longer maliciously laughing at Jez and using Jez's misfortune for his own personal gain. Instead Mark has changed the performance into a pitiful, grovelling act of apology, hoping that through this new role, Mark having donned a pair of glassy eyes on the edge of tears, Jez will accept his attempt at saying sorry. Mark has changed his performance in order to maintain his social relationship with Jez, and attempt to manage the way in which Jez sees him for future performances.

Goffman suggested that the effect of dramaturgy became particularly apparent when encountering an awkward situation between individuals -

⁴⁵ Shakespeare et al., 2009, p.83

⁴⁶ Goffman, 1956, pp.1-9

“Given the fact that the individual effectively projects a definition of the situation when he enters the presence of others, we can assume that events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection. When these disruptive events occur, the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassed halt. ... at such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile, and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomie that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down.”⁴⁷

In this situation, it's Mark's projection that has been discredited. Jez believed Mark to be his friend, so his actions in the previous scene discredited this belief in Jez which had been built up over years of previous 'performances' of friendship - Mark letting Jez live in his spare room, lending him £30 etc. When Jeremy entered the room the interaction between Mark, Toni and Jez came to a 'confused and embarrassed halt'; Mark felt shame at this discovery, and Jeremy hostility, exactly as described by Goffman.

In *Cringeworthy*, Melissa Dahl also makes use of Goffman's dramaturgical theory when thinking about the concept of cringe in relation to her experience of auditioning for *Mortified*, a live stage performance where people read the most embarrassing moments and darkest secrets from the diaries of their younger selves:

'Goffman theorized that every social interaction functions as if it were part of a play: We present ourselves to be a certain way, in order to fit the expectations of a certain audience. In contrast, the backstage is where you can relax, and be your true self. Awkward moments arise when the stage and the backstage clash, when the audience can see you mid-costume change. It's a metaphor that helps explain why my experience auditioning for *Mortified* is so strange. It's the backstage intentionally brought onstage.'⁴⁸

This notion of 'the backstage intentionally brought onstage' immediately reminds me of the internal monologues presented by *Peep Show*. The voice overs we hear from Mark and Jez are of their backstage voices, their innermost thoughts which are not meant to be heard by other players. However, they are audible to us as the audience as Mark and Jez continue their on stage performances, with this clash producing a feeling of cringe.

In watching this exchange, I am hit with a wave of disgust-adjacent-tinge. Watching Mark grovel like this makes me feel sick, I can't watch him do this. It's so pitiful! It's quite obvious by this point in the show that Mark doesn't have any friends aside from Jeremy, but I want him to own up to his mistake like an adult instead of leading with *but it wasn't that big of a thing was it? Just one of those weird things that happen sometimes between mates?* In an attempt to deflect his guilt on to Jeremy, trying to claim that it was Jeremy's misinterpretation of the situation which has caused all the trouble. But perhaps this says more about me than about the characters.

⁴⁷ Goffman, 1956, pp.6

⁴⁸ Dahl, 2018, pp.10–11

I have always had trouble negotiating outward displays of emotion from others, be them good or bad. I become like a rabbit in the headlights, unsure how to respond in kind and completely frozen to the spot. I like things middle of the road - nice, mild emotions from other people that don't require any kind of input from me. If you're in tears I'm the first one out of the room to go and put the kettle on so I no longer have to watch. Knowing this, maybe this is why I cringe away from this insipid display from Mark - I don't want to be like him so I push him further away, into the out-group, to ensure that no one thinks I am this weak.

However, given the proximity we have to Mark and Jeremy in the show, this is hard to do. The psychological distance between us and the protagonists is so close, it would be easy to lose sight of who is in the right or wrong in this situation. It's usual when watching a show to end up aligning yourself with the protagonists, no matter how immoral they may be. You spend an extended period of time with the character, learning their values, morals and motives behind each action. Even if you don't necessarily agree with what they have done, you are able to sympathise. In this instance, it's easy to watch Mark's actions towards Jeremy and understand why he's done it - he's lonely and desperately wants to have sex, perhaps to try and bolster his low self confidence, and the woman he apparently loves doesn't seem to be showing any interest in him. We are in Mark's physical space through the Point of View filming exerting a kind of physical pressure on us as the audience. The Point of View camera forces us to become Mark. We hear Mark's internal monologue explaining why he's doing the things he is - he's resigned to the fact that Sophie isn't interested, and hopes that he might be able to secure some affection from Toni, having seen an 'in' through the offer of Alpen, and probably mistaking Toni's acceptance of his offer for romantic interest. As Matt Lakeman puts it, we are bathed in a 'maximally sympathetic presentation'⁴⁹ of Mark's actions. Every movement, every deluded thought process, every inappropriate word is accounted for by Mark's internal monologue broadcast to us, and even if you don't want to agree, the pressure of his unwavering gaze through the head cam, straight through your television and at your face makes you feel forced to agree, even against your better judgement. If you are able to detach yourself enough from the show's grip and Mark's stare, you are clearly able to see that what Mark is doing is wrong, but due to the onslaught of sympathy, justifications which seem plausible and the weight of the character's stare, it can be easy to lose sight of.

Cringe can form this detachment. When watching this exchange, I cringed so hard I detached from the show. With my face screwed up and half squinting at the screen I was no longer trapped under the stare of Mark or Jez. I gritted my teeth and my lips pulled back, and every muscle in my neck tensed, causing the low rumble of blood rushing through my vessels in my ears to become audible and their monologue was just audible over it. My neighbour looked over and smirked. For that split second I was granted a momentary clarity.

But why was I cringing so hard? This scene wasn't exceptionally embarrassing or awkward in comparison to other segments of *Peep Show*, and I strongly suspect that had I not been in the presence of company, I wouldn't have reacted in nearly such a visible fashion - it's very rare for me to utter even a derisive snort at the TV when watching alone, so what was it about this particular set of circumstances that was making me so vocal? *Peep Show* was not my choice, it was my neighbours, and we are friends. This scene in particular is about

⁴⁹ Lakeman, M. (2020).

turbulence caused in a friendship by being a bad friend to someone you live with. Perhaps I saw something of my own relationship with my neighbour in Mark and Jez due to the proximity of our living situation and the amount of time we spend together. My excessive and visible cringe reactions were my attempt at performing being a good audience member for my friends choice in viewing.

Upon considering this as a reason, I was reminded of Satre's waiter in a Paris café. Both I and the waiter were performing at the thing which we were doing in order to become it - he moving deftly throughout the tables, playing with the ever changing balance of his tray, amusing himself in becoming a caricature of the Parisian waiter in order to perform the role;⁵⁰ I exaggerating my facial movements in relation to the goings on on the TV screen, aggressively sucking air in through my teeth to ensure that it's audible to my companion all while ensuring that my eyes remain locked with the screen the majority of the time. I was playing at being a good watcher, engrossed in the show, all the while aware that my friend was watching to ensure that I was showing the appropriate level of enjoyment, or in the case of this SitCom in particular cringe, as that is the intention of the show, in order to reassure him that I thought this was a good choice on his part.

I would also suggest that my performance served a secondary purpose as a condemnation of Mark's actions. Given the scene pivots around a betrayal of trust by a friend, by showing a visible display of cringe, I am attempting to reassure my neighbour that I would never behave in such a manner towards him - this is me performing cringe criticism.

By now there is almost total silence in Mark and Jeremy's kitchen. Total, uncomfortable silence. The silence is about as dense as that Sara Lee cake Jez is shovelling into his mouth alongside a slab of cheddar. I can hear the low, wet slapping of his jaw breaking down the cake underneath Mark's pleas of forgiveness. My jaw clenches and I can feel my mouth filling up with saliva as I press back into the sofa to try and get away from it. This is a form of cringe I hadn't yet seen in *Peep Show* - the overtly physical kind that overlaps disgust. Arguably, this is the easiest form of cringe to achieve; if you make something revolting enough, make it visceral enough, the audience will cringe: guts, gore, shit, wet squelches and chewing noises are all cheap tricks to make the viewer recoil. Considering how well the creators of *Peep Show* have negotiated the construction of social cringe for the sake of comedy over the past fifteen minutes, this felt a little too easy for them, but nonetheless it managed to get straight under my skin and have the desired effect.

Watching this animalistic behaviour displayed by Jez I am returned to thinking of Samuel Beckett, having been reminded of a book I read last summer before I fell into my readingless slump driven by my own loneliness. I decided to dabble in a bit of Beckett, a writer whose work I should have read by now but had somehow managed to skip on my long list of recommendations from others. I dipped a toe into his oeuvre with *The End*, part of the Penguin Modern Classics collection. A short story centering around an unnamed vagrant having been sent out from a charitable institution with little money to get him started and some clothing, it describes in minute detail the decay of the unnamed man as he is swindled for money, cast out to the countryside and then again toward the sea, before settling down into the shell of a rowing boat filled with his own excrement and piss, and presumably

⁵⁰ Satre, 1992

passing away. Descriptions of bodily functions are a frequent occurrence in Beckett's works I have come to discover, and here a vivid depiction of the man itching his scabbing, psoriatic skin with uncut nails sticks out to me from memory, Beckett having described the way in which he pushed his long nailed fingers inside of his arse all the way up to the knuckle to scratch, revelling in the relief this gives him, claiming it to be better than masturbation, and ultimately causing himself an injury.⁵¹

Beckett's work is not humourous in the sense of traditional comedies, I suppose much like *Peep Show* could be seen as not being funny in the traditional sense, but instead falls into the tradition of black comedy, often associated with the Theatre of the Absurd. His characters undergo distressing and frequently depressing situations, such as those described above, but are dealt with in absurd and humorous ways. Black comedy frequently cites topics which are considered taboo, presenting something shocking or unexpected in order to create humour whilst simultaneously provoking thought and discussion about matters we may wish otherwise to avoid; these frequently include death, human sexuality, disease, famine, and poverty. Black humour utilises humanity's worst impulses and throws them back in our faces, to either shine a light on important topics, or try to create a laugh in an absurd circumstance, showing us the futility of life and making clear that we are helpless victims of fate.⁵²

Christopher Ricks writes that Beckett's works manages to be

'excruciatingly funny despite his possessing a deeply dispiriting apprehension of life, [but] the opposite makes sense too: the conviction that Beckett's apprehension of death is not dispiriting, but is wise and fortifying, and therefore is the lens of his translucent comedy.'⁵³

When considering Beckett's work it would be easy to consider it merely a depressing look at the depravity of the modern age and disenfranchised people's inability to control their own outcomes, but instead through his use of farcical circumstances and low comedy, such as references to the least glamorous parts of human function, it becomes an absurd and illuminating look at the face of finitude. We could become depressed in the face of such misery, but instead we can choose to see the ridiculousness of it clearly through the lens of black humour.

Through the study of Beckett's body of work, Ruby Crohn concluded that 'Beckett's comic ironist is ugly, small, poor, cruel, ignorant, miserable and infinitely vulnerable. It is above all in that vulnerability that we recognize ourselves.'⁵⁴ The above description matches our unnamed protagonist from *The End* almost exactly. It is in the vulnerability of this hapless vagrant that we see ourselves. We laugh at him so preoccupied with his ability, or indeed inability, to satiate his itching skin as there are clearly much more serious issues afoot - his homelessness, his lack of money, his lack of food. If we were to be in an identical situation to his, we too may be preoccupied with the more minor issues of itching and self-pleasure, when the more pressing matters of our living conditions are out of our control. Additionally, one would think that given how miserable his living circumstances are, existing inside of the

⁵¹ Beckett, 2018

⁵² The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023

⁵³ Dow, 2011

⁵⁴ Dow, 2011

shell of a rotting row boat, he would endeavour to keep these conditions as pleasant as he is able. Instead he urinates and defecates inside of the boat, resigned to the misery of his own life. Instead of being miserable about sitting in his own excrement and the putrid smell this undoubtedly causes, he is irritated by his own inability to scratch the itch inside of his anus without causing injury - his inability to affect the larger problems and focus on the smaller particulars of his existence causes us to find a sense of dark and ironic humour. Furthermore, humour is created in the fact that as the reader, I am disgusted not by the way that this man has been treated and appalling conditions under which he is currently existing, but instead by the fact that he is choosing to ram a finger into his arse and the experience is being described in such vivid detail. But, as Simon Critchley comments

'When the laughter dies away, we sense, with a sadness - a *Trustram-tristesse* - that is always the dark heart of humour, what an oddity the human being is in the universe... the body that is the object and subject of humour is an *object* body - estranged, alien, weakening, failing.'⁵⁵

Once you have finished being equal parts amused and disgusted with the antics of the character, a heavy sense of hollowness begins to settle at the realisation that we are all fallible in the same ways that our unnamed vagrant is.

Returning once again to *Peep Show*, I am able to see some similarities between my understanding of Beckett and this episode. Jeremy's unsightly eating habits enable me to laugh despite the ongoing argument caused by Mark's betrayal. I can see myself in Jeremy angrily biting of hunks of cheddar to avoid having to look at Mark, the ridiculousness of his breakfast choices making me laugh whilst Mark continues to beg in the background; similar to that described above, I am disgusted not by the way in which Jez is being treated by what seems to be his only friend, but instead by the close attention that this shot is paying towards his eating habits, thus providing a comic relief in this moment of tension.

Continuing my wandering train of thought of Beckett in relation to *Peep Show*, I am also able to see some similarities between the show and the Theatre of the Absurd, of which Beckett played a major role. Coined by the critic Martin Esslin in his 1960 essay of the same name, The Theatre of the Absurd is a literary movement which came out of the philosophy of Absurdism post World War II as an antidote to Nihilism and a step away from Existentialism. With a focus on the absurd and meaningless nature of existence, Esslin noted that plays following absurdist tropes were greatly enjoyed by audience members despite the fact that audience members were aware that they did not fully understand what was going on or what the playwrights were driving at. He noted several key characteristics including: irrational, often nonsensical goings on; a lack of explicit time or place so that it is difficult to know how much time has passed between or during scenes; nameless characters and a lack of individuality between them who often feel like stand-ins for anyone; plot points going beyond any rational motivation; happenings at random; often falling into the genre of a tragicomedy.⁵⁶ With this in mind, I can certainly see some elements of the Theatre of the Absurd in the writing of *Peep Show*. We move between scenes and episodes without any explicit mention of how much time has passed, and indeed I have only assumed that the show is set in 2003 as that was when it was released and some of the features of the show (namely the styles and buildings) feel pertinent to that era. Whilst our protagonists do have

⁵⁵ Critchley, 2011, pp.47-52

⁵⁶ Esslin, 1960

names, we are given little backstory about them, and the characters of Jez and Mark are so mundane they could easily stand in for any twenty-something male, one of the reasons why the show is so relatable and cringe inducing. Parts of the dialogue are strange, using made up words, as discussed below, and the overarching plot of *Peep Show* is made up of futile events in which Mark and Jez seem to learn nothing, lending the show its circular, purgatory nature. Indeed, Esslin includes a quote from Ionesco's commentary on Kafka in his essay - 'est absurde ce qui n'a pas de but...' (Absurd is that which has no purpose, or goal, or objective), which I would argue could certainly seem to apply to Mark and Jez. They achieve nothing, and have seemingly no purpose; they are existing, often in their own heads as shown through the shows monologues, and finding apparent meaning in that existence - both the Theatre of the Absurd and *Peep Show* 'share the same deep sense of human isolation and of the irredeemable character of the human condition.'⁵⁷ Furthermore, I believe that in some ways *Peep Show* can be described as a tragicomedy as well as a SitCom, as ultimately *Peep Show* follows the pitiful events which befall Mark and Jez, whilst incorporating humorous elements to invoke a comedic response from viewers.

Until this point, the cringe-inducing events of *Peep Show* had centred around actions. Misconstrued intentions, noises and conversations, but as Jez attempts to exact his retribution for Mark's wrong doings, I am confronted by a cringe led by language. In order to teach Mark a lesson, Jez fills his bed with raw pork chops, sausages and bacon spelling out 'JUDAS' to be revealed as Mark pulls back his duvet cover. It is unclear how long Jeremy has been waiting for this big reveal, but it must have been some time as the juices from the meat have soaked their way into the surrounding bottom sheet turning it a pinkish grey. I groan and mime a gag, letting my tongue hang out my mouth. My neighbour snorts and exclaims 'amazing'. That is absolutely disgusting. But it wasn't this that made me cringe. It was Jeremy's next words he had borrowed from Super Hans spoken as he hangs out in Mark's bedroom doorway smoking a cigarette: *It means 'Omerta'. It means 're-wenge'*.

For those unfamiliar, 'Omerta' is a Mafia code of honour often associated with southern Italians, meaning you are sworn to silence about the Mafia and its goings on. It is a promise not to help in any legal proceedings which would negatively affect the Mafia's dealings. Anyone found breaking this code was liable to have revenge exacted upon them by the victims and their families.⁵⁸ It was the use of this word by Jeremy that made me cringe. Jeremy, a do-nothing, apparently law-abiding loser, sponging off his friend and living in a spare room, was claiming to be enacting a moral code of one of the most powerful non-governmental powers in the world. The idea was ridiculous. Not only was he not dangerous or cool enough to be able to pull off using the word, but this is a code that kills people, Mafia and civilians alike, and to say that you are going to enact 'Omerta' is an extreme overreaction to Mark sharing Jeremy's track.

'Re-wenge' by comparison is very literally a joke. Originating from an episode of Blackadder II, 're-wenge' is an intentionally satirised pronunciation of 'revenge' spoken in a spoof German accent.⁵⁹ The conviction with which Jez uses this adds to how ridiculous his threat is, especially when paired with such a strict criminal code as Omerta. The combination of the

⁵⁷ Esslin, 1960

⁵⁸ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998

⁵⁹ Blackadder II, 'Chains', 1986

two terms elicits a cringe response in me, as it's very clear that Jeremy doesn't really understand what the two words mean and he is embarrassing himself without knowing it. He thinks that he is being threatening and mysterious, reinforced by his leaning on Mark's doorframe, when in actual fact he looks like a fool. I am both cringing at his misguided use of these words, and cringing for him as he is totally unaware of what he is doing.

Mark and Jez's argument continues in the doorway, stuttering insults are thrown back and forth between them, drudging up he-said-she-said conversations and recent ex's; juvenile and predictable stuff that you would expect from friends bickering. But it rapidly devolved. The now unacceptable language of the early 2000s is blasted from my speakers across the sitting room at me, reminding me of just how old this show actually is in four letters. S. P. A. Z.

Yeah? Yeah? Cos if we're telling 'the truth' all of a sudden, then the truth is - you're a posh spaz.

Oh really? Well I'd love to know in what way I am a 'posh spaz'?

In the way that you're always doing posh spazzy things like, cleaning up and ironing your socks...

As if the ancient film quality wasn't enough, this just immediately aged *Peep Show* by twenty years. You don't say that anymore - you can't say that anymore. The world has moved on. Become more tolerant. This is ableism. I felt my brain shudder thinking about the way people used to bandy around insults in the early 2000s calling friends and foes alike 'spaz' and 'retards' when I was a child, having learned the terms from the frivolous way older siblings and TV characters used them, clearly not appreciating that there were real people attached to these words and that they were intentionally derogatory terms.

Whilst you may have initially cringed at two adult men arguing like children on your screen, there is now a secondary level of cringe created through the differing social norms between 2003 and today. Cringe is culturally relative. What is embarrassing or shameful in one culture might be more widely accepted in another.⁶⁰ In British culture the word 'spastic' or its clipped version 'spaz' has always been derogatory,⁶¹ and was ranked as the second most offensive term to call a disabled person in a BBC survey in 2003 when this show was created.⁶² But language is slippery and changes through time and use. Even though calling someone a 'spaz' was considered insulting back in 2003, the word was still used to describe people, whether they had a disability or not; it was still offensive, but more widely understood to mean someone who was incompetent or lacked control⁶³ and not directly referencing someone with spastic paralysis (now more often known as Cerebral Palsy).⁶⁴ Being a British SitCom, the writers of *Peep Show* undoubtedly understood the offensive nature of the term, but still chose to include it in a Channel 4 production. *Peep Show* is set in the same time period in which it is written, and so the characters have the same relative knowledge about the use of this word, as did the audience when it was originally aired. As such, whilst it still

⁶⁰ ifeelonline.com, 2020

⁶¹ In the US, the term doesn't necessarily carry the same level of offence - Zimmer explains that in the US it is a piece of 'innocuous playground slang' and has been in use since the late 50s, and even appeared in print, and made its way into American pop culture in the 70's, having lost its original sense and coming to mean 'losing control, acting out or simply acting "weird" or "uncool"'.
⁶² Zimmer, 2006

⁶³ Oxford Languages, n.d.

⁶⁴ Zimmer, 2006

would have been deemed derogatory to its original audience in 2003, it doesn't carry quite the same level of shame that it carries for me now watching this exchange in 2023.

One of the most consistent cringe-inducing situations of *Peep Show* seems to centre around Mark and Jeremy's attempted romantic exploits. It's comparatively easy to make romantic escapades devolve into a cringe fest - a kiss wrong here, a missed social queue there, a severe lack of knowledge from one party, or the unwillingness to take a hint from another makes great cringe fodder for a TV show, and this is because cringe humour revolves around the actions of its characters and not necessarily the physical elements involved.⁶⁵ In theory there isn't anything inherently embarrassing or humorous about Mark or Jez flirting with someone, but it is the way in which they go about their flirting with such incredible social ineptitude which makes it so cringe inducing. For instance, as we watch the party wind down, we are sat between Mark and Toni on her sofa watching Mark attempt to woo her, thinking that as Jeremy had left the party with Paula, he would have an obstacle free route to Toni. He tries to 'sauce things up' a bit, and leans closer to croon in her ear: *You know, the red army shot 16,000 of their own men at Stalingrad*. I choke on thin air as my neighbour howls with laughter sitting next to me, and I manage to splutter out "in what world would that ever be considered a pick up line?" in a voice hoarse from coughing and disbelief. My mind boggles at the thought process:

Romantic interest alone at a party + previous conversation about other neighbours in the building and hairy chests x flirting = number of deaths at Stalingrad?

That was arguably one of the least sexy sentences I've ever heard in my life.

I watch Mark's already zoomed in face and wet lips get larger as he leans in toward Toni - surely it can't get any worse than that. But it does and Mark continues. *And of course the majority of the Wehrmacht had no Winter clothing*. More groans from me - "Stop! Please!", something that sounds halfway between sobbing and laughter, this is so uncomfortable to witness. I twist in my chair as my legs become suddenly restless, as if I were preparing to run away. Mark takes Toni's hand to try and create the beginnings of physical intimacy, hoping that if he makes the first move he'll have broken the initial awkwardness of wondering who goes first, thinking he is piercing some kind of sexual tension that, judging by the perplexed look on Toni's face, just doesn't exist. I watch him wad up Toni's hand into a fist, and wrap his own fingers over the top. It is strangely reminiscent of the way you would hold a relative's hand whilst delivering bad news, like someone had passed away and you were informing the others in the waiting room. There's no heat to it, or passion, it's strangely mechanical, and coupled with his continued explanations of the Luftwaffe raids, has absolutely no sex appeal. Mark's ineptitude isn't even endearing. After having heard how quickly he was happy to stop pursuing Sophie earlier on in the show for someone he deemed an easier catch, he just looks desperate, and therefore repulsive in the eyes of the viewer.

This scene feels like it's been going on forever - slowly but surely I feel like I'm going to die from the ever increasing level of cringe. Between the gravelly put on tone of Mark's flirting voice, the hand holding and story of Stalingrad, it's taken Toni an age to figure out what it is

⁶⁵ Mayer, Paulus and Krach, 2021

that Mark's trying to accomplish - *Mark, you know I don't just bang anyone, yeah? I'm not some kind of next door fuck jar.* And just like that, the shutters have come down and Mark isn't getting any tonight.

Cut to next door, and Jez seems to be faring much better with Toni's sister Paula. This interaction too is immediately gag inducing. Jez's pale face and thin, wet, open lips, sliding towards me, maintaining eye contact the entire time, strongly resembling a gormless wet fish; it's a sight that every one of my girlfriends is familiar with and dies at internally remembering. Please, for the love of god shut your eyes when kissing someone, it's creepy. It wasn't the fact that Jeremy and Paula were kissing that was cringeworthy, but rather the way that he was going about it. Despite how hideous that image was, it was Jeremy's last words that tipped me over the edge and into the cringe abyss: *Sure. Let's get it on. Baby.* Punctuated in the least enthusiastic way possible, and spoken with a totally flat affect, I truly don't know if I can watch this any longer.

However, I was about to discover the writers still had a trump card up their sleeve.

Previously in this episode, Toni tells Mark that her sister has Leukaemia. Toni throws a party, introducing one of the guests as Paula, her sister. Mark put two and two together and, making five, had warned Jez of her condition so that he wouldn't end up 'dropping a clanger'. However, while Jeremy and Paula are in the other room, we find out that Mark got the wrong sister. Now, we watch as Jeremy drops nothing but 'clangers'; he continues to awkwardly fumble around 'sorting [Paula] out' so he can make headway in the music industry, all while negotiating around the delicate situation of her apparent illness. Jeremy laying on cloying levels of sympathy spoken with no conviction, totally unaware of the situation. Every one of Jez's cliché remarks about Paula being brave wracks my body with waves of cringe with the apprehension of his embarrassment when he finally admits to her she knows she is unwell and she denies it. I turn my head to the right and half watch out of one squinted eye. I feel like a coil being wound tighter and tighter, as the writers deliberately delay again and again the admission of Jez's misunderstanding. But instead they double down, making the outcome one hundred times worse.

I'm sorry? Which cancer?

The bloody cancer eating you away!

...Okay. Would you like it if I did have cancer?

The scene cuts. I wail like a wounded animal and throw myself sideways to lay on the sofa, hands covering my face, fingers pressed into my eyes. Christ, she thinks Jez has a weird kink for people with Cancer. What a joke to make. We've swung our legs off the edge of cringe comedy to paddle our feet in the murky depths of black humour once more.

Despite our reputation for being uptight and rather conservative, British humour has a distinct overlap with many of the defining elements of Black humour. In an article for The Telegraph, Andy Bloxham writes that British people have a penchant for cruel humour, favouring insulting or inappropriate humour, sarcasm and self depreciation.⁶⁶ It frequently makes light of the mundane reality of everyday life by revealing its absurdity through the use of satire, with sexual humour and a delight for breaking taboos being prevalent, so joking

⁶⁶ Bloxham, 2008

about Jez's apparent kink for those suffering with Cancer is truly in the right vein for typical British humour.⁶⁷ As an isolated joke or a short skit, this incident might be humorous, us laughing at the shared mistake between Jez and Mark. However, given the onslaught of previous miscommunications, social blunders and sickening close ups of soft jawed faces, it instead serves as the final nail in this cringe coffin; the final punchline solidifying our understanding of Mark and Jez as incompetent with human interaction.

Yeah well, really really nice to catch up Soph. See you tomorrow?

We land back where we started. On a burgundy bus, staring at Sophie's enlarged face smiling awkwardly back at Mark as he bids her goodbye and promises to stalk her home again tomorrow. It's not clear how much time has passed between the party and this moment, but it is clear that we are repeating Mark's cycle.

I watch as he exits the bus accompanied by his monologue.

Yeah. That's the way. Sophie's the one. Toni's Russia - vast, mysterious, unconquerable, I could easily get trapped in her snowy wastes. Sophie's Poland, manageable - won't put up too much of a fight.

The thinly veiled misogyny of referring to women as land to be conquered is so obvious I need not even explain why that's cringeworthy in this day and age, but from this moment it's clear that Mark hasn't learned anything. He will not evolve. He will keep engaging in frustrated attempts to get the girl in concerning ways. He hasn't learned that World War II isn't the way to a woman's heart. He is doomed to repeat his mistakes and be stuck in this suburban loveless purgatory of his own banal evil.

⁶⁷ Laineste, 2014

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All quotes in italics are transcribed directly from Season One Episode One of Peep Show

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