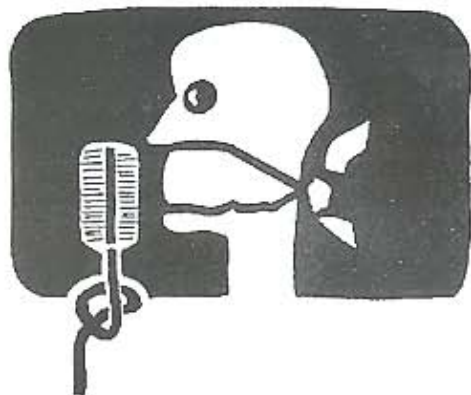


what about free expression in the context of our political culture? Are there one or two self-perceptions which could use satirical treatment?

Satire has a place in a healthy democracy. On occasion, this will offend. At this point we should reflect on how valuable free expression would be if we were not to be provoked by it. I am not talking about humour which simply reinforces existing prejudices. This is easy to do, boring to watch or read, and there are plenty of examples of it in Northern Ireland. In a society like Northern Ireland, where killing on a terrifying scale has taken place (often vocally justified in speech and cultural practices) PN seems harmless enough. Of more concern is the impulse to shut operations like this down. This is not to defend what appears on the website (the treatment of women is clearly offensive), it is to raise ethical questions about the value we place on free expression. How much of what is said in Northern Ireland is shaped by a secret fear that the legacy of violent coercion has not gone away? As Seamus Heaney might suggest 'whatever you say say nothing'.

The peace process has brought with it images which are profoundly offensive to many in Northern Ireland. History is being reconstructed before our eyes to accommodate the various 'hard men and women' in our society. People are asked almost daily to accept this (and even to be grateful for it) as the price of peace. In other words, there is much in the political culture of Northern Ireland to be offended by. Given this general political context, a satirical paper published on the internet is the least of our worries. ♦

Free Speech



on Ireland

Or Free Speech
// Ireland?

Taboo and obscenity in culture

"Fuck is just a euphemism for the obscene expletive f***." *Selva* Mr Justice Rattee, which expression was uttered mid-proceeding wherein FCLK (or French Connection UK) in December 1999 sought to injunct a website run by another company under the name, 'fuk'. The clothing firm had earlier considered action against Conservative Futures UK which had leafleted under the adventurous slogan 'cfuk'; while it had been forced to withdraw billboard posters in the East due to concerns over the slogan. It is seldom that adman fluff receives such (legal) attention.

Causation for some lay of course in the profane-suggestive quality of 'fuk'. The *potential* obscenity is just that—an interpretable expletive. Is it mimesis or equivalent? Which ever it was and is, it was successful. Following the introduction of the campaign in 1997 profits jumped 5m in 4 years. This one can contrast with the relaunch some years ago of 'Penthouse UK, or 'phuk'. The new name ensured that the magazine adhered to the top shell and the new

format flourished.

The term 'fuk' avoided internet filters. It did not survive the attentions of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) unaffected. Only last year did it intercede, calling the 'fukinky bugger' campaign 'irresponsible' and demanding pre-publication scrutiny of future posters. So the obscenity raised the profile and profits of the company. It has also raised the profile of obscenity once more in advertising, throwing its ithyphallic shadow onto the flattened planes of high street hoardings.

Obscenity has not gone away, nor shall it ever. As Paglia wrote, we are in the perpetual grip and thrall of chthonian nature's 'long, slow suck.' Human beings are fascinated with their bits. Yet are they somewhat conscious of the unwieldy danger of rampant libido. More particularly, the attendant threat of violence, which girts the slim tower of eros like a shadow.

Taboo, then, is the reflexive response to these doubts. What is fearful is put beyond reach or sight

CIAN O'NEILL explores the darker side of free expression



It should have been number one

for it is beyond comprehension or control. Obscenity is a casual term and legal term of different import. So *Ulysses* was obscene yet not *legally obscene*. That, as it was less lubricious than it was emetic in effect, Joyce exploded taboos (see the cloacal 'Calypso' episode). Yet there are many remaining: profanity; pornography; pleated slacks. Or another, while we are alliterating—paedophilia.

Like the famously overpopulated first gig of the Sex Pistols at St Martin's Collage of Art in 1975, for every person who saw *Brass Eye*, broadcast July 27, 2001, there are ten who did not. Yet many who had not seen it lillibustered with inchoate rage at the very suggestion that child lust incited in most an illinformed and superfluous reaction. Over 1,500 complaints to Channel 4, and over 750 to the ITC were submitted.

The 'name and shame' campaign of some tabloids was particularly sinister; giving the addresses of the production crew, and given the jaegerlust of some tabloids' readers. The well-intentioned 'StopChildRape' campaign saw in the programme, (as in many other things including 'activities' of the GMC and MOD), a global 'Freemasonic mass-media machine' or 'child abuse pyramid' conspiracy to abuse children. All of which came before the ITC had found any breach of the ITC Code, which it did. Presumption, in law or mores, is as dangerous and wrong as paedophilia.

Overlooked was the sheer crassness of the unknowing participants. QUB alumnus Nick Ross was previously scalded by Chris Morris in the 'Drug Scare' special where he warned against a new superdrug called CAKE. It came in fluoride yellow, the size of a batch loaf. It 'confused' the user's temporal sense. Another Nick, ITN's Mr. Owen, appeared in the July 2001 programme, to warn of 'Pantou the Dog', the electropaedo game featuring groins 'plugged into

the computer' and 'penis-shaped soundwaves'.

Phraseology that would not be transparently fake, were it not for its being transparently fake. "Baltimore" meant "I'm running at them now with my trousers down", explained yoghurt-mild Gary Lineker. "P2PBSH" meant "Pipe to Pipe Bushman" he continued. Bald drummer Phil Collins chimed in. He told children how to detect a paedophile. You shall know them, "If someone shows you a model of your home town and all the houses are shaped as penises."

Satire close to the line revealing the opportunistic nature of some celebrities. Carol Vorderman at least checked the credentials of the usual Morris 'front' production company. The remainder saw an opportunity for garnering moral cred. As did the newspapers. Both went after it like a mastiff running down steak.

The taboo of paedophilia is augmented by that of sexual inversion, in the case of red rimmed glass wearer Jonathan King. His website forum was used, in the manner of John Wilkes and his newspaper propaganda of the 17th century, to defend his activities, before and after his convictions in December 2001 for buggery and indecent assault. This web material included self-serving criticism of non-application of a statutory time bar to such cases, and accusations of CPS/police homophobia. He engaged *Guardian* journalist Jon Ronson, *à la* Hamiltons / Theroux, to secure sympathetic coverage.

Which Ronson did not offer, writing, "As likeable as he is, he did it." What he did find though were "anonymous sources" claiming that King had cruised 14–16 yr old boys, yes, but that many others at the time were doing likewise. This was offered, one assumes, to show that as others did the same it was not exploitative. Ambiguity, quite apart from the verdict, does lie in the related taboo of adult male homosexual 'boy love' as the trial raised.

To name it, 'Platonic love': Plato was bisexual. He was involved with beautiful youths, and advocated such activity as contributing to a refinement of mind through appreciation of beauty. Homosexual love between an adult man and a young boy was for him the 'highest' form of love (see *The Dialogues*).

This paradigm has recurred in male homosexual history, and complicates the role of the male homosexual in modern western society. The example of 'Dear Old Oscar' is pertinent, as King sought to stress. The boys to whom Wilde gave silver cigarette cases and lilies were teenage and just over (King gave t-shirts and records to his 'boys'). Yet the crime which Carson so brilliantly exploited in the Queensbury Libel trial was, principally, buggery, and only secondarily the paedophilia or bad example to young men which Wilde was held to pose (as a sodomite).

Once normal, Child Marriage became taboo. On unequal terms. Jerry Lee Lewis had his career implode (at least in the UK) following his bigamous marriage to a 13 year old cousin, Myra Lewis. The marriage of Bill Wyman to Mandy Smith following his 'seduction' of her when she was 13 was less severely dealt with. Julie Burchill (she who bestrides the world of columnists like a front-prop hammed

colossus) related a story, regarding Michael Caine and the 'Stone'. Caine asked Wyman how old his girlfriend was. "About as old as your suit", he replied.

Now recognition of even nascent sexuality in the young is taboo. Childporn production has been increasingly alleged in the photographing of naked children by the American artist Sally Mann. This all despite that teenage pregnancy rates escalate continuously, and school uniform'd Britney Spears serves as the cynosure of the music industry's strange cult for ever younger girls. The point being, sexuality is still a hydra. Its dilemmas refuse to go quietly. The polymorphic perversity which society tries to immolate only comes back, because it can only come back. It is bound, as are we—ceaselessly lusting; malfunction.

The history of Obscenity tells a tale. Suppress sexuality, and make the fetish. Make the fetish—create multiform strangeness. Create potential dangers. Sexuality is conflicted, and this is to be observed in the tabloid press. They who would publish the addresses of registered paedophiles feature photographed 16 yr old girls bare-breasted. They who would make *construtto* out of each panting sex monster slaver over snaps of Spears in hot pants.

Back to language taboos—profanity and slurs. Bakewell's recent BBC series *Taboo* offered 'nigger' as a top five rated offensive word in the UK. Merriam-Webster ranks it as 'perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English'. Yet Harvard's Randall Kennedy published a tome under that very title in 2001 which sought to investigate the word. The barb of historiographical incidence pricks the tremulous fingers of liberality.

For 'nigger' is an epithet, as it was nominative. It derives from the Latin 'niger', the Spanish 'negro', and the French 'negre'. The word may be used amongst African-Americans to address each other, but not by whites or in the company of whites. Such is the message from Younger, writing in *the Guardian*.

Yet the word has a rich etymology. The Spears Dictionary cites numerous offshoots—'nigger-luck' (good luck), 'nigger-steak' (a slice of liver), 'nigger-night' (Saturday night). 1970s Blaxploitation films with titular like *Boss Nigger* and *The Soul of Nigger Charley* complicated the use of 'nigger' by Tarantino in his genre tribute *Jackie Brown*. Star of said film, Pam Grier, while defending the language, called the term 'blaxploitation' "negative". It seems that definitional lines of 'nigger' taboo are drawn in wet sand. The perpetual controversy has been mazed, it seems, by Daedalus himself.

On the subject of royal messes, June sees the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of HRH. If, that is, June chooses to look. It may be a 'sleeper hit'. Or it may prove quite lucently what an 'irrelevance' the monarch is (Roy Hattersley). It was once more than taboo to ridicule the crown. Seditious libel was set aside specifically for ingrate subjects. Now, there is no such legal issue, and little taboo. The only scandal thus far is that of the Lucian Freud royal portrait donated by the artist in December 2001.

One assumes that Mr. Freud found another beer mat on his perambulations and so handed over this one some time *ex post facto*. For this is a truly inspiring painting to any artist. It is so weak as to make Sigmmid's distant progeny momentarily mortal. His

habitually masterful use of impasto has in this study given way to cobalt blue snear and chicken flesh slough.

It is an even poorer scandal than painting. A certain taboo was broken by the Myra Hindley portrait of 2000, made in childrens' hands. That was about child crime and not art. Scarcely anyone cares about art theory taboos, no matter what electrician prises the Turner from the cold, dead, Barry McGuigan-esque arms of Madonna Ciccone.

To mention the Sex Pistols again, they seem now positively to have dignified the last Jubilee with their 'obscene' Jamie Reid 'God Save the Queen' cover of the monarch with safety pin through proboscis. They noticed her at least. Such ridicule was to reap a whirlwind. Or whip up an awful Scotch bouffant. The industry fixed the chart and put Rod Stewart at No. 1 (failure snatched from the mouth of victory). In contrast, Lucian Freud, by suggesting that the 'queen' was a 'queen' short of shaving lather, seemed to break no taboo.

Bar perhaps making Boris Johnson cry like the stentorian head-girl he is. The Pistols could come back to mark this Jubilee, yet to uncertain reaction. Drug and alcohol abuse is now *déclassé/obverse*, the stuff of princes. Modern entertainment is gaily obscene, and entertainers mostly gay. We have few taboos left it seems, bar the child and the 'nigger' and the modest proposals of satire.

Controversial—Jeff Koons' 'Naked'

