

Stand-up in the age of outrage: how comedians negotiate the repoliticisation of humour

Jonas Nicolai

KU Leuven, Belgium

jonas.nicolai@kuleuven.be

Pieter Maesele

University of Antwerp, Belgium

pieter.maesele@uantwerpen.be

Abstract

In the context of an expanding societal awareness of social injustice and inequality, stand-up comedy is frequently caught in the crosshairs of discourses on free speech and political correctness. This study examines the evolving relationship between comedic critique and contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humour. Drawing on the thesis of the repoliticisation of humour, we analyse stand-up comedy's reflexivity towards “wokeness” and “cancel culture” through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. Our findings suggest that the complexity of the current political climate leaves Van Peel and his contemporaries disoriented in their attempts to surpass the boundaries of comedic critique. As a result, we argue for a reimagining of comedy's political potential beyond traditional interpretations as subversive critique, towards a view of stand-up comedy as a site of democratic resistance. Expanding views on the public role of comedians in response to contemporary socio-political issues can enhance the understanding of complex sociocultural dynamics and enable critical engagement with discourses on social justice and comedic free speech.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, critique, wokeness, Michael Van Peel, repoliticisation of humour.

1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy has long been praised for advocating free speech, but in today's political climate the role of comedic critique is undergoing a profound transformation. When Dave Chappelle hosted *Saturday Night Live* in November of 2022, he closed his intro-monologue by stating “It shouldn't be this scary to talk. About anything. It's making my job incredibly difficult” (*Saturday Night Live*, 2022). Such claims reflect the growing animosity towards the

assumed redrawing of comedy's boundaries in the public sphere today. Similarly, American comedian Chris Rock and the Iranian-British Shaparak Khorsandi have voiced concerns that political correctness might be stifling comedians' creativity (Khorsandi, 2021; Velasquez, 2021), and comedy luminary John Cleese has emerged as an "anti-woke" spokesperson over the last years (Gillespie, 2023). In the past, public debates on humour centred on intercultural religious differences—evident in the Danish cartoon controversy (Kuipers, 2011) or the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack (Dawes, 2015). In the current socio-political climate, it seems that "wokeness" has been declared the new threat to comedic free speech. In other words, more than some are under the impression that "cancel culture is killing comedy" (Aroesti, 2021). Despite limited evidence for these claims (Norris, 2023), it is not entirely surprising that comedians feel threatened by discourses on "wokeness," given that perceptions on the existence of "cancel culture" are more prominent with social groups holding contrarian views (Norris, 2023, p. 148). As stand-up comedy's core business is often to challenge societal mores by navigating the boundaries of free speech, this indeed renders them contrarians in essence.

Stand-up comedy's history is marked by a tradition of social critique. Lenny Bruce, for example, garnered the status as true advocate of free speech when including his court cases over obscenity charges in his comedic routines in the early 1960's (Bingham & Hernandez, 2009). George Carlin's landmark "seven dirty words" routine on government censorship resulted in a supreme court case against New York radio station WBAI for airing it in 1973 (Meyers, 2008). However, contemporary debates on comedy reflect the broader societal shift from a post-political zeitgeist (Wilson & Swingedouw, 2014) to what Anton Jäger (2022a, 2022b) recently termed the condition of hyperpolitics: A political context where "the mood of contemporary politics is one of incessant yet diffuse excitation" (Jäger, 2023, para. 5). As a result, comedic critique—often drawing on provocation and the interrogation of social boundaries through humour—has become the topic of much heated debate in the broader public sphere. As the ontological markers of politics change, so too do the contours of critique. Therefore, this study contributes to ongoing debates on the evolving relationship between comedic critique on the one hand and contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humour on the other. What does it mean to be a comedian in an era of hyperpolitics? And how has this changed comedians' perceptions on the supposed critical function of their work?

To answer these questions, we analyse stand-up comedy's reflexivity towards discourses of "wokeness" and "cancel culture" through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. Such an investigation into the role of comedy is relevant for multiple reasons. First, discourses on "wokeness" invite new perspectives on stand-up comedians' essential roles as "boundary crossers" and their perceptions on free speech. Second, the context of hyperpolitics entails an inflation of critical discourses exemplified by, for example, the rise of right-wing populist parties (e.g. Mouffe, 2019) or hyperpartisan media actors (e.g. Rae, 2021). In turn, this has fostered debate on the limits of comedic critique (see Holm, 2018; Kilby, 2019) as it challenges comedy's previously privileged role as one of few institutes with the "license" to interrogate social conventions and status quos. Additionally, studies on comedians' roles are scarce and focus predominantly on celebrated television news satire shows (e.g., Borden & Tew, 2007; Fox, 2018), and only a small part of this body of research focuses on the experience of comedians themselves by, for example, incorporating interviews (e.g. Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2021; Ödmark & Harvard, 2021).

Our study combines a textual qualitative analysis of a diverse corpus of data concerning Michael Van Peel and Western stand-up comedy. It draws on a semi-structured in-depth interview with Van Peel, secondary interviews in Flemish media, Van Peel's columns in Flemish upmarket newspaper *De Standaard*, and his latest show *Welcome to the Rebellion!* Additionally, in order to enhance the contextual understanding of our findings, we incorporate

international discussions on stand-up comedy and free speech. Following a theoretical paragraph on the repoliticisation of comedic critique (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022), we discuss different views on the criticality of humour and comedy. In our analysis, we trace the way Van Peel identifies and negotiates the changing political climate in which discourses on “wokeness” intersect with comedic freedom of speech. A second analytical paragraph explores different conceptions of comedic critique which Van Peel and others have begun to formulate as an answer to the alleged predicaments stand-up comedy faces. Our discussion formulates suggestions for novel ways of envisioning stand-up comedy as a site of democratic resistance.

2. The repoliticisation of comedic critique

Comedy has been a prominent aspect of Western culture for centuries (Kawalec, 2020). Initially, philosophy, linguistics, and psychology dominated humour theory, resulting in several oft-cited “humour theories” that aim to universalize its function (Weaver et al., 2016). However, as the 20th and 21st century spawned an unprecedented variety of comedic genres, attempts at capturing their essence proved all the more futile. As a result, over the last two decades the field of critical humour studies emerged, which takes a step away from aiming to define comedy and brings together different critical perspectives concerned with the way humour and comedy intersect with broader notions of power and contestation (Lockyer & Pickering, 2008; Weaver, 2011). This understanding acknowledges that humour does not exist in a separate discursive realm free from real-world ramifications (Carrol, 2014, p. 87), and can play a significant role in cultural politics. What connects these studies—and in extension ours—is that they speak of a specific kind of mediated comedy which operates *in* the public sphere, explicitly relating to the political in the sense of its interactions with issues of power, the latter’s contestation, and its social contingencies.

The critical turn in humour studies coincides with a broader societal shift in views about the confluence of humour and politics. This can be described by what Nieuwenhuis & Zijp (2022) recently termed the “repoliticisation of humour,” which sets out to capture how “humour and comedy increasingly take part in the power struggle over who is included and excluded” in society (p. 343). This idea comprises the observation that more apolitical views on humour have been “replaced by the acknowledgement that humour can be used as a political weapon” (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022, p. 344). Additionally, it refers to the increasing extent in which this political dimension of humour is explicitly debated in the public sphere. As such, it echoes observations that Western society is characterized by a conceptual triumph of comedy over tragedy (Kawalec, 2020, p. 3), or that we are “living in the age of the comedian” (Willett & Willett, 2019, p. 140). The significance of these views—the acknowledgment of humour as politics and its subsequent prominence in public discourse—is epitomized in what Kuipers (2011) termed “humour scandals” (p. 64): Public controversies concerning humour which disrupt the public sphere and spark socio-political tensions. For example, In July, 2022, the summer lull in Belgian news media was disturbed when Flemish 90’s sitcom *FC De Kampioenen* set off a nationwide controversy, despite being one of the longest running and best viewed sitcoms ever on Belgian television. The show—centring a local soccer club, the antics between players, their wives, and occasional clientele of the club canteen—draws heavily on frivolous caricature, light-hearted banter, and farce. Nonetheless, when an internal commission of Flemish public broadcaster VRT held some of the show’s older episodes up to the light, the reruns of nineteen episodes including racial slurs, sexist scripts, and the performance of blackface were withheld. Not unforeseeable, the decision sparked public controversy in which reactionary critics, journalists, politicians, and academics

weighed in on questions concerning the boundaries of humour, even crossing the often-impenetrable language border in Belgian media (e.g. Belga, 2022).

Humour has always interacted with social hierarchies or dimensions of power. But, as Nieuwenhuis and Zijp (2022) assert, “the extent to which the political nature of humour is acknowledged and debated, depends on its historical and cultural context” (p. 343). Today, this context is predicated on the recent shift from a post-political zeitgeist to a condition of hyperpolitics (Jäger, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). “Post-politics” was theorized as a critique on Fukuyama’s (1992) echoing assertion that, following the fall of the Soviet Empire, history had come to an end. This idea suggested that the convergence of free market capitalism and liberal democracy has solidified, becoming the sole incontestable societal model. It was criticized for signifying a “disappearance of the political” (Wilson & Swingedouw, 2014, p. 5) which referred to a persistent disabling of political contestation. Where “nothing was political “in a mode of post-politics, “everything is political, and fervently so” in a state of hyperpolitics (Jäger, 2022, para. 8). But this return of the political is not without complications. It entails political dimensions which are no longer bound to the conventional dynamics of politics as we knew it, away from established mass politics of representative democracy. Rather, it is marked by “hysteria, confusion, and atomization” (Hochuli, p. 418), and “its specific focus on interpersonal and personal mores, its incessant moralism and incapacity to think through collective dimensions to struggle” (2022, para. 21). As a result, hyperpolitics represents a new form of politics “present on the football pitch, in the most popular Netflix shows, in the ways people describe themselves on their social media pages” (Jäger, 2022b, p. 412). In relation to public debate, it has brought about an unprecedented proliferation of critical discourses, hyperbolized by social media, and subverting the conventional distribution of critique in society. Hyperpolitics, then, is what gives prominence to the rise of contemporary social justice sentiments such as those existing in debates on #MeToo or Black Lives Matter. But equally, it capacitates voices on pandemic scepticism or any other form of anti-establishment or anti-government commentary.

In a hyperpolitical context, societal critique has thus, it would seem, become a staple to public discourse. As Hochuli (2022) contends, today “everyone is a claimsmaker and not just on social media. More people are doing politics, but in a diffuse, unstructured manner” (p. 418). Taken together, this repoliticisation of humour and the hyperpolitical climate have altered perceptions on the concession of comedic critique in the public sphere. Conventionally, the practice of critique has been attributed to a limited number of social institutions, and together with, for example, journalism or literature, comedy has traditionally been one of few privileged forms of discourse granted the license to interrogate societal conventions with relative impunity. In a societal moment in which critique has become overly commonplace, however, comedy itself has been caught in the crosshairs of political discourse, forcing it to critically interrogate its own public role. These discussions are most visible today in broader discourses on societal awareness and discrimination related to questions of race or gender, often discussed under the catch-all term of “wokeness.”

Since its origins in 1940s African American labour unions (Mirzaei, 2019), “wokeness” was recently adopted by social justice movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo to denote a progressive stance towards social rights issues. As a result, these discussions have found their way to different corners of public debate, from politics to popular culture, giving critics the idea that “the woke mob is everywhere” (Koberg, 2021). Furthermore, discourses on “wokeness” are especially prevalent in digital environments, where a “politics of visibility” (Sobande et al., 2022) exaggerates their political impact and drives polarization: Because “wokeness” has come to mean a number of different things today, the term is highly volatile and often surrounded by hyperbolic or inflammatory rhetoric, with some viewing it as a lens through which to address systemic injustice, while others perceive it as an unwarranted

restriction of free speech (Zavatarro & Bearfield, 2022). In relation to comedy, “wokeness” is often associated with questions of semantic policing, censorship or self-censorship. An oft-cited idea in conservative circles is that “the woke can’t take a joke” (Mann, 2021), or that “the straitjacket of sensitivity isn’t conducive to good comedy” (Roberts, 2019). Such critical voices assume that “wokeness” sets out to curtail comedy which does not adhere to assumed liberal agendas. Ironically enough however, comedians who openly oppose social justice sensibilities often thrive professionally because of it. In the *SNL* monologue discussed above, Dave Chappelle elaborates on the public controversy involving musician Ye’s (the artist formerly known as Kanye West) antisemitic remarks. He seemingly playfully dismisses Ye’s claims, yet subtle endorsements are equally met with applause. Additionally, the segment was viewed almost ten million times on YouTube in four days. Such discrepancies between comedians’ cancellation fears and their unimpeded fame have led critics to retort that “the idea that cancel culture is killing comedy is a nonsense slogan—an absurdist joke in itself” (Aroesti, 2021, para. 15). It follows that among comedians themselves different views exist on how to navigate these changing views on comedic critique. The following paragraph therefore looks beyond the notion of comedic critique and discusses interpretations of comedy as a discourse of resistance.

3. Comedy as critique or resistance?

The nature of comedic critique is a topic of longstanding discussion, and theoretical perspectives on comedic critique have undergone different conceptual incantations over the last decades. Billig’s (2005) seminal work on humour, for example, asserted that it was “the darker, less easily admired practice of *ridicule* (...) that lies at the core of social life” (p. 2). Despite Billig’s (2005) proposed distinction between disciplinary (punching up) and contesting (punching down) types of ridicule, an exclusive focus on disparaging humour is limited as it emphasizes the subversive dimensions of comedy (Mylonas & Kompatsiaris, 2019). According to Brassett (2016), such views on humour reflect the modernist assumption that critical comedy should strive first and foremost to subvert the political order. In this sense, comedic critique is seen as a form of assault, one that “[tears] down systems and structures as a political goal in itself” (Holm, 2018, p. 42). But, as Holm (2018) asserts, “interrogating the supposed political work of critical humour requires us to disentangle the assumed correspondence between humour as a form of critique and humour as a form of resistance” (p. 31-32). Going beyond conventional interpretations of comedy as ridicule or subversion reflects more fundamental distinctions between progressive and reactionary dimensions of critique today. Additionally, it highlights the obscured definitional relationship between critique and *criticism* (Phelan, 2021). This is particularly pressing today, as critique increasingly emerges from unconventional sources and often diverges from its traditional focus on challenging social struggles or promoting democratic ideals of equality. Critique as such entails a profound “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Felski, 2015) aimed at interrogating the self-evidence of societal discourses. Criticism, on the other hand, arises from subjective discontent rather than an intention to deconstruct the deeper structural contingencies of a given social order. Put otherwise, whether stand-up comedy is found to be “critical” or not, says little about the ideological dispositions—progressive or reactionary—present in its message and the position it subsequently takes up in the public debate.

Comedy that predominantly depends on disparagement or ridicule is increasingly viewed as problematic (e.g. Ford, 2015). Engaging in disparaging humour can reflect a comedian’s stance towards social issues at the heart of such discourse. In this sense, ridiculing “wokeness” can be seen as a form of critique that reads “*against* the grain” (Bewes, 2010, p. 12). Such a

form of critique is hinged on a “symptomatic reading” of its subject. It arises out of disagreement, rather than curiosity, and maintains a critical distance between the critic and the topic of his critique. It abandons the humility of the comedic underdog, and punches down at those in subordinate social positions. But to abstain from engaging in the debate would arguably not overcome the pitfalls of comedic critique either. Rather, comedically engaging with discourses on “wokeness” can reveal new perspectives without resorting to adversarial ridicule. *Last Week Tonight* host John Oliver, for example, concluded an episode on tensions surrounding critical race theory by stating: “[T]hese debates are both very loud and very dumb, but unfortunately it is important to engage with them (...) or honest discussions on race will be shut out” (*Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, 2022). In this light, stand-up comedians are faced with the challenging task of reconfiguring what it means to laugh in the face of adversity. As British comedian Omid Djalili has put it, “if a comedian is clever, they can navigate [cancel culture] (...) but I have never done more *set-up* [in my material] (...) you need to kind of explain yourself more” (Djalili, 2022). This hints at a need to reconceptualize critique into an updated form more in tune with today’s political ontologies. But what then can we envision as a viable answer to this perceived stalemate for comedic critique? What critical license is still accorded to stand-up comedy today?

Contrary to critique “*against* the grain”, critique “*with* the grain” assumes a critical reading “that suspends judgement, which commits itself, rather, to the most generous reading possible” (Bewes, 2010, p. 4) and “begins by historicizing its own positionality with respect to the text” (p. 27). Some scholars have problematized this inherent subjectivity in comedy. Kawalec (2020), for example, asserts that stand-up comedy predominantly reflects Western neoliberal ideologies—centred around instrumental individualism—often at the cost of contempt for more inclusive humanistic values (p. 10). Others, however, underline that stand-up comedy’s performative power is derived from its relatively immediate interaction between comic and audience, and its focus on the theatrical authenticity and subjective truth-telling (Sturges, 2015). This fits with what Krefting (2014) called “charged humour”, referring to a form of stand-up comedy that aims to understand social justice issues, embodying the distinct subjectivity of the comedian performing it. In relation to comedy as a mode of social interrogation, Bingham and Hernandez (2009) and Smith (2015, 2018) have offered readings of stand-up comedy as a form of “comedic sociology” which “brings to light inadequate, everyday conceptions of the social and demonstrates our partial, limited understanding we may hold about other people” (Smith, 2015, p. 565). Similarly, Koziski (1984) and Timler (2012) draw parallels between stand-up and anthropology, as it “uses humour forged from the seemingly banal within their own cultures to highlight the Otherness found within their cultures” (Timler, 2012, p. 50). What such interpretations of stand-up comedy have in common is that they do not set out to critique through forms of ridicule or comedic subversion. Rather, through forms of comedic resistance, the stand-up comedian can cast new light on existing social issues, understanding them from a distance. Comedy as a form of resistance, then, rephrases instead of destroys, and facilitates learning in opposition of those aspects of a given social order deemed undesirable. In the light of contemporary debates on social injustice, it does not set out to attack “wokeness” as a threat to the comedic profession but can serve as a form of interrogation that encourages understanding.

4. Michael Van Peel and stand-up in Flanders

Although the public debate on the role of comedy is especially prolific in Anglophonic contexts, it has by now expanded globally in the public sphere (Aroesti, 2021; Whelan, 2022) as well as in scholarship (e.g. Popović, 2018; Zhou, 2022). In Belgium, one figure at the

forefront of this debate is Flemish stand-up comedian and columnist Michael Van Peel. Van Peel started his stand-up career in 2005 yet rose to prominence only a few years later when he won the Dutch *Culture Comedy Award* in 2007, and the oldest Flemish cabaret festival *Humorologie* in 2009 (Van Peel, 2023). Shortly thereafter, Van Peel garnered nationwide attention through his “years-end conferences” *Van Peel Survives* (2009 – 2018)—a Lowlands tradition in which comedians offer an overview of the year’s noteworthy events—airing January 1st on the Flemish public broadcaster. Critics have dubbed him the “best current affairs comedian in Belgium” (Van Loy, 2022). And for his latest show, Van Peel has been praised as a “true court jester of comedy” who “holds up a mirror to the people and challenges current affairs and the current zeitgeist” (Michiels, 2022).

Van Peel represents an interesting case for the analysis of the changing role of comedic critique for several reasons. First, Van Peel overtly self-identifies as a type of comedian who sets out to “question the norm” (Van Peel, 2020b), and he has acknowledged that his shows have acquired a more contemplative character over the years (Michiels, 2018). This connects Van Peel to a longstanding tradition of stand-up comedy known for deliberately engaging with social issues. Furthermore, Van Peel has expanded his role as social commentator through the frequent publication of op-eds in Flemish upmarket newspaper *De Standaard*. Where comedians themselves conventionally minimize their role as social commentators (e.g. Koivukoski & Ödmark, 2020), Van Peel is an example of a body of comedians who have begun to increasingly defend their right to weigh in on political discourse. This allows him to produce material which is “dead serious in message, yet soaked in humour and self-reflection” (Michiels, 2022), rendering the analysis of his work and public persona a valuable site for insights on the changing perceptions on comedic critique. Finally, Van Peel’s work is an interesting example of stand-up comedy’s potential to offer a localized “critique of culture at home” (Timler, 2012), while simultaneously interpreting and presenting transnational topics and social issues to its audiences. Notwithstanding that his work is in Dutch exclusively, it engages with wide-ranging social issues such as international politics or geopolitical conflict (Michiels, 2015).

The Flemish stand-up comedy scene is primarily characterized by its intimate, live performances in comedy bars and clubs. Unlike the United States, for example, where streaming platforms and popular social media channels dominate the industry, Flemish comedians have established themselves as local celebrities through their accessibility to audiences and media. This close relationship between comedians and their fans fosters a concentrated discussion on the role of stand-up comedy in Flanders. Nonetheless, broader debates on the boundaries of free speech have increasingly found their way to the Flemish public sphere, with proponents on both sides of the ideological aisle. Antagonists to the perceived threats of “cancel culture,” for example, have recently stated that “fortunately, [Flanders is] far from the American delusion, but woke is creeping into universities” (Elbers & Neels, 2022). Despite the lack of any evidence for claims that political correctness is stifling academia, “anti-woke” sentiments recently culminated in the creation of a hotline for “woke-activism” incidents aimed at “stopping cancel culture at the University of Antwerp” (*Academici richten meldpunt op*, 2023). In the world of stand-up comedy specifically, Flemish stand-up comedians have similarly taken stances on the perceived prominence of debates on political correctness. Some have reiterated the gut feeling that “woke” is pressuring their profession. Prominent stand-up comedian Alex Agnew, for example, has termed “woke” a “pseudo-religious ideology under the pretense of progressiveness” (Smeets, 2022). Upcoming stand-up comedienne Jade Mintjens contrastingly defended her recent show by stating “it’s better to be woke, than to be an indifferent, unfriendly prick” (Bellwinkel, 2022). Despite its scale, the Flemish context thus functions as a microcosm of broader societal perceptions on comedic critique today.

5. Analysis

5.1. The disoriented stand-up comedian

Van Peel's work is found to thematically incorporate concepts related to the repoliticisation of humour, i.e. the proliferation of critical discourse and its effect on the role of comedy. In his latest show, *Welcome to the Rebellion!* (2022), he frames his views as follows:

Everyone is against something. You're not for freedom or human rights, you're against covid measures. You're not for diversity, you're against white males. You're not for freedom of speech, you're against woke. Everyone is united against something. And all those groups see themselves as rebels nowadays. Everyone is a rebel, from climate activists, wokers, antivaxxers, Trump-supporters, to even politicians. Rebellion has turned fucking mainstream.¹

(*Welcome to the Rebellion!*, 2022)

Here, Van Peel witnesses “an inflation of metaphors bereft of nuance” (*Welcome to the Rebellion!*, 2022) and interrogates the subsequent tensions surrounding general interpretations and capacities for societal critique. In an interview with Flemish newspaper *Gazet Van Antwerpen*, Van Peel describes how comedians feel “robbed of their own rebellion” as we are living in an “Age of Outrage in which everyone is disgruntled” (Vincent, 2022). In doing so, he voices a concern that a profusion of critique simultaneously corresponds with its debilitation, or in Van Peel's words, “if everyone is rebelling, then what are we rebelling against?” (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). In one column, he ironically advocates a “complaint tax” (of fifty euros n.b.) aimed at “preventing justified critique from dissolving in the oblivion of pettiness” (Van Peel, 2019). In a similar vein, in his recent Netflix special Chris Rock described debates on “cancel culture” as hypocritical and called out people voicing critique via Twitter “on a phone made by child[ren]” (Silverman, 2023). As such, stand-up comedy is often found to function as a site for reflexive examination of the changing nature of critical discourse—both in definition and in practice.

In his work, Van Peel illuminates these concerns in the light of the problematization of the role of comedy today. The resulting discussions are often synonymous with debates on the boundaries of free speech and mirror the problematized role of the comedian as an interrogator of social boundaries. Following his contemporaries, Van Peel has taken an explicit stance in favour of freedom of speech (Van Peel, 2020a). According to the comedian, “freedom of speech is punk” and being one of comedy's core values, must be upheld at all costs. Similarly to other comedians such as Chris Rock (Khorsandi, 2021) and Ricky Gervais (*Ricky Gervais defends 'taboo'*, 2022), Van Peel links the need to defend free speech to the rise of social justice movements, which are allegedly emboldened by “adding the dynamite stick of [social media] algorithms in the mix” (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). However, what is designated is a specific kind of free speech: One which implies a right to offend, on the one hand, but presupposes the need for “a critical and intellectual maturity of citizens” on the other (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). If censored, the absence of free speech would then problematize the role of the comedian as interrogator of those in power. But as Mello (2017) has shown, interpretations of free speech are contingent on conceptions of what constitutes “the powerful” at a given time. As our political climate is characterized by an increasing awareness to social injustice and inequality, and subsequently, a heightened sensitivity to the crossing of normative boundaries, Van Peel voices concerns regarding shifting balances of

¹ All translations of the data in the analysis (Dutch to English) were made by the authors. Translations of Van Peel's comedic work take into account important linguistic comedic elements (e.g. puns or irony) as much as possible in order to maintain its original ideas and messages.

power and their effect on his role as a comedian. Drawing on academic theory ranging from Pew Research Center reports to philosophical literature, Van Peel strives to overtly make sense of the changing political context, and his role as a comedian within it:

Tinneke Beeckman, the philosopher, advised to use the terms (...) majority thinking and minority thinking (...) Minority thinkers always assume that you have to question the norm: “Is it really?” (...) And that's the reflex that comedians in general have, isn't it. That's usually what a comedian does, looking at everyday life, that could be male-female relationships or politics or whatever. And say “Isn't that a bit weird? Isn't that a bit strange that all of us, when we're in the elevator, don't say anything to each other, when that's the consensus?”

(M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022)

What Kate Fox (2018) termed *humitas*—a conflation of humour and gravitas—relates to the interplay between humorousness and seriousness facilitated in comedic discourse, resulting in a “more complex, multiple discourse which counters the univocal nature of much media and political discourse” (Fox, 2018, p. 96). As a result, stand-up comedy is increasingly used as a site for the dissemination of scientific topics (e.g., Riesch, 2015). However, Van Peel's comedy cannot strictly be termed a vessel for science communication. Rather, it incorporates such scholarly discussions in his material to navigate changing perceptions on the public role of a comedian. But when referring to perceived “extreme forms of woke,” Van Peel also sympathizes with why his international colleagues are intrinsically at odds with it. One reason for this relates to existing power dynamics and the comedic mandate of interrogating them:

There's a censoring aspect to these debates: “You can't say those words.” Which is a power dynamic, call it as it is. And that's what comedians have difficulty with, with authority. “Why not? Because I say so!” (...) There's no sense of agreement, there's no debate (...) That's authoritarian censorship talking.

(M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022)

Such a view relates to the inherent assumption that comedy hinges on the interrogation of boundaries. Where in our current political climate certain sensitivities are commended, the license to disrupt these boundaries is often expanded for comedians: As “boundary crossers” (Weaver & Mora, 2016), comedians subvert the socially or politically self-evident by “speak[ing] to the center from the periphery” (p. 481). However, by grafting an argument for comedic free speech on the grounds of comedy's alleged intrinsic role to interrogate boundaries, Van Peel also legitimizes the unequal power relations at the basis of these boundaries. But as Pickering and Lockyer (2009) pointed out, “paradoxically, making offensive jokes about others with total impunity would mean that there are no boundaries to push at anymore [as] humour is only possible because certain boundaries, rules and taboos exist in the first place” (p. 16). According to this principle, the current political climate with its heightened awareness of social injustice ideally functions as a mirror, not a muzzle for comedians: It can inspire them to go beyond adding insult to injury and elicit reflection on the principles that guide comedic professionalism. But where then does the stand-up comedian point his arrows? And when to sharpen them, or when to blunt their tips with preamble? For Van Peel, this boils down to one central question which guides his latest work:

Minority groups are less repressed than, say, twenty years ago, which leads to a power shift. Not a reversal, not that we live in an LGBTQ tyranny. Obviously. Not at all. But there's been a shift in power, where I ask myself the question, “when is one powerful enough to be ridiculed again?”

(M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022)

With this inquiry, Van Peel reiterates that comedy's role is to challenge those in power. But what is often left undefined is what constitutes power in the alleged "power shift" that comedians set out to scrutinize. In the current sociopolitical climate, critical reflections on "woke" often reproduce the idea that power has tilted in favor of progressive discourses and once-repressed minorities. Summarized, the idea would run as follows: Social groups in minority positions have their rights and voices disproportionately amplified in today's (digital) public sphere and, as a result, they are found to "impose" restricting social mores on comedy's previously allegedly unassailable license to mock. Such a view of humour as a social corrective is, however, exclusively aimed at identitary dimensions of power i.e., dimensions of "wokeness" affecting comedic free speech. Despite aiming to understand the changes at the heart of Van Peel's profession, supposing a true "power shift" would have to entail broader conceptions of critique, including the position of comedians themselves. It follows that what some comedians consider progressive critique may however represent a critique of a different order: One which is reactionary rather than progressive and confirms the status quo rather than subverts it.

As a result, the current political moment leaves Van Peel and his contemporaries disoriented. If the critical stand-up comedian wants to be a thorn in the side of those in power, Van Peel asks aloud: "Do I aim my arrows then at groups I sympathize with? Of which I am an ally as well? But what if there's also *assholes* among them? What if I don't like what some of them are doing?" (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022). In other words, is interrogating "woke" punching *up*, or punching *down*? What remains of the comedian's underdog position when he formulates critique on discourses which set out to critique social injustice as such? With these questions in mind, the following paragraph investigates stand-up comedy's attempts at formulating new forms of comedic critique in a so-called Age of Outrage.

5.2. Beyond comedy as critique

The abundance of critique marks our present conjuncture as one in which critique is no longer marginalized but welcomed and even culturally encouraged. In Van Peel's words:

I thought the [pandemic] curfew was a far-reaching breach of civil rights, but then on the right there's these nutcases with their Star of David, screaming "The vaccine certificate is like the Holocaust!" No, man, I'm not in your team either! And on the left, some crazy with a tinfoil hat claims Bill Gates will inject us with 5G (...) We're surrounded! (...) So I stopped critiquing altogether, which is self-censorship, sure, but I just couldn't figure it out.

(Welcome to the Rebellion!, 2022)

By engaging in length with critiques on "woke," stand-up comedians run the risk of invoking associations with contemporary discourses of, for example, alt-right or conservative leaders who often rhetorically exploit the myth of an "unchecked culture war." The difficulty then becomes that any formulation of critique in a highly politicized public sphere can immediately be identified along partisan lines or become "hijacked" by political extremes. But to stop engaging with the debate altogether, as Van Peel asserts, does not resolve the problem of comedic critique either. According to Van Peel, it is the act of raising questions and "avoiding the dangers of trying to formulate answers" (M. Van Peel, interview, May 9th, 2022) which allow him to understand the changing boundaries of his profession today. Such attempts at reformulating the critical nature of stand-up comedy have been present in the work of other comedians as well. Performances such as Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* (2017) and Dave Chappelle's *8:46* (2020) have demonstrated how seriousness and explicit social commentary can be worked in comedy routines to advocate progressive social movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter (Webber et al., 2021). Although such shows have deviated from

conventional humorous expectations significantly, laughter is arguably still a key component to their identification as a novel kind of comedy for their audiences. But a resistant type of stand-up comedy can then be what Ulrich Beck (Beck in Sturges, 2015) has termed “Mitlachen”—to laugh *with*, implying togetherness—where mutual understanding between comedian and his audiences is attempted through the act of “self-estrangement” (Speck, 2019, p. 245), not by punching down in ridicule. In the context of debates on wokeness, this kind of comedy is presumably more inclusive and assumes a humility and awareness towards the sensitivities of all potential audiences, not just those loudest in the public sphere.

To illustrate, when Ricky Gervais released his special *SuperNature* in 2022, it received instant backlash for its abundant transphobic content (Earl, 2022). In Gervais’ own words, the show’s title refers to the fact that “nature is super enough” (*The Late Show*, 2022). Together with the content of the show—four minutes into the show a graphic routine associates transwomen with sexual assault—it can be said that Gervais voices a critique of woke discourse and “trans-ideology” running rampant, altering what he perceives to be a self-evident natural order. In public interviews, Gervais has recurrently fallen back on the oft-cited trope that “these are just jokes” (BBC, 2022). Gervais’ comedic discussion of “wokeness” can be seen as a form of critique that reads “*against the grain*” (Bewes, 2010, p. 12). It emphasizes maintaining a critical distance between the critic and the topic being criticized. Rather than adopting the humility of the comedic underdog, such critique can be seen as punching down, under the guise “getting us over taboo subjects” (BBC, 2022).

Like Gervais’ show, Van Peel’s special *Welcome to the Rebellion!* also deals with questions surrounding wokeness and free speech. Nonetheless, Van Peel’s title summons imagery of a different interpretation of comedic critique. By interrogating the rise of societal rebelliousness, at the same time Van Peel interrogates what is left of the rebellious comedian and acknowledges his own role in the broader debate on social injustice and discrimination. Although he is critical of certain perceived extremes of “wokeness,” contrary to Gervais, Van Peel elaborates on the historical context of these debates to engage in explicit dialogue with himself and his audience, often at the cost of a punchline:

What annoys me about extreme forms of wokeness is that I notice that all around me average people are dropping out. I hear people saying things like “What’s with all this woke nonsense? I’m sure discrimination is not that bad.” No! Those two are completely independent of one another. One is people seeking attention, and the other is a real societal issue. But I get how people get angry by such extremism, but I think the solution lies not with getting riled up, the solution lies within ourselves.

(Welcome to the Rebellion!, 2022)

On its face value, such a claim could be interpreted as a delegitimization of certain dimensions of “wokeness” as irrational. Nonetheless, by distinguishing between what he terms “real problems of discrimination” and “[an ideology] fueled by the algorithms of social media, in which (...) extremes emerge” (*Welcome to the Rebellion!*, 2022), Van Peel can be found to strive for nuance in the debate. Although perhaps he does not succeed entirely in casting off the cloak of comedic ridicule, his work invites reflection on the “stand-up-comedian-as-ethnographer” (Timler, 2012, p. 50): By contextualizing broader socio-political issues in everyday experiential terms, his work invites audiences to view discourses on “wokeness” not solely from a distance, but to near the topic and acknowledge its otherness. For Van Peel, this includes sympathizing with “average people” who perhaps do not entirely understand the finer political intricacies behind “woke” discourses, without therefore immediately identifying as a social justice adversary. Unlike comedians who avoid such debates or “appear woke” on stage, Van Peel acknowledges that this discourse is a complicated one, but that merely ridiculing it is

not warranted. In this sense, his work reflects the positionality of Van Peel himself, reflecting both “woke” and “woke-critical” perspectives, both understanding and lack thereof. In one segment, for example, Van Peel critiques the alleged “extreme woke” stance of condemning the accidental act of deadnaming a Flemish trans person on public television, while simultaneously normalizing his gender identity and commending him for tolerating the unintentional misgendering: “He didn’t care about that at all. Of course not. He’s a man, with bigger balls than twenty of those Twittering idiots combined” (*Welcome to the Rebellion!*, 2022). It confirms perhaps that comedic free speech, although not entirely dead, comes with social and democratic responsibility (Peifer, 2012): If there were such a thing as a “right to offend,” it is imperative that resistant humour punches up, not down, and is aimed at those in positions of power (Pickering & Littlewood, 1998, 295).

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the evolving relationship between comedic critique and contemporary discourses on the boundaries of humour through the case of Flemish stand-up comedian Michael Van Peel. What does it mean to be a comedian in an era of hyperpolitics? And how has this changed comedians’ perceptions on the supposed critical function of their work? To answer these questions, we have conceptualized what some stand-up comedians today perceive to be an ideologically confusing landscape that ultimately problematizes the nature of comedic critique. Drawing on the thesis of the repoliticisation of humour (Nieuwenhuis & Zijp, 2022) and the notion of comedy as a site for resistance, we analysed Van Peel’s stance and reflexivity towards discourses of “wokeness.”

Our analysis has shown that stand-up comedians have increasingly and more explicitly begun to incorporate discussions on the role of comedy within their work, while at the same time conceiving the current political moment as a hurdle for comedic practice. Van Peel’s work reflects an explicit awareness of the challenges stand-up comedy in general faces as a form of critical discourse: In the so-called ‘Age of Outrage’, criticism has become abundant, and critique—in the sense of a progressive interrogation of societal issues—has become harder to formulate. On the other hand, we have empirically explored what a resistant kind of stand-up comedy looks like, i.e. one that ideally functions as a conduit for a better understanding of broader political tensions. Here, our analysis revealed that Van Peel’s work perhaps is not conclusively resistant but explores the possibility of “[moving] beyond the aggressive criticism that informs the assault of laughter” (Holm, 2018, p. 40). But a resistant form of stand-up comedy does not cast aside its critical potential entirely. Rather, it reimagines critique as “a road map of ideological debate and a negotiation of identity—individual, communal, and national—that reveals much about who we have been in the past, who we are now, and who we might become” (Webber et al., p. 433). As such, it strives to surpass forms of humour as ridicule or disparagement and is adapted to a contemporary political context which is hyperpoliticised and hyperdiverse in terms of ideological perspectives. One potential shortcoming of this study therefore relates to the distinct social positionality of Van Peel as a stand-up comedian. As a white cisgender male, Van Peel arguably runs the risk of engaging in forms of “weak reflexivity” (Colpean & Tully, 2019) by joking about social injustices in a way that dismantles certain ideologies, yet reproduces others. As it is predominantly the social categories of whiteness and masculinity that are challenged in discourses on “wokeness,” comedians such as Van Peel perhaps overestimate and misrepresent these discourses and their impact on stand-up comedy.

With its focus on the inherent subjectivity of its creators, comedy remains a highly politicized lens on society. As a result, the world of stand-up comedy will remain an engaging

barometer for broader public debates on topics related to social justice and free speech. By now, distinct types of comedy are emerging which redefine conventional comedic formulas that are so often publicly scrutinized, opening up new venues for such subjective interrogations of social issues. For example, the term “post-comedy” was recently coined to refer to a kind of comedy that “uses the elements of comedy (be it stand-up, sitcom, or film) but without the goal of creating the traditional comedic result—laughter—instead focusing on tone, emotional impact, storytelling, and formal experimentation” (Fox, 2018, para. 3). What Waisanen (2018) termed “advocacy satire” is another example of a discursively hybrid blend of comedy which draws on humour to facilitate political action. Such novel forms of comedy deserve attention in future research as they allow us to look beyond specific one-dimensional interpretations of critical comedy, in form as well as content.

Although the field of comedy studies is expanding rapidly, studies which place comedy within their contingent sociopolitical framework remain scarce. Future studies can highlight different dimensions in which the repoliticisation of humour affects comedy, focusing on comedians’ perspectives—e.g. How do comedians navigate the changing perspectives on comedic critique—audience reception—e.g. How do audiences reevaluate the role of comedy in the public sphere—or critical discourse analyses of comedic content—e.g. What is the role of seriousness in comedy vis-à-vis political discourse? Finally, it is largely a matter of conjecture to forecast how comedy will develop from here. As our social mores and boundaries change, so too do our attempts to make sense of them, to navigate them. Comedians’ roles will undoubtedly also change because of this.

Acknowledgements

This study was made possible by the University Research Fund (BOF) of the University of Antwerp.

References

- Aroesti, R. (2021). Cancel culture killing comedy? What a joke. *The Guardian*, 10 Aug. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/aug/10/cancel-culture-killing-comedy-what-a-joke>
- Baym, G. (2010). *From Cronkite to Colbert*. Paradigm Publishers.
- Belga (2022, July 26). La VRT ne diffusera pas certains épisodes de FC De Kampioenen, jugés «inappropriés»: le ministre des Médias réagit. *Le Soir*. <https://www.lesoir.be/456175/article/2022-07-26/la-vrt-ne-diffusera-pas-certains-episodes-de-fc-de-kampioenen-juges-inappropriés>
- Bellwinkel, J. (2022, December 13). Deugt comedian Jade Mintjens? HUMO. <https://www.humo.be/nieuws/deugt-comedian-jade-mintjens-liever-woke-dan-een-zak~bad8ca2d/>
- Bewes, T. (2010). Reading with the grain. *Differences*, 21(3), 1–33.
- Billig, M. (2005). *Laughter and ridicule*. Sage Publications.
- Bingham, S. C., & Hernandez, A. A. (2009). Laughing matters. *Teaching Sociology*, 37(4), 335–352.
- Borden, S. L., and C. Tew. (2007). The role of journalist and the performance of journalism. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 22 (4): 300–314.
- Brassett, J. (2016). British comedy, global resistance. *European Journal of International Relations*, 22(1), 168–191.

- Carroll, N. (2014). *Humour: A very short introduction*. Oxford Academic.
- Colpean, M.L., & Tully, M. (2019). Not just a joke. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 42, 161-180.
- Dawes, S. (2015). Charlie Hebdo, free speech and counter-speech. *Sociological Research Online*, 20(3), 219–226.
- Djalili, O. (2022, April 20). Clever comedians can navigate cancel culture. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/entertainment-arts-61112057>
- Earl, W. (2022, May 24). Ricky Gervais' Netflix special draws criticism for graphic jokes mocking trans people. *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/ricky-gervais-trans-jokes-netflix-special-supernature-1235275966/>
- Elbers, A., & Neels, L. (2022, September 29). Vrijheid van meningsuiting en academische vrijheid onder druk? Knack. <https://www.knack.be/opinie/vrijheid-van-meningsuiting-en-academische-vrijheid-onder-druk/>
- Felski, R. (2015). *The limits of critique*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Ford, T. (2015). The social consequences of disparagement humor. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(2), 163-169.
- Fox, J. (2018). Journalist or jokester? In J. Baumgartner & A. Becker (Eds.), *Political humor in a changing media landscape* (pp. 29–44). Lexington Books.
- Fox, J.D. (2018, September 4). How funny does comedy need to be? *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/2018/09/post-comedy-how-funny-does-comedy-need-to-be.html>
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last man*. Free Press.
- Gillespie, N. (2022, December 18). John Cleese on how wokeness smothers creativity. *Reason*. <https://reason.com/2022/12/18/john-cleese-on-how-wokeness-smothers-creativity/>
- Hochuli, A. (2022). Social purpose and autonomy at the end of the end of history. *New Perspectives*, 30(4), 415-423.
- Holm, N. (2018). Against the assault of laughter. Differentiating critical and resistant humour. In C. Bonello, R. Giappone, F. Francis & I. MacKenzie (Eds.), *Comedy and critical thought. Laughter as resistance* (pp. 31-44). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Jäger, A. (2022a, February 14). From post-politics to hyper-politics. *Jacobin*. <https://jacobin.com/2022/02/from-post-politics-to-hyper-politics>
- Jäger, A. (2022b). The illusion of the end. *New Perspectives*, 30(4), 410–414.
- Jäger, A. (2023, February 22). Everything is hyperpolitical. *The Point Magazine*. <https://thepointmag.com/politics/everything-is-hyperpolitical/>
- Kawalec, A. (2020). Stand-up comedy as a hallmark of western culture. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/20004214.2020.1788753>
- Khorsandi, S. (2021, May 21). Cancel culture is ruining comedy – it's time to stand-up to it. *The Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/cancel-culture-comedy-chris-rock-shappi-khorsandi-b1851680.html>
- Kilby, A. (2018). Provoking the citizen. *Journalism Studies*, 19(13), 1934-1944.
- Kma, Sco. (2023, January 27). Academics richten meldpunt op voor 'woke-incidenten'. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20230126_98308422
- Koberg, K. (2021, July 24). The woke mob is everywhere: Here's where it came from and how one critic believes it can be stopped. *Fox News*. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/thewoke-mob-is-everywhere-heres-where-it-came-from-and-victor-davis-hansons-solution-for-stopping-it>
- Koivukoski, J., & Ödmark, S. (2020). Producing journalistic news satire. *Journalism Studies*, 21(1), 1-17.
- Koziski, S. (1984), The standup comedian as anthropologist. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 18, 57-76.

- Krefting, R. (2014). *All joking aside: American humor and its discontents*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Kuipers, G. (2011). The politics of humour in the public sphere. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14 (1), 63–80.
- Last Week Tonight with John Oliver. (2022, February 21). *Critical race theory*. [Television broadcast]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EICp1vGlh_U.
- Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering (2010). You must be joking. In M. Pickering (Ed.), *Popular Culture* (pp. 247–258). Sage.
- Mann, K. (2021, November 9). Why the woke can't take a joke. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-woke-joke-free-speech-comedy-polarization-censorship-dave-chappelle-netflix-chesterton-11636473581>
- Mello, J. (2021). Free speech from left to right. *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 17(2), 335–354.
- Michiels, K. (2015, December 19). 'Het gaat keigoed met de wereld, en toch zijn we bang'. *De Standaard*. https://m.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20151218_02028837?pid=5242274
- Michiels, K. (2018, December 22). 'Ik voel dat ik in herhaling ga vallen'. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20181221_04055828
- Michiels, K. (2022, April 15). Een doodserieuze boodschap, maar badend in humor. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20220414_97579852
- Mirzaei, A. (2019, September 8). Where “woke” came from and why marketers should think twice before jumping on the social activism bandwagon. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/where-woke-came-from-and-why-marketers-should-think-twice-before-jumping-on-the-social-activism-bandwagon-122713>
- Myers, R. (2008, June 23). Words are all we have. *American Civil Liberties Union*. <https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/words-are-all-we-have>
- Mylonas, Y., & Kompatsiaris, P. (2021). Trolling as transgression. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 34-55.
- Nieuwenhuis, I., & Zijp, D. (2022). The politics and aesthetics of humour in an age of comic controversy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25(2), 341–354.
- Norris, P. (2023). Cancel culture: Myth or reality? *Political Studies*, 71(1), 145–174.
- Ödmark, S., & J. Harvard (2021). The democratic roles of satirists. *Popular Communication* 19(4): 1–14.
- Peifer, J. T. (2012). Can we be funny?. *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, 27(4), 263-276.
- Phelan, S. (2021, Feb 3). Media critique in a very online world. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/media-critique-very-online-world/>
- Pickering, M., & Littlewood, J. (1998). Heard the one about the white middle class heterosexual father-in-law?. In S. Wagg (Ed.), *Because I tell a joke or two* (pp. 291-312). Routledge.
- Popovic, H. (2018). 'Good comedy' and the limits of humour. *Sociologija*, 60: 595-613.
- Rae, M. 2020. Hyperpartisan news. *New Media & Society*, 23(5): 1117–1132.
- Ricky Gervais defends 'taboo' comedy after backlash. (2022, May 25). *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-61576751>
- Riesch, H. (2015). Why did the proton cross the road? Humour and science communication. *Public Understanding of Science*, 24(7), 768–775.
- Roberts, G. (2019, July 5). Why the woke can't make jokes. *UnHerd*. <https://unherd.com/2019/07/why-the-woke-cant-make-jokes/>
- Saturday Night Live (2022, November 13). *Dave Chappelle stand-up monologue – SNL*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_m-gO0HSCYk

- Silverman, S. (2023, March 6). Chris Rock Netflix special ‘Selective outrage’ slams businesses over woke culture: ‘every business is full of s-t’. *Entrepreneur*. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/business-news/chris-rock-slams-woke-business-culture-in-netflix-special/447004>
- Smeets, J. (2022, October 7). Alex Agnew: “Woke is een pseudoreligieuze ideologie die pretendeert progressief te zijn”. *Gazet Van Antwerpen*. https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20221007_94459584
- Smith, D. (2015). Self-heckle. *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 15(3), 561-579.
- Smith, D. (2018). *Comedy and critique*. Bristol University Press.
- Sobande, F., Kanai, A., & Zeng, N. (2022). The hypervisibility and discourses of ‘wokeness’ in digital culture. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(8), 1576–1587.
- Speck, S. (2019). The comedy of reflexive modernity. *Cultural Sociology*, 13(2), 233–248.
- Sturges, P. (2015). The production of comedy. The joke in the age of social media. *Sage Open*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015612521>
- Swyngedouw, E., & Wilson, J. (2014). There is no alternative. In the post-political and its discontents (pp. 285-300). Edinburgh University Press.
- The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. (2022, May 18) *Nature is super enough. I don't need angels and unicorns*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFupAV1_xWU
- Timler, K. (2012). Critical laughter. The standup comedian’s critique of culture at home *Platforum*, 13, 49-65.
- Van Loy, J. (2022, April 15). Michael Van Peel geeft zuurstof aan zuurpruimen in ‘Welcome to the Rebellion!’. *De Morgen*. <https://www.demorgen.be/tv-cultuur/michael-van-peel-geeft-zuurstof-aan-zuurpruimen-in-welcome-to-the-rebellion~b45477660/>
- Van Peel, M. (2019, September 6). Klaagtaks. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20190906_04595539
- Van Peel, M. (2020a, July 18). Omdat ik het zeg. *De Standaard*. https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20200718_91786038
- Van Peel, M. (2020b). *Michael Van Peel maakt engagement plezant* [Interview]. Zwijgen is Geen Optie. <https://zwijgenisgeenoptie.be/michael-van-peel/>
- Van Peel, M. (2023). Bio. <https://michaelvanpeel.be/bio/>
- Velasquez, A. (2021, May 19). ‘Everybody’s scared to make a move’: Chris Rock slams cancel culture as stifling the creativity of comedians. *Atlanta Black Star*. <https://atlantablackstar.com/2021/05/19/everybodys-scared-to-make-a-move-chris-rock-slams-cancel-culture-as-stifling-the-creativity-of-comedians/>
- Vincent, P. (2022, April 10). Michael Van Peel: "Spaar je verontwaardiging voor de zaken die het verdienen, niet voor elke scheve scheet". *Gazet van Antwerpen*. https://www.gva.be/cnt/dmf20220408_94433748
- Waisanen, D. (2018). The rise of advocacy satire. In J. C. Baumgartner & A. B. Becker (Eds.), *Political humor in a changing media landscape* (pp. 189-206). Routledge.
- Weaver, S. (2011). Liquid racism and the ambiguity of Ali G. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(3), 249–264.
- Weaver, S., Mora, R. A., & Morgan, K. (2016). Gender and humour: Examining discourses of hegemony and resistance. *Social Semiotics*, 26(3), 227-233.
- Webber, J., Momen, M., Finley, J., Krefling, R., Willett, C., & Willett, J. (2021). The political force of the comedic. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20(3), 419-446.
- Welcome to the Rebellion!* directed by Michael Van Peel, performance by Michael Van Peel, November 10, 2022, GC De Route, Sint-Gillis Waas.
- Whelan, E. (2022, May 25). Netflix is not anti-trans – it’s pro-freedom of speech. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/2022/05/25/netflix-not-anti-trans-pro-freedom-speech>

- Willett, C., & Willett, J. (2019). *Uproarious*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Zavattaro, S. M., & Bearfield, D. (2022). Weaponization of wokeness. *Public Administration Review*, 82(3), 585-593.
- Zhou, Q. (2023). Ought comedies be censored?. *Comedy Studies*, 14(1), 54-63.