A Very Peculiar Practice and campus comedy: 35 years on

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Abstract

On May 21st 1986, the BBC broadcast the first episode of Andrew Davies’s campus black comedy *A Very Peculiar Practice*. 2021 celebrates the series’ 35th anniversary. This article considers the contribution of the series to the genre of campus comedy (and “campus novel”). It considers and evaluates the themes, plots and characters introduced throughout the series and how these reflected, and reacted to, the political backdrop and ideology of the time. Its contribution to the tradition of university satire is discussed in the broader context of the campus novel, that comedy of manners in which the University, its staff, its students and its operation are satirised.
On May 21st, 1986, the BBC broadcast the first episode of a black comedy that was to mark a milestone in BBC drama comedy and launched the television career of one of the UK’s most prodigious adaptors of novel fiction for television and film. *A Very Peculiar Practice*, written by Andrew Davies, ran for two series and a special, and was a very peculiar drama in many ways but in at least two: (i) it was born of some degree of creative desperation by the author and was, therefore, almost a serendipitous creation, and (ii) it revivified a genre of comedy (and drama) which had been dormant since at least, arguably, 1981, when the BBC (again) broadcast the television adaptation of Malcolm Bradbury’s novel, *The History Man*. It was also, unlike other televisual examples of campus comedy, an original drama and did not draw on some earlier novel for inspiration.

The genre of campus comedy or satire had been the more familiar bailiwick of the novel where its hinterland is extensive: this medium represented a comedy of manners and action which ridiculed academics and academic life in higher education in the UK (mainly) and (rarely) elsewhere. Television and film had been no stranger to the paratelic milieu of the University, and the eccentricities of its staff, structures, operation and expectations -see below- but the novel was the most self-identifiable repository for satirising university life, describing gleefully a habitus fraught with alcoholism, polymorphism, professional and sexual jealousy, departmental politics, questionable management (and teaching) practices, rivalries, and pomposity.

The examples of the genre in English literature are familiar and are classic exemplars. They include Kinglsey Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), Tom Sharpe’s *Porterhouse Blue* (1974) and his Wilt series (starting with *Wilt*, 1976), Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man* (1975) and assorted other campus-related novels, David Lodge’s campus trilogy, and Howard Jacobson’s *Coming From Behind* (1983). There are others, such as Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005). Most have been interpreted via a televisual or film medium at some point. *Lucky Jim* starred Ian Carmichael as probationary lec-
turer Jim Dixon in the 1957 film, with Keith Barron playing the role in the BBC1 sequel of sorts in the *Further Adventures of Lucky Jim* (1967), Enn Reitel as Jim in the ITV series *The New Adventures of Lucky Jim* (1982) and Stephen Tomkinson in the ITV remake of the film in 2003. *The History Man* was broadcast by the BBC in 1981 and starred Antony Sher as the “theoretician of sociability”, Howard Kirk; *Porterhouse Blue* was made into a four-episode series by Channel 4 and broadcast in 1987; *Wilt* was made into a film by LWT in 1989 (called *The Misadventures Of Mr Wilt* in the US) starring Griff Rhys Jones as Henry Wilt, a FE academic who “had done his damnedest to extend the sensibilities of Day-Release Apprentices with notable lack of success”. It was filmed at the now-defunct Bounds Green campus of Middlesex University. *Nice Work* was broadcast by the BBC in 1989 and starred Warren Clarke and Haydn Gwynne, who also appeared in the first episode of *A Very Peculiar Practice* (“A Very Long Way From Everywhere”).

**The university or “campus novel”**

A distinction is sometimes, if now rarely, made between academic novels and campus novels, with the one type (academic novels) concerned with the University environment and its students and the other (campus) with the academics themselves (Williams, 2012). It is probably an artificial distinction and one that no longer provides any form of useful taxonomy - the division has been superseded by the widespread use of “campus novel” to describe any work of extended literary prose fiction in which the subject matter is the University, its students, its staff and its functioning. Its tone and purpose is comedic, usually satirical, and often constitutes a comedy of manners. The campus novel ridicules or satirises personal peculiarities, professional rivalries, fears and insecurities, sexual ambitions (and insecurities), and work-related politics (which involve rivalry, fear and insecurity). David Lodge, in *The British Museum Is Falling Down*, wrote that “literature is mostly about having sex and not much about having children; life is the other way around.” And campus novels certainly follow this carnal template; even *A Very Peculiar Practice* was largely unblessed and bothered with children until the end of series 2, but it was deeply distracted by sex.
There are novels where the locale is the University and where the characters might be academics but these are not novels concerned with an analysis or comical exegesis of University life and work but exploit this environment and these characters indirectly as devices on which to hang other, larger stories (Ian McEwan’s *Solar* and Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited*, for example, or Colin Dexter’s Morse novels). The term “university novel” has also been suggested (Shaw, 1981) -and this describes any novel where the principal context is the University and the main characters are University academic staff or students- but the term “campus novel” has stuck and is now instantly recognisable as a distinctive, if boutique, genre of novel.

**A chronology of the campus novel**

It is probably fair, and accurate, to say that university, academic, campus -whatever you would like to call them- novels were, until the postwar era (1950s and later) novels about two Universities: Oxford and Cambridge and, if we are being even fairer and more accurate, largely Oxford. The 19th century “university” novels which invoked Universities and their staff, invoked those specific Universities and their staff (Proctor, 1977) for historical reasons. Shaw (1981) notes that 85% of pre-20th century University novels were set in Oxford, a situation which existed up until the post-war period when the literary domain became less exclusive and graduates other than those from Oxford began writing; out of the Tower and into the Provinces. But even these two institutions were different and, also, parochial because their ways of functioning and because the language of their operation were distinctive and idiosyncratic; they had their own idiolects. Thus, novels of the 19th century in which Universities played a core part were based on these two, very niche, environments which would not necessarily be comprehensible to most readers. Examples include John Gibson Lockhart’s *Reginald Dalton: A Story of English University Life* (1823), Thomas Little’s *Confessions of an Oxonian* (1826), Charles Henry Cook’s *With the Best Intentions: A Tale of Undergraduate Life at Cambridge* (1884) and Anne Edwards’s *A Girton Girl* (1885).

There are some common tropes seen in the typical campus novel, even these early examples, summarised by Dalton-Brown (2008). The protagonist is usually male -and all of the well-known
exemplars are male protagonists- and this man is usually naive and the subject of ridicule or sympathy (or both); both expressions are channeled via a corpus of supporting characters. The department or University in which he finds himself in is a hotbed of politics, pretension, frothing envy, and pettiness which requires deft manouevring. “There are as many fools at a University as elsewhere,” wrote William Gerhardie in *The Polyglots*, “But their folly, I admit, has a certain stamp- the stamp of University training, if you like. It is trained folly.” The campus novel is riddled with trained folly.

But the main theme of these novels, according to Dalton-Brown, is “survival”- the protagonist’s journey will involve navigating, withstanding or eliminating all of these indignities, pettinesses and challenges (or not). She also suggests that the protagonist is involved in a battle for the “life of the mind or the life of desires” (which take the form of sexual appetites, professional ones or those involving status or money) and that this battle is played out across the course of the fiction as the protagonist attempts to achieve a new post, retain an existing one, or attain some other much-desired status. The sleazy, malicious, the inept and the pompous are portrayed mockingly. There is discontent with the working environment and with the people the characters are forced to work with. According to David Lodge, the campus novel offers “the literature of escape”. None of what happens appears to matter very much to the outside world and we can enjoy the shenanigans safe in the knowledge that we are gazing at the petri dish of a delightfully baffling, yet harmless, strain of streptococcus. This, of course, might have been true in the early days of Amis, Bradbury and Lodge but the idea that academia is a self-contained environment immune from the slings and arrows of life outside the campus is now exemplarily naive, as Lodge’s *Nice Work* demonstrates.

Since the 19th century, the number of students who have studied at University has increased exponentially. Universities are no longer the preserve of the well-heeled and the moneyed (just) and with the 1997 Labour government’s aim of ensuring that 50% of school leavers study for a University degree in the UK, the number of people who have become familiar with this world, and have participated in it, has grown. The growth in student numbers exists alongside the growth in Univer-
sities themselves. Back in the 16th century when the whole of England only had two Universities (and Aberdeen, famously boasted that it had two), there was little possibility of receiving access to study at this level unless you were independently wealthy or had other means or charity. With the creation of variously funded and established Welsh and English Universities in the 19th century (the University of London was established in 1836), the 1944 Education Act, the development of the “provincial” “New” Universities in the 60s and then the conversion of the Polytechnics to Universities in 1992, the British University system became transformed and its nature and function became more familiar.

**Lucky Jim and after**

The unwitting progenitor of the campus novel and the first, and most successful, postwar novel to feature academics as prominent sources of mirth was Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), originally titled “Dixon and Christine”. Jim Dixon, “a shabby little provincial bore” is a history academic at a provincial University whose journey in the novel—psychologically, emotionally and professionally—is one of seeking to attain a full-time position at the university, an ambition he spectacularly fails to achieve after a drunken lecture. On the journey, he meets a series of ridiculous characters and caricatures.

Although a literature lecturer at the University of Swansea at the time of the book’s publication, Amis did not necessarily base the novel on his employer (he would have been unwise to and, in any case, the germ of the idea had begun a year before Amis’s arrival at Swansea) but more likely the University of Leicester where his friend Philip Larkin was librarian. After a visit to the senior common room, Amis wrote: “I looked around and said to myself: “Christ, somebody ought to do something about this.” Not that it was awful…it was strange…a whole model of existence one had got on to from the outside, like the SS in 1940, say. I would do something with it.” (Amis, 1991; cited in Belei, 2017). Larkin was a significant influence on *Lucky Jim* bequeathing the character’s surname (Larkin lived on Dixon Street), suggesting that Dixon have a competitor for Margaret (Catchpole) and indirectly lending a major character (Dixon’s girlfriend, Margaret Peel, is based on
Larkin’s partner, Monica Jones). The novel was dedicated to him. Larkin commented extensively on drafts of the book. The novel was a terrific success, going into its 5th printing six weeks after its first publication and selling 12000 copies by the end of 1954. The first exposure to the novel, though, was not via any publisher but via the radio when extracts were read on air during the BBC’s First Reading, edited by a contact of Amis (Belei, 2017). Somerset Maugham hated it. He might also have hated Malcolm Bradbury’s The History Man, the next in the campus novel wave to cause an academic stir and had an impact on the genre although the author himself ostensibly did not regard the work as a university novel but a universal novel (Bradbury, 2007).

If Eating People Is Wrong was about leaving the Fifties, The History Man was about entering the Seventies but really wishing to leave them. Published in 1975, and adapted for television in 1981, The History Man reflected the author’s fear of, possibly contempt for, the New Academic more broadly and for the discipline of sociology more explicitly, via the portrayal of Howard Kirk, the awful, radical, sexually incontinent sociology lecturer at the heart of the novel. The novel, reflecting “the malign stereotypical representation of life in the new universities” (Taylor, 1992), itself had as painful a gestation as Bradbury had an experience of radical University politics and their rejection of humanism and liberalism, having drafted at least seven different versions of the novel’s opening lines (the manuscripts are in the repository of Indiana University, where Bradbury briefly taught) (LeMahieu, 2017). The novel was set at the glass and concrete edifice of the University of Watermouth, a new university which did “not educate its students, it teaches its teachers”. One of the students, George Carmody with his blazer and suitcase and glabrous mien, is the subject of Kirk’s merciless and cruel persecution and bullying through the novel. Carmody ends up reporting Kirk to the Vice-Chancellor, accusing him of sleeping with his students. Carmody is expelled and Kirk becomes Professor of Sociology at the University of Dewsbury, voting Conservative in the 1979 general election.

The impact of the novel was made greater -the impact was arguably created- by the television adaptation. Television magnifies everything, draws attention and makes everything salient. A mi-
nority readership can translate into a wider viewership. A similar asymmetry characterised Tom Sharpe’s *Blott On The Landscape* (1973) and *Porterhouse Blue* (1974), and with the television adaptation creating a much greater impact, through wider exposure, than did the novel (Blott and Blue were televised in 1985 and 1987 respectively and both were scripted by Malcolm Bradbury). But the televisual interpretation of *The History Man* placed rather rancid flesh on the novel’s skeleton, making some scenes and characters much more salient and vivid when portrayed on television. The novel, and the television play, were a satire of the new sort of academic, sexually liberated, radical, liberal yet hypocritical (all views are welcome unless they clash with the protagonist’s own).

A similar radicalisation -this time forced- is found in the next of the successful campus novels, David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), the last in a trilogy of campus novels by Lodge (*Changing Places* in 1975, *Small World* in 1984). The radicalisation is forced or imposed because the novel satirises the then Thatcherite ideology of marketisation, value for money, the lust for the enterprise culture, and the expectation that Universities pay their way, translated in this novel via the job shadowing of a Northern business manager by a junior English Literature Theory lecturer (note the “theory”, compounding the Conservative academic crime of impracticality). It is a novel examining the more sterile cross-fertilisation between gown and town (or factory) and of compelling the humanities to justify their applicability and existence. This novel, like all of the other examples of campus comedy discussed here, were either created in the context of, or in response to, some significant shifts in political thinking and ideology and considered directly or indirectly the place of academia within this new thinking. Table 1 highlights some of the major developments in HE during the 20th century as these novels and television series were being created.

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**
Unlike the first two novels in the trilogy, this novel attempts to wrestle with three, interweaving subjects: the relevance of humanities (specifically, literature) in the universities, political ideology, and the clash of cultures, “two nations; between whom there is no intercourse or sympathy; who are ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings” (Disraeli, 1845). There is a lot of clashing in between the satiric shenanigans and there is also some intercourse. Changing Places was a novel about culture clashes, too - academics from the US and UK undergo a job swap- thus extending the campus novel from one specific campus to two international campuses. Small World was a further examination of what happens when you have several cultures all in one place, in one setting- the international academic conference, the cynosure of “professional self-display and erotic opportunity” (Lodge, 1986). In Lodge’s (1986) words, it was a novel about “the vanity of human wishes as exhibited in the jet-propelled peregrinations of scholars around the global campus” with characters from the previous novel returning. It is, again, remarkable that the most well-known (in terms of public recognition) of Lodge’s academic trilogy is the televised novel Nice Work, which starred Haydn Gwynne as Robyn Penrose, a part-time academic from the University of Rummidge (modelled on Lodge’s own Birmingham University), an ugly university in an ugly city, and Warren Clarke as Victor Wilcox, the industrialist/entrepreneur whose observations on Rummidge begin the novel.

The other two novels in the trilogy are set in a context in which there is discussion of issues which, at best, would be alien and esoteric to a general audience and, at worst, would be irrelevant. The sexual peccadilloes, rivalries, and petty squabbling about postmodernism were already familiar to readers of these things- these readers were already either graduates of the same, worked in the same sort of departments or wrote book reviews in which the arcana and stodginess of literary theory were well-known. Nice Work is the most political of the trilogy because it draws this explicit contrast between the seemingly impractical, pointless work of a humanities lecturer with the ostensibly valuable work of a money-generating businessman and employer. Neither character is fully sympathetic and your sympathies dove-tail between the two. It might be thought that our original sympathies, our viewpoint, lie with that of the academic but she is quick to reveal her own snob-
bery (she is dismissively demeaning of her brother’s girlfriend’s job as a finance executive and disdains her cockney accent) and her entitlement (she comes from a wealthy family and really wants for very little).

Before Small World and after Nice Work, a new comic author made a significant, if single and singular, contribution to the genre but whose contribution bridged the style of Lodge and Bradbury and the other scion of the field, Tom Sharpe whose own novels are replete with lubricious incidents, surreal vignettes and highly stylised comic violence. Howard Jacobson’s (1983) Coming From Behind is a novel about Sefton Goldberg, an English academic, entering middle-age and teaching at Wrottesley Polytechnic and was the first significant novel to satirise the polytechnic campus (Wilt does so obliquely), drawing unfavourable comparisons between it, its campus, its staff and its students with its more moneyed and historically embedded competitors. The innuendo in the title is pretty much on par with the innuendo found in the novels of Tom Sharpe.

Sharpe himself began his comic novel career with satires on South African apartheid and police brutality, Riotous Assembly (1971) and Indecent Exposure (1973), but his reputation was made by a series of comic novels starring the English academic, Henry Wilt, and which was inspired by his teaching experience at what is now Anglia Ruskin University. These novels - Wilt (1978), The Wilt Alternative (1981), Wilt On High (1984), Wilt In Nowhere (2004), and The Wilt Inheritance (2010) - were distinctive in their portrayal of absurd sexual aggression and perversion. The plot of Wilt involves the protagonist waking up glued to a sex doll and being accused of murdering his wife by a clueless detective, an accusation that has some merit given that he had dressed the sex doll in the clothes of his wife and attempted to bury it under concrete; in Alternative, he has sex with a terrorist to distract her from taking his daughters hostage and the novel ends with the explosion of a bio- loo which covers the terrorists with excrement and kills them.

Another confluence of the absurd and the sexual appears in the later novel Porterhouse Blue (2002) in which the student Zipster, in an attempt to hide his embarrassment at amassing a bag of
condoms, attempts to get rid of them by filling them with gas and releasing them through a college chimney. The condoms become stuck and Zipster’s housekeeper ends up blowing up the college Tower when she goes to light the fire. Both are killed. *Porterhouse Blue* is closer in tone and content to the conventional campus novel than are Sharpe’s *Wilt* novels involving, as it does, the satirising of the tension and animosity between conservative, sepulchral University grandees and incoming modernising arrivistes, a theme that is developed throughout the second season of *AVPP*. Sharpe’s campus novels are significantly more ribald than other entries in the genre and, in a sense, are novel farces (trying to jettison a sex doll; mismatched, aggressive sexual advances; volitant condoms; exploding chimneys and lavatories). The element of the surreal and the absurd, found in many of Sharpe’s novels, is also a leitmotif of the next significant entry in the campus genre, *A Very Peculiar Practice*.

**A Very Peculiar Satire**

*A Very Peculiar Practice* ran for two series (1986; 1988) of seven episodes each followed by a one-off special (*A Very Polish Practice*, 1992) in which the lead character was transplanted to a different environment and allowed to cope, thrive or fail. Whereas all the other campus satires had at their core their academics as their dramatis personae, *AVPP*’s unique approach and glory was to undertake the heavy-lifting of satire indirectly via a constellation of picaresques supporting the University, namely the staff at a University Medical Practice. In so doing, it provided additional, ostensibly objective social satire of the mores of mid to late 1980s Britain and was a none-too-subtle rebuke to the prevailing Conservative ethos which placed emphasis on marketisation, commercial self-interest, and individual prosperity. A leitmotif, particularly in series 2, was obsession with income generation, the University’s precarious finances and management and, ultimately, the destruction of the University as a result of both. Its comedy was a combination of two major underpinnings of comedy: superiority/disparagement and incongruity (Martin, 2021).

The campus medical practice of The University of Lowlands, a fictitious University set somewhere in the provinces of England, was headed by a lugubrious, exophthalmic, eccentric drunk and author
of “Sexual Anxiety and the Common Cold”, Dr Jock McCannon (played Graham Crowden). His team included a sociopathic, white-collared, stereotypical 80s yuppy, Dr Bob Buzzard (a brilliant, scene-stealing David Troughton); languorous cod-feminist Dr Rose Marie who believed that illness was something men did to women (Barbara Flynn); and our Ulysses, our everyman, our Pennyfeather, Dr Stephen Daker (Peter Davison), a GP from Walsall who beat Marie and Buzzard for the post he now occupies. Buzzard is probably the stand-out character of the series and his persona is set up beautifully by his coiffure, his wardrobe, his speech and our original introduction where he ignores a weeping student and refers to Irish practice nurse Maureen as “simple Maureen from the bogs”. According to Davies (2011), Troughton’s preparation for this role was painstaking and he would rehearse and deliver a very precise, tightly-wound performance as a result of meticulous planning. Apart from Daker, all the other members of the practice were, according to Davies, “crazy and probably shouldn’t be allowed to practice.” John Bird played Vice Chancellor, Professor Ernest Hemmingway (sic). Davies had great fun with names throughout the series: Daker’s predecessor was Blair Atholl. A Dick Dado is also mentioned.

Jock speaks in a kind of portentous, grandiose but self-deprecating poetry. Each “my dear boy”, “my dear girl” or “dear lady” (or “dear Bob”, or Stephen) is followed by some meditative observation on life’s travails or the failings of some part of the University and its falling moral masonry. It is Jock who provides the moral and dramatic frame for what follows in the series, telling Daker and his ensemble: “This university is a swamp of fear and loathing. It’s the cuts…” and describes a litany of University problems including voluntary redundancy, early retirement and inter-colleague rivalry. Swamps become a running theme in series two with the new Vice-Chancellor’s wife routinely referring to the institution as a “piss-ant swamp” in virtually every episode she appears, an epithet so infectious even Jock is found using it later in that series.

Jock continues in episode 1, “let me tell you about this place, Stephen. They call it a new University but it’s 20 years old now. Concrete’s crumbling; all these bloody silly flat roofs leak…It’s like a very, very inefficient sector of British industry. Top management are morally corrupt and idle. Mid-
dle management are incompetent and idle. And the workforce is bolshy and idle. And, of course, there’s no bloody product. No wonder people get ill here. There’s nothing else for them to do.”

Apart from explicitly setting the stage early on and providing the viewer with a caustic if realistic appraisal of the environment they find themselves in, what this monologue also accomplishes is the feat of reminding the viewer of how clear and clever the writing is. The speech could be read in print with zero detriment to its meaning and comedy and this is a linguistic gift that percolates throughout the series. Jock also touches on another subject that was thematic in higher education and later became even more salient, student fees. In response to the observation that the University encourages a lot of students to come to Lowlands, Jock’s explanation is: “for the big, fat fees”.

Jock is very much the Lear of AVPP and, in the next series, is seen staggering and wandering around campus at night as a group of feminist protestors chase an intruder, and some beagles are let loose from one of the science facilities by student animal-rights activists.

The first episode (“A Very Long Way From Anywhere”) opens, as does every episode, with two feral nuns whose role is principally to rummage through bins and engage in general anti-social behaviour such as stealing milk bottles and terrorising binmen, a sort of out-of-order of nuns. Jock looks out across the campus from his office window. Daker is first seen, driving to the deserted campus on his first day at work, navigating his Volvo through a maze of signage- speed checks, dead ends, prohibitions and, in one case, “Caution: Altered Priorities Ahead” suggesting that Davies’s comedy workshop was sometimes happier using a mallet than a chisel.

Although in the tradition of Voltaire’s Candide, Daker has much in common with Pennyfeather from Waugh’s Decline And Fall- another comic “university novel”- and with the ingénues from Sharpe, Bradbury and Lodge. He is similar in many ways to Henry Wilt but more competent, idealistic, sedulous and less professionally disastrous. His background is modest and monotonous. When Buzzard lists his prestige alma mater and asks Daker for his own potted career history, Daker replies: “Birmingham, Birmingham, Birmingham, Walsall.” (“It has a sort of grim coherence”). Walsall is mistaken for Wolverhampton, for comic effect, throughout the series and this is the fate of Walsall.
All Daker wants to be is a “really marvellous doctor” and later, in episode 2, says “I’m a humanist. I believe in people” and this is the character’s core, defining, idealistic trait or failing.

In the first ensemble scene where we meet the cast of the practice, Davies delineates a very clear set of characters that almost borders on caricature- the border-crossing becomes well and truly transgressive later when we are introduced to the campus students and staff. The first recurring character Daker meets is copper-turned-PhD student, Lynn, when she is out jogging and he bumps into her. Later, he meets her again in the University swimming pool where, as the pool’s lifeguard, she saves him from drowning. This leads Daker to conclude: “I’m alive. And this is a beautiful University.” They later form a relationship, her more open than his, and she capitalises on her research on “body language” to help Daker with his somatophobia. (“I don’t get any cuddles, Lynn. My wife doesn’t even hit me any more”). We are also introduced to some academic types at the Vice-Chancellor’s drinks party later in the episode where Daker is duped into thinking it is a casual dress affair when it isn’t. The in-jokes flow freely and there is even a knowing reference to a fellow campus author: “You are talking about Bradbury’s latest one?” “No, I’m talking about the new parking regulations”.

The filming of the external scenes for the series took place at, among other places, the Universities of Birmingham (the opening shots of the arriving bin lorry) and Keele (most of the rest) in 1985. According to Davies (2011), the former was indifferent to the potential effect of the programme on its reputation and was too unassailable to care; the latter needed the money. Daker arrives at the grimmest student union known to human kind as he discovers a man in a donkey jacket weeping next to a drinks dispenser, and a wall bearing the graffitto legend “University kills intellect by degrees”. The exterior scenes are shot on film and the opening- and the whole of the first series- has the dated look of the BBC serial drama of that time, with an accompanying atonal electronic soundtrack reminiscent of McCoy era Doctor Who. Each episode also opens with an animation of a bleak landscape of silhouettes walking upland to the tune of Elkie Brooks singing Dave Greenslade’s “We love you”, before the bleakness transforms into a literal sunny upland and the blues and
blacks are replaced with yellow. The opening is tonally reminiscent of *Whoops Apocalypse* (1982) in which a grim, apocalyptic opening is also replaced by a jauntier theme tune.

Over the next five episodes, we are introduced to a succession of academic-themed plots which touch on political issues of the time (working with industry, monetising University functions) and a sense that all might not be well at the cash-strapped University of Lowlands. Episode 2 (“We love you: That’s Why We’re Here”) introduces us to the first of our students and the other staff- including an unappealing theatre studies tutor who Daker later discovers has a debilitating eye condition, and Welsh religious studies student, Megan, who ends up married to local preacher, Hugh Grant. The episode ends with Lynn and Daker holding hands after having spent an afternoon in a tin shed listening to a sermon.

Relationships, and a satire on a certain type of academic relationship, are developed further in episode three (“Wives of Great Men”), where the central plot concerns the workaholicism of ferocious bully and Pro Vice Chancellor, John Thomas Furie (of course), played by Timothy West, who suspects his wife is having an affair (she is) and becomes hysterically paranoid. The workload issue, and Furie’s drive to produce, is presaged by Jock’s opening remarks to his practice meeting at the beginning of the episode where he says that “the VC is baying for more cuts, more redundancies. How do we respond?”. (he has already closed down Media Studies). Buzzard, naturally, wishes to develop private consultancy work that “would actually pull in some cash”, another theme of 1980s University life. This is referred to again throughout series two and in one particular cynical instance in the plot in which an art historian is at risk of redundancy but an academically poor student has a wealthy art-collecting father whose donations allow the University to establish an art gallery and the academic is allowed to keep his job, until the student graduates and the favour is no longer live and the staff member can be ditched.

Furie is described by Anne Marie as “a bully of the crudest kind. I’d like to picture him as a hollow plaster phallus.” When his wife suggests an alternative form of dinner, he barks “I need meat. I’m
not a sociologist.”, a very neat joke and one in a tradition of sociology-bashing by campus comedians. Furie also issues caustic observations of other colleagues-over dinner with Daker, he points to a nearby table and says “three half-wits kow-towing to a non-entity. There’s the philosophy department with their external examiner”. The episode does end with a resolution and a mea culpa.

Furie, commenting on his own condition: “we love our work, we let it take over us. And we ignore the women. We blind ourselves to their needs. And when we’ve realised what we’ve done, it’s too late.” which is a touching example of profound self-reflection that could represent a realisation relevant in any context; it is universal. Furie’s pre-occupation with livestock also finds its way into a final mea culpa regarding his bullied wife where he admits “I’ve eaten that woman like a piece of meat, Stephen”.

The next episode satirises Buzzard’s foray into entrepreneurship (“Black Bob’s Hamburger Suit”) but, in his monomaniacal drive to be seen to succeed, ends up prescribing an anxiolytic, Confidan, fairly indiscriminately to any patient whatever their presenting illness. Bob is the embodiment of the Thatcherite ideal and yuppy- BWM-driving, squash-obsessed, with two children in private school and a ferociously corrosive self-interest. In this episode, we see revealed his views of his academic clientele: “in reality, they’re here to avoid contact with students as much as possible while they write their books and articles no one’s going to read, and swan off to conferences to give papers no-one’s going to listen to. And the more of that they do, the more time off they get to do even more of it until they get so eminent there’s no danger of them ever having to see another student.” With his speech, you can hear Davies having a lot of fun at his old profession’s expense.

This is also the episode in which Jock reveals he is writing a book called “The Sick University”. Sickness, and sex -the other staple of campus comedy- is the theme of episode 5 (“Contact Tracer”) in which an outbreak of STDs is reported on campus (the spreader is a Reader in Interdisciplinary Studies) and the VC is found to have contracted it. Episode 6 (“The Hit List”) sees the peril enhanced significantly with the potential redundancy of Dr Lillian Hubbard, a historian and custodian of an all-women hall on campus that the VC would like to see converted into a confer-
ence centre for Japanese investors. This theme of attracting external financial investment into public institutions such as Universities was emblematic of the political direction of government at the time. He does not succeed and Hubbard concludes that they “are voluntary inmates at a mental institution”. The final episode continues the fiscal theme with the University required to find a 25% cut in its budget. A fact-finding team is sent in to see what can be cleaved. “Fear stalks the campus,” Jock says portentiously, “and no-one is safe”. Least of all the VC who ends up getting sacked, the reasons myriad: “he failed to keep his talented people, he backed all the wrong horses and he couldn’t even flog the campus to the Japanese. His lack of principle is mitigated only by his lack of competence.” This episode also sees the first appearance of Ron Rust, Arts Council Fellow in Creative Writing and Davies manqué who, as Daker’s patient, confides that he’s writing “a sharp, satirical, black comedy with a bit of Chekovian understated pathos” for the BBC because he owes them £17000, a similar situation to the one Davies himself found himself in and wrote AVPP in order to pay back money for a project that did not work. Rust also channels a frustration that Davies himself has also recorded: “Every time I think up something really outrageous, reality comes up and tops it.” The episode ends with the University becoming merged with Hendon Police College.

The success of the series led to an inevitable follow-up with an improved budget, but where to go when you’ve already sacked your VC and your University has merged with a training college? Davies solution was to amplify the surreal and accelerate the peril with the introduction of a new, American Vice-Chancellor, Jack Daniels, zealous for a new kind of University. “The University of Lowlands,” says Jock, “has sold itself to the Prince of Darkness”. Jack Daniels, again, is a bit of an in-joke because one the wealthy benefactors of Warwick University where Davies taught English, was Jack Martin who ran the Smirnoff empire and whose name is attached to an existing Hall of Residence at the University (Shattock & Warman, 2010).

It is a cliche to describe generally grim and authoritarian contexts as Orwellian but this series justifies that description with its thuggish private security guards on campus, the besuited sunglasses-
wearing body guards, the axing of financially under-performing departments, and the drive to remove human obstacles if they are not perceived to follow University think. Episode 1 (“The New Frontier”) opens with scenes of cactopian squalor on campus - students coughing, living outside in tents, later reporting malnutrition to medical staff because they cannot afford food because of university rents. It is all exaggeration but it is hyperbole for comic effect and it falls just the right side of plausible. In series 2, Daker has become head of the medical practice and has a new love interest in the form of the aggressively Polish Art History lecturer, Dr Greta Gratowska who initially, with her later lover, Anne Marie’s connivance, accuses him of sexual assault following his medical examination of her. This is resolved and this series ends more apocalyptically than does the first with rioting, violence and the University closed entirely. In episode 7 (“Death of a University”), the final scene sees the University of Lowlands becoming “Lowlands High Security Defence Research Establishment”. Gratowska and Daker have a child and the final shots sees Stephen lament: “It could have been such as good place you know. It could have been really…OK”. The characters were subsequently revived in a one-off special which did not take place on campus (A Very Polish Practice) and was more a fish-out-of-water comedy in which a character is transplanted from one culture to another.

Conclusion

While AVPP’s environment and location was relatively novel for any television comedy at the time, it is worth noting that is shares many features in common with another broadly satirical BBC comedy, a self-identifiably clear comedy with a laughter track, about the workplace and workplace colleagues, namely Anthony Jay and Jonathan Lynn’s Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister which straddled AVPP from 1980 to 1988. It, too, made light work of departmental politics, inter-colleague conflict, the demands of a larger controlling management and the ridiculousness of ways of working and communicating. Clearly a sit-com and not a comedy drama, it, too, was peopled with a small group of recurring principal players, each with his or her own motivations and agenda which brought them into conflict with each other and with others. Looking back at AVPP now, it is an in-
teresting example of a comedy drama that, although not having a laughter track or live studio audi-
ence, would not have been disadvantaged by it.

Since *AVPP*, there have been very few, further attempts at campus comedy in print and on televi-
sion. Laurie Taylor’s Poppleton column has been running in the *Times Higher Education Supple-
ment* since 1979 and continues, *Porterhouse Blue* was broadcast the year after *AVPP* and
Jesse Armstrong and Sam Bain’s *Fresh Meat* (a comedy about student life and behaviour than
university more broadly) ran for 30 episodes from 2011 to 2016 on Channel 4. Perhaps, as Ron
Rust and Davies acknowledged many years ago, the world of higher education is already so extra-
ordinarily surreal that comedy is redundant. This may explain why, although *AVPP* included its fair
share of the surreal it was grounded in the relationships of its characters and the drama flowed
from their interchange. The series opened with that song of Brooks with its refrain “We love you,
we need you” which probably referred to the students or the medical practice. But perhaps it was
really an allusion to Universities themselves.
References


Table 1. A chronology of major and significant events in higher education in the UK in the 20th century

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>The establishment of the University of Birmingham, the first “redbrick” University</td>
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<td>1919</td>
<td>The University Grants Committee established to allocate funds to Universities; abolished in 1989 and replaced by University Funding Council</td>
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<td>1920</td>
<td>A new college established in Swansea, followed by Leicester in 1921, Exeter in 1922 and Hull in 1927</td>
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<td>1926</td>
<td>The University of Reading becomes the only University to be established between the two World Wars</td>
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<td>1944</td>
<td>The Education Act proposes expansion of Universities and that more school leavers should be qualified to enter HE</td>
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<td>1949</td>
<td>The University of Keele becomes first University College to become an independent University</td>
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<td>1961</td>
<td>The University of Sussex established, the first of the “plateglass” Universities</td>
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<td>1962</td>
<td>Education Act establishes student maintenance grant to be paid by local education authorities to students</td>
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<td>1963</td>
<td>The Robbins Report recommends expansion of Universities and that University places “be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and attainment”</td>
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1964 The University of Strathclyde becomes an independent University

1967 All University Colleges have become independent Universities

1969 The Open University is established, based at Alexandra Palace, London

1970 E.P. Thompson publishes *Warwick University Ltd*

1979 Margaret Thatcher becomes Prime Minister

1983 The University of Buckingham becomes the first private University

1985 The University of Oxford refuses to award Honorary Degree to Margaret Thatcher

1986 The first version of what would become the research assessment exercise implemented

1988 Academic tenure removed in the UK

1988 University Funding Council established

1992 Introduction of the first Research Assessment Exercise

1992 The University Funding Council replaced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (abolished in 2018) and Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (abolished in 2005)

1992 The Further and Higher Education Act abolishes the division between polytechnics and universities
1996  Volume-based criterion removed as an assessment metric for research

1997  Tony Blair becomes Prime Minister

1997  Quality Assurance Agency formed

1997  University of Cardiff granted independent degree-awarding powers

1997  Dearing Report (the “National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education”) proposes that students should contribute financially to their University fees (£1000)

1998  Introduction of University tuition fees

1999  Tony Blair sets a target of 50% of young adults going into higher education