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"Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy": A case study in incompleteness for humorous effect in British children's comics of the 1930s

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Ambiguity: Introducing the uncertain format in children's humour comics

- 1 The *Beano* comic is today widely considered a classic in the children's humour comics field if for no other reason than it has been in continuous publication since its launch in July 1938. Included in the inaugural edition was a whole page humorous strip called "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy"¹. It was created by two Italians, Tristano and Bubi Torelli, and they continued to produce it until the 69th edition of the *Beano* (18 November 1939). It is anecdotally recorded that their displacement to France due to the threat of war led to the discontinuance of the Torelli version of the strip, which was taken over by publisher D. C. Thomson's in-house artists (Holland).
- 2 Although the *Beano* comic is still going strong both as a paper publication and online, "Tin-Can Tommy" only ran until 1947. It was a regular fixture on the back cover, the last strip in a montage of content. The comic openly targeted an audience of children yet, for many in the late 1930s, adults continued to be in charge of buying the paper. Perhaps as a consequence of parental regulation, the front and back cover strips of these types of comics tended to be family friendly as they were more likely to be

noticed and possibly read by parents. In "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy", the weekly strips recounted episodes from his experiences as an animated clockwork boy going into the world as a naive innocent. The panels were accompanied with captions in rhyme, a format more commonly associated with moralistic picture stories for younger readers, such as the already well established (although much less colloquial in tone) *Rupert Bear* (1920 - present). Furthermore, the important role that Tommy's parents play in the serial strip, particularly his father as the restorer of order, emphasised domestic and family power structures. These aspects make the strip a rather unusual inclusion in a comic which otherwise tended to advocate a pro-independent and empowering, authoritarian-mocking attitude towards the experiences of childhood. In other ways, however, "Tin-Can Tommy" was very similar to other strips in the *Beano*. The quality of drawing was representational, a cartoon-like style similar to the other gag strips, rather than realistic as was the more common convention for picture stories with captions. The humour in "Tin-Can Tommy" strips further broke with the serious picture story format, using exaggeration and slapstick rather than action and adventure. These strips conform to the format of gag strips in that the final panel always presented a punchline of some sort. The strips differ however, in that their whole page story layout allowed for a longer story development. These aspects of format are combined unstably in the strips and therefore, the format of "Tin-Can Tommy" strips is incomplete, and rather a mosaic of aspects drawing from several formats. As a consequence, this incompleteness pervades the strip. "Tin-Can Tommy" typifies the difficulty of definitions, a difficulty which has been a persistent problem in the study of children's humour comics. This analysis, by actively drawing attention to how humour is created and by applying contemporary comics theory to the strip's play with form, seeks to fully appreciate the montage of effects and the layering of devices that are combined to produce complex humour in children's comics.

- 3 The style of comic strips has adapted and changed through time and in response to reader, editor and producer preferences. Focusing on a strip from the late 1930s can only offer a snapshot of incessant change. Rather than attempting to define the humour in children's comics form, this analysis will simply highlight the traits of differing formats vying with each other in one particular example. In order to establish the position of early humour comics in a wider context of periodicals and cultural development, this paper begins with a brief history of British humour comics and the factors that impacted their development. This analysis then considers how format pervades comics humour, firstly through the impact of structure in shorter gag strips, and secondly through illustrations of bodies and movement as negotiated through representational and realistic styles. Finally, this paper considers how "Tin-Can Tommy" was specifically relevant to the era in which it was published and how exploring the cultural context furthers our understanding of the ways in which humour comics are comic.

Unpredictability: The evolution of British children's humour comics

- 4 Humour, particularly character-based humour, has been a consistent feature in the history of British comics. This tradition was significantly influenced by an early master of sequential art, the 18th-century British illustrator William Hogarth (1697-1764).

Thierry Smolderen posits that Hogarth established many persisting aspects of comics related to both form and humour. Hogarth's satirical social commentary united existing popular forms of humour: "By combining, in an ironic way, an older tradition of edifying picture narratives with the humorous literature that emerged in England during his time, Hogarth is the artist who brought the art of the print into modernity" (3). Smolderen particularly draws attention to the ways in which Hogarth depicts bodies for humorous effect, exploiting a cultural interaction between the aesthetics of classically idealised postures and "the unnatural and ridiculous representations" of caricature (21). As comics have continued to evolve, this fundamental tension of using gestural bodily representation as social commentary² has remained central to the British tradition of comics humour.

- 5 More affordable printing techniques developed in the 19th century, enabling the mass production of newsprint and periodicals targeting more diversified audiences. As James Chapman has described, initially the cheap broadsheets were inexpensive reading for the working-class, whilst illustrated magazines were primarily accessible for the middle- and upper-classes. However, the popularity of particularly the satirical publications, such as *Punch The London Charivari* (1841-1992), spurred publishers to quickly release spin-offs, establishing the form of affordable 'funnies'. Simultaneously, periodicals for juvenile readers (predominantly boys) were also booming. In the 1800s, before the introduction of pocket money, adults controlled the available reading material for children. Consequently, the tones of children's magazines, "were intended to be morally educational, emphasizing good behavior and respect for parents" (Murray 20). Although they occasionally offered imported reprints of funny strips, the stories tended not to be humorous, nor did they include cartoons. Rather they were action and adventure narratives and popular novel serialisations: "The goal of the boy's weeklies was to provide content that was more exciting and spirited than the earlier story papers aimed at younger children, which were full of games and puzzles, while also being much less sensational, and therefore less supposedly harmful than the penny dreadfuls." (32)
- 6 The separation between humour for adults and ardent character building for children dominated the periodical market until the 1920s when the Scottish publisher DC Thomson introduced *The Big Five*: "*Adventure* (1921-1961), followed by *The Wizard* (1922-1963), *The Rover* (1922-1961), *The Skipper* (1930-1941), and *The Hotspur* (1933-1959)" (37), flooding the children's magazines market. These titles drew increasingly from American adventure comics strips, resisting the sanitized English moral storytelling tradition; mythical and super-heroic figures replaced school stories and empire adventure. Whilst continuing to embrace the text story style which had been a longstanding feature of the magazines, these comics gradually introduced more picture stories and comic strips. The picture stories were often action stories or retellings of myths or legends, told through non-humorous serial images and captions. The success of *The Big Five* motivated DC Thomson to release a new kind of humour comic targeted specifically at young readers as consumers in their own right. These comics used gimmicks such as free toys or trick jokes in the early days, overtly targeting their marketing to the child reader and purchaser, endeavouring to convince their readers that these comics were a good use of limited pocket money. In speaking directly to children, these comics dispensed with the moral and literary ideals of children's

magazines; instead they built a reputation for fun, laughter and behaviours that Peter Hollindale refers to as "childness".

- 7 *Dandy* (1937) and *Beano* (1938), compared to previous children's magazines, included many more cartoons and American style comic and gag strips (with speech balloons and no captions). The content of the comic overall however maintained a wide diversity. The visual style ranged from very detailed, realistic illustration to cartoon or gestural drawing. The formats varied from short (3-6 panel) gag strips, to half and full pages; there were also text stories, picture stories or comics strips with or without captions or balloons. The topics of stories encompassed nonsense knockabout humour and moralistic or fairy-tale hero adventures. Picture and text stories were often more action or adventure, whilst the comics strips tended to be humorous, but this is a rather unstable generalisation. All the formats utilised regular characters, some longer lived than others, whose personalities or unique traits were central to the strips. This plethora of content and style appealed to a diverse readership and reinforced the status of the comics as entertainment rather than educational material. The launch of these comics marked a moment of openness, a space of uncertainty within the developing form of children's periodicals. Therefore, the study of these comics as material objects affords an opportunity for exploration of the evolving and unfinished form of humour strip comics. The following analysis explores the fluctuating intricacies of trans-format through the case study of "Tin-Can Tommy". The next sections look particularly at incompleteness through three elements evident in the humorous strip: the relationship between predictable structure and the discontinuity or non-resolution of gags and punchlines; the emotional variability of a character who is just a spherical line man representation and yet also a complex character; and the ways in which social nuances are suggested, framing the slapstick as either successful humour or uncomfortable violence.

Contradictions: Predictably surprising structures for humour in strips

- 8 The early editions of the *Beano* comic included several pages with shorter, three and four panel gag strips alongside the longer (half and full page) humour ones. That a single edition contained both forms, but that the gag strips gradually dropped away over time while the longer strips remained central to the comic suggests that these two formats, despite their many similarities, are not the same and do not create the same reading experience.
- 9 Gag strips play with perception. Whether climaxing with puns or slapstick, the building of expectations through a subjective prism works to construct a frame of acuity which can then be broken humorously by the punchline. The formulaic structure of the gag strip is well established as, predominantly, a regular grid of similar sized panels, often using a fixed number "to set up and resolve a joke; hence the name "gag strips." (Witek 30) The security of this formulaic arrangement, its close relationship to verbal joke humour, and the finality of release associated with laughter, has served to construct an archetype so familiar that it has become invisible, a comics format which offers much joy and has garnered surprisingly little academic criticism.
- 10 Witek, building from a widely accepted premise that the prescribed structure of humorous strip comics is a result of the theatrical traditions out of which they grew,

explores how farce and nonsense influence funny comics. In such a model, the ambition of laughter drives the form: "The punch line or pratfall takes precedence over probability, line plotting, and psychological verisimilitude." (32) This assessment however, that the comics form is subservient to or undermined by the focus on the gag in such strips, rather overlooks the complicated emotional qualities of humour.

- 11 One fundamental difference between gag strips and picture stories, whether humorous or not, is the use of captions or speech balloons. In the adventure type picture stories, captions are styled in order to add to the adventure and tension or excitement of stories. In a humour strip, the tone of telling is playful and fun in order to further the humour of the story. Whilst adventure picture stories were often written in a formal, literary, storytelling tone, humour comics used devices of familiarity, colloquial language and direct address that quickly constructed close, companionable relationship between the reader and the storyteller or characters. In British comics for children there was an inconsistent back and forth between captions and speech balloons. This continually shifting process was subject to historical and cultural nuances and subtleties. In tracing the history of "Tin-Can Tommy", it is notable that through the life span of the strip, the storytelling gradually shifted from relying entirely on captions, to increasingly using speech balloons which allowed more embedded storytelling in the panels and less reliance on the text for clarification.
- 12 Another aspect specific to this strip, which later fell away, was the mode of storytelling in relation to seriality. The earliest strips used the first panel to re-tell the premise. The opening of the strip from No. 15 (November 5 1938) frames it thus:

*Professor Lee's a brainy bloke, the best in all the land,
He built himself a clockwork son, a boy to beat the band,
Tin-Can Tommy is his name. And now on Guy Fawkes' Day
You can see what fun he's having at a fireworks display.*

- 13 The caption is a rhyming restatement introducing Tommy as his father's invention, referring to an event which occurred in an earlier strip. Gag strips tend to be stand-alone stories; however, this sort of introductory panel suggests this strip is intended to be read as part of a larger open-ended story, rather than as a narrative of discontinuous seriality. However, strips never overtly link one narrative to the next. The recap purely serves to check, to emphasise, perhaps in the interests of the intended young, child audience, that everyone understands why Professor Lee has a metal son, because the recurrent building and re-building of Tommy is essential to the humour. This repetition is rather important in recognising a key difference between the gag strip and the longer humour strip format. Gags turn on the element of surprise, the punch-line changing our expectation in some way. In contrast, familiarity and anticipation are central to the format of the longer strips; we expect Tommy to end the strip in pieces and our knowledge of this repetitive punch-line, as well as the different ways in which the strip plays with it, fuel the humour. Later editions stop using the first panel for retelling once readers can be trusted to 'know'. Noticing these elements as incomplete traits of this particular strip which changed over time serves to emphasise how the comics format was in continual adaptation. The format of these longer humorous strips constructed rapport between story, storyteller, character and reader, and therefore the tone with which the comic speaks to the reader was especially important.

- 14 In addition to narrative tone, narrative structure has a significant role to play in the format of humour comics. *How to Read Nancy* by Paul Karasik and Mark Newgarden is one of the rare pieces of scholarship that illuminates the specific mechanisms of the gag strip. Through detailed analysis of one particular, randomly selected and yet representative Nancy strip, it peels back the layers, onion like, of how the elements of the gag and the strip cohere to create that devilishly inexplicable reader response, laughter. The methodology thoroughly de- and re-constructs Ernie Bushmiller's approach to short (three and four panel) gag strips. They focus on one artist, and his dedication to the mastery of his art, illuminating how "[h]is formulaic approach to visual humor beautifully revealed the essence of what a Perfect Gag is all about: economy, symmetry, payoff, equilibrium." (Karasik et al. 66)
- 15 *How to Read Nancy* is a study of the form and humour of daily newsprint gag strips. There is, as yet, no equivalent study of longer humour strips of the kind found in weekly or monthly publications. Whether short or long, humour strips use regular characters, overt and exaggerated humour, relatively regular panel layout, and are serial but not sequential in that they begin anew with each new strip. However, there are also significant differences. Whilst the Bushmiller approach privileges family friendly punch-lines for an open (although predominantly adult) newspaper audience, "Tin-Can Tommy" speaks primarily to the child reader. Bushmiller's formula for gags famously privileges the punchline, an attitude emphasised by his method for drawing the final panel first. In such formats, the joke is the strip.
- 16 The neat, complete style of short gag strips does not always transpose to the tone and style of humour found in the longer form of humorous comics and just considering a limited selection of Tommy strips demonstrates the difference. The eight panels of the first strip from edition 1 are humorous, drawn in a cartoon style and use a light-hearted narrative voice, but there is no punchline. Instead, it offers joyful resolution due to successful problem-solving, (more in the vein of adventure stories). Tommy's creator, his father, appeases his wife's pain over the death of their son by bringing to life a clockwork boy. The celebratory final panel evokes good humour, but is not a gag. The "Tin-Can Tommy" strips from the following weeks of the *Beano*, however, establish a regular structure for humour. The 'joke' of the final panel is a persistent punchline, the rather violent slapstick dismemberment of Tommy in creative and original ways. Although these are not gags in the sense of the Bushmiller strips, the humour lies in the inevitability of the catastrophe, and for children, Tommy's persistence to go out into the world, to try and explore, despite having to be put together afterwards, is an inspiring and resilient attitude; it is funny, but not a gag.

Figure 1. Tommy's Destruction. Final panel of "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy" from *The Beano Comic* No. 15 November 5, 1938.

© Image courtesy of The British Library and copyright of DC Thomson & Co Ltd.

- 17 Predictable, regular panel-structured humour has a well-established heritage in comics history. Scott Bukatman's exploration of the significance of humour, panels and timing in relation to Winsor McCay is particularly relevant here. *Little Sammy Sneeze* (1904-1906 *New York Herald*) was a regular six panel gag strip. The premise was simple, a middle/upper-class child called Sammy, whilst being expected to behave with decorum in polite society, consistently, in panel five, produced an enormous, disruptive sneeze. Panel six revealed the aftermath. Arguably for these strips, the fifth rather than the sixth panels presents the gag, and contrarily to how jokes usually work, the reader always knows exactly when and what is coming. Bukatman describes the format of these strips as a "stupefyingly predictable windup" (96). He argues though that the humorous play with time and timing in comics is about playing with bodily action in order to explore the human experience through the prism of laughter: "in the wake of chronophotography, comics developed a more sustained interest in mapping time, measuring the moment-by-moment transitions of a body traveling through or acting within space", what they were particularly interested in measuring was "the onset of disorder." (13) This kind of humour then, as also seen in "Tin-Can Tommy's" eighth panel, is rather about the potential for a body at play, rather than the finality of a gag. The character's amusing actions can be laughed at, but the impact on and reactions of others in the strips, how they are forced into responding to something unexpected, also offers a source of humour.

Oxymorons: Drawing funny flat characters with complex emotions

- 18 Embedded within the constructed format of the gag strip are representational, humorous, caricature characters. Their association with this type of strip, perhaps because of the reputation for silliness it involves, has resulted in characters who

struggle to shake off their status as “puppets”, vessels for “infantile escapism”, despite the pervasive trend in comics studies towards accepting and exploring the complex “inner lives” of comics characters (Groensteen et al. 129). Thierry Groensteen argues that narrative interconnects with consciousness. If the story is driven by the inner lives of characters, characters whose stories repeatedly end in a gag or punchline are consequently seen *only* as humorous, representative of a singular emotion, rather than emotionally, and therefore intellectually, complex. This notion is perpetuated as the format of gag strips serves to consciously create a break, undermining the clarity of denouement with tricky, unruly punchlines. Whilst the characters might be dismissed as two-dimensional “puppets”, subservient to laughter and nothing more than symbolic or stereotyped, some gag strip characters are also recognised as well-loved, enduring and sentimentalised, in one word, complex.

- 19 In order to reconcile the seeming contradiction, that a character can be simultaneously both a puppet and an individual, both a stereotype and a unique person, it is helpful to draw from Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer and Jörg Meibauer’s notion of a “hybrid character, oscillating between a human-like and a very artificial or abstract character” (140–41). This definition draws from their research focusing on how children read the hybrid character of a matchstick-man, a construct of simple lines and circles where the lines of the body capture movement in its most gestural form, and the crude form of ‘just’ a round head becomes the space for complex emotional expression. Although simply drawn, matchstick-men are far from simplistic because of the potential they offer readers: “even young children develop a graphic logic, insofar as a simple, abstract entity can stand for another more complex entity, such as a human or an animal” (142). As a means for discussing the tensions between the simultaneously simple and complex stickmen characters, Kümmerling-Meibauer and Meibauer turn to E. M. Forster’s 1985 distinction in *Aspect of the Novel* between flat and round characters. Although it continues to be well used as a generalising differentiation, it is worth acknowledging that Forster’s constructed separation between flat and round character types has been extensively critiqued as imperfect and problematic, even by the author himself (Pickrel). Nevertheless, the act of exploring the distinction between flat characters as “constructed around a single quality” and round characters possessing the “capability to surprise the child reader” raises interesting tensions.
- 20 Characters can be flat both in terms of “anonymity or generic personality”, or in “bodily incompleteness” (Kümmerling-Meibauer 151):

Despite its incompleteness, the matchstick man is able to move around, has physiological needs, such as eating, drinking, and going to sleep, and shows emotional expression, for instance feeling sad, excited, happy, or scared. This contrast or incongruence yields funny and humorous effects. (152).
- 21 The inherent humour primed by such flat-round “preliminary versions of the human body” (145) allows gestural characters like these to both embody humanity, and defy it. Stickmen simultaneously represent independent, free-thinking, liberated characters, whilst being confined to the most fundamental, gestural expressions of embodied experience. Their othered bodies enable them to behave in impossible ways, whilst also retaining the emotional qualities of humanity; simple gestural lines and circles representing emotional depth.
- 22 In 1845, Rodolphe Töpffer’s essay on graphic storytelling explored the same tensions between completeness and expression, arguing that incompleteness in graphic

storytelling can actually serve to enhance the effectiveness of the relationship between form and content, that the graphic line always implies a level of meaning: "its monstrous discontinuities are neither stains nor gaps, just as they are not, as is often the case, merely the pleasant use of a permissible concision by the procedures and desires of an author." (31). Starting from what seems a rather contradictory notion – that the seeming incompleteness of the comics form actually serves to clarify meaning – Töpffer identified two key, arguably interrelated, aspects of the form that seemed to work in tension in order to construct this effect; speed and precision. Töpffer wrote about graphic storytelling explicitly in relation to practice. In order to rehearse speed he advocated "doing daily sketches [...] the briskness that does damage to the forms and also skips over the details works better than the cautious ability of politely filling the forms by marking in the details" (29). In recognising that more detail or precision does not necessarily improve the creation, Töpffer's speed-precision tension underscores the intractable relationship between storytelling and form as subjective, aesthetic and contextual. The reader's connection to the characters and events on the page are integral to the creation of humour. Capturing the most appropriate balance between embellishment through minutiae and driving the narrative forward is essential to maintaining the reader's engagement.

- 23 In many ways the nature of matchstick-type-men such as Tin-Can Tommy is significant for negotiating the speed-precision tension. These characters are already a sort of abbreviation of a whole, with lines instead of limbs; their movements and actions embody gesture and energy rather than meticulous features. However, unlike gag strips where the final panel strives for a punchline, the space that these longer strips have to construct relationships and interaction, empathy and care, mean that the lines and circles depicting the character, are also weighted with the reader's emotional relationship with the character. As Jared Gardner states in *Projections: Comics and the History of Twenty First Century Storytelling*, "It is not surprising that it is often the flattest of characters in serial literature that produce the greatest emotional response on the part of the readers: after all, flat characters *require* an active readership to "bring to life," and serial publication provides the space in which such a readership has (enforced) time to collaborate." (57)
- 24 The following example illustrates how flatness in characters, particularly in "Tin-Can Tommy", is filled in, enriched and complicated, through narrative. In this strip from No. 23 December 31 1938, whilst out hill-walking with his parents, inspired by a film he has seen at the cinema, Tommy braves mountaineering with neither skill nor safety rope. The inevitable consequence, predictable because of the nature of the strip, is not pure laughter though. The slapstick of the action is weighted with Tommy's desires to become a complete boy, like any other child, by trying out things he has never done before, taking risks he perhaps shouldn't take in order to prove what he is capable of. The humour is burdened with the tragedy of Tommy's parents' loss of a child, a loss which they seemingly have to relive every week as Tommy is repeatedly left in pieces. The emotionally complex backstory surfaces in this particular strip in how Tommy's parents' relationship is altered by his fall. The transition is sudden, from a cosy picnic position of togetherness in panel 5, to sitting as far out to either side of the panel as they can be, on either side of a void into which the pieces of their son smash. In the context of this comic strip we are reassured by the knowledge his father will fix him. The sad backstory served to amplify the joy felt by the reader on the rare occasions when Tin-Can Tommy manages to remain complete at the end of the strip. The

laughter in these strips, rather than having the independence of a gag, is humour bound with our relationship with these characters and their incomplete desires, which we can hope they might be able to fulfil in next week's instalment. The incompleteness motivates the reader to return the following week and see that the pieces have been put back together, a device of unfinished-ness which not only shapes the final panels but which pervades the whole nature of these narratives.

Figure 2. Tommy's Fall. Final sequence of "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy" from *The Beano Comic* No. 23 December 31, 1938.

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Illogicality: socially acceptable laughter at violence

- 25 The relationship between the characters and the audience, specifically through constructions of empathy, directly impact the quality of laughter. As Louise Peacock's *Slapstick and Comedy Performance* (2014) so carefully unpacks, the relationship between physical performance, humour and pain is fundamentally embodied and emotional:

If we empathise too strongly with the victim we will be too engaged in feelings of sympathy and in imagining how the pain might feel to be able to laugh. If we do not care at all about the characters we may not continue to watch long enough to witness the slapstick punishments they suffer or inflict. [...] This notion of empathy is, of course, closely related to decisions that we make about morality and deservedness. This is, perhaps, the most powerful single element in governing whether or not we laugh. (172)

- 26 With this in mind, the ways in which gag strips construct and undermine the perceptions of the reader relates not only to the substance of the gag, and the manipulation of the formula of the strip; it also connects to the ways in which characterisation is able to establish an appropriately intimate distance, through which a compassionate and yet suitably detached relationship to the reader is formed before the strip reaches its punchline.

- 27 Peacock's study focuses on how adults receive slapstick, thus paying attention to the ways in which adults are able to let go of their moral restrictions in order to allow themselves to laugh at suffering. Whilst it is the moral concerns of adult audiences which may mute laughter when witnessing performances of pain for humour, children harbour less conflicted inhibitions about laughing at the slapstick suffering of others. They rather laugh, Peacock argues, "instinctively"; "we become accustomed whilst very young to laughing at trips, falls and hits of all kinds." (169) However his notion of the un-sentimentalised laughter of children at funny comics seems at odds with the abovementioned necessity for empathy. There might be some truth in that children will always laugh more quickly than adults at slapstick, unhampered (through lack of knowledge rather than ability) as younger children are by the momentary checking thought of a wider moral consciousness that adults must negotiate; thinking 'is it alright to laugh now?' However, children also construct relationships differently from adults, establishing emotional bonds and alliances more quickly (Ross and Conant). The complex social negotiation that 'allows' laughter at the suffering of others also serves to construct an important empathetic relationship between child readers and characters in humorous comics, provoking laughter *because we care*. In some ways, this investigation rather turns Peacock's work upside-down. Rather than exploring how separation and distance 'allows' laughter, the focus here is on how comics characterisation constructs empathy through intimacy and association in order to embolden children's laughter.
- 28 The visual simplicity of characters is not necessarily relative to their potential for complexity. 'Understanding the Matchstick Man Aesthetic and Narrative Properties of a Hybrid Picturebook Character' traces a previously undocumented history of matchstick men in picture books, since the 1920s, suggesting the trend was most popular in Europe in the first half of the century (Kümmerling-Meibauer). This history frames the development of the matchstick man aesthetic as coinciding with the development of the British market for humorous comics specifically for children. Tin-Can Tommy takes the form of, to use Kümmerling-Meibauer's definitions, a spherical man. He has a round head and body, but his limbs are simply lines suggestive of the versatile matchstick man, although specifically for Tommy they are spirals, evocative of springs and so in keeping with his clockwork body. Feasibly, Tin-Can Tommy might be considered an 'in-between' form, not a stick man and not a full character either.

Figure 3. Title Banner. "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy" from *The Beano Comic* No. 15 November 5, 1938.

© Image courtesy of The British Library and copyright of DC Thomson & Co Ltd.

- 29 The premise of the "Tin-Can Tommy" strip is efficiently summarised by the two illustrations that frame the title banner; Tommy's adventures repeatedly lead him into trouble, during which the vulnerability of his body is emphasised by the resulting total mutilation of it. Framed in a humorous strip, this motif is an exaggeration of popular

comedy slapstick. Unlike actor-performed slapstick, where the skill of the acrobatic artist constructs an illusion of the 'slap' moment, with comics, as with puppets such as Punch and Judy, knowing that the characters feel no pain affords a space in which their 'slap' moment can depict extreme violence relatively harmlessly. The extent to which this violence can be performed, and yet remain within the bounds of the joke, can be seen for example in this strip from No. 15 (November 1938). The innocent Tommy, inspired by the wonder of fireworks on Guy Fawkes night, raids his piggy-bank in order to be able to test fireworks fun for himself. For a modern reader perhaps the humour is overshadowed by how dangerous this scenario might sound, but in the context of an era where it was normal for children to collect money in the community to spend on fireworks, Tommy's character is only testing out what would be considered normal child behaviour. The construction of the strip however makes the assumption that Tin-Can Tommy will predictably 'get it wrong', and through his error provoke laughter.

30 Setting off rockets at a passing marching military parade lights the inevitable fuse. The fun lasts whilst the soldiers "howl and roar", "dance and skip". The boundary for acceptable fun however is crossed when the Captain is drawn into the fray. Playfulness is tolerable here as long as authority figures are not undermined. The angry, sword-wielding officer literally dismembers Tommy as punishment. The extremely graphic image of "chopped up" Tommy is, however, reassuringly subdued by the text underneath which assures us that the character will be reconstructed by his father in time for next week's strip. It seems worth detailing that Professor Lee is also shown in the background of the final panel, in despair clasping his head at the sight of his broken 'son'. This appearance comes rather abruptly, as he does not otherwise appear in this particular strip, and his inclusion therefore is perhaps an explanation aimed at the non-literate reader. Doubling of the explanatory content from the image into the captions was the common, standard device for the strip format for children's comics in this period, ensuring that the image clarified the text and the text clarified the image. It was not unusual for the editor, author or artist of stories to also appear overtly in the strips, as here where the third-person *knowing* narrator addresses the reader as "you". The total destruction of Tommy in this sequence leaves him powerless and therefore voiceless. The invitation to come back next week, where all will be restored, plays into the nature of this form of entertainment where the laughter raised by the disastrous ending, is just one possible ending of many and not a grand finale. Although the formula of the comic shows Tommy in pieces in the final panel, the mode of slapstick ensures this is a harmless, humorous performance of destruction, and the reader knows that he will appear whole again the following week.

31 In order to understand the humour associated with this kind of caricature and the breaking apart of bodies, it is helpful to trace the trope back to Victorian literature. In his chapter on 'Brutal Buffoonery and Clown Atrocity: Dickens's Pantomime Violence', Jonathan Buckmaster aligns Charles Dickens's (1812-1870) verbal caricature with George Cruikshank's illustrations (1792-1878), positing that humorous dismemberment "is both about invincibility and about blurring the boundary between things and humans" (58). With these associations in mind, broken bodies represent boundaries and possibilities, ideas associated with the, as yet incomplete, exploration of human potential. To exemplify this idea, I will further consider the fireworks strip recounted above. The dramatic show of violence the Captain displays in chopping up Tommy is significantly out of scale in relation to the event that sparked it. By drawing the Captain

into the fun of fireworks, Tommy undermines the authority and status afforded by his position. That a little boy in the spirit of playfulness can destabilise the Captain's command and break his illusion of invincibility, emphasises the fragility of his character. The exaggerated way in which Tommy is chopped up reinforces the Captain's loss of control, both physically and socially. Whilst the reader knows that Tommy will be restored to health again by next week, the greater commentary in the strip, of authority as powerful and yet brittle and vulnerable, is less easily reconciled.

Incomplete: conversations about late 1930s popular children's culture

- 32 The trope of the matchstick figure first drawn by a human character and then magically coming alive is a very familiar one. Kümmerling-Meibauer's investigation offers several examples of stories where, "the second-order matchstick man turns into a first-order matchstick man when it comes alive and functions as protagonist of the story" (146). The freedom this creates, crossing boundaries between the plausible and the implausible, enables a non-human character to embody a human-ish existence, to engage with the real emotions of experience whilst remaining free to play on the border between reality and fantasy. By bearing witness to their moment of animation, the reader is encouraged to become emotionally invested in the experiences of the 'innocent'. Their moment of 'birth' presents the character as vulnerable and naive in a 'knowing' world, provoking the reader's empathy towards the character. Perhaps then, it is no coincidence that "Tin-Can Tommy" echoes this same trope, although drawing from the much older Pinocchio³ narrative of created and animated children wishing to become 'real'. In this 1938 version however, the husband creates a tin child in response to his wife's unending grief at the loss of their son. In drawing from the Pinocchio trope, the narrative quickly becomes a familiar, enriched story – a kind of shortcut for accessing the emotions associated with familial love and the contemporary status of children as adorable, burdensome troublemakers who learn through trial and error – although it is mostly the error which provides the fuel for the comedy. Tommy's parents are strongly caricatured and consequently flat; for example, the egg-shaped head of Professor Lee suggests his intelligence defines him, whilst sentiment defines his wife. Her arguably melodramatic, emotional extremes range from inconsolably tearful at first to later jumping for joy. In contrast, Tommy is described as "chock-full of life", prioritising his animated state as complex, rich with potential, despite his newly-born, and thus naive, unfinished status. Tommy is like the first-order protagonist matchstick men who come to life, who are endearing and 'cute' characters whom we quickly feel drawn to because of their blundering failures in contrast to our experience and knowledge.
- 33 Whether Pinocchio, a matchstick man, Frankenstein's Monster or Tin-Can Tommy, characters brought to life are effectively transported suddenly into an unfamiliar context. This serves to draw attention to their ignorance in contrast to the socially normative constructs and interactions that the audience or reader is so familiar with that they take them for granted. Tommy's lack of knowledge as he enters the wider world with its existing ideas, beliefs and assumptions creates unlimited humorous conflicts, and this provides the intrigue for each new weekly strip. The potential for a child's uncertainty in facing the world became an increasingly pertinent trope as

Britain went to war in 1939. "Tin-Can Tommy" continued to grace the back cover of *Beano*. However, as the war progressed, Tommy, as many of the other comic characters, and the child readers, was expected to change and grow up. Within just a few years Tommy's character changed quite significantly. He became a more empowered and capable character, who fell to pieces less often. He was also supported and accompanied by other clockwork friends. Perhaps as a consequence of the prolonged period of war, moments of chaos, social breakdown of structure and order and disembodied young men probably became less funny and rather more an everyday reality. The very same qualities of incompleteness of format discussed in this paper enabled "Tin-Can Tommy" to adapt and change, and it became one of the most overtly propagandistic humour strips in *Beano* throughout the war. Although the strip was discontinued in 1947, to make way for later evolutions of humour strips, this analysis uses Tin-Can Tommy as a particularly pertinent example to illuminate how humour comics are continually in a process of negotiation and change, incessantly redefining the relationship among format, character, narrative and humour.

Figure 4. Tommy's Parents. First panel of "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy" from *The Beano Comic* No. 1 July 30. 1938.

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NOTES

1. For clarity, this paper uses "Tin-Can Tommy" to refer to the strip and the name Tin-Can Tommy without quotations marks when denoting the character.
2. Suggestions for further reading on this dynamic include Smolderen's chapter on "Graffiti and Little Doodle Men" (25–34), Katherine Hart on caricature (Rosenthal 76–103), or Theodor Adorno on aesthetic montage (45–61).
3. *The Story of a Puppet* by Carlo Collodi was first published serially in 1881–2 in the children's weekly *Giornale per i bambini*, before being published as *The Adventures of Pinocchio* in 1883

ABSTRACTS

This article explores the format and construct of longer humorous comics strips through the close analysis of "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy" from D C Thomson's *The Beano* Comic, a publication aimed at children and launched in 1938. This study of one specific strip argues that the use a seriality somewhere between open-ended and discontinuous, continual fluctuations between flat and round characterisation and a style wavering between completeness and expressivity constructs an aesthetic of incompleteness which is essentiel in the creation of humour. Following investigation of the ways in which this particular format constructs funniness as a process of continual negotiation, specifically through the use of exaggeration, asymmetry, dissatisfaction and imbalance, the article concludes that a quality of unfinished-ness is integral to the relationship these comics create with their readers, and therefore fundamental to laughter.

Cet article explore le format et la construction de bandes dessinées humoristiques dans *The Beano*, publication pour la jeunesse lancée en 1938, à travers la lecture rapprochée de "Tin-Can Tommy The Clockwork Boy". Cette analyse d'un titre avance que la tension sérielle entre ouverture et discontinuité, les fluctuations continues entre personnages 'simples' (flats) et 'complexes' (round) participent d'une esthétique de l'inachevé au service d'un propos humoristique. L'article examine ce rapport entre format et humour par l'étude du processus de négociation continue et de l'usage de l'exagération, de l'asymétrie, de l'insatisfaction et du déséquilibre, et sur cette base propose que cette donnée de l'inachevé constitue un aspect essentiel de la relation que ces bandes dessinées créent avec leurs lecteurs, et donc fondamental pour la construction de l'humour.

INDEX

Keywords: gag strips, seriality, subjectivized objectivation, catch-phrase, knowingness, hybrid characters, matchstick-men, slapstick, Pinocchio, Bushmiller (Ernie)

Mots-clés: gag, sérialité, objectivation subjectivée, accroches, savoir-faire, personnages hybrides, bonhomme, slapstick, Pinocchio, Bushmiller (Ernie)

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Dona Pursall's PhD research explores childhood and identity through the development of British 'funnies', particularly in relation to times of socio-political unrest. Her thesis challenges the critical methodology for humorous comics and comics representations. Her work is embedded in the wider aims of the ERC project Children in Comics: An Intercultural History (1865-) based at Ghent University, Belgium. As a teacher with over fifteen years of classroom experience Dona is especially interested in children's reading experience. Her Master's degree explored young adult readers and notions of identity and consumerism within vampire fiction. She recently published on the history of British children's comics and naughtiness on the Henry Jenkins weblog, and on friendship and social, emotional learning in schools and comics in *Studies in Comics* (11.1) <https://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/intellect/stic/2020/00000011/00000001/art0000>