For British Eyes Only:
Arrested Development and Neo-Victorian Television Comedy

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Abstract:
Stumbling upon Victorian adaptations in modern television drama is a routine affair. Locating references and allusions in television comedy, however, is another matter, in great part because the nineteenth century's best humour is often contained within its dramatic plots. Thus, turning to a critically acclaimed example of television comedy vérité demonstrates how Victorian themes – both comic and dramatic – can be re-imagined for laughter. Often explicitly Dickensian, *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013, 2018) presents a particularly useful case to define the elements of neo-Victorian comedy. Centred on the Bluths, whose dysfunctional dynamic echoes several Dickensian families, *Arrested Development* consistently mines Victorian themes for its humour, demonstrating that contemporary comedy relies on nineteenth-century interests.

Keywords: *Arrested Development*, class, comedy, Charles Dickens, disability, humour, *Little Dorrit*.

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> It was the best of times, it was the blurst of times.
> —*The Simpsons* (Kirkland, Kogen, and Wolodarsky 1993: 13:13-13:16)

During a tour of his sprawling mansion, C. Montgomery Burns, the cruel and decrepit power-plant magnate of *The Simpsons* (1987-present), shows Homer "one-thousand monkeys working at one-thousand typewriters" and boasts that "Soon they'll have written the greatest novel known to man" (Kirkland, Kogen, and Wolodarsky 1993: 13:04-13:10). The manuscript that Mr Burns randomly chooses, however, has instead corrupted the famous opening line of Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). Mr Burns evidently wishes to test the 'infinite monkey theorem', which stipulates that, given unlimited time, a monkey's random keyboard strokes would produce the complete works of Shakespeare. That the monkey can only produce a defective copy of one of the "greatest novel[s] known to man" suggests an

anxiety of influence – anticipating the resigned concession of a 2002 *South Park* (1997-present) episode entitled 'The Simpsons Already Did It'. Indeed, *The Simpsons* abounds in direct Dickensian allusions, which signal the series' profound debts to the inimitable Victorian author.[1]

Tracing elements of Dickens's craft in modern dramatic television is a rather straightforward exercise, due primarily to the "ubiquitous presence of his work in multiple media" (Kaplan 2011: 81).[2] The Dickensian features of *The Wire* (2002-2008) have received the most critical attention, prompting not only contentious debates among bloggers, but also attempts at adapted serialisation. Creator David Simon appears to have encouraged the comparison, titling a fifth-season episode 'The Dickensian Aspect' (2008).[3] Finding evidence of Dickens's influence on television comedy is another matter. The absence of scholarship on the subject is the consequence of a similar lack regarding its historical referent. For Victorian comedy – outside of the overt examples in the plays of Oscar Wilde and Weedon Grossmith or in the works of Edward Lear and Jerome K. Jerome – remains nebulous, perhaps because its best examples are woven into the realistic plots of such novelists as Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray. For this reason, it is fitting to turn to the recent trend of comedy vérité in television, where humour arises in real-world environments. This essay will attempt to articulate the defining elements of neo-Victorian televisual humour through an analysis of a pioneering example of comedy vérité – *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013, 2018). For rather than turning to the comedic aspects of neo-Victorian drama – which include the Dowager Countess's quips in *Downton Abbey* (2010-2015) and Holmes's banter in *Sherlock* (2010-present) and *Elementary* (2012-present) – this essay will locate neo-Victorian elements in a television comedy that appears to be confined to its modern context. Doing so demonstrates that neo-Victorian humour extends widely and is not confined to aesthetic products that are already outwardly Victorian in nature.

Mitchell Hurwitz's portrait of the Bluth family is sometimes explicitly drawn from some of Dickens's outrageous families, and one can trace 'arrested development' in any number of Dickensian characters, including Nell Trent, Tiny Tim, and Miss Havisham. Christian Gutleben argues that the pervasive "recourse" to humour in neo-Victorian Gothic texts "constitutes a distancing device meant to assert an anti-nostalgic stance" (Gutleben 2012: 303). The genre of neo-Victorian humour operates

similarly, but with the added touch of debt to its nineteenth-century antecedents. While parodying the alleged seriousness of the nineteenth century, neo-Victorian humour simultaneously draws on the century's comic conventions, with the result that it develops an "antagonistic self-differentiation *from* and affiliative identification *with* the era" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 1). This blend of homage and parody of the nineteenth century ripples beneath the surface of *Arrested Development*'s outwardly modern concerns – the exigencies of the inaugural years of the twenty-first century. In other words, for all its overt attention to the bankrupt businesses and warrantless wars that defined the early 2000s, *Arrested Development* remains obsessed with Victoriana, and is particularly fixated on Dickens, the nineteenth century's "representative cultural emblem" (Joyce 2007: 141).

This essay argues that *Arrested Development*, while brimming with diverse pop-culture references, relies most on Dickensian themes, scenes, and characters to construct its complex humour. Dickens's novels, in other words, provide the foundation for *Arrested Development*'s irreverent comic voice. Significantly, however, this neo-Victorian television comedy is not limited to adapting comic tropes; rather, *Arrested Development* fixates on a broad spectrum of Dickensian subjects, both comic and dramatic, to demonstrate that humour can be mined from the nineteenth century's sincerest subjects. Ultimately, *Arrested Development* functions "to re-fresh and re-vitalise the importance" of Dickens's work "to the here and now" (Llewellyn 2008: 170-171). Drawing humour from themes that continue to link the Victorian period to the present, including familial dysfunction and class concerns, *Arrested Development* also reinvigorates more troubling Dickensian tropes, such as disability, as a source for laughter. In so doing, it gives dehumanising subjects "new life", as Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben argue, "keeping them in cultural circulation" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 2).

1. "It's so good to laugh again!": Humour Developed

Theories of humour generally fall into the three fluid categories delineated by D. H. Monro in *The Argument of Laugher* (1963) – superiority, incongruity, and relief. One may trace the first to Aristotle (384-322 BC), who writes that comedy is an "imitation of men worse than average, [. . .] but only as regards one particular kind of the Ridiculous, which is a species

of the Ugly" (Aristotle 1920: 33). Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) followed this line of thought, defining laughter as a "sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes 1991: 10). Incongruity theories of humour, Monro asserts, began with Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who argues that laughter "*arise[s] from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (Kant 2005: 135; original italics). Humour develops in this regard when our established notions about the world are challenged, inverted, or dispelled. Finally, relief humour posits that the subject turns to laughter for release from social or psychic constraints. Given *Arrested Development*'s obsession with all things oedipal, it is fitting to pause, however briefly, on Sigmund Freud's concept of humour as release and/or relief.

Freud distinguishes between wit and humour in two separate texts – *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1916) and 'Humour' (1928). For Freud, the process of "wit-work" resembles "dream-work" in that both reveal repressed desires that are submerged in the unconscious (Freud 1916: 249). There are two types of wit – harmless and aggressive/obscene. The latter, which Freud also calls "tendency-wit", allows repressed pleasures to emerge from the unconscious: "*wit affords us the means of surmounting restrictions and of opening up otherwise inaccessible pleasure sources*" (Freud 1916: 150; original italics). Wit allows the subject to challenge the authority of the superego, which draws its power from the moral agents of law and religion. Freud also sets up a hierarchy of wit, beginning with harmless word play, moving into the joke, and culminating with tendency-wit, which is used by subjects who have a "powerful sadistical component in their sexuality" (Freud 1916: 214). Humour resembles wit because it also "has in it a *liberating* element", which is fundamentally rebellious, and represents the "triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure-principle" (Freud 1928: 2-3). The difference between the two, however, is that humour possesses "dignity" in its role to "evad[e] the compulsion to suffer" (Freud 1928: 3). Whereas wit arises from the unconscious and challenges authority, humour is a product of the superego meant to "comfort the ego [. . .] and to protect it from suffering" (Freud 1928: 6). Regardless, both modes offer catharsis for the subject, who is able either to release repressions or to find relief from constraining forces.

One other concept of humour is worth noting, because it elucidates the comedy of *Arrested Development*. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that the "characteristic trait of laughter" in the Renaissance "was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning" (Bakhtin 1984: 71). Humour, in this sense, is neither degrading nor aggressive, but rather generative – a positive force that restores and elevates. *Arrested Development*'s humour also resembles Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, in which the "vast and manifold literature of parody" straddles the "borderline between art and life" (Bakhtin 1984: 4, 7). Season four of *Arrested Development* begins at a dockside celebration for "Cinco de Cuatro", where the Bluths, both individually and collectively, fall to their lowest point (Hurwitz and Miller 2013: 00:16-00:17). For the carnival marks the "suspension of all hierarchical precedence" (Bakhtin 1984: 10). The Bluths finally descend to the level of the common, following three seasons of ignoring their changed roles in a developing world. Bakhtin concludes that "festive folk laughter [. . .] means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (Bakhtin 1984: 92). Perhaps the Bluths have experienced their "second life, organised on the basis of laughter" (Bakhtin 1984: 8), and may finally be free to develop.

2. "I'm out of this family": The Bluths

Mitchell Hurwitz has revealed that he borrowed the idea for the Bluth family's structure from a "paradigm that exists: matriarch, patriarch, craftsman, and clown" (Hurwitz qtd. in Robertson 2005: par. 19).[4] The Bluth siblings occupy these categories: Lindsay, the flighty sexpot; Michael, the gullible everyman; Buster, the perpetual schoolboy; and Gob, the blundering magician. *Arrested Development* also follows the mode of 'New Comedy' outlined by Northrop Frye, which "presents an erotic intrigue between a young man and a young woman which is blocked by some kind of opposition, usually paternal, and resolved by a twist in the plot" (Frye 1957: 44).[5] Relationships frequently rise and fall in *Arrested Development*, especially for the siblings. Parental pressures make stable romance impossible for every character in the series, and these characters pass their own insecurities onto their children. Michael's son, George Michael, for example, embarks on a relatively healthy relationship with Ann Veal, the daughter of a local pastor. Yet no one can remember her name ("egg",

"plant", "bland"), and Michael especially thinks her ("Her?") unfit for his son. Unable to see the romantic connection between the cousins, Michael unintentionally encourages incest: "Do not be afraid to ride her. Hard" (Russo, Hurwitz, and Levenstein 2003b: 5:37-5:40).

The best example of Frye's New Comedy definition, however, is the ever-budding, Sam-and-Diane relationship between George Michael and Maeby Fünke. Although cousins, they nevertheless engage in several awkward kisses, which, following a night of non-alcoholic wine, round off at "second base" (Fortenberry, Hurwitz, and Day 2006: 00:54). Nevertheless, they are always thwarted from moving forward, primarily because they are interrupted by paternal figures (Michael, Tobias, the Veal family's fundamentalist faith, and even Steve Holt, who *is* Maeby's cousin). The third-season twist, hinted at frequently, is that Lindsay was adopted, and thus George Michael and Maeby are freed from social and biological constraints. Hurwitz plays with the formula, however, choosing to keep the pair separate, for ultimately the taboo (expressed in George Michael's fascination with the fake film *Les Cousins Dangereux*) was the relationship's only intrigue. Frye writes that the "*cognito* in comedy, in which the characters find out who their relatives are, and who is left of the opposite sex not a relative, and hence available for marriage, is one of the features of comedy that have never changed much" (Frye 1957: 170). This formula is also a fixture of nineteenth-century literature, especially Gothic novels. Michel Foucault writes that "since the eighteenth century the family has become an obligatory locus of affects, feelings, love; [. . .] for this reason sexuality is 'incestuous' from the start" (Foucault 1978: 108-109). What the nineteenth-century Gothic took seriously, however, neo-Victorian sources have taken comically. Indeed, *Arrested Development* refuses to discard its incest humour. The news of Lindsay being adopted prompts Gob immediately to make sexual advances towards her, although she has been his sister for decades.

For all the ways that *Arrested Development* confirms the relationship formula of New Comedy, it also seamlessly parallels the other elements of Frye's definition. In comedy, Frye argues, the "hero himself is seldom a very interesting person", and instead is "ordinary in his virtues, but socially attractive" (Frye 1957: 44). Michael Bluth is just this sort of character, a fixed point around which the show's tumult revolves. The other family members are what Frye would call "blocking characters", who "stand in the

way of the action" (Frye 1957: 167). Michael's family repeatedly thwarts his good intentions, the plans he concocts for saving the company. As Frye points out, the model of a dull protagonist surrounded by a bevy of eccentric characters is a staple of the Victorian novel. Dickens, especially in his later novels, relies on this pattern: Paul Dombey Sr of *Dombey and Son* (1846-1848), Arthur Clennam of *Little Dorrit* (1855-1857), and John Harmon/Rokesmith of *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865) are all relatively uninteresting protagonists, who interact with some of Dickens's most memorably peculiar characters. Fittingly, John Carey notes that Dickens's "hypocrites are the prime beneficiaries of his inventive genius. The heroes and heroines have no imagination" (Carey 1973: 64). Although Hurwitz and his writing partners follow this Dickensian pattern in the first three seasons of *Arrested Development*, they depart from the path in season four, transforming Michael into yet another blocking character. Critics have not been kind to this change in comic structure. Yet we might observe how season four, in abandoning its solid centre, resembles Dickens's earlier work, such as *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-1837) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844). These novels are grounded in the picaresque tradition, in which we follow the adventures of an appealing rogue. Season-four Michael transforms into just such a rogue.

3. "Forget-Me-Now": *Arrested Development* and *Little Dorrit*

Season three of *Arrested Development* represents the series at its most neo-Victorian, obsessed with all things British.[6] Perhaps the most explicit Victorian allusion in the series, however, arrives through its potentially direct references to Dickens's *Little Dorrit*. A season-three subplot – set in the fictional "Wee Britain" section of Orange County – features not only mix-ups over the acronym "Mr F", but also "Forget-Me-Now" pills, both of which appear specifically to refer to *Little Dorrit*, a novel with its own Mr F and mysterious acronym "D. N. F." (Do Not Forget). What is more, both *Arrested Development* and *Little Dorrit* not only concern the collapse, both figuratively and literally, of the family houses, but also rely on the "one son who had no choice but to keep them all together" (opening credits).

One of the principal settings in the first season of *Arrested Development* is the prison where George Sr is incarcerated. As with the Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit*, however, the prison system in *Arrested Development* is decidedly unthreatening (with the exception of when Gob is

shivved by White Power Bill). Inmates and guests have unlimited access to ice-cream sandwiches, and the only rule seems to be 'No touching!'. In Dickens's novel, William Dorrit, suffering from insurmountable debts, becomes a perpetual inmate at the Marshalsea prison, where his benevolent attitude and interminable residence gain him the moniker "Father of the Marshalsea" (Dickens 2003: 72). The prison operates as a place of learning, business, and recreation; its inmates are collegians rather than prisoners, and outsiders may visit whenever they choose. In *Arrested Development*, George Sr similarly becomes the prison's 'teacher', recording spiritual self-help videos. As with George Sr, William Dorrit "was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out" (Dickens 2003: 79). The prison in *Arrested Development* offers George Sr a sanctuary from both his legal troubles and his family. In several instances, he begs to return to prison, especially when falling into the amorous or injurious clutches of his wife, Lucille.

In *Little Dorrit*, Arthur Clennam returns to London after the death of his father. His unwillingness to become reacquainted with his family's affairs parallels one of the central conceits of *Arrested Development* – Michael Bluth's vacillating investment in his family's wellbeing. In *Little Dorrit*, Arthur remarks, "You have anticipated, mother, that I decide, for my part, to abandon the business. I have done with it. I will not take upon myself to advise you" (Dickens 2003: 61). Yet Arthur finds himself drawn back in: the deceptive villain Rigaud attempts to blackmail Arthur's mother with knowledge of the real terms of the Clennam family inheritance. Similarly, the pilot episode of *Arrested Development* begins with Michael disowning his family after being denied the company's presidency. By the episode's conclusion, however, Michael comes to realise that his family cannot survive without him, and – as with Arthur Clennam – he must pick up the pieces to solve his family's many financial and filial mysteries.

Near the conclusion of *Little Dorrit*, Rigaud dies in the Clennam house as it spontaneously crumbles to the ground. The "high-cost, low-quality" Bluth model home is similarly shoddy to the point that it begins to sink into the desert sands (Russo and Copeland 2003a: 3:35-3:38). As with the Clennam house, which deteriorates and crumbles as a symbolic sentence for its sordid history and malevolent final occupant, the Bluth house appears to collapse during scandalous affairs: the living room sinks most dramatically when George Michael and Maeby begin kissing on the couch.

In this case, however, the Bluth home most resembles the titular edifice of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), which bifurcates and sinks following generations of unchecked sibling incest. Although the potential connections between the animated houses are tempting, they seem almost insignificant when compared to the ominous acronym that *Little Dorrit* and *Arrested Development* share.

In *Little Dorrit*, Arthur's father ensures that his watch is sent to his estranged wife following his death. The watch contains the engraving D. N. F. for "Do Not Forget", meant to remind Mrs Clennam of her misdeeds concerning Arthur's real mother. Actually the child of his father and a since-deceased actress, Arthur is not in line for an inheritance, which in fact passes to Frederick Dorrit and finally to his niece, Amy. In contrast, Gob's "Forget-Me-Now" pills in *Arrested Development* are not so mysterious: "They're pills that create a sort of temporary forgettingness" (Amodeo and Saunders 2005: 14:10-14:12). Yet Gob is unwilling to accept – even at the urging of Tobias – that the pills are, in fact, roofies. He takes them in dangerous, addictive amounts in order to forget not only embarrassing sexual encounters, but also family secrets. Whereas *Little Dorrit* fixates on remembering, piecing together clues to restore past claims, much of *Arrested Development* concerns forgetting, with the result that history repeats. Edwin Demper observes that the Bluths' "apparent financial descent is actually a state of stability, where crisis is the natural state" (Demper 2015: 9). Any time that the Bluths move forward, they ultimately pull themselves back. If the Victorian period was the age of progress, then the twenty-first century, at least for families like the Bluths, is one of inertia. Time after time, the Bluths end up either dispersed around the model home or huddled inside Lucille's apartment, having neither learned their lesson nor faced any significant punishment. Whereas the rich are often humbled in Dickens's world, they perpetually spring back to homeostasis in *Arrested Development*.

One final connection between *Arrested Development* and *Little Dorrit* is crucial to note, for it may signal the series' most explicit Dickensian allusion. In *Little Dorrit*, Arthur begrudgingly reconnects with his ex-fiancée, Flora Finching, an exasperating, but ultimately compassionate figure, who is past her prime. She had been married since her break-up with Arthur, but her husband, referred to as Mr F, has since died. Flora is habitually accompanied by Mr F's Aunt, who maintains a stubborn

antagonism toward Arthur. They talk of Mr F a great deal, and his portrait looms above them ominously, but he remains a mysterious figure in the novel. In *Arrested Development*, George Sr reveals that he is being tracked by "nefarious Brits" (Fortenberry, Hurwitz, and Day 2005: 14:53) In an attempt to find someone who can access British housing records, Michael ventures into 'Wee Britain', and meets Rita Leeds at the Yellowfang Pub. The main street of Wee Britain is filled with visual gags, ranging from a flying 'Mary Poppuns' to a red double-decker bus. Michael begins a romantic relationship with Rita, whose beauty (via plastic surgery) masks her strange mannerisms. Michael becomes aware that he is being followed by Mr F, whom he assumes is a British spy. Rita wears a bracelet, similar to the watch in *Little Dorrit*, with the initials, M. R. F., which furthers Michael's suspicions. As it turns out, Rita is heir to the property of Wee Britain, and the man shadowing Michael is her uncle and caretaker, Trevor. Rita's parents were cousins, and the inbreeding caused her to be an 'M. R. F.' or Mentally Retarded Female.[7] As with the other depictions of disability in *Arrested Development*, Rita's intellectual impairment borders on the offensive. One may soften some of the insult, however, by speculating that Rita is yet another allusion to *Little Dorrit*, this time to Amy Dorrit's friend Maggy, who is twenty-eight, but mentally functions as a ten-year-old. Still, where Dickens locates pathos in Maggy's plight, using her as a metaphor for the economic and social stagnation of the debtor's prison, *Arrested Development*, perhaps unsuccessfully, squeezes humour out of Rita's impairment (the 'Wee Brain' of 'Wee Britain').

4. "*I'm Poor* magazine": Charity and Class

The methodology and morality of charity were prevailing themes in the Victorian period, prompting discussions that entered and consumed both aesthetic and political realms. Debates over philanthropic efforts abroad were especially contentious. Thomas Carlyle, for example, notoriously railed against monetary assistance that was directed to populations outside of Britain. "Reform, like Charity," he writes in *Past and Present* (1843), "must begin at home" (Carlyle 1999: 32). Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot were particularly concerned with the plight of the poor at home, especially the suffering of labouring women. No author, however, represented the struggles of the impoverished class with more despondent anger than Dickens. *Bleak House* (1852-1853) highlights the seemingly

inextricable predicament of the poor through both the lowly street-sweeper Jo and the starving family of the abusive brickmaker. Dickens directly juxtaposes the suffering of domestic citizens against the philanthropic efforts of Mrs Jellyby, who works indefatigably to aid the people of Africa, all the while ignoring the plight of those around her. Foreign philanthropy is only part of the problem, of course. Dickens's nouveau riche families, such as the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-1865), appear to inhabit a world entirely separate from the labouring classes. It is not so much that the Veneerings are uncharitable, but rather that they are unaware that the poor even exist.

Neo-Victorian humour introduces families much like the Veneerings to satirise the oblivious ignorance of the rich. *Another Period* (2015-present) is especially attuned to this sort of injustice, as the Bellacourt family – in a ruthless parody of *Downton Abbey* – treat their servants like livestock and props. (One character is known simply as 'Chair'.) However, *Arrested Development* was perhaps the first series to tap into the issue of charity for laughs. The hypocrisy of Lindsay Bluth's charitable efforts is a constant source of humour. She protests against childhood hunger (while eating to the point of being "stuffed"); advocates an anti-circumcision cause named HOOP ("Hands off Our Penises"), which draws the ire of the Jewish Defense League; attends a "neuter fest" for animals; and participates in a wetlands conservation project, during which she assumes that volunteers will "dry them" (Mottola and Adler 2003: 4:59).[8] The rest of the family is just as unprincipled. Always cognisant of re-varnishing their image, the Bluth family holds an annual charity event. Unable to think of an appropriate cause, however, they name the event TBA ('to be announced') on the invitations. Donations are unprecedented, and with no actual disease to fund, they pocket the money.

Kristen M. Distel observes that there is a "constant correlation between charitable actions and criminal behavior" in *Arrested Development* (Distel 2015: 23). Indeed, the "light treason" of the Bluth Company under the direction of George Sr triggers all of the show's events (Feig, Hurwitz, and Vallely 2004: 9:33). Model homes in Iraq, commissioned through an alleged partnership between the Bluths and Saddam Hussein, prompt US agencies to investigate. To evade suspicion, George spreads his assets to various locations – "There's always money in the banana stand" (Russo, Hurwitz, and Levenstein 2003b: 20:48-20:49) – but never to charity. When

rival builder Stan Sitwell proposes that one in 450 new homes be given to a disadvantaged family, Gob recoils in disgust: "So the other 449 families live in fear?" (Feig, Lilly, and Adler 2005b: 5:45-5:46). Neo-Victorian humour exhibits the rich in all their unrepentant, unconscionable glory, borrowing from Marxist concepts to highlight capitalism's unrelenting injustice. Like the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend*, the Bluths are all show, no substance. But the absurdity, as in Dickens's representations, is that they will never care. Gob's increasingly expensive suits and Tobias's parasitic hair-plugs are comic set pieces borrowed straight from the nineteenth-century page. Neo-Victorian humour restages the archetypes of Victorian social critique, demonstrating that contexts may change, but people will not.

5. "I'm a monster!": Disability as *Arrested Development*

Disabled characters feature prominently in Victorian novels. In general, they are represented to garner sympathy and respect far more than to prompt laughter or fear. In so doing, these novels combat what Lennard J. Davis has termed the "hegemony of normalcy" (Davis 2013: 10). Such characters as Quasimodo in Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831) and Philip Wakem in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) reveal the exceptional souls within abnormal bodies. In sensation fiction, especially, disability "disrupt[ed] a host of [. . .] binaries, generating shock, curiosity, and a sense of the uncanny" (Holmes and Mossman 2011: 494). Wilkie Collins's novels introduce many disabled characters who possess diverse physical and mental abnormalities. For Dickens, however, disability remained as much a sideshow as an everyday reality. For example, Jenny Wren, the benevolent doll's dressmaker in *Our Mutual Friend*, remains a comic figure, despite her narrative authority. Neo-Victorian texts typically challenge such representations, condemning the use of disability for comedic purposes. As Rosario Arias argues, neo-Victorian authors "critique and subvert nostalgic re-appropriations of Victorian England" through "diseased and disfigured individuals and families" (Arias 2011: 361). *Arrested Development*, by contrast, adopts a more Dickensian perspective to disability, finding humour in the functions of abnormal bodies. Thus, it joins other examples of neo-Victorian humour that "implicitly justify or beget violence by dehumanising particular groups or individuals" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2017: 4). Representations of disability in *Arrested Development*,

in other words, re-enact the Dickensian trope of abnormality eliciting laughter, thus promoting outmoded and offensive tropes to a new audience.

In a season-two act of defiance against his mother, Buster triumphs over his fear of open water, and enters the ocean. A nearby seal, ravenous for human blood after starring in and escaping from one of Gob's magic tricks, attacks him. Witnesses attempt to alert Buster by shouting "Loose Seal", but he understandably fails to heed their warnings (Leiner, Martin, and Vallely 2005: 21:05-21:06). The seal bites Buster's hand off, and from that point forward he utilises such prosthetics as a razor-sharp grabbing-hook and an inhumanly strong, oversized hand. Buster's affliction echoes several of Dickens's characters with wooden legs, who figure in *The Pickwick Papers*, *Martin Chuzzlewit*, *David Copperfield* (1849-1850), and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) – the latter being a novel that also features Joe Willet losing his arm during war.[9] The most appropriate Dickensian analogue to Buster, however, is *Dombey and Son*'s Captain Edward (Ned) Cuttle, who is described as a "gentleman in a wide suit of blue, with a hook instead of a hand attached to his right wrist" (Dickens 2002: 55). Yet Dickens highlights disability with the most energy in *Our Mutual Friend*. Silas Wegg is "so wooden a man that he seemed to have taken his wooden leg naturally", to the point that "he might be expected – if his development received no untimely check – to be completely set up with a pair of wooden legs in about six months" (Dickens 1985: 89). Dickens's use of the word "development" to describe Wegg's disability is worth noting. Almost invariably, Dickens's disabled characters are benevolent, suggesting that bodily loss results in personal gain. In contrast, Buster's impairment is yet another ingredient of his arrested development, rather than being the impetus for growth.

The second season of *Arrested Development* introduces yet another adaptation of a Dickensian disability via the character 'Uncle' Jack Dorso, who has lost the use of his legs and must be carried around by an assistant, Dragon. Jack routinely orders Dragon to "shake" his legs (Feig, Vallely, and Hurwitz 2005a: 10:48), which echoes the invalid Grandfather Smallweed in *Bleak House*, who forces his granddaughter Judy to "Shake me up" (Dickens 1977: 267, 333, 412). Each character, to use Dickens's words, is "like a broken puppet, […] a mere clothes-bag" (Dickens 1977: 259). Although the characters' physical disabilities are similar, their motivations are decidedly reversed. A veteran voice actor of 1940s radio productions,

Uncle Jack later became rich by opening a chain of gyms, where he continues to showcase his prodigious upper-body strength. Michael Bluth contacts Jack with the intention of obtaining money, and, following various exploits and misunderstandings, he succeeds. Smallweed, conversely, is a vicious moneylender, who drives George Rouncewell to bankruptcy, and enlists the malicious attorney Tulkinghorn to carry out his legal claims. In equally offensive representations, both Dickens and Hurwitz exploit paraplegia for humour, making the impaired body a sideshow, and suggesting that mobility for disabled subjects requires able bodies.[10]

6. "What connexion can there be?": Narrative Complexity

Dickens's third-person narrator in *Bleak House* famously pauses to muse over the "connexion" between so many characters "curiously brought together" (Dickens 1977: 197). The interminable Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit functions as the likeliest catalyst for the novel's interwoven relationships and coincidental run-ins. George Sr's shady business deals serve a similar function for the first three seasons of *Arrested Development*. Each character introduced in these seasons proves to be linked in some way to the Bluths' legal troubles. In *Little Dorrit*, the narrator mentions the "interweaving" of characters' stories, which reemphasises Dickens's prefatory metaphor concerning the novel's "various threads" (Dickens 2003: 5). In an interview previewing the fourth season of *Arrested Development*, David Cross (who plays Tobias Fünke) describes the writers' room in curiously reminiscent terms:

> You know the murder scene where they go to the psycho killer's apartment and he's got all this crazy s— mapped out? That's what it looked like. Post-it notes and index cards all across the three walls in this big conference room. Yarn stretching from one thing to another and pinned in one place, […] [a]nd then there's a different-colored yarn that intersects and weaves in. It took [Hurwitz] twenty-five minutes to explain what I was looking at. And I still didn't get everything. When you see that, of course it has to be a TV show. There's no way else to do this. (Cross qtd. in Snierson 2013: n.p.)

Cross is incorrect on his last point. The Victorian novel was the first venue that featured extraordinarily intricate plots. Indeed, the writing process for *Arrested Development* resembles Dickens's working notes, in which he mapped out in words and short phrases his elaborate narrative tapestries. This similarity is perhaps the most important link between Dickens's novels and modern television: the narrative complexity previously reserved for film and television drama is now a recognisable characteristic of television comedies. Hurwitz's other productions highlight this complexity, as well. *Lady Dynamite* (2016), for example, is equal parts challenging and rewarding for its persistent irreverence and elusive/illusive narrative flourishes.[11]

In the end, Hurwitz's shows demonstrate that neo-Victorian humour can best be identified by its narrative sophistication. The intricacies of neo-Victorian comic plots distance the genre from the rote productions that populate both primetime and streaming platforms. Dickens's novels provide a template for twenty-first-century television comedy, not only in terms of narrative complexity, but also in themes ranging from class to disability. *Arrested Development*, in particular, demonstrates that the same economic inequalities that Dickens excoriated in the nineteenth century remain relevant today. Twenty-first-century television provides a platform to exhibit and discuss these injustices in much the same way that the Victorian novel reached a wide, newly literate readership. Unfortunately, however, neo-Victorian adaptation sometimes means that potentially offensive subjects also reach a new audience. Drawing laughter from mental and physical disability is, regrettably, not beneath the dignity of either Victorian or neo-Victorian authors. *Arrested Development* demonstrates the endurance of Freud's "tendency-wit", drawing its power from undermining social rules and moral codes. Doing so, it eschews humour, which possesses a "dignity […] wholly lacking […] in wit" (Freud 1928: 3).

Notes

1. Among other references, Bart plays the role of "Gus, the lovable chimney sweep" (Moor and Vitti 1993: 12:41-12:43); the show's recurring consumptive orphans come straight from Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839); Lisa constructs an intricate diorama of the characters from *Oliver Twist*

(Kirkland and Scully 1994: 15:30-15:35); and Mr Burns, though implacably unrepentant, is a clear homage to Ebenezer Scrooge.

2. For more on Dickens's influence on modern television, see Romano 2003: 89-94.
3. Many other television series also warrant attention. Discussing the genre-shifting popularity of *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), for example, John Freeman observes that "critics were calling [David] Chase the Dickens of our times" (Freeman 2007: par. 2). For more on *The Wire* and Dickens, see Kaiser 2001: 45-70.
4. In a 2013 interview, Hurwitz remarks that season four of *Arrested Development* "is more like a novel" because its episodes were available to be "binge-watched" (Hurwitz qtd. in Paskin 2013: par. 5). The first three seasons, shown in weekly half-hour episodes, were more like short stories, Hurwitz asserts, whereas viewers of season four "don't [watch] it all at once. But you are in control of when you feel like going back to it" (Hurwitz qtd. in Paskin 2013: par. 7).
5. In 'Old Comedy', Frye notes, "the comic hero will get his triumph whether what he has done is sensible or silly, honest, or rascally" (Frye 1957: 43). This model fits better with programmes like *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), in which the titular protagonist escapes most scrapes with relative impunity. See, for example, 'The Opposite' (1994), in which Jerry realises: "It never fails. I always even out!" (Cherones, Cowan, David, and Seinfeld 1994: 11:40-11:41).
6. Season two features Mrs Featherbottom, Tobias's nanny alter-ego, who drives her Union Jack Mini Cooper on the left side of the road, forgetting that she is "in the colonies" (Russo, Adler, and Rosenstock [2005]: 17:30-17:33).
7. In Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, Eugene Wrayburn refers to "my respected father" as "M. R. F." (Dickens 1985: 192-193).
8. Lindsay is part of several other charities, including 'No More Meat', 'No More Fish', 'No More Meat and Fish', 'Protest the War', 'Graft v. Host', 'Right to Die', the 'Monkey Freedom Rally', 'Save a Tree', and 'Separation of Church and State'.
9. *Arrested Development* features at least two references to lost arms: J. Walter Weatherman, who teaches the Bluth siblings lessons, and Carl Weathers' character in *Predator* (1987), whose arm is ripped off by the titular alien.
10. *Arrested Development* routinely fails to represent disability favourably. In seasons one and two, Michael engages in a short tryst with Maggie Lizer, an allegedly blind and pregnant attorney, who is neither blind nor pregnant. In

addition, Tobias's hair-plugs become parasitic and impair his lower extremities, leading to offensive physical gags via his body and his wheelchair.

11. The star of *Lady Dynamite*, comedian Maria Bamford, describes her attempt at rewriting one of the episode's scripts: "It was just awful […] I put so many words in it. It was like a Charles Dickens novel" (Champagne 2016: par. 12).

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