

Welcome to Royston Vasey: Grotesque bodies and the horror of comedy in *The League of Gentlemen*

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(1) The comedy show *The League of Gentlemen*, which first appeared on British television in 1999 and ran until 2002, was probably not to everyone's taste. Themes explored through three series and a Christmas special included murder, kidnapping and imprisonment, incest, monstrosity and deformity, masturbation, transvestism and transexuality, dead children, cruelty to animals, the imbibing of urine, erotic asphyxiation, vampirism, voodoo, implicit cannibalism (a rare moment of restraint), limb grafting and a plague of nosebleeds. Add nudity, some violence and gore, the occasional use of the word 'fuck', and an obsessive fixation on bodies marked in various ways as grotesque, and you end up with a most unusual recipe for TV comedy. Given this, it is perhaps surprising how little controversy has been provoked by the League (which consists of writer-performers Mark Gatiss, Steve Pemberton and Reece Shearsmith and writer Jeremy Dyson). Instead the TV show – which had evolved from stage performances and a BBC radio series – went on to attract critical plaudits and prizes (including a BAFTA and the Golden Rose of Montreux award) as well as a dedicated audience following. The League's commercial ascendancy was clinched in 2005 when the film *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse* received a wide cinema release.

(2) One of the most striking sequences in *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse* involves a giraffe ejaculating – or 'spunking up', as one character puts it – over some unsuspecting visitors to a zoo. It's hardly a 'tame' scene but in the context of contemporary film comedy, its grossness is not unprecedented. Gross-out comic effects based on bodily functions and secretions have been around since the 1970s in films such as *National Lampoon's Animal House* (1978) and *Porky's* (1982), and from the 1990s onwards these gross-out elements have acquired a taboo-breaking explicitness in, amongst others, the films directed by the Farrelly brothers (including *Dumb and Dumber* (1994), *Kingpin* (1996), *There's Something About Mary* (1998)) and the *American Pie* films. In this respect, the League's film fits into current comic trends in the cinema. However, the fact that the League has operated mainly under the auspices of television rather than cinema tends to make its humour both more distinctive and more problematic, for television comedy, until recently at least, has not embraced the opportunities for gross-out offered by the cinema. Even in its more vulgar or radicalised variants, comedy on the box has generally been reluctant to breach some of the proprieties associated with home-based viewing, especially those body-centred proprieties so enthusiastically jettisoned by film comedies.

(3) From this perspective, the success – or, more particularly, the lack of notoriety – of the League on television requires some explanation. In part, this explanation might well lie in the way in which the activities of the League fit into, and contribute towards, a broader

willingness apparent in contemporary British television to engage with 'bad taste' material within the context of popular entertainment. Certainly the League's TV show can be grouped with a number of other British 'dark' comedies that appeared in the early 2000s, mainly on the specialist channels BBC2 and BBC3. Series such as *Little Britain* (2003-Present) and *Nighty Night* (2004-2005) set out to shock, *Little Britain* largely through its grotesque images of bodies urinating, vomiting, etc, *Nighty Night* (which featured the League's Mark Gatiss) through the actions of its amoral, murderous heroine and through jokes about cancer, disability, etc. It is a type of comedy that builds upon, and seeks to go beyond, the iconoclastic humour provided by the radical or alternative comedy of the 1980s and 1990s (in series such as *The Young Ones* (1982-1984) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-)), with a new generation of writer-performers (including not just the League but also Matt Lucas, David Walliams, Julia Davis) pushing back yet further the boundaries of taste and acceptability. (For a discussion of alternative comedy in Britain, see Wilmut and Rosengard 1989.) Inasmuch as this new dark comedy depended on grotesque imaging of bodies (and the League led the way in this respect), its acceptability was probably assisted by the coincidental popularity from the late 1990s onwards of what might be termed 'autopsy TV', with American and British series such as *CSI* (2000-Present), *Silent Witness* (1996-Present) and *Waking the Dead* (2000-Present) offering, and to a certain extent normalising for the television audience, graphic representations of bodies in various stages of decay or dissection.

(4) Having said this, the League is probably too distinctive – or peculiar – simply to be contextualised and thereby explained away. For one thing, the format of its show is decidedly unusual, even within the innovative context of dark comedy. Sketch show-like elements are intertwined with sitcom conventions and serial narrative arcs that became increasingly sophisticated as the show progressed, culminating in ambitious experiments with narrative time and causality in the third series. For another, the League's programmes are rich in allusion. In this period, other comedy series also offer allusive references to other areas of culture – notably the Simon Pegg-Jessica Stevenson vehicle *Spaced* (1999-2001) – but none have managed the breadth or intensity of allusion generated by the League. References, direct and indirect, abound to literary, cinematic and televisual texts and traditions, with all of these interwoven into complex and sometimes surprising patterns. In a discussion of 1970s British low culture, Leon Hunt has suggested that the allusiveness apparent in the groundbreaking television comedy series *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969-1974) rendered it 'clever humour for clever people' (Hunt 1998: 36). *The League of Gentlemen*, which in many ways is comparable with *Monty Python*, can be seen similarly as a clever text for the new millennium inasmuch as a full understanding and appreciation of its humour seems to require both some effort and a pre-existing knowledge of aspects of cultural history. Indeed it is this cleverness that has arguably helped to shield the League from accusations of vulgarity and coarseness and made it a suitable object for critical praise.

(5) It is worth considering how precisely this cleverness and this allusiveness operate, particularly in relation to any potentially vulgar

elements associated with the body. The Christmas special (first broadcast 27 December 2000) offers a useful example. Three children clad in period costume, two girls and a boy, wave at a steam train as it passes by. It is likely that many people of a certain age will recognise a reference here to either the 1968 television adaptation of E. Nesbitt's classic children's novel *The Railway Children* or the much-loved film adaptation that followed in 1970. Both serial and film conclude with all the passengers on the train waving back at the children to celebrate the release of the children's father from an unjust imprisonment. The League's version is slightly different, however, with one of the passengers dropping his trousers and mooning at the children. The scene concludes with the startled expressions on the children's faces.

(6) The more one considers this scene, the more one realises that the laugh it is intended to generate is not especially dependent on recognising the reference to *The Railway Children*. Getting the reference might make a spectator feel knowledgeable but the joke itself seems to be elsewhere, in the none-too-subtle juxtaposition of decorum and someone's exposed arse. The context provided by *The Railway Children* provides some nuance, then, just as seeing the multiple-narrative Christmas special as a whole as an homage to the British portmanteau horror film offers added value for the knowledgeable spectator. But none of it is an essential prerequisite to getting the humour which here, as elsewhere in the series, involves the disruptive and inappropriate display of exposed or grotesque bodies.

(7) This does not mean that the League's allusions are insignificant, though, for in fact they help to characterise the show in an interesting way. Generally the League does not rely on the high-cultural or intellectual allusions associated with *Monty Python* but instead exhibits a more contemporary, subcultural and fannish predilection for popular-cultural and low-cultural sources, with multiple references to horror (for more on which, see below) and to some of the less reputable British sitcoms (see in this respect the casting in the first series of Don Estelle, best known to British audiences as 'Lofty' in the 1970s sitcom *It Ain't Half Hot Mum* (1974-1981)) and a range of popular films including *The Full Monty* (1997), *Dead Poet's Society* (1989) and, of course, *The Railway Children*. (*Python* too offered references to pop culture formats such as the game show and talk show but usually in the interests of a ferocious parody bordering on contempt.) That these sources – and especially those to do with horror – often rely on indecorous and indecent representations of the body suggests another way of thinking about the League's allusiveness. Instead of ameliorating or containing representations of vulgarity or the grotesque, the League's framework of allusions helps in certain respects to situate those representations within particular generic contexts in a manner that actually foregrounds notions of the body rather than suppressing or managing them. Most notably, this is achieved through a self-conscious articulation of comic and horror traditions and, more implicitly, through an interplay between the televisual and the cinematic. In a sense, uncertainties about the limits of what can be done to the body within the institutional confines of

television are manifested in the body itself as it hovers between being grotesquely funny and just plain horrifying.

Comedy traditions

(8) The first episode of the first series of *The League of Gentlemen* (which was broadcast on 11 January 1999) begins with the arrival of Benjamin, an innocent abroad, in Royston Vasey, a peculiar town – to put it mildly – that provides the main setting for all three series. This peculiarity manifests itself almost immediately when Benjamin catches a taxi from the station. The driver, hirsute and with a deep, husky voice, happily points out the local shops where he buys his dresses – ‘I couldn’t go into Dorothy Perkins once my bust started showing’ – and discusses some of the effects of his hormone treatment – ‘I’ve been on the hormones eighteen months. My nipples are like bullets’ – as Benjamin becomes increasingly discomfited.

(9) Barbara, for that is the taxi-driver’s name, turns out to be a regular character in series 1 and 2, happily regaling his passengers with graphic details of his forthcoming sex-change operation. As a kind of gatekeeper to Royston Vasey, he is clearly an important figure. However, the most striking thing about him is that we never get to see his face or his body as a whole. Instead we are presented with glimpses of various heavily masculinised body parts – notably hairy arms, legs and chest – that are sometimes adorned with feminine apparel – for example, high heel shoes or jewellery – with these linked by an ultra-masculine voice-over (provided by the League’s Steve Pemberton). It is as if Barbara’s transgendered identity, and the very idea of a male becoming – anatomically at least – a female, is unrepresentable within the terms of the series. This is interesting because much of the humour in *The League* derives from forms of male transvestism, with male performers frequently dressing up and performing as female characters. Within this context, Barbara can be seen to represent a limit-case, a surgically defined abject object that might have its own fascinations but which in its non-representability helps to define the performative playfulness going on elsewhere.

(10) The League’s main female characters (virtually all of whom are played by men) never actually look like women but instead like men dressed up none-too-convincingly as women. This is partly because we recognise the male performers – who play many roles, male and female, throughout the series – but also because of the exaggerated and caricatural forms taken by their renditions of femininity. In this, yet again, the League can be compared with *Monty Python*, another male troupe of writer-performers who often dragged up to play grotesque females. These caricatured old women were dubbed ‘the pepperpots’ by the *Python* team, and indeed some of the League’s female characters have a pepperpot-like quality to them, notably Renee (Steve Pemberton) and Vinnie (Reece Shearsmith), the two old ladies who work in Royston Vasey’s charity shop. (Both the *Python* team and the League also sometimes bring in female actors to perform more ‘realistic’ renditions of women.)

(11) A key difference between the League and *Python*, and one that has implications for an understanding of their attitudes to comic cross-dressing, lies in their respective origins. *Python* was part of what Roger Wilmut has called the third wave of twentieth-century British comedy – the university-educated comedians of the 1960s. (The first wave consisted of pre-World War Two music hall performers and the second of performers who debuted while in the armed services during World War Two; Wilmut, 1980.) Of the *Python* performers, John Cleese and Graham Chapman were at Cambridge, Michael Palin and Terry Jones at Oxford (with Terry Gilliam, the American member of the team not joining the British comedy scene until later in the 1960s). Wilmut notes that the Cambridge Footlights, the university revue society that proved so important in grooming new comedy talent, was in the early 1960s an intensely male preserve, with some of the male performers resisting the admission of women. Comedian Tim Brooke-Taylor, a Footlights member who voted against allowing women in, remarked some years later, 'It was a wrong decision, in a way – but at that particular time, it's hard to believe, but people got slightly self-conscious when there were women around. We were all green – and suddenly everybody would behave totally differently. Women were not on the whole the creative forces – not willing to make complete and utter fools of themselves' (Wilmut 1980: 36). The association made here by Brooke-Taylor between what appears to be an essentially homosocial environment and a male freedom from restriction discovered in performance arguably underpins a lot of the 'university comedy' of the 1960s and 1970s, especially *Python*. As was also apparently the case with the Footlights, the presence of women seemed to inhibit the zaniness that characterised much of this comedy, restoring proprieties and returning men to their socially prescribed roles; in effect, bringing playtime to its conclusion.

(12) The League does not share *Python's* Oxbridge origins. Instead Steve Pemberton, Reece Shearsmith and Mark Gatiss met as students at what one presumes was the considerably less homosocial environment provided by Bretton Hall Drama College, University of Leeds (where Jeremy Dyson, who was studying philosophy at Leeds, also joined them). Nevertheless, the League does seem to maintain the association of a homosocial world – and Royston Vasey is certainly that – with crazy and surreal male transformations manifesting in performance and dressing up. The name of the series itself, *The League of Gentlemen*, refers, with more than a degree of irony in this respect, to the intensely homosocial 1960 British crime caper film of the same name. However, the League is more willing than *Python* ever was to explore some of the more disturbing aspects of the practice of grotesque female personation, with this having consequences for the ways in which bodies, male and fake-female, are figured in the League's comedy.

(13) This has a lot to do with the level of performative detail offered by the League, which – in terms both of characterisation and of make-up – goes far beyond that assayed by *Python*. Some of the League's female characters never transcend their pepperpot status but others, while not jettisoning entirely the caricatural and grotesque qualities associated with the obvious maleness of the performers involved, do

develop as the series progresses, with their grotesquerie modified accordingly. For example, the initial presentation of Mrs Levinson (Reece Shearsmith) and her cleaner Iris (Mark Gatiss) is in terms of a schematic class divide, with the smug bourgeois complacency of Mrs Levinson set against Iris's working-class vulgarity and physicality. However, as this relationship develops, Mrs Levinson's loneliness and self-deception become increasingly apparent, with her antagonism to Iris an expression of this. Eventually – in the final episode of the second series (first broadcast on 18 February 2000) – she collapses and, in a genuinely unexpected plot twist, it is revealed that she is actually Iris's daughter. This moment is certainly funny but it also stands as the climax of a dramatic story arc that has involved a degree of pathos as well. Much the same could be said of the changing relationship over three series between monstrous employment retraining officer Pauline (Steve Pemberton) and the perpetually unemployed Mickey (Mark Gatiss); this is never anything less than grotesque – in the opening episode of Series 3 (broadcast on 27 September 2002) one character refers to the couple as 'the lesbian and the monkey' – but in places, thanks to some effective writing and playing, it also manages to be quite touching.

(14) In fact this is a general feature of the League, and one that becomes increasingly apparent as the show progresses. The starting point for most of its characterisations, male and female, is in terms of a physical grotesquerie. This is most obviously the case with the female performances but the male characters too are frequently trapped in bodies that are misshapen or driven by uncontrollable desires, impulses or obsessions. The acting here is strongly gestural and the dialogue full of obsessive-repetitive catchphrases. Yet these characters are subsequently often delivered into dramatic situations that require their development and some nuance in performance. (This quality separates out the League from the equally grotesque-orientated *Little Britain*, a series that rarely if ever develops its characters out of the stock situations in which they repeatedly appear.) This is finally taken to its Pirandellian extreme in the film *The League of Gentlemen's Apocalypse* when some of the show's characters escape from Royston Vasey into the 'real world' and seek to move beyond their stereotypical existence.

(15) But the League's female characters have a special resonance in this constant slippage away from a sitcom or sketch-based show towards something more closely resembling serial drama. This is not only because their male-to-female grotesquerie can never be entirely effaced but also because they are often located in dramas involving sexual desire for men (or rather, desire for other men). The 'innocent' playfulness of the homosocial starts to crumble in the face of any explicit visualisation of the homoerotic, and any scene such as the love scene between Pauline and Mickey in the third series that shows one man passionately kissing another (even if one of the men is pretending to be a woman) provides such a visualisation. Elsewhere too the League does not shy away from representations of gayness. The series contains its own gay stereotype in Herr Lippe from Germany (although even as a stereotype he gets the chance to develop in the film version). More telling is the penultimate episode in the series three

(broadcast on 24 October 2000) – which generally was more adventurous than the previous two series in its explorations of unconventional sexual practices – that features what in effect is a sustained gay coming out narrative, one in which an ostensibly heterosexual male character, masquerading as a female masseuse who provides 'special services' at the local massage parlour, falls in love with one of his male clients.

(16) It is not just the emotional and sexual complexities of the dramatic situations into which the League's characters are placed that destabilises any simplistic notion of the League as a group of men producing zany or surreal comedy in the male-centred tradition of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (or, going back further, the radio series *The Goon Show* (1951-60)). *The League of Gentlemen* also offers some moments that are confrontational in a different way and which stand in uneasy relation both to the sitcom/comedy sketch elements and to the more dramatic elements. Most notable here are the few scenes involving female nudity, and particularly the lengthy full-frontal scene afforded Val Denton (played by Mark Gatiss), the wife of toad-loving Harvey Denton, in the fourth episode of the second series (first broadcast on 4 February 2000). It's a triumph of make-up but it is the kind of make-up that displays itself as make-up rather than contributing to any impression of the real. If this were a real woman, such a scene would probably not be acceptable, even within the taboo-breaking world of the new dark TV comedy. The scene's acceptability then is predicated on this not being a woman, but the conditions of this acceptability are in themselves anxiety-provoking for what we see here is a pathological endpoint to the sort of homosocial enterprise that excludes women and installs men in their place, namely its presentation in terms of anatomical sexual difference. In its perverse way, the scene returns us to transsexual taxi driver Barbara, with both Val's nudity and Barbara's off-screen transformation equally marked as impossible but also as standing in a disturbing relation to the other male transformations out of which the League's comedy is fashioned.

(16) It is striking how much the series associates this kind of representation with horror cinema. As a man 'wearing' what in effect is a 'female suit', Val Denton/Mark Gatiss is clearly comparable with Buffalo Bill, the serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) who wants to construct a female skinsuit for himself from the skin of the women he murders. (Elsewhere – in the fifth episode of series two, which was broadcast on 11 February 2000 – the League refers to *The Silence of the Lambs* in a scene where Edward, the local shopkeeper, adopts Buffalo Bill's *modus operandi* when attempting to kidnap a woman.) As has been noted by numerous critics, the League is very horror-conscious, in terms of its personnel – Gatiss and Jeremy Dyson have both written non-comedy books about horror-related subjects (Gatiss, 1995; Dyson, 1997) – and in terms of how the show itself operates. It is worth considering at this point how the horror references might connect with the League's often complex attitudes to its comic forebears, particularly so far as representations of the body are concerned.

Horror on the box

(17) *The League of Gentlemen* alludes to individual horror films in much the same way as it alludes to non-horror films such as *The Railway Children*. For example, Boris Karloff's intoning of 'We belong dead' at the climax of the Universal horror film *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) is reprised as 'We belong local' by Edward in the final episode of the second series (broadcast on 18 February 2000), while the Denton's two sinister daughters appear to have strayed in from *The Shining* (1980). However, the horror references arguably carry more weight inasmuch as they seem more integrated into a broader preoccupation with horror-like themes and imagery. This preoccupation, while one of the League's distinctive features, complicates yet further the ways in which the League's comic effects function.

(18) Critical discussions of 'vulgar' body-centred forms of comedy have often drawn upon Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival (for example, see Hunt 1998; King 2002; Paul 1994). Bakhtin saw carnival as a powerful, life-affirming cultural experience associated with the common people that existed alongside and sometimes in resistance to more elite cultural forms. Carnival in this sense tended to involve a positive rendering of the body in all its physicality and grossness: 'The very material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body) bears a deeply positive character. This principle is victorious, for the final result is always abundance, increase' (Bakhtin 1984: 62). Bakhtin's ideas have provided a useful resource for those critics wanting to validate 'low-cultural' forms of comedy in film and television (although Bakhtin himself explicitly argued against the idea that modern cultural forms are carnivalesque in his sense of the term). Take as a relevant example, British 'low' television comedy of the 1960s and 1970s, with earthy performers such as Sid James, Peggy Mount and Benny Hill and sitcoms such as *On The Buses* (1969-1973) and *Love Thy Neighbour* (1972-1976) offering audiences a type of humour largely based on pratfalls, gurning, an impolite stress on bodily functions, and impertinence in the face of authority. From a Bakhtinian perspective (albeit one that would not have been shared by Bakhtin himself), this low humour, far from being degraded or vulgarly commercial, acquires a positive, healthy quality, connected as it appears to be with popular or folk traditions of humour. Leon Hunt has rightly pointed out that this kind of approach can end up idealising the culture of the 'lower classes' when that culture might well exhibit some questionable or reactionary features, such as misogyny, racism, etc. (Hunt 1998: 35). Nevertheless, as has already been suggested in this chapter, some aspects of the League could well be seen as 'carnavalesque', as offering a provocative vulgarity – with nudity and jokes about sex, pissing and shitting – designed to disrupt traditional notions of good taste.

(19) Yet this positive affirmation of what Bakhtin has termed the material bodily lower stratum sits uneasily with the deployment of imagery from another body-centred genre, horror. Clearly there is a relation between some forms of comedy and some forms of horror, particularly around the idea of the 'gross-out', but the effects

generated by each genre often seem incompatible. In a study of American comedy and horror, William Paul identifies what he sees as the key differences between the two forms and seeks to reconcile them: 'gross-out horror and comedy present complementary dystopian-utopian visions. Like the fun house where we prefer to see distorted reflections of reality, gross-out films present us with a distorting mirror vision of culture and society by moving into positive and negative idealization' (Paul 1994: 68). Horror's 'negative idealization' of the body entails anxieties about control – or rather lack of control – over the body, with, according to Paul, comic affirmations of the body combating those anxieties. However, the positive/negative nexus set out here is not one that Bakhtin would have recognised because for him carnival is a state in which 'terror is conquered by laughter' (Bakhtin 1984: 336). For Paul, by contrast, anxiety seems to be omnipresent, with comedy functioning as a kind of reaction-formation to it. From this perspective, the League offers some very negative horror-related idealisations of the body, although the relation of these to any positive idealisations is far from straightforward. In particular the League draws upon two important cinematic horror traditions, both of which present human bodies as sites for anxiety and as something less than human – rural horror and body horror.

(20) Cinematic rural horror narratives usually involve town-dwellers unwisely venturing into the countryside only to be terrorised, raped and/or slaughtered (and sometimes eaten as well) by the savage locals. Although not strictly a horror film, *Deliverance* (1972) is a key American text here, as are cannibal films *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) and *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977) as well as notorious rape-revenge drama *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) and more recent productions such as *Wrong Turn* (2003) and *House of Wax* (2005). Significantly, so far as the League is concerned, rural horror also has a place in British cinema, most notably with *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Frightmare* (1974) and the cult classic *The Wicker Man* (1973), in which a Christian policeman confronts pagans on a remote island. This type of horror manages to be both deeply pessimistic about the state of the modern world – with its town-dwelling protagonists usually weak, complacent and not up to dealing with the locals – and deeply scared of country dwellers, who tend to be characterised as a subhuman, degraded, deformed, inbred, cannibalistic rural underclass. (*The Wicker Man*, which does seem to have been an influence on the League, presents its pagans with more sympathy, although ultimately they remain a scary bunch.)

(21) Royston Vasey clearly offers itself as a setting for rural horror. In the first series in particular, Benjamin is the cosmopolitan outsider who – in a classic rural horror narrative device – finds himself trapped and unable to return to the world of modernity. The key locals in this respect are the keepers of the local shop, Edward and his wife/sister Tubbs. They are incestuous, mad and dangerous, with Edward happily murdering outsiders, and, as if to underline their status as horror icons, in the second series they acquire a monstrous son who lives above the shop. It is a classic rural horror scenario, with this monstrous family comparable with similarly degraded families in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Hills Have Eyes*, and yet it is never

as disturbing as its cinematic counterparts. This is not necessarily because the television series is funny and the films are not, because the films themselves often rely on a perverse kind of humour. Famously, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* plays a gruelling torture scene for cruel laughs, thus earning its transgressive cinematic credentials. In the TV show, by contrast, Edward's violence always occurs off-screen and we are never shown the gory aftermath of his acts. This reticence about acts of extreme violence is clearly imposed by the institution of television itself, although at the same time it seems to be something that the League itself requires in order to function and be distinctive. It is interesting in this respect that when the League finally 'liberated' itself from television and escaped into the world of cinema, its imagery did not become noticeably gorier than it was on television.

(22) All the references to rural horror play in this respect as allusions to that which exists outside the world of the League but which sporadically erupts into the drama, if only in a limited and temporary fashion. Something similar could be said of the way in which the second series of the League uses as its main story arc a body horror narrative, with a mysterious consignment of meat infecting the locals and causing an outbreak of fatal nosebleeds. In the hands of a director such as David Cronenberg (master of cinematic body horror with films such as *Shivers* (1975), *Rabid* (1977), *The Brood* (1979) and *The Fly* (1986)), this kind of material can be both very graphic and very disturbing in its presentation of bodies acquiring their own materiality and 'revolting' against their human owners. But it is never that way with the League. The body-horror themes of infection and monstrous biologies are there but only periodically and some of the imagery is also there but in an attenuated, less graphic form.

(23) It is not simply a question here of the horror imagery being restrained by the institution of television (although it is thus restrained), nor of the League's restricting the horror input so that the comic effects are not disrupted by too much gore or violence, for as we have already seen, the humour itself is in places dark, disturbing and pathological. Instead, the constantly shifting format of the show – with sketch, sitcom and dramatic elements intertwined – facilitates some remarkable shifts in tone, from caricature to psychological complexity, from cruelty to pathos and from allusion to vulgarity. In this veritable parade of attractions, grotesque bodies provide some continuity, with body-anxiety a major theme, albeit one that is modulated in different, generically specific ways as the show progresses. The deployment of grotesque bodies, defined in relation to both comedy and horror traditions, also helps to articulate the peculiar televisual character of a show that seems very much to be defining itself in terms of the limits of what can actually be shown on television. The shocking or transgressive edge possessed by *The League of Gentlemen* is not brought about simply by being 'rude' (in the manner of, say, some scenes in *Little Britain*) but instead often involves activating broader generic fields that seem incompatible – through their gore or obscenity – with television comedy or drama. Repeatedly, the emphasis is on what we cannot see, with the limits of our vision often associated with partially glimpsed bodies. We cannot see the source of the infected

meat (although we might presume that it is human flesh), we cannot see the monster above the shop, we cannot see Barbara in all her transsexual glory. Instead the show alludes to extra-televisual generic worlds that are not fully representable within television itself, with those allusions drawing the attention of an audience – or at least a generically knowledgeable audience – precisely to what they are missing.

(24) It is not just horror that provides a source of the unrepresentable for the show, however, for comedy too has its illicit, obscene areas. The League's town is called Royston Vasey, which just happens to be the real name of popular Northern comedian Roy 'Chubby' Brown, someone whose foul-mouthed act is generally considered unacceptable for television transmission. (His DVD release, *King Thong* (2005), was sold with the slogan 'Too rude for TV'.) And yet in the second series of *The League of Gentlemen*, Roy 'Chubby' Brown shows up at the mayor of Royston Vasey. In a scene in the fourth episode that serves to crystallise the League's use of television as a framing device, he is interviewed for a live television broadcast after being told by an aide to mind his language. He is as good as gold throughout, until the end when the interviewer thanks him. Brown's reply is delivered with the perfect timing of a seasoned performer: 'It's a fucking pleasure,' he says. Rudeness interrupts televisual decorum, and a world of comical and scary limits and transgressions comes sharply into focus. Welcome to Royston Vasey.

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