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**A LAUGHTER THAT WILL BURY YOU:
THE MORALITY OF PLANT-BASED MEAT IRONY**

1. *Meat, Plant-Based Meat, and Irony* 2. *From the Immorality of Irony About a Death to the Case of Plant-Based Meat Advertisements* 3. *“Immoral” Irony in Immoral Contexts: Overturning the Moral Status of Irony about Animals’ Deaths* 4. *Conclusion*

ABSTRACT: *A LAUGHTER THAT WILL BURY YOU: THE MORALITY OF PLANT-BASED MEAT IRONY*

When plant-based meats enter the foodscape, they face the challenge of how to communicate their nature and function to consumers: one strategy for navigating the tension between portraying conventional meat as something to be replaced and affirming their unique meaty tastiness is through ironic claims and performances. This paper seeks to analyse the moral stance of irony in plant-based meat advertisements, specifically when this irony involves the death of animals. Firstly, it presents an argument showing that, from the standpoint of veganism, ironising about animals’ death can be a moral wrong. Secondly, by relying on an interpretation of irony that leverages its potential for subverting and criticising hegemonic viewpoints, it is shown that this kind of irony can serve as a form of resistance aimed at dismantling the pervasive indifference towards the killing of animals for producing meat.



«Fantasy will destroy power and a laugh will bury you!»
(Anonymous)

1. *Meat, Plant-Based Meat, and Irony*

The troubled relationship that meat foods hold with animal death has been thoroughly investigated across various domains of research, spanning from the analysis of meat cultural imaginary, in which animals are the «absent referent»¹ of ‘meat’, to that of ideological discourses,² of consumers psychology, such as the recent inquiry into the meat paradox,³ i.e. a coping mechanism

¹ C. J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Continuum, New York 2010²⁰, p. 66.

² See M. Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism: The Belief System That Enables Us to Eat Some Animals and Not Others*, Conari Press, San Francisco 2011.

³ S. Loughnan, T. Davis, *The Meat Paradox*, in K. Dhont and G. Hodson (eds.), *Why We Love and Exploit Animals: Bridging Insights From Academia and Advocacy*, Routledge, London-New York 2019, pp. 171-187.

used to reconcile the enjoyment of meat consumption with the moral aversion to animals' slaughter, and so on. In all cases, this intricate dynamic takes the shape of a process of distancing, concealing, and invisibilisation of the animal origin of meat.

This interplay of absence and presence of animals' lives from our meals has been further complicated by the widespread commercialisation of plant-based meats (PBMs). Despite being aesthetically similar to meat foods, PBMs are produced from vegetable ingredients to offer the experience of eating meat without incurring the ethical and environmental costs associated with its production. In this tension between substituting conventional meat and wanting to be considered as such - between distancing themselves from animal flesh and being built upon its edibility that they reaffirm through the reproduction of its taste - these products face the decision of how to communicate their identity and present themselves in the foodscape.

Companies such as THIS⁴ and Juicy Marbles⁵ have found a way to walk this fine line: through ironic advertisements, performances, and images. Indeed, PBMs can be interpreted as a "caricature"⁶ or "parody"⁷ of meat, whose identity, built on what they are not, seems well fit to be communicated through irony. Employing irony, which is characterised by being open to different layers of possible interpretations without an explicit commitment to any of them, allows PBM companies to express their aim (that is, substituting meat produced by slaughtering animals) in a way that, on the one hand, blinks an eye to veganism, and on the other hand, does not require them to take an explicit stance against meat that risks making them perceived as a threat by omnivores. Does this

⁴ See <https://this.co/>, accessed 1 May 2024.

⁵ See <https://juicymarbles.com/>, accessed 1 May 2024.

⁶ See G. Stahl, *Making a Mockery of Meat: Troubling Texture and the Failings of the "Flesh"*, in «Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture», II, 2, 2017, pp. 184-204.

⁷ See S. Efstathiou, *Performing 'Meat': Meat Replacement as Drag*, in D. Bruce and A. Bruce (eds.), *Transforming Food systems: Ethics, Innovation and Responsibility*, Wageningen Academic Publishers, Edinburgh 2022, pp. 412-417.

strategy constitute a moral contradiction? Can it be a form of critique? Or could it be both?

The paper is organised as follows: *Section 2* proposes an argument for considering it morally wrong to ironise about death and shows that certain PBM advertisements can be interpreted as instances of irony regarding animals' death. As such, the question becomes how or why this form of irony is not always perceived as problematic by those who oppose the slaughtering of animals for meat, namely vegans. In *Section 3*, the issue is reframed in a way that allows for interpreting these ironic advertisements as cases of subversion and resistance against the prevailing indifference towards animals' death. This perspective acknowledges that while they may not be morally pure, they are not necessarily morally wrong from the standpoint of veganism.

2. From the Immorality of Irony About a Death to the Case of Plant-Based Meat Advertisements

The nature of irony has been the object of intense debate in the last centuries. Contemporary theories of irony are all in debt with Grice's approach, according to which irony is a case of flouting the cooperative principle by violating the maxim of quality, where one tries to be truthful and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.⁸ Indeed, many authoritative works on irony can be classified as neo-Gricean.⁹ Another influential view of irony is the one offered by Sperber and Wilson, in which irony is explained in terms of

⁸ See H. P. Grice, *Logic and Conversation*, in P. Cole and J.L. Morgan (eds.), *Speech Acts*, vol. III, Academic Press, New York 1975, pp. 41-58, and Id., *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1989.

⁹ See D. J. Amante, *The Theory of Ironic Speech Acts*, in «Poetics Today», II, 2, 1981, pp. 77-96; R. L.J. Brown, *The Pragmatics of Verbal Irony*, in R. W. Shuy and A. Shnukal (eds.), *Language Use and The Uses of Language*, Georgetown University Press, Washington 1980, pp. 111-127; G. Sam, *Commentary on Nonliteral Language: Processing and Use*, in «Metaphor and symbolic activity», X, 1, 1995, pp. 47-57.

sentences that are *mentioned* rather than *used* as we normally do.¹⁰ In particular, mentioning one's own sentence typically produces irony, while mentioning another person's sentence typically produces sarcasm. The idea is that, when I utter "what lovely weather today!" with irony or, better, sarcasm, on a rainy day, I am echoing some weather forecaster's sentence. According to Clark and Gerrig, Sperber and Wilson's theory fails to account for the irony of an essay such as *A Modest Proposal* by J. Swift,¹¹ because it is hard to maintain that Swift's irony consists in mentioning a discourse by either Swift himself or some other person.¹² Indeed, Swift *invented* an absurd proposal – his invention being normally referred to as a model piece of irony – and is not referring to some previously existing discourse, nor is he pointing to some popular wisdom or received opinion as the mention theory would require. So, some scholars have suggested that irony is better to be seen as having to do with *pretence*.¹³ Other proposal sees an ironical utterance as characterised by being both inappropriate and relevant to its context,¹⁴ or by conforming to a socially accepted procedure and being etiolated uses of language.¹⁵ Independently of the particular analysis of irony we buy, irony seems to be socially forbidden for moral reasons in relation to

¹⁰ D. Sperber, D. Wilson, *Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction*, in P. Cole (ed.), *Radical Pragmatics*, Academic Press, New York 1981, pp. 295-318, and Id., *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1995².

¹¹ J. Swift, *A Modest Proposal* (1729), edited by Charles Allen Beaumont, C. E. Merrill Publishing Company, Columbus 1969.

¹² H. H. Clark, R. J. Gerrig, *On The Pretence Theory of Irony*, in «Journal of Experimental Psychology: General», CXIII, 1, 1984, pp. 121-126.

¹³ The pretence theory of irony is defined by Clark and Gerrig (*ibid.*, p. 122) as follows: «Suppose S is speaking to A, the primary addressee, and to A', who may be present or absent, real or imaginary. In speaking ironically, S is pretending to be S' speaking to A'. What S' is saying is, in one way or another, patently uninformative or injudicious [...]. A' in ignorance, is intended to miss this pretence, to take S as speaking sincerely. But A, as part of the "inner circle" (to use Fowler's phrase), is intended to see everything – the pretence, S's injudiciousness, A's ignorance, and hence S's attitude toward S', A', and what S' said».

¹⁴ See S. Attardo, *Irony as Relevant Inappropriateness*, in «Journal of Pragmatics», XXXII, 6, 2000, pp. 793-826.

¹⁵ See M. Witek, *Irony as A Speech Action*, in «Journal of Pragmatics», 190, 2022, pp. 76-90.

certain topics in certain circumstances. For example, while we can ironically utter “what lovely weather today!” on a rainy day, it would be inappropriate for moral reasons to ironically utter “we don’t really care for the deceased!” at a funeral, no matter that every addressee knows how deeply saddened the speaker is, and perfectly understands that the sentence is ironic. As previously suggested by Myers Roy,¹⁶ Haverkate has claimed that irony expressing a negative attitude in a positive mode is to be expected as more infrequent than irony expressing a positive attitude in a negative mode, because the price paid in case of being taken literally is much higher.¹⁷ But while this would explain why we do not frequently utter “we don’t really care for the deceased!” at a funeral, it does not explain why – even if the addressee remains sure that we are deeply affected by the loss – our utterance would be felt as inappropriate both by the addressee and by ourselves, for moral rather than merely practical or conventional reasons. The problem is not that irony would not be intended; rather, it is that perfectly intended irony would be morally wrong.

One could object that, in the proposed situation, irony would be merely *socially* inappropriate, with no specific moral relevance other than that brought in by the consideration that acting deliberately in a socially inappropriate manner is *ceteris paribus* morally wrong. Consider, however, the following argument:

The argument for the moral wrongness of irony about a death

- (1) irony involves a form of humour;
- (2) humour is aimed at making people laugh;

¹⁶ See A. Myers Roy, *Towards A Definition of Irony*, in R. W. Fasold and R. Shuy (eds.), *Studies in Language Variation*, Georgetown University Press, Washington 1977, pp. 171–183.

¹⁷ See H. Haverkate, *A Speech Act Analysis of Irony*, in «Journal of Pragmatics», XIV, 1, 1990, pp. 77–109.

(3) trying to make people laugh about the death of *X* is deliberately disrespecting *X* and all the people who are grieved by *X*'s death;

(4) deliberately disrespecting someone is morally wrong

(5) irony about the death of *X* is morally wrong

The argument seems valid; if the premises are true, it shows why being ironic in the funeral situation is not only socially inappropriate, but also morally wrong. We can discuss whether all of its social inappropriateness, or just part of it, depends on its morally wrongness; we could even argue that its social inappropriateness is independent of its morally wrongness. We can't deny, however, that it possesses the property of being morally wrong, unless we contest at least one of the premises of the previous argument.

Now, (1) seems correct. Irony is defined as «a subtle form of humour which involves saying things that you don't mean»¹⁸ in the Collins Dictionary, «a form of deliberate mockery in which one says the opposite of what is obviously true»¹⁹ in the Cambridge Dictionary, and «a usually humorous or sardonic literary style or form characterised by the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning»²⁰ in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. True, we can classify some forms of irony that seem not to involve a humorous attitude, such as Socratic irony – a pretence of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the other's false conceptions conspicuous by adroit questioning –, dramatic irony –

¹⁸ Collins Dictionary, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/irony>, accessed 1 May 2024.

¹⁹ Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/irony>, accessed 1 May 2024.

²⁰ Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/irony>, accessed 1 May 2024.

the incongruity between a situation developed in a drama and the accompanying words or actions that is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play, as famously in Shakespeare's *Othello* –, and irony of fate or situational irony – which is a state of the world itself which is perceived as ironical, like for example, the fire station burning down to the ground.²¹ Still, these and perhaps other non-humorous subtypes of irony are highly specific, infrequent minor variants of it, where irony normally involves a form of humour.

While (2) seems unquestionable, one could doubt that (3) is necessarily true. For example, when a comedian dies, trying to make her heartbroken relatives and fans laugh by recalling how funny she was, and how intensely she has laughed at death until the end, is not necessarily deliberately disrespecting the comedian. Perhaps examples of this kind are genuine exceptions to (3). But perhaps they are not. Indeed, it could be argued that in the comedian's case, we would not exactly be trying to make people laugh *about the comedian's death*, but about something else – the comedian herself, or her way of taking life easy, or even the last actions she performed in her lifetime. If this is true, even in the comedian's case the dead's death in itself would remain a sad event that no one would be using to make people laugh.

A different remark against (3) is this. If the people one tries to make laugh about the death of *X* do not include any of the people grieved by *X*'s death, *and* if none of the persons grieved by *X*'s death ever knows about the agent's attempt to make (other) people laugh about the death of *X*, it can be argued that the people grieved by *X*'s death are not actually disrespected. In fact, being disrespected means *being treated* disrespectfully. But the agent does not treat in any way the people grieved by *X*'s death, because she has no causal interaction with them.

²¹ See R. J. Kreuz, R. M. Roberts, *On Satire and Parody: The Importance of Being Ironic*, in «Metaphor and Symbolic Activity», 8, 1993, pp. 97–109, and also Attardo, *op. cit.*

The answer to this remark against (3) is twofold. First, even if we accept the point that the agent does not disrespect the persons grieved by X 's death, there remains the problem of her disrespecting X . True, it can be objected in the same spirit that, since disrespecting X requires interacting with X , and interacting with X requires in turn that X exists, it is simply not possible to disrespect X when X has ceased to exist, as in our case. This answer, however, is not convincing. Indeed, we have very strong intuitions that it is possible for an agent to deliberately offend, harm or wrong X even after X 's death, for example by spreading false shameful accusations against X . This is also a reason for thinking that one can disrespect the people grieved by X 's death even if she does not causally interact with them: after all, if the agent can disrespect X even if X is dead, she can a fortiori disrespect a group of persons that would unquestionably be disrespected by her if she causally interacted with them, provided that these persons exist and X , by contrast, has ceased to exist.

A second answer to this remark against (3) is that (3) is true at the condition that "trying to make people laugh" is meant to mean "trying to make people laugh *publicly*, that is, by (potentially) trying to make laugh also the people grieved by X 's death, or, at least, by trying to make people laugh (potentially) under the eyes of the people grieved by X 's death".

Finally, let us consider (4). Again, one can object that (4) is not necessarily universally true, because there may be cases in which disrespecting an individual is not morally wrong. For example, disrespecting a person who has killed and tortured thousands of people may be not morally wrong. So, in particular, even if trying to make people laugh about the death of such a person is deliberately disrespecting her and all the people who are grieved by her death, doing so may be not morally wrong. We are not sure that this conclusion is correct. In any case, we may

say that deliberately disrespecting X and all the people who are grieved by X's death by trying to make people laugh about the death of X is morally wrong at least whenever we agree that X's death is an intrinsically bad or undesirable event (or, perhaps more correctly, at least whenever we do not agree that X's death is not an intrinsically bad or undesirable event).

We may conclude that *The argument for the moral wrongness of irony about a death* is convincing and its conclusion is true at least if (i) the kind of irony involved is not Socratic irony, dramatic irony, irony of fate or some other subtype of the non-humorous (and infrequent) genre of irony, (ii) the attempt to make people laugh about the dead's death is public (in the sense specified above), and (iii) the dead is not an objectively morally disgusting agent all things considered, or perhaps equivalently, we do not agree that the dead's death is not an intrinsically bad or undesirable event.

Now, consider the event organised by the UK PBM company THIS in January 2020.²² Over a weekend, THIS fooled Londoners with chicken-like vegan nuggets given out by an Ed Sheeran-like imposter. Many people have looked at the event as usefully ironic. THIS sent a message that look-alikes could be just as exciting as the real thing: just like the Ed Sheeran impersonator could excite thousands of people, THIS vegan nuggets can be just as palatable as their "authentic" counterpart.

The problem for this kind of ironic event is that its irony can be seen as irony about the death of chickens. If this interpretation is correct, according to *The argument for the moral wrongness of irony about a death* this is a morally wrong irony, at least for all those people (including ethical vegans) believing that a chicken's death is an intrinsically morally bad event that we

²² See M. Chiorando, *Ed Sheeran Gives Out 7,000 Vegan Nuggets – Fooling Starstruck Londoners*, available at <https://plantbasednews.org/lifestyle/ed-sheeran-vegan-nuggets-london/>, accessed 1 May 2024.

should actively avoid, especially when it is exploited for food purposes.

So, what are the reasons for seeing the irony in the THIS 2020 event as irony about the death of chickens? Well, suppose that a Parisian company specialised in fake wood floors advertised its products by making people falsely believe that a new terrorist attack had taken place at Bataclan, in Paris, after the one of November 13, 2015. We all would agree if the bereaved families rose up by protesting that the irony in the advertising campaign is actually about the death of their relatives. Indeed, the THIS event marketing is successful only if people experience the irony of a situation where *it seems that* real chicken nuggets are distributed. Real chicken nuggets distributions, however, necessarily require the killing of a large number of chickens. Many participants even falsely believe that the handed-out food is chicken-based. So, there is little room for denying that irony which is at the basis of the THIS event is about the death of chickens.

Nor is the THIS event the only example in vegan food marketing that seems to fall under *The argument for the moral wrongness of irony about a death*. Consider, for example, the graphic advertisements of Juicy Marbles (*Figures 1 and 2*).²³

²³ Source of the images: Juicy Marbles Instagram Profile, <https://www.instagram.com/juicymarbles/?hl=en>, accessed 1 May 2024. The permission to utilise the images has been granted by Juicy Marbles.



Figure 1. Graphic advertisement by Juicy Marbles.

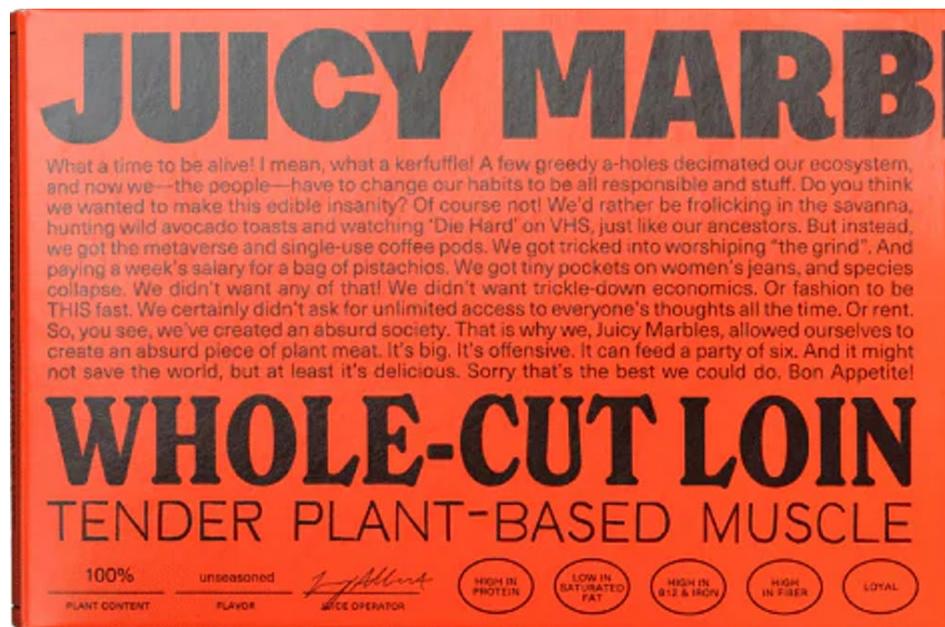


Figure 2. Close-up of the Whole-Cut Loin Package.

If this analysis is correct, the irony used by these companies of PBM is morally wrong, at least from the point of view of ethical vegans. So, we have an interesting question to raise: why don't ethical vegans even perceive the moral wrongness of this kind of irony?

3. "Immoral" Irony in Immoral Contexts: Overturning the Moral Status of Irony about Animals' Deaths

The multifaceted, polysemous and ambiguous nature of ironic claims makes it difficult to pinpoint a fixed interpretation of their content: irony involves humour, yet at the same time enables the establishment of distance between a belief and its holder, creating the space of a serious, critical evaluation; irony intertwines what is affirmed and what is negated, making it challenging to discern what is the commitment of the ironist and whether they stand by the message that they put forward. These layers of meanings that irony entails can be fully grasped by taking into account the context and the relationships in which they arise, context and relationships that are composed of many elements, such as: who is the ironist, who is the interpreter, who is left outside of the joke, what is the shared background discourse, and so on.²⁴ This complexity gives rise to a multitude of possible interpretations echoed by differences and controversies on the moral evaluation of irony. For the present purposes, the moral evaluation of ironic claims such as the ones of THIS can be built on a comprehensive perspective that considers the interplay of at least three elements:

- a) the comic object – in this case, the death of Xs;
- b) the object of critique – if any;
- c) the target – those who are ridiculed.

²⁴ See L. Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Taylor and Francis, Hoboken 2003.

Depending on the relationships between *a*, *b* and *c*, the outcome and perceived moral appropriateness of using the death of *Xs* as a comic object, as well as the efficacy of irony for constituting a form of critique, would vary. This analysis would help explain why the irony of PBM companies is not always perceived as morally unacceptable or incoherent, but rather as a way for dismantling the taken-for-granted assumptions that sustain the practice of meat eating.

Let's start by considering the target *c*. It is not unusual for irony to be employed as a weapon for ridiculing someone or something, and in some instances, this target coincides with the comic object *a*. However, this is not necessarily the case. Take the example of THIS (*T*). Surely, in *T* irony involves the death of chickens, yet the ones ridiculed are the individuals who fell for the prank, as they couldn't tell apart a plant-based nugget from a chicken one. Moreover, depending on who is laughing, the source of humour would vary: those who fall for the prank might laugh at themselves, experiencing the comic effect given by the discrepancy between their expectations and reality; conversely, vegans might laugh at the victims of the prank: here, the humour reaction stems from the fact that those who usually eat conventional chicken nuggets are caught red-handed – because they liked “vegan” foods and because they couldn't even spot that their object of desire (meat) was fake. Despite the prank having the death of chickens at its core, the effect of the humour hardly stems from it or is pointed at it.

Now let's consider *b*, the object of critique. Rarely neutral, ironic claims leak out a judgement or attitude – even if it cannot be entirely ascribed to the ironist – towards a state of affairs. Irony exhibits the contradictions of a given situation, whether to mock, critique or resist it. It subverts meanings and beliefs, and by offering a viewpoint on a given situation from a distance, which thus can appear as strange and unfamiliar, irony can

challenge established perspectives. When it is used as a form of critique, irony allows for reversing the dominant discourse and offering a new framing for interpreting a given situation.²⁵ Indeed, the capacity of irony to disrupt and question conventional wisdom has been exploited in post-colonial, feminist, and gender studies in order to subvert given hierarchies and deconstruct them.²⁶

Yet, it is precisely irony's ability to hold «incompatible things together»²⁷, to be «transideological»²⁸ and to evade explicit commitment to a particular worldview that renders it dangerous, morally ambiguous, and contentious when it addresses sensitive topics in a humorous way, as it happens in the case of PBM campaigns. Indeed, even if irony about death is used for criticising something (*b*), this does not entail that ironising about death is automatically morally legitimate. Recall the previous example of the Fake Wood Company: here there is no object of critique *b*, however, one can modify the scenario to introduce an object of critique and still consider the irony used by the company as morally illegitimate. For instance, suppose that this company aims to raise awareness about the power of social media to deceive people and feed them fake news. Let's call this scenario 'F'. Here we have *a*, the comic object constituted by the victims of the terrorist attack; *b*, the object of critique, namely the widespread fake news; and *c*, the target, i.e. the people who fell for the fake news. Even if the ones ridiculed are those who cannot distinguish between fake and real news, and even if the company intends to make people aware of this problem, the victims'

²⁵ See P. Stallybrass, A. White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Methuen, London-New York 1986, and also R. Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*, Cornell University Press, London-New York 1985.

²⁶ See Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, and also V. R. Renegar, C. E. Goehring, *A/In (Further) Defense of Irony*, in «JAC», XXXII, 1-2, 2013, pp. 315-324.

²⁷ D. J. Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, in Id., *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York 1991, p. 149.

²⁸ Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

families would rightfully protest against this advertisement. Their deaths are used to raise awareness of a real problem *by making people laugh*: even if they do not laugh about the terrorist attack itself, they are laughing at a joke that involves the victims of this attack, thus not approaching their death with the graveness and reverence it deserves. In short, it would be disrespectful.

Conversely, consider the case of Swift's irony in *A Modest Proposal* (S): the comic object *a* is the eating (and thus, the killing) of poor children, which is presented as a "modest solution" if one follows through its end the political agenda (*b*), at the time perpetuated by the ruling class, the target *c*. Even if controversial, macabre, and ambiguous, this kind of irony opens the doors for being interpreted as a form of resistance that shows the absurdity of *b*, which in turn paves the way for recognising the comic object *a* not as something suitable to being laughed at, but as the beneficiary of a form of irony that vindicates them by ridiculing *c*, their persecutors. A similar strategy has been used by Elwood Dog Meat,²⁹ an organisation that tries to raise awareness about the problem of speciesism: through the pretence of organically farming dogs and selling their meat, the website mocks the arguments used by conscientious omnivores to justify humane animal farming, thus forcing people to critically evaluate the speciesist attitudes implicit in these arguments.

²⁹ See <https://www.elwooddogmeat.com/>, accessed 1 May 2024.

	THIS (T)	SWIFT (S)	ELWOOD DOG MEAT (D)	FAKE WOOD COMPANY (F)
a) <i>The comic object</i>	Chickens' death	Irish children's death	Dogs' death	Victims of terrorist attack
b) <i>The object of critique</i>	Eating meat	Political system	Speciesism	Fake news
c) <i>The target</i>	People who eat meat	The ruling class	People who love dogs but eat meat	Uninformed People

The important question is, thus, what is the particular relationship instantiated between *a*, *b*, and *c* in the case of Swift, the Dog Meat, and THIS that can make them perceived as not morally wrong, unlike the case of the Fake Wood Company?

Firstly, in these three cases but not in *F*, the comic object *a* is used to expose the contradiction of a system of beliefs *b* held by *c*, the target. It is that comic object alone that *allows irony to unmask the inherent contradictions of the object of critique*. While in *F* the critique of *b* could be carried out without referring to the victims of a terrorist attack (because there is no necessary relation between the problem of fake news and their deaths), this does not apply to *T*, *S* or *D*: it is precisely through the reference to a specific comic object *a* that the system of beliefs *b* is contested.

Secondly, in these three cases but not in *F*, the mocking of the target *c* – as the holder of *b* – forces them to reconsider their attitude towards *a*. In *F*, the critique of the phenomenon of fake news (*b*) does not produce a “shift in thought” by *c* that involves a moral reappraisal of *a*: the attitudes, considerations, or moral evaluation that the people targeted by irony hold towards the problem of terrorism are not affected by these jokes, not only because there is no link between *a* and *b*, but also because there

is no link between the people that cannot spot fake news and the terrorist attack. Conversely, in the other three cases, irony forces the targets to cast doubt over certain beliefs that they hold which are related to the comic object *a*, being it the starving and poverty of an entire population because of a given political agenda, the contradictory system of moral consideration that is applied to certain species but not to other, or again the indifference towards the slaughter of chickens required for producing conventional chicken nuggets.

Thus, the intuition is that using death as a comic object is not necessarily immoral in every context, because there are instances where this ‘immorality’ is outweighed by the positive moral benefits of debunking *b* and targeting *c*. *T*, *S*, and *D* accept the risk of appearing immoral on *a* because they aim to act morally by subverting a system of beliefs they oppose. As a matter of fact, they do not appear as immoral at all, because their first-level immorality is overridden by their most important second-level moral approvability.

However, one could argue that *T* cannot offer a critique or resistance towards a certain dominant view *b* because, unlike *S* or *D*, the comic object is not constituted by an absurd proposal that shows the inherent contradictions of *b*, but it is rather built upon the very acceptance of it. To propose to eat children strikes immediately as wrong, and the same applies to the case of eating dogs in Western societies: these proposals show the absurdities inherent in a particular worldview, a worldview that if applied coherently would lead to these unacceptable outcomes. Conversely, eating chicken nuggets – and finding pleasure in eating them – is completely accepted and ordinary: the performance of THIS, by relying on the fact that chicken nuggets are tasty, seems to confirm that there is nothing unjust or immoral about killing and eating chickens. If these performances merely prove that plant-based nuggets are good to eat exactly as chicken nuggets, what is

the fallacy exposed through irony? Taken from this perspective, it seems that irony does not provoke any debunking of *b*.

And yet, it is not unusual for vegans to affirm, with a light attitude, that their meals can deceive the most convinced omnivore; one cannot possibly find a negation of the pleasure of eating meat in these pranks. To find a critique of the dominant discourse one must go further: what is mocked is a certain attitude that underlines every carnivorous meal, namely the indifference about systemic violence towards animals in the name of humans' gustatory pleasure. But how can this happen?

First, the initial pretence is presented as something ordinary by conforming to a set of beliefs and norms. This set of beliefs, norms, and practices that the pretence conforms to, are those that sustain a systematic indifference towards animals' deaths involved in the production of meat foods. Surely, people do know that chicken nuggets are made by killing chickens but, as mentioned in the introduction, this thought is hidden away so that the moral problem of killing animals for food is not even considered as a problem in most ordinary dining situations. Vegan meals are, in this sense, always threatening because they are a reminder that one can choose to avoid suffering – that suffering is contingent, relative to a set of collective and individual choices, and thus avoidable.³⁰ Yet, when the irony is involved, these meals are no longer threatening but rather subversive. Indeed, as soon as irony reveals itself as it is, to reconcile the prank one must draw a distinction between vegan and conventional chicken nuggets, a distinction that is based on the fact that the latter but not the former requires the death of chickens. In this way, the indifference towards these deaths is unmasked: the comparison between plant-based and chicken nuggets prompts people to face

³⁰ See C. J. Adams, *Ethical Spectacles and Seitan-Making: Beyond the Sexual Politics of Meat – a Response to Sinclair*, in B. Donaldson and C. Carter (eds.), *The Future of Meat without Animals*, Rowman & Littlefield International, Lanham 2016, pp. 294–302.

that their conventional meals are always intertwined with animals' deaths. The debunking of *b* does not come from an initial proposal that is absurd, but by being tricked and seeing what was previously considered normal as *now unfamiliar and strange*, as in fact it happens when one adopts the literary device we call 'estrangement' (in Russian: 'ostranenie') whose distancing effect is produced by adopting an unorthodox point of view on a given object or topic.³¹

If this form of irony achieves anything, it is that by infiltrating into a hegemonic worldview it exposes animal deaths required for producing meat and it shows that avoiding meat is not impossible. The acknowledgement that vegan food can be as satisfying as non-vegan erodes one of the most common and ordinary reasons that lead people to choose meat over plant-based food: its taste.³² These pranks demonstrate that adopting a vegan diet doesn't demand grand gestures, in a way that questions dominant culinary practices: indeed, if chicken nuggets are indistinguishable from their plant-based counterparts, opting for the former over the latter signifies a preference for a practice that necessitates animal slaughter. Thus, this preference now needs to be explicitly justified, endorsed, or rejected – it can no longer be taken for granted.

Furthermore, it's not just the attitude towards animal death that's subverted, but also the perception of veganism itself. Commonly framed as an overly sacrificing lifestyle, veganism has been stereotyped as an exaggerated escape from earthly pleasures.

³¹ See V. Shklovsky, *Art as Device* (1917), in Id., *Theory of Prose*, Dalkey Archive Press, Elmwood Park 1990, pp. 1-14; G. Chernavin, A. Yampolskaya, *Estrangement in Aesthetics and Beyond: Russian Formalism and Phenomenological Method*, in «Continental Philosophy Review», 1, 2019, pp. 91-113; J. Sensat, *The Logic of Estrangement: Reason in an Unreasonable Form*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2016.

³² See S. Jahn, P. Furchheim, A. Strässner, *Plant-Based Meat Alternatives: Motivational Adoption Barriers and Solutions*, in «Sustainability», XIII, 23, 2021, and also J. Aschemann-Witzel et al., *Plant-Based Food and Protein Trend from a Business Perspective: Markets, Consumers, and the Challenges and Opportunities in the Future*, in «Critical Reviews in Food Science and Nutrition», LXI, 18, 2021, pp. 3119-3128.

This perception is evident in those narratives that associate veganism with orthorexia nervosa³³– an unrecognised eating disorder characterised by the obsession with healthy eating – or with a rejection of sexuality,³⁴ along with general accusations of moral sanctimony.³⁵ All these factors have reinforced the notion that veganism must adhere strictly to seriousness and avoid elements like camp, irony, and parody to not fall into moral contradiction and to uphold the ‘high’ moral standards associated with it.³⁶ However, as Stano shows in her study on veganism and digital communication,³⁷ the reappropriation of irony by vegan discourses has been used exactly to challenge this perspective, while at the same time creating the necessary space for being heard, as «the practice of irony represents a means through which the “enunciator” (cf. Greimas & Courtés 1979) manifests itself as an uttering entity, thus asserting his or her existence».³⁸ Moreover, Stano highlights that this rhetorical strategy allows the message to be perceived as less threatening, potentially leading to understanding and sympathy (Figure 3)³⁹.

³³ See V. Stanescu, J. Stanescu, *The Personal Is Political: Orthorexia Nervosa, the Pathogenization of Veganism, and Grief as a Political Act*, in L. Gruen and F. Probyn-Rapsey (eds.) *Animaladies: Gender, Animals, and Madness*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2018, pp. 137–154.

³⁴ See A. Potts, J. Parry, *Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex*, in «Feminism & Psychology», XX, 1, 2010, 53–72.

³⁵ See N. Seymour, *Satire*, in L. Wright and E. Quinn (eds.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Vegan Literary Studies*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2022, pp. 267–277.

³⁶ See E. Quinn, *Notes on Vegan Camp*, in «PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America», CXXXV, 5, 2020, pp. 914–930.

³⁷ S. Stano, *Veganism 2.0: Gastromania, Nutrition, and Digital Communication*, in «Digital Age in Semiotics & Communication», 4, 2021, pp. 12–30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³⁹ Source of the image: Juicy Marbles Instagram Profile, <https://www.instagram.com/juicymarbles/?hl=en>, accessed 1 May 2024. The permission to utilise the image has been granted by Juicy Marbles.

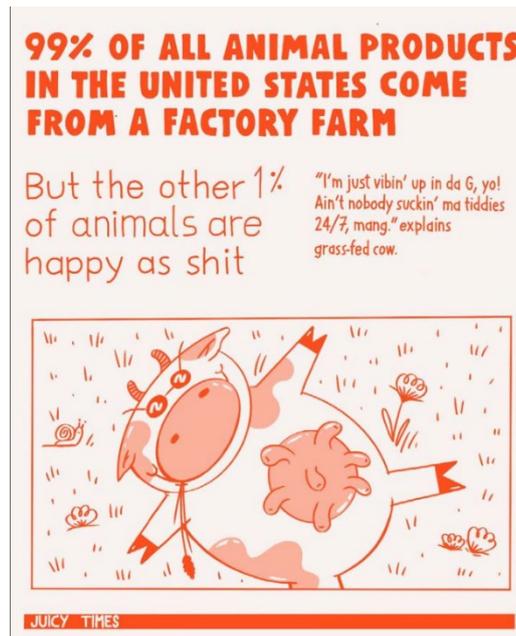


Figure 3. Example of using irony as a form of critique.

Playing the same game, employing the same language, and using the same rhetoric strategies set by an immoral context is necessary to enter the hegemonic discourse that pertains to it – it is the necessary condition to be heard and understood.⁴⁰ Yet, because it relies on the same discourse that is being critiqued and asks for sympathy from those who are part of it, this form of irony remains ambiguous and open to different interpretations and moral evaluations. Indeed, this form of irony always carries the risk of complicity: it has an inherent vulnerability for being co-opted back into the very power structures and beliefs one seeks to disrupt, or at least for being perceived as such.⁴¹

If the meme (Figure 3) were directed at people, it would be less acceptable, as the prevailing social norms do not see irony about death in a good light, given the widely shared belief in the value of human life. Similarly, in a completely anti-speciesist context, such ironic expressions would be deemed unnecessary, ineffective, and inappropriate. However, this is not the context in which these

⁴⁰ See Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁴¹ See R. Siegle, *Suburban Ambush: Downtown Writing and the Fiction of Insurgency*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1989.

pranks and advertisements are currently presented. Considering the historical and discursive contexts in which they are embedded helps explain how their pragmatic ability to disrupt hegemonic worldviews can prevent them from consistently provoking indignation among vegans. Thus, this contextual understanding sheds light on why these actions are not entirely morally incoherent from the standpoint of veganism. That said, this does not completely protect PBM irony from accusations of immorality: this form of irony is not innocent, nor does it aspire to be morally pure, as it hinges on rejecting the narrative portraying veganism as moral sanctimony. It attempts to disrupt hegemonic worldviews at the cost of potential complicity. Nevertheless, if this form of irony manages to challenge the widespread moral indifference toward animals' deaths, it may serve as a beneficial, and not morally wrong, form of resistance.

4. Conclusion

The marketing strategies of companies that sell PBM often employ irony to communicate the nature and aim of their products (*Section 1*). As we have attempted to show in *Section 2*, using death as a comic object can constitute a moral wrong and PBM advertisements can be interpreted as inappropriate instances of irony about the death of animals. We have therefore asked why this form of irony, which in principle should be morally problematic from an anti-speciesist and vegan point of view, does not always cause outrage among vegans. In *Section 3* we have tried to answer this question by demonstrating that the immorality of this form of irony can be outweighed by the moral benefit of criticising an entrenched system of belief: indeed, ironising about animal death can be used to expose the systematic indifference towards the killing of animals for food that characterises carnivorous meals. From this perspective, irony could become a critical tool that subverts commonplace assumptions about both the ethics of meat consumption

and the stereotypes associated with veganism as moral sanctimony. Thus, despite retaining its controversial and ambiguous nature, the irony used by PBM advertisements is not inherently morally wrong from the standpoint of veganism.

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