Introduction

This is a book about the effects of the media on consumers – and the importance of fun in that relationship.

Although that's not entirely accurate. Rather, this is a book about the effects of *entertainment* on consumers. It's common to talk about 'media effects' (Sparks, 2010) – but that's a slightly misleading approach to understanding how culture works. Not all media have the same effects: does an instruction manual for Ikea have the same effects on its consumers as a film by Andy Warhol? Does either of those have the same effects as an episode of *Real Housewives of Atlanta*? And in the same way it's not immediately clear that the effects of mediated culture are necessarily different from those of unmediated culture: does watching Katy Perry perform live necessarily have a different effect from watching a video of Katy Perry performing live? And so this is a book about entertainment and its effects. Not all media is entertainment; and not all entertainment is mediated.

And because the focus of this book is the effects of entertainment, fun plays an important role. As you'll see when you read on, I bring together two quite distinct traditions of academic thought in this book – a media studies concern with the effects of culture and an aesthetic interest in the ways in which culture can improve its consumers – in order to make two distinct but related points. The first point is that we have fun consuming entertainment; the second point is that entertainment provides us with materials to think about the importance of fun. And so, if we want to understand the effects that entertainment has on its consumers, a focus on fun should be an important part of our thinking.

Before I go any further, it's worth addressing the elephant in the room – because I know what you're thinking. Academic books about media effects are pretty standard. But an academic book about fun? Isn't that like a Catholic priest writing a book on how to raise healthy children – just wrong on so many levels? Academic writing is rarely fun: but to write about fun is a risk that has to be taken if we want academic research to have validity in describing the world of cultural consumption, because fun is a serious topic. As I will argue in this book, fun is a central organising principle for entertainment, and

entertainment is the most important category of culture in twenty-first century Western cultures. If we don't understand the importance of fun then we don't understand the world in which we live. And hopefully this book, if not fully fun, will at least be readable. The writing may not reach the heights of Dean Koontz or Agatha Christie, but it should at least be clear and – hopefully – engaging. I don't get to decide whether that's true or not – only the readers have that power. Be honest in your online comments. Consumer feedback is central to the processes that make entertainment work. And it's the reason why entertainment is so concerned with fun.

The cartoon *Futurama* tells us a story that illustrates the importance of fun. It's the early thirty-first century and the crew of interstellar delivery ship Planet Express are visiting a futuristic Oktoberfest (Vebber & Sandoval, 2012). But – as with all good science fiction – this isn't the Oktoberfest that we twenty-first century humans know and love. It has evolved to become 'the world's most sophisticated exhibition of German food, drink, and culture'. So when Phillip J Fry – a twentieth-century idiot who has travelled to the future - ends up getting drunk and standing on the table to perform the chicken dance, the assembled company of connoisseurs are appalled. 'Oktoberfest is a classy celebration of how far humans have evolved. You need to be on your best behaviour', chides his friend Leela. Fry is appalled 'Man, all the fun has been taken out of this once-noble barf-a-palooza'.

But *Futurama* doesn't leave us there. Yes, the show acknowledges, barfing can be fun – but there's much more to be said about this important and slippery concept (fun, that is – not barfing). As a good example of mainstream commercial entertainment culture, the show is here to make an argument for the importance of fun. When a group of frozen Neanderthals from the nearby Neander Valley is awoken and attacks the humans (don't ask), fighting proves futile – the proto-humans are perfectly capable of fighting back. In the end, Fry has a cunning plan to save the day. He uses fun - distracting the proto-humans from their attack with drinking, sex and partying. It works – and the human race is saved. As Leela says at the end of the episode: 'I have to admit, your version is more fun'. And it saves humanity. *Futurama* gives us twenty minutes of fun, and uses those twenty minutes to argue for the importance of fun. And this is true more generally. Entertainment both shows and tells – it gives us fun, and at the same time it explores the role of fun in our lives. This duality runs through this book, as I consider

the proposition that maybe the most important effects that entertainment has on its audiences are related to fun.

The question of how culture affects the people who consume it has concerned philosophers for a long time. Researchers in this area often mention Plato's worries about the negative effects of fiction on consumers as an important starting point for this tradition of investigation. For example, 'Poetry' – unlike philosophy, Plato tells us – 'has a terrible power to corrupt even the best characters' (Plato, 1974, p. 436). The artist who makes fiction 'deals with a low element of the mind … he wakens and encourages and strengthens the lower elements of the mind to the detriment of reason' (Plato, 1974, p. 435). Indeed, in producing fiction 'the poet gratifies and indulges the instinctive desires of a part of us … with its hunger for tears …' (Plato, 1974, p. 436). Unlike philosophy – says Plato – fiction doesn't show 'the highest part of us' – the part that 'follow[s] reasoning' – but rather 'The other part of us' – which

> we may, I think, call irrational and lazy and inclined to cowardice … And this recalcitrant element in us gives plenty of material for dramatic representation; but the reasonable element and its unvarying calm are difficult to represent, particularly by the motley audience gathered in a theatre, to whose experience it is quite foreign (Plato, 1974, p. 435)

Fiction both represents and satisfies the worst part of human nature – the irrational and the emotional – rather than the part of the human character that is characterised by unemotional rationality. And it does so for the 'motley' audience – the masses – who really aren't reasonable enough to enjoy a good documentary. Or so says Plato.

In the two and a half thousand years since Plato voiced his concerns about the negative effects of exposure to fictional media the human race has proven to be consistently fascinated by the question of how culture affects its consumers. In the modern era a number of standard approaches to this question have emerged. In this book I draw on two of these traditions: concerns about media effects; and the exploration the aesthetic impact of culture. In fact, as I suggest below, these traditions, different as they are, can be brought together as complementary approaches to the thinking of the effects of culture on its consumers.

The media effects model - as explained by the iconic textbook *Communication, Media and Cultural Studies: the Key Concepts* – is:

> Based on social psychology and aspiring to scientific status … [and] sought to show *causal* links between media content and individual behaviour. It investigated the effects of sexual and violent content in popular film and television, comics or popular music on adolescents, women, and other, supposedly, vulnerable groups (Hartley, Montgomery, Rennie, & Brennan, 2002, p. 81)

Within the social sciences, the study of 'media effects' has been one of the most popular approaches to understanding how culture works. Media effects are 'those things that occur as a result—either in part or in whole—from media influence' (Potter, 2013, p. 38). Social scientists worry that:

> media messages are so constant and so pervasive that we are continually being exposed to media information either directly from media exposures or indirectly by other people talking about media exposures. Therefore, we need to acknowledge that the media are continually exerting an influence on us (Potter, 2013, p. 38)

The history of this approach can be traced back to the nineteen twenties, and concerns about the effects of cinema on children: in the twenties, 'Going to the movies was a frequent event for most families - they were great fun' (Shearon Lowery and Melvin DeFleur quoted in Sparks, 2010, p. 46). As Sparks notes, with this much fun being had, people were bound to worry: 'With movies as the primary source of public entertainment, researchers started to become interested in documenting the effects of movies toward the end of the 1920s' '(Sparks, 2010, p. 46). And so from 1929 to 1932 the Payne Fund Studies became the first systematic attempt to prove that consuming entertainment is bad for you. The Payne Fund studies were not interested in the possible *positive* effects of exposure to entertainment. Rather, they established a paradigm for 'media effects' research that explores sex, violence and disrespect for authority as the most obvious effects from consuming entertainment:

> this emphasis on the impact of movies seems just as relevant today as it was in the late 1920s when the studies were done. Public discussion about the V -chip and

the possible effects of violent video games is just a contemporary version of the same concerns that were voiced 70 years ago (Sparks, 2010, p. 48)

Theoretically a study of 'media effects' could focus on the positive effects of exposure to mass media: but as W James Potter points out, while 'the media [can] exert positive effects':

> when people in their everyday lives think about media effects, they typically limit their thinking to negative things that happen to other people after watching too much 'bad' content (Potter, 2013, p. 35)

It is also interesting that the vast majority of media effects research has focused on entertainment rather than art. Technically books are a medium, and so there's no reason why a media effects approach shouldn't study the possible negative effects of exposure to the texts of Shakespeare (all that fighting! All that underage sex!). But while there have been literally thousands of studies exploring the possible negative effects of exposure to action films, soap operas or pornography, it is surprisingly difficult to find work on the negative effects of exposure to great literature, for example. In a way, the clue is in the name – of course exposure to 'great literature' wouldn't have negative effects … would it? Although, if we've never actually tested for them, how would we know?

By contrast, when researchers are interested in understanding the effects of exposure to art, high culture and great literature they tend to use another approach: aesthetics. Aesthetics is also a long-standing intellectual tradition - although one that has been less commonly used for understanding the effects of entertainment. *Key Concepts* defines it in this way:

> A term deriving from the philosophical analysis of art, aesthetics refers to insight, expressiveness and beauty in creativity … aesthetics provided a paradigm for talking about texts as art, and art as humanising civility, not mere decoration (Hartley et al., 2002, p. 4)

More generally, aesthetics is 'the philosophy of art' (Cooper, 1997, p. 2). It explores a range of issues including 'the definition of art' (Lyas, p. 103), 'what is important in art' (Manns, 1998, p. 59; Stolnitz, 1965, p. 3), 'the meaning and value of the work of art' (Beistegui, 2012, p. 11) and 'Whether taste is strictly an individual matter or whether

aesthetic judgments passed by some people carry more weight than those made by others' (Manns, 1998, p. 133).

Aesthetics has also been centrally concerned with exploring the kinds of effect that art can have on people who are exposed to it – ' the power that art can have over us' (Lyas, p. 219), or the 'aesthetic experience' (Manns, 1998, p. 175). Unlike media effects research, which tends to focus on the possible negative effects of exposure to culture, aesthetic approaches more commonly focus on possible positive effects. There is a general agreement among philosophers of aesthetics that exposure to art has the capacity to make people better in some way. Manns argues that 'There is ... a close connection ... between representation and truth: we emerge from our confrontations with works of art as wiser people' (Manns, 1998, p. 29); while in relation to the capacity of art to communicate emotions he notes that: 'Since emotions are often spurs to action, and through action our moral character makes itself manifest, art therefore is seen to have the capability to make us better people' (Manns, 1998, p. 29). Lyas notes that 'if we are looking for a way of understanding the importance of art, the relevance of truth and morality to art is a promising area to investigate' (Lyas, p. 189). He cites Elliott's claim that exposure to art offers 'the promise of the continual possibility of spiritual renewal' (Lyas, p. 31) and Kant's insistence that 'an intense attention to the aesthetically valuable leads to reflection on the moral good' (Lyas, p. 32).

All of these aesthetic philosophers focus on the possible positive effects of exposure to art. There has been surprisingly little research that asks whether entertainment can function in the same way? Could we argue that exposure to *X Men: Days of Future Pas*t offers the possibility of spiritual renewal? Or that consuming the novels of Jackie Collins leads to reflection on the moral good? To start with it's worth noting that most philosophers of aesthetics explicitly exclude entertainment from consideration. It's true that the work of pre-modern philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle – long before the term 'aesthetics' was invented in the eighteenth century – made no distinction between different kinds of culture (Cooper, 1997, p. 9). And a small number of modern philosophers, such as Lyas, argue that the term 'art' should logically include all human culture, and that 'as the Latin origin of the word "art" suggests ... all made things are art'(Lyas, p. 103). But, as he notes, the dominant tradition in aesthetics does not do this – in fact, most philosophical writing in this area argues that art is valuable, but other

forms of culture (including entertainment), aren't. These writers try to work out 'how to divide *the things that human beings make* into things that are art, and things that are not' (Lyas, p. 103):

> the tendency to put artistic expressions a cut above supposedly more humble expressions is one of the reasons why aesthetics and the arts are sometimes thought of as what Croce dubbed an 'aristocratic club' (Lyas, p. 100)

And so, for example, Tolstoy dismisses the work of the creative worker 'whose only goal is to entertain the audience': he [sic]:

> is often inspired by no emotion of his own. He works to a formula of commercial success, and his art is therefore lifeless, even when it "sells". When the audience, inevitably, becomes jaded, the artist resorts to wilful obscurity, or else sensationalism – the emotions of sex, perversion and violence (Stolnitz, 1965, p. 8)

He is '[s]cornful of the idea that art ... constitutes some sort of play or amusement' (Manns, 1998, p. 90). Similarly, Andre Malraux argues that the forms of culture consumed by 'crowds' (entertainment) are:

> often superficial and puerile, and scarcely go beyond the amorous and Christian sentimentalities, the taste for violence, a little cruelty, collective vanity and sensuality (Andre Malraux, quoted in Stolnitz, 1965, p. 9)

Manns dismisses:

> most of what is churned out for mass consumption by the television, cinema and popular music industries these days, regardless of how much they may seek to justify their more horrific and offensive production by making appeal to 'artistic' freedom' (Manns, 1998, p. 93)

Clive Bell uses both 'melodrama' and 'juggling' – both venerable forms of entertainment – as terms of disdain in order to deprecate those creatives who are not, he believes 'great artist[s]' (Clive Bell quoted in Manns, 1998, p. 58). And Baggini and Southwell note that art is more than 'merely a means of enjoyment' (Baggini & Southwell, 2002, p. 178).

Two points emerge from reviewing this work. The first is that, for most philosophers of aesthetics, entertainment isn't included in the category of 'art'. But more than this, a

second point is that the system of aesthetics hasn't really been set up to deal with entertainment. In asking what is the value of art, the answers that are given would exclude works of entertainment even if they were allowed into consideration. If offering consumers a fun experience is dismissed as 'merely a means of enjoyment', then one of the central criteria for good entertainment is excluded from consideration. If 'sensuality' is seen as a negative and 'superficial' quality then entertainment's work in that area can't be taken seriously. If amusement is dismissed 'scornfully', then how can we celebrate the work of entertainment that successfully amuses its audience?

Philosophical aesthetics, then, hasn't had much time for entertainment. But it's worth noting that there has been a growth in recent years in what we might call 'applied aesthetics' – taking the questions of aesthetics and applying them to particular forms of culture. Writers are now exploring 'the aesthetics of sampling' (Navas, 2012), 'the aesthetics of architecture' (Goldblatt & Paden, 2011) or 'the aesthetics of wine' (Burnham & Skilleas, 2012). These explorations do not follow the same trajectory as philosophical aesthetics in its attempts to generalise about art and beauty. Rather they explain how particular forms of culture work, and how they might be valued. We could say that this book, explores 'the aesthetics of entertainment'. And in this analysis, fun becomes a central term. Entertainment and fun go together like – as *Married with Children* so often reminded us – love and marriage. Spend a week consuming entertainment and looking out for 'fun' and you'll be surprised by just how central it is. You read an entertainment magazine reviewing a comic book, commenting that the film 'seems to have forgotten that this kind of superhero event should also at least TRY to be fun'. You put on the radio and hear that 'Girls just want to have fun'. (or perhaps 'Some nights', by the band Fun). You put on the television and see *30 Rock* making fun of the branding of NBC – it's 'funtertainment'. Indeed, so important is fun that artist Nicky Case has complained about 'the tyranny of fun' in entertainment (Begley, 2014, p. 33) – in the same way that we might complain about 'the tyranny of seriousness' in art.

But what is fun? If I'm going to argue that one of the most important effects of the exposure to entertainment is that fun is to be had, then I need to make clear what I'm actually talking about. Bringing together an effects tradition and an aesthetic tradition proves useful here. I take from the media effects tradition a focus on entertainment and an interest in understanding the ways in which encounters with entertainment might

change the consumer. From the aesthetics tradition I take the questions that I will explore: What is the definition of entertainment? What is important in entertainment? What is the meaning and value of the work of entertainment? I also take from aesthetics an interest in the positive ways in which entertainment might affects its consumers. In the following chapters I explore these issues in detail, taking entertainment as not only a source of fun, but also a way of thinking about fun. Hopefully in doing so this book gives us a better way of understanding the kinds of effects that entertainment might have on its consumers.

In making these arguments, I will take what John Hartley insists is an empirical approach – gathering textual evidence from examples of entertainment in order to illustrate and support the claims I make about what fun is and what is its place in the cultural system of entertainment. The research method I use, both for data gathering and for data analysis, is poststructural textual analysis. This approach involves studying texts (a text is anything that is meaningful – films, television programs, books, T-shirts with slogans on them) in order to make an informed guess at likely interpretations of that text (McKee, 2003). In this book I'm particularly using textual analysis for exegetical ends (McKee, 2014) – aiming to explain the ideas that are put forward in a text – as in the example of Futurama above. The point is not to produce innovative or clever interpretations that nobody has thought of before: rather the aim is to gather evidence of how our systems of sensemaking work around us, in an everyday and unexceptional fashion. Anybody who is familiar with the ways in which entertainment works will be unsurprised by my insistence that 'fun' is central to this system – it's everywhere around us.

As I noted above, you might be wary of a book by an academic claiming to explain the importance of fun – and certainly after reading a paragraph that introduces my research method. And I certainly can't guarantee that reading this book will be as much fun as, say, dancing with a hot guy in a dingy nightclub; or getting drunk at a futuristic Oktoberfest and fighting off Neatherdals by showing them how to party. In fact, as we explore what is meant by fun it might become clear that academic books are, in many ways, the very opposite of fun. But hopefully reading this will be interesting, and readable, and provocative, and might even be useful in your own thinking about the world we live in, about the nature and function of culture – and even what it means to

live a good life. It might at least be – to set a modest ambition – not the very opposite of fun.

So let's start with a quick discussion about the relationship between entertainment and fun.

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