This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in CULTURAL STUDIES 35.2-3, available online
https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09502386.2021.1898026

Nicholas Holm

School of Humanities, Media and Creative Communication, Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand

nhfholm@massey.ac.nz

ORCiD 0000-0003-0391-939X

Nicholas Holm is a senior lecturer in Media Studies at Massey University, New Zealand. He writes on political aesthetics and popular culture. His most recent publications include articles on bureaucratic boredom in *New Formations* (2020) and popular critique in *Cultural Studies* (2020). His most recent monograph is *Humour as politics* (Palgrave 2017).

No Time for Fun: The Politics of Partying during a Pandemic

In 2020, in the face of the unparalleled epidemiological threat posed by Covid-19, multiple governments around the world sought to contain the spread of the virus by imposing strict lockdown measures that dramatically limited the movement and gathering of citizens. Not only did these restrictions severely curtail the regular patterns of economic, political and cultural life, they also made it very hard to *have fun*. While this last point may appear flippant, this article proposes that a proper accounting for fun is absolutely necessary if we are to understand not just the challenges passed by lockdown measures, but also the legal and biomedical risks people were willing to take to engage in activities like hosting parties, surfing and attending raves, during a pandemic. Arguing against the idea of fun as a form of displaced political practice, I instead suggest that fun is best understood as an example of contingent, non-transcendent aesthetic value that is absolutely central to everyday desire and the appeal of popular culture. Often easy to overlook, the experience of lockdown brought the appeal and importance of fun into sharp relief in ways that point towards the powerful role fun plays in shaping our lives both during a pandemic and (hopefully) after.

Fun; Lockdown; Covid-19; Pandemic; Aesthetics, Politics

In response to the growing threat of the global Covid-19 pandemic, on March 25, 2020, Aotearoa New Zealand entered into what was, by many accounts, the most stringent lockdown in the over-developed world (Blavatnik School 2020; Douglas 2020). With only two days' notice, almost all residents were confined to their homes for what would turn out to be just over a month. They were only allowed to venture out for groceries and medical supplies, and to engage in exercise in their local areas. Once it became apparent that this strong and swift action had enabled the island nation to not only 'flatten the curve,' but actually to begin a process that would see the first wave of active infections eliminated by early June, the actions of the New Zealand population and its leadership were subject to

extensive praise and coverage in a range of global media outlets (Baggaley 2020; BBC 2020; Brockett 2020; Conforti 2020).

In contrast, local defiance of the lockdown orders received relatively little international attention, although they were of subject of acute concern and conniptions in local news media. Reports of private parties, social mixing and casual sports stoked furious commentary and public outrage (Alves, 2020; Manch 2020; Ritchie 2020). General opinion seemed to regard such behaviour as inconsiderate at best, treacherous at worst in the context of wider sacrifices being made. A website established to allow New Zealanders to report suspected breaches of lockdown to police crashed due to high demand (RNZ 2020). This anger was only compounded by ambiguities in official guidelines regarding travel limits and sanctioned behaviour. Was swimming allowed? What about surfing? (No, and no, it would turn out) (Leahy 2020). Was it acceptable to drive to a nearby park or beach for exercise? (No, said the Police commissioner. Perhaps, said the Prime Minister) (Geddis, 2020; Sadler 2020). When hunting was initially prohibited, exemptions were sought for those groups who engaged in hunting for subsistence, rather than recreation (Hurihanginui 2020). The overarching theme of these decisions appeared to be that New Zealanders could only leave lockdown for the serious business of maintaining the basics of biological life: woe betide those who appeared to take pleasure in their exercise or provision. Best not to smile while out for your daily constitutional.

Moreover, Aotearoa New Zealand was not alone in witnessing such conflicts around the limits of officially sanctioned behaviour imposed against the backdrop of surging global death counts. In neighbouring Australia, Sydney's famous Bondi Beach became the centre of national concern and anger as surfers and swimmers were reported scaling fences in order to access the ocean after barricades were erected (Doherty 2020). When the beach re-opened and the fences were removed, the surf breaks became so crowded that distancing measures

become impossible (BBC 2020b). In the UK, as the pandemic continued to rage in June, police cracked down on illegal raves held in contravention of social distancing guidelines (Grant and Okpattah 2020). As the global death count climbed, particular ire seemed reserved for those who prioritised their personal pleasure over epidemiological solidarity.

No doubt many factors are at play in such conflicts over permissible behaviours: not least longstanding tensions over race and class tied up with practices such as surfing and raves (Hough-Snee and Sotelo Eastman 2017; Gilbert and Pearson 1999; McRobbie 1994). However, such debates also point towards an often-overlooked aspect of our social and cultural lives: the idea, the experience, the desire that we call *fun*. Even amidst the spectre of global death and collapsing health systems, evidence of a desire for fun persisted in both discreet and disruptive ways. On the one hand, there has been a constant low-level concern with what it might mean *to have fun* under quarantine conditions: from the novel phenomenon of the Zoom party and online workout classes to the booming fortunes of streaming and video game industries and beyond. More dramatically, on the other hand, the idea of fun also informed many instances of determined opposition to official declarations and state edicts. From the defiant surfers at Sydney's Bondi Beach to police crackdowns on private parties in Aotearoa New Zealand, the pull of fun would seem to be such that it can motivate citizens to defy the will of the state and even risk exposure to a potentially fatal illness. By limiting and distorting the ways and means by which people were accustomed to experiencing fun, stay-at-home and lockdown orders paradoxically made fun, and the ways in which the pull of fun shapes our everyday life, more visible.

The desire for fun during a pandemic will likely strike many as inappropriate or irresponsible, even inhuman. In legal and biomedical terms, the strictures of lockdown orders and the facts of disease transmission effectively forbade almost all those forms of social contact associated with fun. Meanwhile, on a moral level, it would seem indecent to seek out

frivolous enjoyment while others are dying or engaging in the grim business of trying to prevent others from dying. Never mind that this simultaneity is an inescapable fact of the human condition at any time, the ever-present awareness of covid-19 brought into sharp relief the uneven distribution of access to fun. Essential workers of all stripes—from health professionals to low-wage stockers of supermarket shelves—were compelled to labour under conditions widely perceived to put them at risk of infection, while others suffered extreme material hardship as the economy collapsed and businesses closed. At a time when others suffer or are subject to undue risk, fun can certainly seem inappropriate. However, although lockdown was certainly not widely regarded as the time for having fun, *fun* can nonetheless help us make sense of popular responses that defied the predictions of both economic and epidemiological models. In doing so, such an investigation also sheds light on the wider and often taken-for-granted role of fun under the regular conditions of taken-for-granted consumer capitalism. Thus, while the idea of fun might seem a world away from the realities of life during a pandemic, the rapid social transformations implemented in response to Covid-19 brought into sharp relief a deep, powerful and widely distributed desire for fun.

Even during the best of times, fun can seem like a trivial concern. *Fun* is not only a deeply complex and contested term; it is also fundamentally ineffable. Attempts to lock down or reduce fun to an expression of popular politics or a manipulative concoction of the culture industry risk neglecting the term's apparent lightness. Consequently, it is almost by definition difficult to take fun seriously, and harder still to discuss it in any sustained and rigorous way. This difficulty perhaps goes some way to explaining the term's absence in cultural studies, even as related terms such as *pleasure*, *jouissance*, and *play* have been the subjects of extensive consideration in the field's history (if not as much in recent years) (c.f. Bahktin 1984; de Certeau 1988; Harris 1992; Radway 1991; Stallybrass and White 1986; Stam 1989). As Joanna Zylinska notes, "fun" is one of those terms that threatens to evoke the

"cultural studies bashing" attitudes of infamous figures like Alan Sokal and Richard Dawkins (2005, 26-8). Fun thus functions as something of a limit case: a topic that is potentially simply too "embarrassing." To speak of fun would seem to risk presenting oneself for ridicule and rejection. And yet, the desire that we call fun is an ever-present and often powerful part of our lives: at once the ostensible output of multibillion-dollar media industries, and a powerful object of individual desire that drives everyday sociability and communal experience (McKee 2016; Fincham 2016). Fun sits at the heart of our affective lives in highly mediated contexts as an essential means by which popular legitimacy, desirability and taste are produced and contested.

Extant studies of fun, predominantly situated in the behavioural sciences, tend to conceive of it in fundamentally apolitical terms: as a desirable but minor form of social experience that can be applied to the instrumental ends of motivation and social integration, or codified as a set of media design principles (Blythe and Monk 2018; De Koven, 2013; McManus 2010; Roy 1959). What such behaviourist models fail to account for, however, is the paradoxical nature of fun. Although almost by definition without consequence, the desire, the drive, the appeal of fun is such that, in practice, it can become deeply consequential. This meaningfulness of fun was on full display as large sections of the global population become subject to lockdown orders, or local variants. Under such conditions, fun would appear to be of extremely minimal importance in the face of epidemiological, economic and even existential threats. And yet, even amidst the spectre of global death and collapsing health systems, commentators yearned publically for a return to everyday practices and experiences of passing human contact, unburdened movement, and diverse forms of consumption: not only because of the economic benefit associated with the '"re-opening" of society, but also because of a deep desire for the pleasures of everyday life. As noted above, some were even willing to defy public health and police notices in order to experience the fun of communal

gathering and physical movement. In this context, fun emerges as an intense desire for what we would customarily be regarded as the non-meaningful or the non-serious, the ostensibly trivial and the flippant. Under such circumstances, inherited distinctions between that which is serious and that which is not begin to become shaky, if not untenable.

What such disruptive fun-seeking behaviour demonstrates is how fun can mark particular instances of culture and social life as simultaneously worthwhile and potentially trivial, both deeply important and absolutely unimportant at the same time. Accounting for this paradox is the key to understanding how fun functions as a fundamental and deeply consequential source of both social attraction and repulsion; that is as a force that motivates particular practices, communities, and relationships. In doing so, fun reaches out beyond the limits of recreation and entertainment, such that the promise and possible pleasures of fun become drivers of socially and politically meaningful behaviour. This does not mean that fun is inherently progressive or reactionary, but simply that it is implicated in some of the most pressing political questions of our moment in ways that demand attention.

For example: it is fun, I am arguing here, that informed unexpected forms of resistance to biomedical discipline and regulation during lockdown orders. While much of the formal debate surrounding the desirability of lockdown was couched in terms of economics versus public health, it would be a stretch to attribute the bio-medically defiant actions of surfers, ravers or illicit partiers to purely or even primarily economic concerns. Although there are certainly economic interests tied up with such activities, they are not reducible to them. To argue that ravers rave in spite of stay-at-home orders because they have been conned into doing so by profit-seeking organisers, or that surfers are the pawns of Big Surf, is to reductively characterise the motivations of those subcultures and surrounding economies: it is to deny the agency of the participants so deeply as to slip from a model of false consciousness into misanthropy.

Nor does it make particular sense to attribute the choice to surf or rave or party to a desire to express political opposition to stay-at-home orders through indirect social or cultural means. Such an argument would be familiar to those conversant with those forms of populist cultural studies ascendant in the 1980s and 90s, where "resistance" to the dominant order could be found in innumerable acts of popular consumption, display, and amateur production (Fiske 2011; Jenkins 2013). However, although forms of prohibited behaviour like partying no doubt acted as indirect challenges to the hegemonic consensus under lockdown conditions—particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand where the commonsense acceptance of the public health paradigm reigned almost unchallenged—the context of those actions here mitigates an emphatically political reading. In contrast to the USA, where protestors openly declared their opposition to lockdown orders as an impingement of their freedom (DeBrabander 2020), those who took part in clandestine socialising or swimming were almost always attempting to conceal rather than publicise their actions. They relied on neighbours and passers-by to turn a blind eye, rather than escalate the response to their situation. Such reticence challenges any assumption that these are best understood as purposively agonistic communicative actions, instead suggesting that their motivations were private and directed inwards, rather than performative (to the extent that such a distinction makes sense). Thus, while such behaviour certainly has wider ramifications in terms of the negotiation and contestation of state power in unusual times, I suggest that their motivation is best characterised not as obliquely political or self-deceptively economic, but instead as a desire for fun as an end in itself.

Fun is usually understood as a self-sufficient justification for engaging in an activity or behaviour: as in the idea of "doing something for fun" (McKee 2016, 29-40). To understand fun as something that is desired as an end in itself is potentially to characterise it as "autonomous": a term that is historically more closely associated with the study of art

rather than popular entertainment. An autonomous account of art and artistic practice conceives of them as motivated and directed towards their own internal ends, as opposed to a heteronomous conception that regards art as either determined by or directed towards the conditions of its production (Rancière 2011). However, fun is not autonomous in this sense: it does not mark a transcendent break with its social and cultural context. Rather, fun is absolutely bound up with and shaped by the concrete conditions, the economic and social muck and stink of the environment in which it is found. In foundational aesthetic terms, fun aligns more closely with what Immanuel Kant called the "agreeable": a term against which he then defined the more promising and powerful notion of "beauty" (2000, 91-98). It is Kant's beauty which has since captured almost all attention of those who seek to understand the political force of cultural work. Beauty has formed the basis of a critical aesthetic theory that seeks to understand the political relevance of art and cultural expression through reference to the negation of everyday interests and investments in favour of transcendence (Brown 2019). In contrast, fun points towards a different model of critical aesthetics: one that is non-transcendent, but rather firmly rooted in the material limits of the everyday. Like beauty, fun is purposeless; but unlike beauty, fun is not alien to the everyday. Fun lacks the redeeming sense of social status or betterment that has historically attached itself to that privileged category of beauty, and as a result it perhaps carries less baggage, less sense of Bourdiuesian distinction and pretension (Bourdieu 1984). To paraphrase Raymond Williams, fun is ordinary (2014).

Fun is also terrifying. It not only opens one up to charges of being overly concerned with that which is *really*, *actually* trivial, it also refuses to sit neatly within established models of cultural theory. This is almost certainly the reason why cultural and critical studies have had no time for fun: a concept that is deeply rooted in everyday life and popular experience. However, this is also exactly the reason why the varied experiences of fun during

lockdown conditions are so important: they sharpen attention to the too often overlooked importance of fun in explaining the motivations, priorities and decisions of our everyday lives as they relate to questions of cultural consumption, social interaction and community engagement. Lockdown conditions revealed how important fun is, and how necessary it is that we take fun into account when trying to explain the consequences and complications of topics like everyday life and popular culture, or perhaps even when formulating public health policy. Illegal parties and forbidden surfing were undeniably tied up with the forging, negotiating and challenging of hegemonic consensus but cannot be easily understood as politically motivated or directed in any straightforward way. These instances were not primarily indirect statements about the role of the state: they were expressions of the continued pull of fun under dramatically changed circumstances.

To state that people took part in these activities because they *were fun* is thus to begin to find a way to acknowledge how those actions had political meaning—that they constituted a meaningful intervention in relation to the exercise of authority under largely unprecedented conditions of biomedical regulation—without reducing them to overt political statements. In place of the familiar terms such as *transgression*, *resistance* and *discipline*, the experience of fun-during-lockdown provides examples of how everyday behaviours and popular culture can constitute forms of meaningful action without being reduced to simply the practice of politics by other means. This is a political aesthetics of texts and practices that are desirable and enjoyable, but that do not mark a profound break with established ideology or epistemology: a cultural politics of the ordinary and the agreeable, in order to complement the well-established cultural politics of the radical and transcendent. Nor is this simply a lesson for a world in lockdown. Looking beyond a world shaped by the demands and priorities of epidemiological response, making time for fun will enable us to account for new and different ways in which politics is being done: from the utopian impulse of Acid Corbynism

to the gleeful disrespect at the heart of the alt-right and the rise of a new class of comedian-politicians (Fisher 2018; Milburn 2019; Nagle 2017). Drawing on an established tradition in cultural studies (Williams 1988), we might therefore even consider *fun* a "keyword" for pandemic, and hopefully post-pandemic, times: a way to reimagine how we account for political force of popular culture and everyday life. Before and after a world in lockdown, there is a pressing need to attend to the ways in which fun has become entangled in our political lives: not only informing new forms of political action and association, but also potentially altering broader ideas of what politics is and how it can and should work.

References

Alves, V., 2020. Why we should be mindful of dobbing in our neighbours. *Stuff.co.nz*, 31 March. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12321036

Baggaley, K., 2020. What we can learn from New Zealand's successful fight against COVID-19. *Popular Science*, 10 June. https://www.popsci.com/story/health/new-zealand-coronavirus-eliminated/

Bakhtin, M., 1984 *Rabelais and his World*. Trans. Iswolsky, H. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

BBC., 2020. New Zealand lifts all Covid restrictions, declaring the nation virus-free. *BBC*, 8 June. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52961539

BBC., 2020b. Surfing: Coronavirus lockdown advice leaves room for confusion. *BBC*, 9 April. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-52225031

Blavatnik School of Government., 2020. Coronovirus Government Response Tracker. *University of Oxford*. https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/coronavirus-government-response-tracker

Blythe, M., and Monk, A. eds., 2018. *Funology: From Usability to Enjoyment*. Cham: Springer.

Bourdieu, P., 1984. *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Brockett, M., 2020. New Zealand Ends Social Distancing After Eliminating Covid. *Bloomberg*, 8 June, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-08/new-zealand-eliminates-covid-19-with-zero-active-cases-reported.

Brown, N., 2019. *Autonomy*. Durham: Duke University Press.

de Certeau, M., 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Rendall, S. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Conforti, K., 2020. Jacinda Ardern Says, 'Thank You, New Zealand,' as Country Crushes Coronavirus. *Forbes*, 8 June. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kaeliconforti/2020/06/08/jacinda-ardern-says-thank-you-new-zealand-as-country-achieves-alert-level-1/#68e865195beb

DeBrabander, F., 2020. The Great Irony of America's Armed Anti-Lockdown Protesters. *The Atlantic*, 13 May. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/05/guns-protesters/611560/

Doherty, B., 2020. Quiet, with some defiance, as Bondi Beach succumbs to coronavirus closure. *The Guardian*, 22 March. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/22/quiet-with-some-defiance-as-bondi-beach-succumbs-to-coronavirus-closure

Douglas, J., 2020. Measuring the Strictness of Your Lockdown: A University Boils It Down to One Number; Researchers at Oxford University use 17 variables to develop a 'stringency index.' *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May. https://www.wsj.com/articles/measuring-the-strictness-of-your-lockdown-a-university-boils-it-down-to-one-number-11590246001

Fincham, B., 2016. *The Sociology of Fun*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Fisher, M., 2018. *K-Punk*. London: Repeater Books.

Fiske, J., 2011. *Reading the Popular*. New York: Routledge.

Geddis, A., 2020. Lockdown policing can't work well while there's still confusion over rules. *The Spinoff*, March 30. https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/30-03-2020/lockdown-policing-cant-work-well-while-theres-still-confusion-over-rules/

Gilbert J. and Pearson, E., 1999. *Discographies: Dance, Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*. Routledge, London.

Grant, P. and Okpattah K., 2020. Secret raves in London 'put lives at risk.' *BBC*, 5 June. https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52923321

Harris, D., 1992. *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure*. London: Routledge.

Hough-Snee, D.Z. and Sotelo Eastman, A., eds., 2017. *The Critical Surf Studies Reader*. Durham, Duke University Press.

Hurihanginui, T., 2020. Whānau relying on hunting for food should have exemption – leaders. *RNZ.co.nz*, 22 April. https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/te-manu-korihi/414888/covid-19-whanau-relying-on-hunting-for-food-should-have-exemption-leaders

Jenkins, H., 2013. *Textual Poachers*. New York: Routledge.

de Koven, B., 2013. *The Well-Played Game*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Kant, I., 20002 *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Huyer, P., ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Leahy, B., 2020. New lockdown law officially bans swimming, hunting, surfing. *NZ Herald*, 5 April. https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12322512

Manch, T., 2020. More than 4000 reports of possible lockdown breaches in a day.

Stuff.co.nz, 30 March. https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/coronavirus/120676405/coronavirus-more-than-4000-reports-of-possible-lockdown-breaches-in-a-day

McKee, A., 2016. *Fun! What Entertainment Tells Us About Living a Good Life*. London: Palgrave.

McManus, I.C. and Furnham, A., 2010. "Fun, Fun, Fun": Types of Fun, Attitudes to Fun, and their Relation to Personality & Biographical Factors. *Psychology* 1.3: 159-168.

McRobbie, A., 1994. Shut up and Dance: Youth Culture and the Changing Modes of Femininity. *In*: A. McRobbie. *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 135—154.

Milburn, K., 2019. The comedian as populist leader: Postironic narratives in an age of cynical irony. *Leadership* 15.2: 226-244.

Nagle, A., 2017. *Kill All Normies*. London: Verso.

Radway, J., 1991. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Rancière, J., 2011. "The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes." In *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, 115-133.

Ritchie, O., 2020. Crusaders players caught breaking lockdown rules. *Newshub*, 6 April. https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/sport/2020/04/coronavirus-crusaders-players-caught-breaking-lockdown-rules.html

RNZ., 2020. Nearly 10,000 reports of suspected lockdown breaches made. *RNZ.co.nz*, 31 March. https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/413052/nearly-10-000-reports-of-suspected-lockdown-breaches-made

Roy, D.F., 1959. 'Banana Time': Job Satisfaction and Informal Interaction. *Human Organization* 18.

Sadler. R., 2020. Police 'absolutely discourage' all driving during lockdown that isn't Essential. *Newhub.co.nz*, 26 March. https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2020/03/coronavirus-police-absolutely-discourage-all-driving-during-lockdown-that-isn-t-essential.html

Stallybrass P. and White, A., 1986. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Stam, R., 1989. *Subversive Pleasures*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Williams, R., 1988. *Keywords*. London, Fontana Press.

Williams, R., 2014. Culture is Ordinary. *In*: J. McGuigan, ed. *Raymond Williams on Culture and Society*. London: Sage, 1—18.

Zylinska, J., 2005. *The Ethics of Cultural Studies*. London: Continuum.