

'I am in Great Pain, Please Help Me': Nihilism, Humour, and *Rick and Morty*

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Abstract

One of Cartoon Network's most successful shows ever, *Rick and Morty* (2013–present) has established a cult following for its blend of dark humour and existential themes. However, the show is more than just a representation of popular nihilism; through its sustained engagement with nihilistic themes, it also demonstrates how nihilism can be embraced, exhausted, and potentially eventually surpassed in a popular context. Drawing on Richard Hoggart's model of "social hermeneutics," this article analyses key episodes as a means to think through the broader trajectory of nihilism as an influential element of twenty-first century popular culture.

Keywords

Absurdity, comedy, humour, nihilism, *Rick and Morty*

Introduction

If *Seinfeld* (1989–1998) was famously a 'show about nothing' (Mirzoeff, 2007: 19) then Adult Swim's *Rick and Morty* (2013–present) might be characterised as a show about nothingness: about the comic exploration of an infinitely complex universe where consequences are irrelevant, and morality is fundamentally relative. Charting the cosmic

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and multidimensional misadventures of an alcoholic and cynical scientist, Rick Sanchez, and his cowardly and awkward grandson Morty Smith, *Rick and Morty* is both a highly successful animated comedy and an extended meditation on meaninglessness. In doing this, the show constitutes one of the more recent examples of the long-standing engagement with nihilistic themes in popular culture. However, the show is also more than just a reflection of a popular concern with nihilism. It can also be understood as a direct intervention into how nihilism circulates as a social and philosophical perspective: a textual form in which popular nihilism is evoked, (re)articulated, and potentially even surpassed through its engagement with humour¹.

Nihilism has been observed, analysed, and frequently fretted over across a range of popular media from the ‘new nihilism’ of American indie cinema in the late 1990s (Sconce, 2002) through science-fiction and superhero nihilism (Younis, 2007) – not least the troubling figure of the Joker across multiple iterations of the Batman franchise (Kellner, 2013; Diken and Bagge, 2022). Popular nihilism has been condemned by those working in an avowedly Christian tradition of critique (Hibbs, 2014), located in different forms of popular music spanning decades – from David Bowie (Fitch, 2015) to Australian post-punk (Stratton, 2018) to the entire genre of Rap (Kubrin, 2005) – and decried as a hallmark of violent video games (Waddington, 2007). More recently, *Rick and Morty*’s animated contemporaries, like *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020) and *Big Mouth* (2017–present), have been taken up as illustrations of a new expression of comic nihilism (Falvey, 2020; Sawallisch, 2021).

At the core of *Rick and Morty*’s success has been the show’s sustained engagement with comic nihilism: an aspect that has been celebrated, criticised, and analysed in popular coverage (Horcher, 2023; Marshall, 2016; Mooney, 2019; Patterson, 2017; Stamato, 2016). Across six seasons and 61 episodes to date, the show has followed Rick, Morty, and their family as they travel to other planets and dimensions and encounter various bizarre beings and societies, ranging from sentient genocidal farts to space-faring dinosaurs to metanarrative parasites. Throughout these adventures, *Rick and Morty* glories in its representation of not just a profoundly alien world, but an at-times deeply unsettling moral universe where nihilism is a manifestly appropriate philosophy for addressing a multiverse that is demonstrably without meaning. Contrary to *Seinfeld*, then, the characters in *Rick and Morty* do learn lessons, but they are almost always invariably the same lesson: that the universe is a contradictory and nasty place where almost every attempt to do the ostensibly right thing will lead to further suffering and unexpected misfortune.

Consequently, whereas other popular texts might present nihilism as a fleeting source of dark humour or an alluring alternative to the social order, over its run *Rick and Morty* has grappled with the contradictions and limitations of what it means to think through nihilism in a sustained manner. What potentially sets *Rick and Morty* apart from previous popular engagements with nihilism is the extent to which the show’s central conceit has required it to stay with, and work through, the provocation of a meaningless universe. In part, this is due to the longevity of the show: what might begin as a throw-away gag can take on greater weight after multiple seasons of narrative development. This aspect of the show makes *Rick and Morty* an unusually fruitful example to explore not only how themes of nihilism are expressed and negotiated in contemporary popular culture, but also

how popular expressions of nihilism might reflect and inform our wider political culture. Through the analysis of *Rick and Morty*, we therefore intend to not simply document how the text incorporates and addresses themes of nihilism, but also to take up *Rick and Morty* as a way to think through how nihilism, especially comic nihilism, circulates as a cultural, social, and political mode in our current conjuncture.

Our approach in this analysis draws inspiration from Richard Hoggart's model of 'social hermeneutics,' as articulated by Stuart Hall, wherein 'the literary-critical method of "close reading" [is applied] to the sociological task of interpreting the lived meanings of a culture' (Hall, 2018: 40). Addressed in this way, *Rick and Morty* serves not just as a text to be analysed, but as an articulation point of contemporary popular culture that aligns with broader attitudes towards nihilism with the potential to 'inflect [those existing attitudes] in new directions' (Hall, 2018: 40). The show is thus herein taken as both a paradigmatic expression of nihilism in the English-language media-scape of the 2010s and 20s, and a working through of that nihilism towards its exhaustion and refutation. To develop this argument, this article begins by outlining the fundamental tenets of nihilism as a philosophical position, and how nihilism has informed a persistent category of absurd humour. We then track how such nihilism has manifested in *Rick and Morty* through the close reading of key episodes that illustrate the show's shifting relationship with its own central comic premise. In conclusion, we suggest that the show needs to be considered as more than simply a popular example of comic nihilism, but also as an important manifestation of the broader ways in which nihilism is evoked, valued, and potentially surpassed in popular discourse.

Comic nihilism: Should we laugh, or should we cry?

Defined as a philosophical belief or doctrine that denies the existence of inherent meaning or purpose in life (Nietzsche, 1883/2006: xvi; xvii; Marmysz, 2003: 156; Lovink, 2008: 17), nihilism is a recurring attribute of contemporary culture. Numerous scholars have ascribed this worldview to the decline of traditional values, particularly religious, ethical, and moral frameworks like truth, justice, and goodness, leading to a state of disillusionment and passivity, and the perception of life as fundamentally meaningless, hopeless, and worthless (Marmysz, 2003: 156; Lovink, 2008: 17). Such a sense of apathy is often expressed through a hyper-individualism that prioritises personal gratification and pleasure over collective values or social responsibility (Lovink, 2008: 29). Although some have deemed nihilism a 'divine way of thinking' for scholars and artists alike, for the most part it is considered 'a "malaise," a "cancer", and a "sickness"' (Marmysz, 2003: 1). John Marmysz goes so far as to call it 'a more urgent philosophical syndrome today than it ever has been' (2003: 12).

At first glance, nihilism and humour might appear to be at odds: the former often leads to despair and lachrymosity, while the latter is usually associated with amusement and laughter. Yet, humour is often employed as a way to explore and engage with nihilism in intriguing ways, through themes, storytelling approaches, and characters. For instance, nihilism's rejection of inherent meaning and objective reality can align with the broad category of 'absurd comedy,' (Koltun, 2018: 112–118) especially when absurdity is

understood, following Albert Camus, in terms of the quest for meaning in a meaningless world. Using the Greek myth of Sisyphus as a metaphor for this human condition, Camus explains that Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to repeatedly (and eternally) roll a boulder up a hill, only for it to roll back down again (Camus, 1955: 75–76). Although Camus' articulation of the absurd should not be understood as inherently comic, the notion of the absurd can thus be conceptualised in terms of a confrontation between human consciousness – with its tendency to seek meaning, purpose, and coherence in life – and an indifferent universe that remains silent to these inquiries. As he so eloquently puts it: '[the absurd is the] divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints' (Camus, 1955: 33).

The point at which nihilism and absurd comedy intersect, thus, is their shared reliance on, and utilisation of, incongruity. The link between humour and incongruity is well-known and widely discussed in the study of humour where it is commonly argued that humour arises from a perceived incongruity within, or deviation from, what is considered normal or expected in a given situation. For instance, consider Kant's explanation of laughter at jokes and wit: 'Something absurd ... must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty convulsive laugh. Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing' (Kant, 2007: 161). This existential paradox also correlates with Marmysz's notion of 'nihilistic incongruity' which he frames as the discrepancy between reality and the superlative ideals we formulate for ourselves (Marmysz, 2003: 2). He argues that 'The world is irrational, but humans demand order and sense, and so the encounter of humans with the world produces an absurd situation' (Marmysz, 2003: 47). Karen Carr interprets Nietzsche's notion of nihilism in a similar way; as 'a condition of tension, as a disproportion between what we want to value (or need) and how the world appears to operate' (Carr, 1992: 25). With both nihilism and absurdity, then, we are faced with a collision between, on the one hand, the rational, the serious and the real, and on the other, the irrational, the non-sensical and the ideal. The former seeking a stable source for morality, value and meaning, while the latter gestures towards a universe that is ultimately arbitrary and trivial.

However, in addition to serving as an expression of nihilism, humour can also operate as a defence against it. Marmysz posits that rather than fall into despair at the irreconcilability of our aspirations and the real state of the world, one should 'adopt an attitude of humorous amusement toward the world's absurd nature. If the human condition is viewed as a joke – something ludicrous, and necessarily marred by imperfection – then it makes sense to stop trying to treat it like a puzzle with some sort of clever solution' (Marmysz, 2003: 13). For him, in order to 'extract pleasure from a situation that would otherwise only bring frustration and pain' we should face the incongruous gap between the real and ideal with 'lingering' and 'fearless' amusement (Marmysz, 2003: 13). Following on from Marmysz then, a sense of humour may constitute a positive response to nihilism because it allows us to break with expectations that normally constrain us, and instead encourages us to create and adopt new perspectives (or challenge our existing viewpoints) on serious subjects such as the absurdity of existence and the ridiculousness of the human condition.

While adopting a humorous attitude does not eliminate or 'overcome' nihilism altogether, it does help us to think through, and make sense of, that suffering, negativity, and

destructiveness such that it becomes bearable (even liberating). Just as humour encourages us to cultivate an understanding of incongruous elements or phenomenon to ‘get the joke’, so can it encourage us to ‘linger in contemplation of various incongruities [in life] and to consider them from a variety of differing angles, or perspectives’ (Marmysz, 2003: 124). The comic treatment of nihilism can thus potentially function in two opposing directions. On the one hand, humour can operate as nihilism’s confirmation: an amused, even joyful, acceptance of meaninglessness and amorality that can also inform a sardonic contempt for those who insist on the continued relevance of moral and existential order. Or, on the other hand, it also has the potential to mitigate or counteract the antisocial impulses of nihilism by encouraging new perspectives and fundamental human connection in an otherwise meaningless world.

‘Show me what you got!’: Nihilism as absurd play

In its initial flourish, *Rick and Morty* followed the lead of many other animated comedies in its playful embrace of nihilism as a comic premise. The fundamental formal flexibility of the animation medium has long leant itself to heightened levels of exaggeration and reality distortion as the basis for comedic material (Goldmark and Keil, 2011: 7; Wells, 2013: 127–132), which can also undermine any sense of a world, or a society, governed by consistent or stable rules (Holm, 2017: 170–171). For example, although Warner Brother’s Loony Tunes animated shorts could not be considered nihilistic in any philosophically meaningful way, their comedy is nonetheless often premised on a fundamentally anarchic and malleable world that has the potential to underpin a nihilistically absurd worldview. By the latter half of the twentieth century, though, more nuanced and sophisticated forms of animated humour, such as *The Simpsons* (1989–present) and *South Park* (1997–present), leveraged this tendency towards narrative and representational experimentation as a platform for social commentary and critique. The animated format of these cartoon sitcoms allowed them to experiment with, and sometimes defy, traditional storytelling norms, thereby tackling sensitive topics that live-action domestic sitcoms typically sidestepped (Stabile and Harrison, 2003: 9). This new form of the adult animated comedy thus served as an ideal medium for exploring nihilism as a critical and comic attitude.

This propensity towards popular comic nihilism found even more pronounced expression in the context of Adult Swim, the media entity that produces and distributes *Rick and Morty*. Adult Swim began as a programming block and website affiliated with the cable channel Cartoon Network. Launched in 2001, it quickly cultivated a reputation for unusual and experimental animated comedy, characterised by surreal plots, alternative animation styles, non-traditional narratives, experimental formats, and unconventional content. Both its original and syndicated shows were marked by ‘an openly aggressive and nihilistic mode of humour’ (Holm, 2022: 368) that caters to alternative, offbeat, and subcultural taste cultures among technologically-savvy young adults, particularly white men (Elkins, 2014: 595–596). It is in the context of this history of nihilistic humour as a staple of animated comedy that the initial comic treatment of nihilism in *Rick and Morty* needs to be understood: not as a radical departure from previous forms of animated comic

nihilism, but as a more sustained and pointed exploration of such forms of humour by virtue of the show's science-fiction setting.

In the first two seasons of *Rick and Morty*, nihilism informs chaotic but joyful comedy as humankind's plight of meaninglessness is highlighted to absurd lengths. This comic tendency is well illustrated in the episode 'Get Schwifty' (S2 E5) which opens with a large yellow humanoid head (devoid of hair and with a unibrow and unyielding dour expression) among a vast cosmos of sparkling stars, the moon, and Earth. Its scale is made apparent as the head lands on Earth and the pine trees below it – which are comparatively meagre in size – burst into flames. The destruction continues as fires engulf mountains, land masses crumble, and winds rage at rapid speed, before the head bellows: 'Show me what you got!' Faced with this unexplainable and terrifying threat, the population of earth begins to panic, unable to determine what the unexpected visitor wants from them.

However, as the episode proceeds, Rick explains to the US President that the giant head is interested in 'a hit song.' The head does not seek evidence of wisdom or cultural accomplishment, but rather demands Earth's participation in a musical competition to avoid destruction. Such a revelation playfully subverts our conventional expectations of what intergalactic demands would be, such as those relating to science, culture, history, math, or war. Here, interstellar contact is a source of neither existential revelation nor apocalyptic conflict, but rather amounts to a demand for the composition of a pop song as part of a large-scale reality show.

This is not to say that the show completely ignores many of the science-fiction tropes associated with alien invasion. While Rick and Morty address the situation in the narratively correct way – composing and performing the song 'Get Schwifty' which features repetitive, catchy, and vulgar phrases over a looped simplistic backing track – other characters turn to an ad hoc religion that worships the giant head. This includes Morty's sister, Summer, who wholeheartedly embraces the new belief system much to the consternation of her parents, which propels a secondary plot about the purpose and social function of religion. Elsewhere, a pugnacious General launches two nuclear warheads at the giant head, barely making an impact. Rather, the creature expresses mere discomfort, exclaiming 'Boo! Not cool!' These responses sum up the show's continuous confrontation with humanity's tiny place in the universe, for both humankind itself and from the perspective of infinitely greater sapient and sentient races. In the end it is neither belief nor aggression that saves humanity, but the ability of the main characters to improvise derivative music to the satisfaction of arbitrary judges.

In its nihilistic undercutting of existential or social significance, the resolution of 'Get Schwifty' is broadly representative of the show's comic treatment of otherwise ostensibly weighty or challenging concepts and issues. For example, in 'M. Night Shaym-Aliens!' (S1 E4), Rick and Jerry are caught in an abyssal Matryoshka doll of nested simulations where they are unable to determine what is real, but where Jerry is endlessly distracted by the corporate success he is forever denied in the real world; and in 'Auto Erotic Assimilation' (S2 E3) the show explores themes of collectivity and individuality when Rick, Morty and Summer encounter a parasitic hive-mind that has taken over a planet, but who turns out to be Rick's ex-lover with whom he has a toxically hedonistic relationship.

Perhaps the most pointed example of the comic undercutting of existential themes can be seen in the episode ‘Meeseeks and Destroy’ (S1 E5) which explores themes of self-belief and personal freedom through the Meeseeks, an annoyingly-pollyannaish race of blue-skinned humanoids who have a clear sense of their purpose in the universe. They are summoned into existence to perform specific requests, upon completion of which they disappear into a puff of smoke. However, due to the comic ineptitude of Morty’s father, Jerry, they are unable to fulfil his request to improve his golf game. Slowly, the Meeseeks become increasingly deranged from existential frustration, turning their rage to their creator, Jerry: ‘Meeseeks are not born into this world fumbling for meaning, Jerry! We are created to serve a singular purpose for which we will go to any lengths to fulfil!’ Eventually the Meeseeks beg for death, their rigidity of purpose and meaning of existence emphasising humanity’s incalculable insignificance in the universe.

Such nihilistic comic conceits are broadly indicative of the first twenty-one episodes on which *Rick and Morty*’s initial success was premised. The science-fiction setting provides the set-up for narratives that explore themes of cosmic wonder and metaphysical significance that are then undercut by either the persistent mundanity of the show’s universe or the human failures of the main characters. In the first two seasons, *Rick and Morty* embraces forms of absurd humour that emerge from the subversion of expectations and the employment of irony and contradictory elements through both narrative and character arcs. While such forms of humour can be understood as an engagement with nihilism, the concept is approached playfully, to the extent that the two seasons seem to be playing with nihilism, thrilling at the comic possibilities opened up by an infinite and unbounded universe. However, as the show developed a sustained narrative and accompanying lore over multiple seasons, such a flippant form of nihilism would become more difficult to sustain, especially as *Rick and Morty* became tangled up in broader social and political anxieties regarding the consequences of popular nihilism.

‘Raping muppets and eating babies’: The cruelty of antisocial nihilism

The initial airing of the third season of *Rick and Morty* in 2017 aligned with a growing public concern regarding the rise of antisocial and nihilistic behaviour, often associated with new forms of digital communication and interaction. Although worries about the effects of social media had been percolating since the early 21st century, they seemed to take on new importance with the rise of what was dubbed the ‘alt-right’ with ties to the Presidential campaign of Donald Trump, the UK’s Brexit vote, and other forms of global populism that surged to prominence in 2016 (Finlayson, 2021; Winter, 2019). Somewhat infamously, Angela Nagle argued that online culture was giving rise to a new form of nihilism, where individuals rejected traditional values and beliefs in favour of a hyper-individualistic, cynical and ironic worldview, and engage in provocative, nasty, and offensive behaviour to challenge social norms and elicit reactions (Nagle, 2017: 9–10; 43).

The ascendant term for such individuals was ‘trolls,’ those who ‘actively embrace amorality, and are, or at least profess to be, pawns in the service of nothing but their own

amusement' (Phillips, 2015: 22). Whitney Phillips argues that this 'troll subculture' spread nihilistic ideologies across the hyper-networked social media landscape. She explains that the constant barrage of information and stimulation from these platforms created (and still create) a sense of anonymity and impassiveness which can ultimately lead to cynicism, disengagement, and meaninglessness in life (Phillips, 2015: 18; 126; 147; 155). Such online cultures were in turn linked to aggressive and anti-social forms of nihilism, expressed through provocative forms of online activity (Aspray, 2019), and which came to be associated with a range of political movements including destructive forms of far-right and conspiratorial thinking (Blakely, 2019; Salek, 2023; Wimberly, 2021). In the few years since *Rick and Morty* was first distributed, nihilism had developed from a minor and largely disregarded worldview to the basis of what appeared to be a transformative socio-political movement premised on provocation and cruelty. The show's comic exploration of nihilism was thus recontextualised by virtue of a cultural setting where nihilism was encountered as a prominent and disruptive social force aligned with reactionary and extreme political movements.

It was into this broader cultural context that the first episode of the third season of *Rick and Morty* launched on April 1, 2017 (due to production delays the remaining episodes would not follow until July 30). However, the relationship between the third season and a growing concern with online troll nihilism was not only chronological coincidence. Rather, given the show's established concern with themes of nihilism, the third season served to crystallise and dramatise ongoing concerns with nihilism, the text serving as a sustained exploration of nihilism as a form of entertainment and worldview. Following Hoggart and Hall, to approach *Rick and Morty* in this way is to take it as a manifestation of the wider concern with nihilism at the moment of its production: an expression of the lived meanings of a culture that not only expresses a wider concern with nihilism but also thereby appeals to those for whom it appears as a viable philosophy.

The viability of this interpretive approach can be seen in this show's shifting relationship to comic nihilism. If the fundamental meaninglessness of the universe provides a context for playful and flippant humour in the first two seasons of *Rick and Morty*, it becomes a justification for much crueller and darker comedy in the show's third season. In place of a comic disregard for existential complexity, the humour of the show begins to engage more with the emotional lives of its characters, especially through an exploration of the motivations of Rick as a central character. The scope of the infinite multiverse is no longer primarily a backdrop for bizarre adventures, but instead increasingly functions as an existential challenge to any sustained emotional connection or sense of stable morality. Thus, alongside the outlandish science-fiction tropes which continue to define the show, there are increasingly episodes anchored by deeply upsetting premises, perhaps most prominently in 'The ABCS of Beth' (S3 E9), which explores how a young boy survived entrapment in a fantasy world by copulating with the fantastical inhabitants and consuming the offspring for sustenance. Or, as the character of Beth, Morty's mother, puts it 'raping muppets and eating babies.'

Central to *Rick and Morty*'s darker comic direction in the third season is the show's repeated deployment of a formal mechanism that might be understood as 'emotional misdirection.' This mechanism incites humour by encouraging the audience to

emotionally invest in a character, belief, or relationship, and then revealing that investment to be foolish or founded on false pretences. The result is a form of psychological incongruity – rapidly shifting from poignancy to cynicism – by which, not only the characters, but also the audience are revealed to have misplaced their empathy and sympathy. Heroes are revealed to be craven villains, apparent personal growth is a calculated deception and benevolence is manipulation. However, whereas in other narrative contexts, these rapid shifts in empathy could be read as dramatically meaningful here they are rendered comic by their trivial or excessively misanthropic nature.

For example, this comic logic can be seen at work in the narrative core of the season premiere, ‘The Rickshank Redemption’ (S3 E1) which hinges on Rick’s motivations for both his science-fiction adventuring in general and his actions during the specific episode’s climax, where Morty and Summer are held hostage. During the ensuing standoff, Rick debates with the episode’s villain whether he is driven by love for his family or a ruthless desire for revenge. Against the backdrop of an epic, interstellar battle, the audience witness several reversals and twists that place the answer in question, before Rick ultimately outsmarts his opponent and rescues his grandchildren, thereby providing apparent narrative and emotional catharsis. However, this is ultimately undercut in the final minute of the episode when a manic Rick rants to Morty that all his actions were driven by a desire to manipulate both his family and the universe and exert control over them for his own gratification. With heroic music swelling in the background as a comic counterpoint to the depraved substance of Rick’s outburst, he declares that his ‘series’ arc’ and ultimate purpose is both selfishly hedonistic and bathetically trivial: he wants to locate a discontinued dipping sauce that McDonalds used to promote the film *Mulan* in 1994.

As a statement of purpose, this sequence is indicative of how the third season of *Rick and Morty* uses ideas of emotional authenticity and human connection as punchlines: a broad formula for humour that recurs throughout the third season. This is the comic logic that underpins ‘Rickmancing the Stone’ (S3 E2), for example, where Summer and Morty flee to a Mad Max-esque post-apocalyptic world to avoid coming to terms with their parents’ divorce, ultimately learning that a life of extreme, explicitly nihilistic violence can help them find fulfilment. Similarly, the climax of ‘Vindicators 3’ (S3 E4) culminates in a death trap that can only be disarmed by identifying what it is that Rick truly values; Morty confidently volunteers himself as the answer, only to discover that the correct answer was a minor background character who, in passing, laughed at one of Rick’s abusive jokes. The repeated comic structure of these plots thus revolves around the revelation that it is foolish – or simply irrational and stupid – to think that conventional ideas of loyalty or emotional health make sense in an infinite world. The sorts of moral lessons that might be expected in a conventional television show thus form the implied backdrop against which *Rick and Morty* posits comic deviations.

Nowhere is this refusal to adhere to moral expectations as evident as in the infamous episode ‘Pickle Rick’ (S3 E3). The bizarre premise of the episode is that Rick has transformed himself into a pickle to avoid attending a family therapy session. The episode thus develops along two parallel paths: in one, Beth, Morty, and Summer take part in an awkward and occasionally emotional conversation with a therapist; in the other, Pickle Rick engages in a series of fantastical misadventures that culminate in a sustained action

movie pastiche, where he concocts a battle suit from everyday items and invades a foreign embassy.

In its very structure, this episode dramatises the third season's cruel nihilism by contrasting the excitement of the pickle adventure with the uncomfortable mundanity of the therapist plotline: daring the audience to choose the thrill of empty spectacle over the difficult work of emotional growth. Moreover, it does so comically through the sheer absurdity of Rick's pickle form and the narrative leaps required to present that scenario as feasible. Thus, even as Rick is reunited with the family at the end and is admonished by the therapist for neglecting the boring but essential work of repairing and maintaining the self, the very structure of the episode works against that moral lesson. Pickle Rick is thereby instructive of how the cruel and antisocial nihilism of *Rick and Morty* during this period is premised on the ridicule of empathy and caring. It is indicative of how the show's comic focus shifted from an exploration of the absurd wonder of an infinite universe, to a much more cynical interrogation of that universe's capacity for depravity, suffering and callousness.

'Brave enough to love': Working through nihilism with comedy

Although the dark and cruel nihilistic humour of *Rick and Morty*'s third season proved immensely popular – bringing in the show's highest sustained ratings – it also created significant problems for popular perception and reception of the show. The show's fandom publicly harassed and 'doxxed' female writers they blamed for 'ruining' the show (Lamare, 2022), and in an infamous incident fights erupted at McDonald's restaurants in the USA following promotional events related to the aforementioned dipping sauce in 'The Rickshank Redemption' (Muriel, 2018). More generally, across social and popular media, fans were accused of idolising and emulating Rick's intellectual elitism, narcissism, and misogyny to condone their online and public prejudicial behaviour (Muriel, 2018; Walker, 2020). Described as a 'hate movement' (Walker, 2020) and the '[i]nternet's most toxic fandom' (Muriel, 2018), following the third season, *Rick and Morty*'s devoted audience had made the show a shorthand for deeply antisocial and entitled behaviour.

As a consequence of such fan actions, nihilism had become more than a recurring theme for *Rick and Morty*: it had also become a problem. On one level, this problem was economic. The antisocial behaviour of the fan base threatened to bring the show into ill repute in ways that could jeopardise the reputation of Adult Swim and potential advertising income. On another level, this was also a creative problem, with one of the series co-creators, Dan Harmon, taking the unusual step of publicly denouncing elements of his show's fan base, who he accused of grossly misinterpreting its humour to support their 'creepy agenda' (Hibberd, 2017). However, given *Rick and Morty*'s well-established and fundamental relationship to comic nihilism, it was not possible to simply turn away from themes of nihilism without undermining its central premise and comic tone. Thus, instead of rejecting or turning away from nihilism, the show instead came to function as a textual means to work through nihilism using comedy. In its latter seasons, then, *Rick and Morty* would actively and directly reflect upon the political, social, and interpersonal implications of nihilism in ways that do not simply illustrate broader concerns with nihilistic

beliefs but actively examine them, in ways that constitute an intervention in how nihilism manifests and is addressed in popular contexts.

It is in the context of this larger reckoning that we can perceive and interpret the show's reassessment of nihilism in seasons four to six. In purely dramatic terms, this shift manifested through an increasing emphasis on character development and the emotional weight of its storytelling. For example, in 'Star Mort Rickturn of the Jerri' (S4 E10), it is revealed that Rick cloned Beth so she would have the opportunity to abandon her family and follow her dreams (as is often the case with any brief summary of an episode of *Rick and Morty*, this is a relative simplification of a highly complicated, high concept plot). This is not played for humour, however, but instead is revealed as a poignant ethical dilemma rather than as liberation from conventional morality. In a similar vein, the show also develops Rick's backstory, including his complex historical friendships and the confirmation that Rick's multidimensional adventures and emotional callousness are motivated by the untimely death of his original family. This last point is also relevant insofar as it directly contradicts one of the most significant moments of nihilistic humour in season three, where Rick 'fooled' both the antagonists and the audience into believing what appeared to be an emotionally motivated deception. As the show develops its own sustained serial narrative it introduces emotional stakes that contradict its previous comic nihilism.

Moreover, and more immediately relevant for the current argument, this shifting relationship to nihilism also alters the show's approach to humour. Whereas in season three the repeated comic structure relied upon the undercutting or rejection of ostensibly sanctioned emotional connections, from season four onwards an alternate comic strategy develops whereby emotional and ethical stakes exist in tension with ambiguity and absurdity: the show no longer tends towards the ridicule or rejection of empathy, but rather how emotional weight can sit uncomfortably with the absurd or abject. Explicit examples occur frequently in season four. For instance, in 'Edge of Tomorty: Rick Die Rickpeat' (S4 E1), Rick is lectured on the importance of ethical affirmation by a family of wasp monsters even as they devour their prey alive: 'when you're born [this] big an asshole, the least you can do is have a little empathy.' Building on this theme, the following episode, 'The Old Man and the Seat' (S4 E2) addresses Rick's search for personal meaning but does so through the lens of a competitive relationship he develops with an alien who has been using his utopian space toilet. When Rick discovers that his adversary has unexpectedly died in a skiing accident, the episode ends with a mournful Rick sitting on the toilet, which he has 'trapped' with a series of mocking holograms. The humour of these narrative moments is predicated on the ill-fit between earnest emotional expression and science-fiction absurdity, but in a way that does not refute or ridicule emotion.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this emotionally ambiguous humour can be seen in 'Mortyplicity' (S5 E2), a high-concept, highly-complex episode wherein Rick and the family build decoys of themselves, who in turn build further decoys. As the pattern continues, the new decoys become less-and-less realistic, until near the end of the episode we encounter versions of Rick and Beth who appear to be crude puppets. In contrast to their ridiculous appearance, the puppets have a heart-felt conversation about their love and commitment to one another, wherein Rick admits he has made mistakes and apologises.

The humour of this scene thus emerges from the disconnection between their authentic emotional relationships and synthetic appearance. The comic elements of this scene are thus further compounded when the puppet appearances are revealed to be disguises worn by the characters. Importantly though, this twist affirms and confirms, rather than undercuts, the emotional resonance of the previous scene by suggesting that it has taken place between canonical versions of the characters. The comedy here emerges from the surprising (and compounding) emotional depth and meaning of the father-daughter exchange, rather than through the nihilistic undercutting of that relationship.

This use of compounding complexity as a formal means of constructing post-nihilistic comedy finds further manifestation in the show's embrace of metanarrative in these later seasons. Although metanarrative elements were present in the earlier seasons (most prominently in the flashback episode 'Total Rickall' (S2 E4)), the frequency and scope only increase after the third season. This manifests most prominently in two episodes featuring the antagonist, Storylord, in which the characters flit between genres, explicitly invoke narrative tropes and even complain about 'how meta this is getting.' However, metanarrative elements are not restricted to those episodes, but instead function as regular tropes. For instance, in 'Star Mort Rickturn of the Jerri,' Morty and Summer discuss how learning to work together is their 'narrative arc,' while in 'Rickmurai Jack' (S5 E10), characters argue over whether their adventures ought to be episodic or serialised. This sustained engagement with the show's position as a text not only provides a mean to directly engage with the status of the show and the opinions of critics and fans, but also as a way to refute the show's prior nihilism in comic fashion. As with the example of Morty and Summer above, metacommentary on narrative elements – especially those tied to emotional growth and empathy – provide a means for the show to both incorporate ethical lessons while also ridiculing itself for doing so. The humour here is not targeted at the ethical concept, however, but rather at the show itself for 'stooping' to the inclusion of such sentiment.

The humour of later seasons of *Rick and Morty* can thus be understood to operate according to a comic logic that inverts the nihilistic humour of the third season. Rather than the inclusion of material that shocks the viewer through its callousness or cruelty, here the humour arises from the unlikely integration of extreme sentiment and sincerity: no longer is the show's humour primarily about how far it can pursue the distasteful or offensive, but rather about how far it will take earnestness and unqualified caring. This, then, points towards one possibility for post-nihilistic forms of humour where any clear distinction between irony and earnestness is collapsed: where an episode can end with a character named Mr Poopybutthole, initially conceived as a throw-away gag, confessing to the viewer that he 'wish[es] I was brave enough to love [his family] back, I don't know, maybe you should try it. We don't have as much time as we think.' Here the humour emerges out of the confusion as to whether such a heartfelt expression ought to be rejected as excessively sentimental or recognised as true wisdom: that is, finding humour in the struggle with emotion and human connection in a meaningless world, rather than in their callous rejection.

What can be seen in this later series of *Rick and Morty* is a changing strategy for how the show evokes nihilism as a source of humour as the show struggles to find a way to tell

engaging and sustainable stories in the context of the inherently nihilistic worldview it had adopted as a guiding philosophy. Nihilism remains the central focus of the show's humour, but this does not mean that the humour needs to be expressed in ways that endorse a nihilistic philosophy. Rather, the comic nihilism of *Rick and Morty* changes focus in terms of both the potential butts and the formal mechanism of its humour. Whereas earlier seasons would adopt nihilism as if it were an inherently superior position from which to ridicule the epistemology and ethics of others, in these later seasons, the show begins to explore the incongruities and limitations of nihilism. Humour here does not overcome the challenges of a nihilistic world, nor align itself with nihilism to reduce others. Instead, it embraces the uncertainty that is part of nihilism in order to compound narrative and meta-textual confusion as a form of comedy. This is a less confident humour, one that does not mock others, but instead increasingly reflects upon its own comic conceit as a means to work through nihilism and its consequences by means of humour.

Moreover, this process of working through nihilism occurred in explicit and public dialogue with many of the darker manifestations of popular nihilism that have emerged out of contemporary digital culture, and which have become entangled with some of the most concerning forms of anti-democratic politics. The comic tone and long-form serial narrative of *Rick and Morty* enable the show – or perhaps more accurately *compel* it – to work through the limitations and problems of nihilism as a popular philosophy. While joking about nihilism is a frequent aspect of a range of comic texts across popular forms, to engage with comic nihilism in any sustained manner is to press against the textual, cultural, and sometime even social ramifications of it as a philosophical position. This shift in nihilistic humour across the run of *Rick and Morty* is therefore more than a textual phenomenon, but rather, following Hoggart and Hall, can be understood as a re-articulation regarding the cultural status of nihilism by way of a popular text. As a consequence of the prominent anti-social actions of its fans, *Rick and Morty* became a flashpoint for public discussions and decrials of new forms of digital nihilism. Actively responding to this status, the show's writers shifted the text's comic nihilism in ways that unsettled the seeming desirability of nihilism that the show had been accused of cultivating. In doing so, it modelled a way to not argue against nihilism, but instead embrace and work through it as a strategy for living that need not reject community and emotional connection. *Rick and Morty* thereby operated as more than an expression of a wider nihilistic tendency, but an intervention in that wider debate; one that potentially offers a way to think through nihilism and find a humanism and a sociality on the other side.

Conclusion

Across its first six seasons, *Rick and Morty* does more than simply invoke nihilism as a passing source of dark humour or alluring alternative to conventional morality. Instead, the show illustrates, grapples with, and ultimately supersedes particular forms of comic nihilism in ways that are indicative of the popular treatment of nihilism more broadly. In the first two seasons, the show's philosophical themes are often bleak, but its comic engagement with nihilism tends towards the playful and gleeful. Season Three, however, shifts towards more complex and serialised storylines and sustained character

development, and in the process comes to favour forms of nihilistic humour premised on the ridicule of emotional connection, empathy, and ethical community. Such humour proved popular, with the third season consistently attracting the highest rating of the show's run so far. However, such forms of nihilistic humour also proved unsustainable. On the one hand, they undermined long-term textual coherence and story-telling possibilities by undermining the audience's ability to invest in or sympathise with characters who were increasingly sociopathic in their behaviour. On the other hand, these new forms of cruel humour also informed, and perhaps even emboldened, the 'toxic turn' in the show's fan base, which led to widespread criticism that brought the show and its creators into disrepute, and even led one of the show's creators to publicly reflect on his responsibility as a creator of popular comedy. Comic nihilism thus proved to be unsustainable as either a narrative or social act.

Seasons Four and onwards of *Rick and Morty* can therefore be understood as a response to the fall-out from the antisocial nihilism of the third season. They enact a sustained reckoning with nihilism as a comic and social mode, whereby the show articulates an idea of meaning and connection after or beyond nihilism that Harmon has referred to in a recent interview as 'therapeutically nihilistic' (Herman, 2023). In contrast to the third season's humour of emotional misdirection, new forms of more vulnerable and empathetic comedy would emerge out of a difficult and unstable engagement with the challenge of building meaningful connection(s) in a meaningless world. Such humour remains fundamentally grounded in nihilism, but in ways that emphasise the unstable incongruity of human meaning- and community-making, rather than ridiculing characters and audiences who engaged in such acts. The audience is encouraged to find amusement in complex emotional struggle, rather than from the perspective of superiority that aligns with the destructive arrogance that characterised earlier appearances of Rick. This shift in comic tone can be understood as both a rejection of the celebration of the show and its characters as figureheads of antisocial behaviour, and also as a creatively necessary act that maintains the textual conditions for sustained long-form storytelling.

Rick and Morty thus illustrates Hoggart's social hermeneutic approach to popular culture, which sees a text as not simply a representation of broader attitudes, but as an articulation of lived meanings, one that has the potential to inflect those attitudes. As a highly popular cultural text, *Rick and Morty* intervened in a significant social discussion around the merits of nihilism through its changing relation to nihilism as a source of humour. It is for this reason that *Rick and Morty* ought to be understood as more than just the representation or dramatisation of popular nihilism, but rather as the recalibration of ongoing discussions regarding the viability and desirability of nihilism as a political and social strategy: not by way of didacticism, but through the exploration of how humour and nihilism can inform one another. Our engagement with *Rick and Morty* has thus sought to do more than articulate how the show illustrates popular nihilism, but instead argues that the show represents a sustained confrontation with both the appeal and the threat of nihilism in the mediated politics of the 2020s. Moreover, *Rick and Morty* functions as an intervention in how nihilism is understood and enacted: one that not only speaks directly to the peculiar appeal and dangers of contemporary popular nihilism, but, in doing so, also demonstrates how popular cultural texts can intervene and shape wider political discussions.

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Note

1. During the first season of *Rick and Morty*, Rick repeatedly uses the catchphrase, “Wubba Lubba Dub-Dub,” usually while dancing and with a cheerful smile on his face. At initial appearance, then, this appears as a metatextual parody of the catchphrase as a tired sitcom cliché. However, in the last episode of Season One, ‘Ricksy Business’ (S1E11), it is revealed that the phrase translates as “I am in great pain, please help me!” which casts the previous episodes in an emotionally upsetting and nihilistic light.

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