

# *Irish L'humour Noir: Peter Foott's The Carpenter and His Clumsy Wife*

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**Abstract:** *In this essay I read Irish director Peter Foott's short film, The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife (2005), through Oscar Wilde's aesthetic theory, "The Decay of Lying" (1891). I argue that Wilde's critique of Realism as a "complete failure," and as a corollary from this, that Lying "is the proper aim of art," while convincing and useful, stops short of Grotesque Comic theory that combines the real and surreal. In grotesque comedy we encounter exaggerated, nightmarish lies; but beneath the surface there is a certain psychological realism – laughter is a coping mechanism. Foott uses grotesque humour to illicit confused laughter from his audience; he makes the vulgar beautiful and the real surreal. In other words, Foott blurs the boundary between life and art, thus undermining the fundamental ordering structures of society. In this article I focus on the boundary between Art and Nature, and between workspace and domestic-space. The carpenter's wife moves from the domestic-space into the workspace; and the carpenter replaces his natural wife with an artificial recreation.*

**Keywords:** *Peter Foott; Oscar Wilde; grotesque humour.*

In *l'humour noir* we encounter exaggerated, nightmarish lies; but beneath the surface there is a certain psychological realism: laughter as a coping mechanism alerts us to the grim realities that must be made humorous to endure. Exaggerating natural boundaries is the comedic technique of *l'humour noir* that helps the audience cope with absurd reality. In *l'humour noir*, life's vulgarities must be unmasked for the criticism of such vulgarities to be effective: such art treats the grotesque, vulgar, and obscene reality of human existence humorously for two closely related reasons: laughter is a defense against unfulfilled expectations and unavoidable tragedy, and laughter is a means of asserting one's superiority over an absurd situation or character.

In this paper, I propose that contemporary Irish filmmaker Peter Foott employs *l'humour noir* (grotesque humor) to illicit confused laughter from his audience; he makes the vulgar pleasurable and the real surreal. In other words, Foott blurs the boundary between life and art, thus undermining the fundamental ordering structures of society, thereby challenging the authority of all boundaries. I focus particularly on the supposed

divide between Art and Nature, and between workspace and domestic-space. When, for instance, is an artist not an artist? Can a musician ever ‘turn a deaf ear,’ or does that psychological attitude permeate into every sphere of a composer’s life? By this logic we can better understand Foott’s attention to boundary, and his film as an attempt to cope with the absurdity of human predicament, if we view it through the lens of *l’humour noir*. Crossing boundaries is irreverently humorous, especially when the boundary is crossed and the right character ends up in the wrong setting, or the wrong character inhabits the proper setting. This is forcefully illustrated in Foott’s film *The Carpenter and His Clumsy Wife* (2004) when the carpenter’s wife moves from her decidedly gendered domestic-space into his equally gendered workspace; and also when the carpenter replaces his natural wife with an artificial recreation.<sup>1</sup>

To date, critics have been unable to agree upon a definition of *l’humour noir* (also referred to as black humor, dark comedy, gallows humor, Gothic humor, and grotesque comedy); therefore, I will rely on a number of critics to reach a more precise definition. Alan R. Pratt, editor of *Black Humor: Critical Essays* (1993), claims, “Black humor involves the humorous treatment of what is grotesque, morbid, or terrifying. And while it bitterly ridicules institutions, value systems, and tradition, black humor offers neither explicit nor implicit proposals for improving, reforming, or changing the painful realities on which it focuses” (xix). Max Schulz goes further to explain why this is the case:

[The Black Humorist] forces us to share with him the painful laughter of examining and analyzing our mutually hidden and camouflaged obsessions. . . . But where satire would perform a lobotomy on these sudden terrors, Black Humor simply records them for future reference, though not without a wink so tight that it brings an empathic tear to both author’s and reader’s eyes. It is more a detached history of the black thoughts of the human mind and the unspoken fears of society than its scourge. (167)

*L’humour noir* literature resists tragedy through laughter: laughter replaces anger, distress, and violent aggression, which are critically unacceptable exhibitions of emotion. Late Victorian society would agree that such emotions would be unacceptable, but it would be equally unacceptable to employ the grotesque as a way to regulate behavior. Thus, *l’humour noir* does not reflect its age, in fact it is in direct opposition to the moral climate of its own time.

J. Jerome Zolten offers an overview of comic theories in his article “Joking in the Face of Tragedy” (1988). Zolten draws upon Freud’s *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* to distinguish between innocent and tendentious jokes; that is jokes that aim only to amuse, and jokes with an agenda beyond amusement. Like most comic theorists, Zolten is interested explicitly in tendentious jokes. He offers three theories in an attempt to understand why we laugh: ambivalence theory, incongruity theory, and disparagement theory. According to Zolten, “ambivalence theorists say that we laugh when we recognize conflicting emotions within ourselves” (305); “incongruity theorists

say we laugh at the improper or inappropriate time” (305). He explains that we might be ambivalent about tragic events because we are ultimately glad that we were not the victims of the tragedy, and “the very act of injecting humor into a tragic situation is incongruous behavior that jars some of us into laughing” (305). Finally, Zolten suggests that disparagement theory, “explains that humor at the expense of self or others is disguised aggression” (305), “according to the ‘disparagement’ theory, joking is a way to create a symbolic hierarchy wherein ‘we’ are always better than ‘they’” (309). Recently, Doug Haynes has argued against the disparagement theory, “while black humor is of course frequently tendentious, its ‘target’ . . . is the nature of social conflict as such, rather than any underprivileged group” (28). After an exploration of what black humor does, and the method by which it succeeds, the question that arises is why turn tragic events into humor? To attempt to answer such a question we must turn, at least briefly, to Freud.

I see *l’humour noir* as an amalgamation of these three theories held together by Freud’s ‘displacement theory,’ which suggests the comic arises when our train of thought is derailed or displaced, thus confusing the psychical process. In effect, black humor subverts pain by confusing the audience – we are ambivalent about the tragedy because it does not directly affect us, we then respond to the tragedy with laughter (an incongruous response) because we see ourselves as superior to the victim. This is only possible if the author decides to present the tragic situation in a humorous way, which confuses our expected response of sympathy. For instance, we do not laugh at tragedy discussed in a sermon because “a clergyman entirely overlooks the comic in the human weaknesses which the writer of comedies can bring to light so effectively” (Freud, *Jokes* 273). Laughter arises from tragedy only because the author has displaced our expected psychical response.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Freud argues, “the joking activity should not, after all, be described as pointless or aimless, since it has the unmistakable aim of evoking pleasure in its hearers. I doubt if we are in a position to undertake *anything* without having an intention in view” (113). Humor is intended to evoke pleasure, and “the intention of black humorists [is] to transcend the pain and absurdity of reality through works which undermine the seriousness of the subject” (Zolten 310). In light of Zolten’s claim, we should remind ourselves that Freud discusses the repression of pain and absurdity at length in *Totem and Taboo* (1913):

The asocial nature of neuroses has its genetic origin in their most fundamental purpose, which is to take flight from an unsatisfying reality into a more pleasurable world of phantasy. The real world, which is avoided in this way by neurotics, is under the sway of human society and of the institutions collectively created by it. To turn away from reality is at the same time to withdraw from the community of man. (93)

The purpose of the taboo is to escape from reality, to protect the individual from a true understanding of human frailty in a horrific environment. Whereas the taboo

represses, restricts, and protects the individual by *masking* reality, humor uncovers, liberates, and protects by *unmasking* reality. Comedy allows us to approach the taboo without being harmed. Like Zolten suggests, through humor we can observe pain, study it, and experience it, without touching or being touched by it. Laughing at the grotesque allows us to feel superior to the absurd situation by helping us approach it, and ultimately cope with it. And it is not innocent comedy, but *l'humour noir* that allows us to approach the most grotesque situations. Freud insists, "But it is noteworthy that we only find someone's being put in a position of inferiority comic where there is empathy – that is, where someone else is concerned: if we ourselves were in similar straits we should be conscious only of distressing feelings" (Freud, *Jokes* 244). In short, every tragedy is a comedy unless you are the victim.

Often, the source of comic pleasure arises from exaggeration; in addition, according to Freud following Immanuel Kant, "the feeling of the comic arises from the disappointment of an expectation" (270). We might ask: does laughter arise from the disappointment of our expectation to cry? Meaning, when observing tragedy, we expect to experience pity, empathy, or sympathy; but an author might present the tragedy comically, and we cannot help but laugh. This reaction is what Freud refers to as 'broken humor,' the humor that smiles through tears (289). It is precisely this type of humor that has been most prominent in twentieth- and twenty-first century Irish comedy, including Peter Foott's *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife*.

Peter Foott graduated from the Irish National Film School IADT with honors in 2002. His second short film, *Carpenter*, began as Foott's final-year film project in 2002. He had a budget of €5000, and took a further two years to complete it in 2004 (Boylan). Once finished, the fourteen minute long short film was selected to be shown at a number of international film festivals including: Venice, Los Angeles, and Tribeca Film Festivals, and has won nine awards.<sup>2</sup>

Foott produces a Gothic, anti-mimetic, anti-realist argument in *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* via the carpenter's willingness and ability to replace his wife's severed limbs with mechanical reproductions. In an interview with the *Irish Times*, Foott admits, "A lot of stuff I do has to do with Frankenstein." If we couple Foott's admitted interest in the anti-natural, mechanical Frankenstein's monster with Henri Bergson's 1900 anti-natural aesthetic wherein Bergson claims humor is the product of 'something mechanical encrusted upon the living,' then we can conclude that this film is designed to be horrifically hilarious – and it is. In the film, we see Foott execute *l'humour noir* (in particular, the championing of artificiality and exaggeration). He seems to rely on more than just reverse Frankensteinian assemblage, wherein he destroys life by slowly replacing natural limbs with doll parts. The film also draws on W.B. Yeats's "The Dolls," which was published in his 1914 volume, *Responsibilities*. The poem, set in a doll-maker's house, narrates the dolls' horror at the birth of a natural child: "That is an insult to us," one bawls. The child is described as "a noisy and filthy thing" by the 'oldest of all the dolls,' paralleling the Carpenter's disgust of his wife's naturalism in Foott's film. The

doll-maker's wife in Yeats's poem, seemingly possessed by the dolls' screams, murders her child and then consoles her husband (who was awoken by 'the wretch' as it cried out with its final breath) by claiming that it was 'an accident.'

The opening shot of *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* has the audience looking through a camera that mimicks the carpenter's point of view. We hear the carpenter's labored breathing as a woodshop is brought into focus. The carpenter then enters the shot from the left and strikes a pose reminiscent of Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man." As the camera shutters, cheery background music ("The Silver Apples of the Moon") increases in volume, and animated sketching fills in the Da Vinci-esque drawing. At this point the carpenter (Sean Colgan) is established as the main character of the film. Not only is his wife (Nuala Kelly) subordinated in the title, in addition – as we will see throughout – she is subordinated to the carpenter because it is not so much the wife's clumsiness that elicits laughter, but the carpenter's response to her. In the film's opening scene, for instance, the wife enters the workshop to deliver sandwiches. Upon her entry the music and animation stop, and the carpenter maintains his pose, ignoring her presence altogether. The wife tisks, exits the shot, and the music and animation resume.

Following a credit sequence, the narrator (Jim Sheridan) describes the carpenter in a voice-over while the carpenter skillfully and happily manipulates a marionette reproduction of himself. We are told that "he was a very clever carpenter; so clever that he could make almost anything." The carpenter's intelligence and skill as a craftsman will point to Foott's insistence that art is superior to life and nature. To emphasize the point, the narrator describes the carpenter's wife as she is shown on-screen attempting to catch a chicken (which causes her great difficulty), and then peeling potatoes: "She was not at all like the carpenter; she was stupid, and very clumsy." As soon as the word clumsy is delivered, the wife cuts off her index finger. This is a tragic moment because we are reminded of our own frailty: this accident could happen to anyone. What happens next, however, could not. Our first unfulfilled expectation (and thus an ingredient for comedy according to Kant and Freud) is the lack of pain that accompanies the severed finger. The second disappointed expectation is the carpenter's reaction. Whereas most of us would be horrified for the victim and rush to help stop the bleeding, the carpenter reacts without emotion; in fact, there is no bleeding to worry about anyhow. Instead of taking his wife to a hospital, the Carpenter takes the finger from his wife, envisions a mechanical reproduction (with the help of another animated sketch), and crafts for her a wooden replica. As this is happening, we are confronted with another comic gesture: the dog, Henry, steals the severed finger from the carpenter's workbench and feasts on it. Henry's action is taboo because we perceive domesticated pets as being fellow creatures, thus making his eating of the finger at least quasi-cannibalistic. But since the finger was already severed, and the dog steals it when no one is looking, the action is darkly humorous: we laugh uncomfortably. Louis Hasley argues that, "it cannot be too strongly emphasized that nothing is humorous per se, that humor is an attitude, and that a thing is humorous, ridiculous, or laughable only because and when someone considers it so" (113). My argument throughout this essay, however, is that we cannot help but

consider *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* comic because Foott presents the characters and situations with detachment and playfulness. He consistently denies our expectations through displacement, and so we must laugh at our own confusion if nothing else.

“The carpenter set to work making a new finger for his wife;” and when it is finished, and they have strapped it in place, the narrator reports: “It fitted perfectly. In fact, it fitted so well that both the carpenter and his wife agreed it fitted even better than the original finger.” Here, Foott, it seems, takes a page directly out of Oscar Wilde’s playbook. Wilde writes in the opening of “The Decay of Lying,” “the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. What Art really reveals to us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition” (1071). The couple’s reaction to the mechanical finger is precisely Wilde’s reaction to all art: the artificial finger is even better than the natural original.

A few weeks after the success of the artificial finger, the carpenter begins working on a birthday present for his wife: “the carpenter wanted to make her something really special.” On her birthday, the wife slaughters a pig and is cleaving it when she slices into the artificial finger. Again, we are confronted with its superiority. Had it been a real finger that she had cut into, she would have needed another replacement. Once she dislodges the cleaver from her wooded finger, the carpenter arrives to give her a birthday present. She begins excitedly unwrapping it, and tells the carpenter, “I think I know what this is.” But as she slides the lid off the box to reveal a pair of wooden, mechanical hands, her expectation is disappointed: “This is not quite what I thought it was.” She picks up one of the hands and pulls on the strings that operate the fingers: very pretty Carpenter; “very life like.” Here, Foott ventures into the complexity of Wilde’s anti-mimetic argument. Though the hands are ‘very life like,’ they are superior to the wife’s natural hands because she cannot do harm to them. Wilde argues, “Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art’s rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art they must be translated into artistic conventions. The moment Art surrenders its imaginative medium it surrenders everything” (1091). Foott takes this imaginative step in his film with the crafted hands. There was no need for them. The wife hadn’t severed her hands like she had her finger. The artificial hands are purely an example of the carpenter’s imagination refiguring nature’s design. Surely the audience does not suspend disbelief, the film is too absurdly artifice laden, but in order for the audience to accept this critique of realism, Foott employs grotesque humor techniques.

Freud’s discussion of “gallows humor” will be useful to us at this time. He relates a humorous event: “a rogue on his way to execution asked for a scarf for his bare throat so as not to catch cold – an otherwise laudable precaution but one which, in view of what lay in store so shortly for the neck, was remarkably superfluous and unimportant” (285). The situation is similar in *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* in that there is an obvious and horrifying disconnect with reality. Freud continues his explanation of our response to the rogue’s request:

The situation that ought to drive the criminal to despair might rouse intense pity in us; but that pity is inhibited because we understand that he, who is more closely concerned, makes nothing of the situation. As a result of this understanding, the expenditure of the pity, which was already prepared, becomes unutilizable and we laugh it off. We are, as it were, infected by the rouge's indifference – though we notice that it has cost him a great expenditure of psychical work. (286)

We respond similarly to the carpenter's wife, we are numbed (or as Freud proposes, "infected") by her casual reaction to the mutilations. Initially, the carpenter comes to his wife's rescue and we see him as a sort of comic savior. He then deteriorates into a deranged artist, crafting artificial hands his wife does not need. But she accepts his present, and an eerily upbeat song with apropos lyrics – "Walkin' in the sunshine, sing a little sunshine song. Put a smile upon your face as if there's nothing wrong" – begins playing as the camera pans from the meat cleaver, to the carpenter who winks at his wife, to the wife who puts on a nervous smile as if nothing is wrong, and finally to Henry waiting for the scraps. And though she cries out in pain when the carpenter chops off her hands so that he can install the artificial pair, the narrator reports: "They fitted perfectly. In fact, they fitted so well that both the carpenter and his wife agreed that they fitted even better than her original hands." So the pity that we initially prepared for the wife comes to nothing because we are told that she is better off with the artificial hands. Laughter arises from the disappointment of our expectation to offer sympathy.

In the next scene a fourth character is introduced: the neighbor, Mrs. McCombil. The carpenter's wife and Mrs. McCombil share a pleasant exchange across a fence about trimming hedges, and make a joke about Mr. Ben McCombil's eyebrows being longer than any twig on the bush. Both of them laugh, and the carpenter's wife covers her mouth with the artificial hand. Mrs. McCombil exclaims, "Jesus Christ missus, your hand! What happened!" The carpenter's wife fabricates an accident, "I had a bit of an accident cutting the pig; it's alright though," she says as she places her hand upon her hip as if to show Mrs. McCombil the improvement. "Carpenter made it for me; it fits just like me old hand." Creepy instrumental music plays while the next shot establishes a close up of the hand's movement as proof that it is operational. For a moment, Mrs. McCombil seems to accept the explanation. Then she notices the other hand: "Jesus Christ missus, your other hand!" In a short constructed to echo early *Frankenstein* movies, the carpenter's wife holds out both hands and begins walking towards her neighbor as if to touch her. Mrs. McCombil backs away and the carpenter's wife slouches in defeat. Mrs. McCombil's response to the artificial hands reinforces our initial reaction of horrified pity. But as soon as we are reminded of the situation's grotesqueness the scene is over and the next action Foott presents is purely comic. Terry Heller explains that, "by repeatedly calling upon the reader to shift his interpretation of the incident, to laugh only to weep only to laugh only to weep again, [the author] suspends the reader between the two poles" (201). The narrative's presentation of the wife as stupid and clumsy (an absurdly misogynist positioning – on Foott himself, though not his characters, seems

to be critical of) reminds us that, in the words of Burton Feldman, “it is only playing, one knows that. No one will get hurt. If there seem to be pain or degradation or death on the page, the effect will be made incongruous with the fact, sidetracked into a gag, hammed up, parodied away” (104). This is precisely what occurs when the carpenter’s wife attempts to chop wood in the next scene.

The carpenter’s wife is poised with a long-handled axe held in both artificial hands, high above her head. The narrator explains, “although the carpenter’s wife’s hands fitted perfectly, they didn’t make her any less clumsy”: the axe falls, and we hear a slicing sound. The shot cuts to Mrs. McCombil watching from the hedge, then back to the carpenter’s wife holding the bloody axe and smiling as if she had done a fine job chopping wood. There is a faint thud, and as the carpenter’s wife looks down we see she has severed her leg at the hip. She assures Mrs. McCombil that she is okay before falling to the ground.

Another upbeat song, “Love Will Keep us Together,” begins to play in the background as the Carpenter responds to his wife’s accident by crafting her a fully functional wooden leg. Decadent aesthete Charles Baudelaire, claims that, “one of the most distinctive marks of the absolute comic is that it remains unaware of itself” (164). Certainly, the carpenter is not aware that his actions are humorous; he is simply improving upon one of nature’s faults: human frailty. Our laughter comes from the idea of our own superiority over both the carpenter – we would not react in such an absurd manner – and the irrationality of the situation; meaning laughter is a defense against the dystopian universe (Baudelaire, Bergson, Freud). We laugh because the carpenter’s absurd action is really the only logical defense against his wife’s clumsiness. If he took her to receive medical attention, the doctors might reattach her leg. This scenario would allow for her to clumsily cut it off again. The carpenter’s remedy is to replace the fragile, natural leg with a stronger, artificial leg. We were told earlier that “although the carpenter’s wife’s hands fitted perfectly, they didn’t make her any less clumsy;” therefore, we might assume that she would continue to maim herself despite her mechanical improvements.

Our assumption is confirmed following the carpenter’s completion of the artificial leg. While mowing the grass on the slope of a steep hill, the leg detaches. The carpenter’s wife loses her balance and rolls down the hill seemingly uninjured. Once she comes to a rest, however, the mower similarly rolls down the hill after her and chops off her remaining natural leg. Amidst spraying blood and painful screams, the leg flies into the distance with Henry hungrily chasing it down. We laugh at what we perceive to be the sheer improbability of life’s misfortune, all the while knowing these accidents are anything but impossible.

The final scene is set in the carpenter’s workshop. His wife is resting in a chair as he feeds her soup. She is apologetic for her clumsiness, and mentions that she will roast him a joint of meat for all the trouble she’s caused. The narrator assures the audience, “even with all the trouble she caused him, the carpenter really did still love his wife.” Which is why we expect that the carpenter will craft a second artificial leg. We are disappointed. The wife falls asleep as the carpenter begins shaping a stump of wood



that we assume will be the replacement leg. The camera fades out to signal a time lapse, and when the picture returns the wife is waking up from her nap. A fourth lighthearted song, “May I Have the Next Dream With You, Dear?,” is juxtaposed with the horror of what happens next. The carpenter’s wife smiles at the carpenter who is sitting behind his workbench, a burlap sheet covering his latest project. He smiles back at her and lifts the cloth, revealing a wooden head. His wife’s smile slowly fades as the song reports, “close your eyes and put your arms around me, you’d be surprised what love can do.” We are indeed surprised when the carpenter gets up to retrieve a saw from the wall so that he can decapitate his wife and attach the artificial head. We are provided with one last close up of the wife; she is silently shedding a single tear, not at all hysterical as we would expect. The camera returns to the carpenter slowly approaching his wife with the saw as the screen fades out and the credits roll.

According to Freud, humor, albeit dark, springs from mechanical repetition: “A person who has reacted in the same way several times in succession repeats this mode of expression on the next occasion, when it is unsuitable and defeats his own intentions. He neglects to adapt himself to the needs of the situation, by giving way to the automatic action of habit” (75). Thus, the carpenter, who’s original purpose was to provide replacement body parts for those his wife severed, goes too far by replacing body parts that don’t need to be replaced. Ultimately, he kills her so that he can complete her transformation into a marionette. Freud offers a psychological explanation for this type of behavior in *Totem and Taboo* when he suggests that a neurosis like that of the carpenter’s “appears to be so tenderly altruistic, [but] it is merely *compensating* for an underlying contrary attitude of brutal egoism” (91). We are led to believe that the carpenter’s original fear for his wife’s safety and well-being is replaced by a fear that he might become the victim of his wife’s clumsiness. Recall the opening scene of the film, the wife enters the carpenter’s workshop and he immediately stops working until she leaves, perhaps out of fear that her clumsiness would harm him. This would explain why the carpenter goes so far as to kill his wife: he doesn’t see it as destroying her; he sees it as *improving* her. As a marionette, she can no longer cause trouble. She becomes a more perfect marionette than the one that the carpenter fashions at the film’s beginning, because she is the carpenter’s vision of an ideal woman: clever like himself – but only because he will be at the controlling end of her strings.

*L’humour noir* emerges as the organizing theme of this study because it allows for a particular kind of defense against absurdity: laughter helps us stomach the reality that the carpenter aesthetically improves his wife by transforming her into a marionette. The wife’s transformation from natural, living human being into artifice reflects the carpenter’s ideal vision. At no point during the transformation do any of the artificial replacements seem realistic. They are life-like in that they operate, but there is no finishing, and it is through her very incompleteness that the wife approaches the carpenter’s utopian ideal. This happens gradually. At first, when she accidentally cuts off her finger, he is happy enough to remedy the situation by making her a wooden finger as a replacement. Shortly thereafter the carpenter becomes proactive: he makes his wife a pair of hands

as a birthday present, but he must sever her natural hands in order to attach the artificial pair. This assures that any future slip of the cleaver will not damage her at all. But the wife proves clumsier still: she cuts off an entire leg. Happily – whether out of love or desire to craft we aren't sure – the carpenter constructs an artificial leg. But he seems to have made a mistake: he underestimates his wife's clumsiness and doesn't make a pair of legs. The outcome of this oversight is that she rolls down a hill and has her other leg disembodied by a lawnmower. At this point, rather than supply a replacement, the carpenter again gets proactive: he carves an artificial head. It follows that once the wife is decapitated, and the artificial head is in place, she will no longer be stupid or clumsy because a doll cannot think, nor can it act of its own accord. In the end, the ideal situation for the carpenter has been realized: he is no longer married to a stupid woman who could potentially hurt or kill him. Our mood at the end of the film is ambiguous because of the incongruity of the story: it is eerily comic.

So, what is it we laugh at? Seemingly we laugh at the absurdity of the carpenter's birthday gift to his wife: a pair of mechanical hands. We laugh at the fact that this time we are not the victims. Sometimes we might find ourselves laughing at jokes we would rather not laugh at. According to Simon Critchley, "humor can provide information about oneself that one would rather *not* have" (74); and further, "If humor tells you something about who you are, then it might be a reminder that you are perhaps not the person you would like to be" (75). This is an interesting perspective to note since *l'humour noir* scholars such as Lisa Colletta maintain that, "the narcissism of humor protects the individual from threat and pain," "it takes on our greatest fears and makes a joke out of powerlessness, loneliness, ignorance, authority, chaos, nihilism, and death, allowing them to be mastered for a moment" (7). As these two views intersect, we are confronted with a paradox: our laugh at once protects and implicates us; our laughter distances us from the absurdity, while simultaneously placing us in its midst. Whatever might come of laughing in the face of tragedy, it at least "open[s] up a discursive space within which it becomes possible to speak about matters that are otherwise naturalized, unquestioned, or silenced" (Goldstein 10). Though my essay's focus is on aesthetics – mainly mimesis and comic theory – *The Carpenter and his Clumsy Wife* also allows for further investigations into Gothic elements such as human psychology and physiology, feminist readings, and trauma studies.

Mathew Winston declares, "The comedy in black humor helps us overcome our fears" (257). But does it? Do we laugh because we feel superior to the victim, above the absurd situation? Or does it reinforce our fears? Do we laugh because we are afraid that next time the illogical universe will claim us? Or does Gothic, dark humor merely name our fears, taking no action beyond calling attention to our helplessness? Among the various humor critics mentioned in this essay Peter Foott appears to agree with Mel Brooks that, "Humor is just another defense against the universe." At the very least, we might see *l'humour noir* as a useful defense against mimetic art.

## Notes

- 1 Other popular, contemporary Irish films that rely on black comic tropes include: Neil Jordan's *Butcher Boy* (1997) and *Breakfast on Pluto* (2005), Kristen Sheridan's *Disco Pigs* (2001), Martin McDonagh's *Six Shooter* (2005) and *In Bruges* (2008), and Peter Foott's *Just a Little Bit of Love: A Tribute to Des Smyth* (2002).
- 2 Special Mention – Venice Film Festival; Grand Jury Prize – Pescara Short Film Festival, Italy; Best Comedy – LA Short Film Festival; Gold Remi – Worldfest Houston; Runner-Up – Mallorca Film Festival; Special Mention – Cleveland Film Festival; Special Mention (Jury Award) – Night of the Living Short, Kimera, Italy; Special Mention (Audience Award) – Night of the Living Short, Kimera, Italy; FEDIC Plaque – Montecatini Terme Film Festival, Italy; Nominated to the Méliès d'Or for Best European Fantastic Film – Ravenna Nightmare Film Festival (Vico Films).

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