Absurdity, Twitter Comedy, and Humor Bots

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As Elon Musk, the world's richest person, wanted to pull out from buying the social media platform Twitter in the summer of 2022, he quoted the company's inability to quantify the volume of bots on the platform, arguing for it to be much higher than their published estimates suggest. Bots are software applications that run automated or semi-automated tasks, such as sending out tweets, following accounts, liking and sharing posts or chatting with (human) users. While much discussion on bots, such as Musk's, equates them with spam bots using fake user accounts to promote cryptocurrencies or pornographic sites, they are used for a broad range of purposes, from newspapers and weather services sending automated tweets to accounts generating haiku-style poems and absurd humor through algorithmic means. Indeed, it can be tricky to distinguish between bots and humans on Twitter, since renamed X (as the company's then CEO, Parag Agrawal, tried to explain to Musk, only to get a poop emoji in response). But as long as bots were clearly identified as being such, their presence on Twitter was both encouraged and cherished.

This chapter is written on the verge of Musk's rebranding X, along with his decision to charge for the platform's API (Application Programming Interface, which deeply affects bot accounts relying on it to exist). In February 2023, Musk partly pivoted from this unpopular decision, granting restricted free API access for bots "providing good content," as these were seen as essential to the Twitter ecosystem.[1] But as of late Spring 2023, API access was suspended for a huge bundle of Twitter's most beloved bots, including the accounts discussed in this chapter, forcing them to shut down.

[1] See @elonmusk on X, February 5, 2023.

In what follows, we explore the now past world of Twitter bots from a particular angle: that of absurd humor. We are particularly interested in the repetitive rhythms and delightful absurdities of bot-based Twitter humor – indeed, in the pleasures of automated repetition itself. We are further interested in what such repetitiveness means in terms of understanding both humor and automation. Humor is, in a very concrete sense, a vernacular social glue of social media platforms. It plays a key role in how and where attention clusters and what gets shared and commented on; it electrifies but also divides discussions and communities; it brings lightness and playfulness to serious issues, sometimes unexpectedly and sometimes as provocation. In the context of a social media climate involving casual yet high intensities of hate, insult and offense, humor has the potential to interrupt flows of toxicity and do something different to the rhythm of user feeds. As much as people use Twitter for heated political debate and news commentary, it is equally used for distraction, pleasure, and joy.[2] Tweets with vastly different qualities become entwined, or come to take turns, in ever-changing user feeds involving both human and non-human actors. Witty bot-generated Twitter content then came to impact not only what the platform means as *social* media, but also how it feels to spend time on it.[3]

The chapter builds on and advances discussions of absurd humor in general, and feminist and queer humor and absurdity in particular, exploring Twitter bots as part of a landscape where absurd humor was generated in algorithmic assemblages of human imagination and nonhuman repetition and randomness. In what follows, we explore a strategic selection of humorous bots which operated with slightly different logics. Our first example is Gender of the day (@genderoftheday), which generated imaginative, poetic, and charmingly nonsensical takes on what the gender of the day could possibly be, when capaciously envisioned. At the time of writing, Gender of the day had 84.6K followers and

[2] Weber and Driscoll, "Playful Twitter"; Brock, *Distributed Blackness*.
[3] Veale, Valitutti and Li, "Twitter."

active user engagement in the forms of likes and retweets, and was the bot account with the most traction among our examples. Our second example branches out to a more bookish kind of humor generated by Victorian queerbot (@queerstreet) which scoured digitized 19th century novels in search for the terms “gay” and “queer” as “many things are queer in the Victorian novel,” and posted these snippets to its 5.2K followers. Our third example further plays up the non-human dimension of bot communication and bot humor, as we take a deep dive into the eerie flora and fauna coined by the fabulously surrealist poetry bot, British Gardens (@GardensBritish, 9K followers). Gender of the day last tweeted on April 6, 2023, as did British Gardens. Victorian queerbot lasted till June 23, 2023.

Twitter bot humor built on a long line of chatbots and other forms of artificial intelligence that have been intimately entwined with efforts to distinguish the human from the nonhuman. Such enterprises move from early examples such as ELIZA, a Rogerian psychotherapy chatbot created in the mid 1960s at MIT’s Artificial Intelligence Laboratory programmed to perform a parody of non-directional therapist responses (“how does that make you feel?”), to contemporary conversational AI like Ruuh, a chatbot with a sense of humor and a fondness for Bollywood and pop music designed for an urban Indian audience. The three Twitter bots we examine did not respond to or engage with users; they were definitely not social bots. Rather, they tweeted into a void, so to speak, no matter whether people followed and “listened” to them or not. Contextually part of domains of humor and wit created by algorithmic means, they did little to engage with such networked domains.

Ours is hardly a systematic analysis of Twitter bot humor: rather, it is a query into how absurdity took shape through repetition and variation, based on observation of the three accounts combined with background interviews with two of their creators. According to its OED definitions, the absurd signifies things “against or without reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical,” “ridiculous, silly,” as well as people “acting in an

incongruous, unreasonable, or illogical manner." The absurd represents the opposite of reason, rationality and meaning, as its etymological Latin root, *absurdus* ("out of tune, uncouth, inappropriate, ridiculous") suggests. Following this semantic route, absurd humor is out of harmony with reason and notions of decency. We are interested in what happens to such incongruity when it involves not only people but algorithms, and what we may learn about the pleasures of repetition by studying their output.

Delightful gender absurdities

> Today's gender is none of your business.
>
> (@genderoftheday, September 22, 2022, 1540 retweets, 4512 likes)

Gender of the day was launched in 2018 as a genderbot which "lets us outsource our feelings about gender to a bot" with the intent to "free up a lot of mental space for other things" made by the editor and writer Misha Fletcher, using the JavaScript library Tracery – a generative grammar created by Kate Compton – and Cheap Bots, Done Quick! run by George Buckenham.[4] Its basic tweet structure consisted of the openings: "The gender of the day is...", "The gender today is," and "Today's gender is..." to then branch out and present "an assortment of genders that may or may not be relatable."[5] In an email exchange with Fletcher, they talked about the rationale of the bot and what inspired this work:

> Gender of the day is sort of one part uncomfortably sincere, one part joke. My wife Blair and I – both nonbinary – often make jokes about gender, largely as a way of expressing our discomfort with the concept as a whole. I'm sure you've seen the meme "Ah, yes, the two genders: hates coriander and loves coriander" (or similar) (…) We've leaned fairly heavily into that, and into

[4] https://twitter.com/genderoftheday
[5] http://mishafletcher.com/bots/

commentary about gender as performance: heading out to do yardwork wearing jeans and a flannel shirt, "Ah, yes, dyke gender: flannel."[6] Fletcher felt instantly charmed by the bot, even in its most basic form, and kept adding things so that it found itself in a state of constant composition and recomposition. Sometimes people sent suggestions on Twitter, which might be incorporated in the bot's grammar if Fletcher found them enjoyable and not overly complex or specific. Conversely, they removed a few mythical creatures that people generously pointed out as cultural missteps (such as "Thunderbird" which, with its rich North American Indigenous imagery, runs the risk of reading as cultural appropriation).

The genderbot grammar consisted at the time of our email exchange of twenty-four possible sentence variations, and thirty assorted substitutions. The bot continuously combined and recombined words from its corpus created by Fletcher, grouped into expansive collections of: "collectives" (cluster, swarm, murmuration…), "animals" (lemurs, porcupines, skunks…), "mythicals" (chimeras, fairies, unicorns…), "objects" (a cup of tea, a feral smile, a robot companion…), "adjectives" (anxious, shimmering, excited…), "colors" (denim, forest, magenta…), "feels" (concerned, excited, queer), "locations" (1990s mall, playground, speeding car…), "clothes" (baggy jeans, skater skirt, tuxedo… further specified with things like bespoke, dirty, vintage…), "sounds of" (a dial up modem, canned laughter, the first three bars of Für Elise over and over…) and "smells" (a heater that's come on for the first time this year, bleach, your jacket the morning after a bonfire…). Most sentence variations sampled from two or more of these collections, which combined made for gender imaginaries of a broad and vivid range. From "The gender of the day is a casual flannel shirt" evoking a lesbian imaginary, via the sensory suggestive "The gender today is the smell of old books and a hot shower," to fabulations such as "Today's gender is an immense disagreeable raven" and

[6] Email exchange with Fletcher on September 20, 2022.

"The gender of the day is a reassuring poltergeist in an overgrown civilization," followers were quick to like and retweet the posts to publicly display their appreciation.

The account activity for Twitter bots in terms of likes, retweets, and other engagement metrics was generally not high. Counter to the forms of social theater that regularly emerge in X exchanges where users step in to comment on tweets and elaborate on their imaginaries, bot humor tended to involve more solitary modes of enjoyment.[7] This is probably due to it seeming pointless to respond to a bot (that is not a chatbot), even as exceptions do apply. For their part, the followers of Gender of the day engaged with the account but did so largely without added commentary. Fletcher noticed how the tweets that solicited the highest engagements (1000+ likes) were often the ones that tended "towards the more evocative and abstract," even though the corpus itself skewed away from that.[8] Examples included:

> Today's gender is gayness and the smell of gasoline.
>
> (@genderoftheday, November 11, 2022, 416 retweets, 1520 likes)

> Today's gender is too close to the sun.
>
> (@genderoftheday, November 16, 2022, 435 retweets, 1315 likes)

Then again, sometimes more concrete images also managed to make ripples among the followers, such as:

> The gender of the day is a delightful hag in a library.
>
> (@genderoftheday, November 10, 2022, 797 retweets, 2805 likes)

Us starting with a discussion of Gender of the day owes to our long-term interest in feminist and queer humor in social media.[9] Successful bot feminism on Twitter was rarely of the more humorous kind, but consisted largely of more serious examples. One example was the popular Gender Pay Gap Bot (240.4K followers, discontinued in June 12, 2023), which

[7] Sundén and Paasonen, "'We Have Tiny Purses,'" 240–241.
[8] Email exchange with Fletcher on September 20, 2022.
[9] See Sundén and Paasonen, *Who's Laughing Now?*

tweeted sobering gender pay gap data when (British) companies tweeted International Women's Day key phrases, making celebratory announcements around equality and diversity appear rather hollow indeed. The relative absence of feminist humor among Twitter bots is not particularly surprising, given extant research detailing how much online humor is powered by mockery and ridicule of women, racial others, queer and trans people in ways that normalize heterosexism and strengthen cis-male domination.[10] A notably male-dominated platform, X regularly allows for misogyny to spread like weed – particularly since, under Musk's reign, the platform has removed much of its previous safety measures – so as to shape an environment where feminist and queer humor is not likely to thrive, even as it surely exists.

Feminist social media humor initiatives are often reactive in that they come about as means of dealing with injustice by responding to or reacting to sexism and misogyny. Such reactivity can be a powerful mode of critique in that it closely engages with power hierarchies and sexist logics, and allows for humor in rich registers of parody, irony, satire, and ridicule to emerge through tactics of refusal and reversal. This kind of reactive humor nevertheless has passivity at its heart as it rarely moves beyond the very logics that it critiques so as to imagine the world otherwise. For its part, Gender of the day was programmed to coin novel, surprising and absurd gender imaginaries beyond the loops of reactivity. By rendering the inconsistencies of gender imaginaries open, user imagination was equally opened up so that it could take flight elsewhere without being confined by the dynamics of sexism – or, indeed, by binary understandings of gender.

Tweeting every six hours, the bot had an internal rhythm to how it sampled and recombined elements from its grammar. What got posted and when was beyond Fletcher's control, as were the specific combinations of things posted. This in turn created a baseline for

[10] Highfield, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*; Marwick, "Memes"; Massanari, *Participatory Culture*; Milner, "Hacking the Social"; Milner, *The World Made Meme*; Phillips, *This Is Why*; Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*; Ringrose and Lawrence, "Remixing Misandry."

a subtle mode of low-frequency humor invested in making sense of imaginative leaps and incongruous juxtapositions, loosely read against the wider framework of contemporary gender politics. In her work on the literary Twitter bot Pentametron (which created poetry by finding tweets written in iambic pentameter and combining them into rhyming couplets), Leah Henrickson stresses how these bots' fairly nonsensical algorithmic output serves as inspiration for human-machine re-creations, in which readers make sense of the seemingly senseless.[11] A tweet like "Today's gender is annoyance and the sound of the static between radio stations" may thus have made space for interpretations, bodies, and feelings in-between gender binaries as a kind of poetic disturbance of steady signals and frequencies. "Today's gender is sensitive and sensitive" could equally provide something of a humorous contrast to hateful anti-gender debates and standpoints abounding on the platform by emphasizing the bizarre sensitivity of the issue at hand. Or, in Fletcher's words,

> It started out as a sort of silly project, mostly just to understand Tracery better and maybe make us laugh. But as someone who navigates the world in a profoundly uncomfortable way, I sometimes find it sort of a relief to be reminded of the inherent absurdity of gender, that there are other people out there who feel that they don't fit into the 'correct' narrative, and that I don't have to be constrained by what makes other people comfortable.[12]

In a social media climate where the word "gender" in and of itself is enough to set fire to feeds and comment sections, Gender of the day provided something of a breathing space for trans and queer people, a space for solidarity and comic relief or release. By moving in a surprisingly open and imaginative gender landscape, the bot invited and assembled a community of like-minded, gender creative people, or those otherwise drawn to its expansive language of gender.

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[11] Henrickson, "Butterflies," 1.
[12] Email exchange with Fletcher on September 20, 2022.

Controlled Randomness and Camp Humor

> Upon my soul and body, it's the queerest sort of thing altogether--but there's no use in talking about it. Ha! Ha!'
>
> (@queerstreet, January 14, 2017, pinned tweet, 60 retweets, 230 likes)

The purpose of Victorian queerbot, launched in 2017, was to troll through digitized bodies of Victorian literature in search for the terms "gay" and "queer" which, in contemporaneous context, were both abundant and explicitly divergent from their uses today. The bot automatically recycled radically decontextualized snippets of literature within the Twitter character limit without adding any contextual metadata, such as the excerpt's original author or the title of the work in question. Read through contemporary lavender linguistics, these literary fragments took on rather different meanings, optimally to its followers' enjoyment (even as such joys were seldom made manifest in the form of likes, comments, or retweets).

The bot's source texts were far from random – the quote above, for example, is from the veritable Charles Dickens (his 1844 *Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*). As a source, Victorian literature is temporally set – indeed, bound and fixed – and much of it is openly available online by virtue of the works having shifted into the public domain. The surprising randomness of the Victorian queerbot drew on the decontextualization of its source materials and from their arbitrary appearance in users' feeds next to adverts, news items, memes, rants, selfies, porn clips, or whatever it was that the accounts they followed chose to post. There was no shortage of material to draw on, and the bot was set to tweet hourly. The particular, near-idiosyncratic style of Victorian writing and its dated syntax added a further layer of whimsy. Stylistically, the bot's way of routinely cutting off sentences half-way added to the overall sense of randomness by turning the grammar awkward and by highlighting the sense of there being fleeting snippets on offer.

> gay as a lark, and fresh as the dew on the shamrock
>
> (@queerstreet, May 11, 2021, 3 retweets, 21 likes)
>
> I've been in some queer places in my time. Spent a night inside a dead horse
>
> (@queerstreet, May 10, 2021, 10 retweets, 39 likes)
>
> flocking through the streets in their best clothes, and with their gayest faces
>
> (@queerstreet, September 10, 2022, 3 retweets, 8 likes)

The bot turned literary excerpts strange while their placing in user feeds – which, on Twitter/X, tend to be largely focused on current affairs, acute debates, and personal updates on what's up just now – achieved a persistent sense of incongruity. All this rings of the absurd. As a form of humor, absurdity involves the presentation of unpredictable combinations and alternatives ringing of nonsense. The linguist Marta Dynel sees absurdity as distinct from both irony and surrealist humor, with which it is often conflated, in that it does not entail a negative evaluation, or reaction, towards that which is being made fun of.[13] In other words, absurd laughter can take flight towards wherever, there being surprise to its trajectories. At the same time, as we argue below, it may be less than easy, or even relevant, to approach absurdity through the logic of pigeonholing so as to focus on categorical distinctions between the absurd, the surreal, or the ironic.

Victorian queerbot and its output trafficked in obvious ways in the domains of sexuality and queerness, which made for a particular flavor of the absurd and for finding joy at the cultural margins. Or, as Jennifer Reeds puts it, "both humor and queerness depend on a relationship with liminality" in that they operate between categories and push beyond normative constraints.[14] Queer humor grows out of the incongruities and absurdities of hetero-normalcy, opening up a space for something other to take shape. When such humor becomes tinted with the sheer absurdity of reading extracts of Victorian literature in a contra-

[13] Dynel, "Isn't It Ironic?," 628.
[14] Reeds, *The Queer Cultural Work*, 23.

temporal manner, this unfolds a world in which just about everything is, or can easily become, gay or queer.

> We are all pretty gay here, thank Heaven! Ain't we, father? I hope so, my dear,
>
> (@queerstreet, August 14, 2020, 33 retweets, 99 likes)
>
> Dr. Van Helsing, what I have to tell you is so queer that you must not laugh at me or at my husband.
>
> (@queerstreet, September 1, 2018, 25 reweets, 72 likes)
>
> actually kissed Lady Claudia, one morning, instead of letting her kiss me as usual. My friends noticed my new outburst of gayety
>
> (@queerstreet, September 3, 2020, 9 retweets, 72 likes)

One way of accounting for the queer absurdity of Victorian queerbot is to think of it as a form of camp. In her 1964 essay, "Notes on 'Camp,'" Susan Sontag delineated a particular affinity between gay male homosexuality and camp, as "homosexuals, by and large, constitute the vanguard – and the most articulate audience – of Camp."[15] Partly building on Sontag, Esther Newton further solidified the notion of camp as specifically linked to homosexuality in general, and to drag culture in particular. She identified three central characteristics – incongruity, theatricality, and humor – and further argued that incongruous juxtapositions (between masculinity and femininity, for example) are the subject matter of camp; that theatricality is its style, and that humor is its strategy since "the aim of camp is to make an audience laugh. In fact, it is a *system* of humor. Camp humor is a system of laughing at one's incongruous position instead of crying. That is, the humor does not cover up, it transforms."[16]

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[15] Sontag, "Notes on Camp," 64.
[16] Newton, *Mother Camp*, 109.

Consequently, camp became seen as a transformational survival strategy and a form of queer resistance in a world where gender and sexuality are strictly controlled, playing up the inconsistencies in perceptions of gender and sexuality for comic effect. It should be noted that camp has, for decades, been subject to depoliticization and cultural mainstreaming through its uses as a rhetorical and performative strategy easily conflated with irony or satire, so as to distance it from specifically queer forms of critique and appreciation.[17] While such mainstreaming has not hollowed out camp's queer potentials, it has rendered it less markedly queer.

As an approach, camp is ambiguous in being simultaneously distanced and embracing, loving and ironic: it takes great joy in cultural objects with a wry sense of detachment. Camp is further relational in not residing in the object or person itself, but is rather produced through the very tension between something or someone and the context or association. The campiness of Victorian queerbot was an effect of the incongruous juxtaposition between the Victorian "gay" as in happy and "queer" as in weird or strange, compared to their contemporaneous connotations laden with political gravity. The camp comedy of Victorian queerbot had everything to do with unexpected contrast and a form of repetition with a significant difference, through which persons, feelings, and situations were retrospectively assigned an abundance of queerness.

> I love his honest moustache, and jaunty velvet jacket; his queer figure, his queer vanities, and his kind heart.
>
> (@queerstreet, November 2, 2020, 16 retweets, 54 likes)
>
> Uncle Joseph gayly ascended the stairs
>
> (queerstreet, May 28, 2021, 15 retweets, 32 likes)

[17] Meyer, "Introduction," 7.

> there was a queer lurch of the ship which lay stern forward, and a smothered ejaculation from all the seamen
>
> (@queerstreet, August 12, 2022, 23 retweets, 67 likes)

By working with and through Victorian literature, no matter how decontextualized and fragmented, the Victorianness of the Victorian queerbot resounded in the present, an anachronism composed by an inconsistent temporality which played with displacements of people, events, and objects. It was out of synch, yet in synch, evocative of what Elizabeth Freeman calls temporal drag as a performance of anachrony and queerness moving through time – or rather, queerness as an effect of the bot's compositions and recompositions in the present.[18] When the followers of Victorian queerbot willfully ascribed, if not human agency, then perhaps a sense of liveliness to the bot and its comedic workings, this unwittingly aligned with Victorian sensibilities and modes of understanding technologies through a language of living mechanical force.[19] Ways of making sense of the non-human bot through human imagination and playfulness resulted in a loosely knitted network combining the vital with the automatic, the human with the non-human in comedic experiences colored by absurdity.

The absurdity of the bots we address involved a distinct sense of lightness: even as the bots themselves obviously could have no awareness of this being so, their creators certainly did. Within the bot concepts addressed in this chapter, absurdity bred encounters with gender definitions gone anarchically amok, with uprooted literary excerpts open to anachronistic readings, and with impressions of British gardens running rife with oddity, menace, and throbbing passions.

Pulsating Flora and the Joys of Incongruity

[18] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 95.
[19] Cf. Ketabgian, *The Lives of Machines*.

> You are in a British garden. You can feel the throb in spite of the periwinkles. There is whispering and there is melting. The earwigs are taking measurements. (@GardensBritish, 30 August, 2020. 1 retweet, 10 likes)

British Gardens (@GardensBritish, est. 2016) made use of a repetitive tweet structure consisting of four sentences respectful of Twitter's character limit. The first of these repeated verbatim, placing the reader in the environment addressed: "You are in a British garden." This was followed by a sentence describing either the experiences and sensations of the user in second person singular ("Your shins are heaving"; "You can feel the terror on the posies") or the sights she was facing ("In front of you is a pack of dogs"; "In front of you is an orgy"). The third sentence was either a passive one descriptive of the general atmosphere or scene ("There is pouring and there is dilating"; "There is sneezing and there is salivating") or one specifying the subject(s) at play ("The daffodils are screaming"; "The ducks are teasing"). The fourth and final sentence was a declarative one ("The bracken is a policeman"; "The frost is speaking in tongues").

Endlessly recombining words from a database, the parameters of which were set by the account's creator, the author and artist Thomas McMullan, British Gardens ascribed animacy to the inanimate and human qualities to flora and fauna alike, which regularly gave rise to a sense of eeriness, and even of horror, in the process. Like Gender of the day, it was built with the openly accessible Cheap Bots, Done Quick! and used a dataset of words specifically chosen by McMullan for their flow and expressive range, classified into the categories of sensations, prepositions, plants, states, life, objects, body parts, and environments, out of which the bot then composed its sentences. With *sensations* ranging from "throb" and "quake" to "shudder", tremble," and "football" and with *states* varying from "popping" to "dripping", "choking," and "undressing" – further broadening to "out for

your blood", "mincemeat", "dead drunk," and "caffeinated" – the word list explicitly broadened into the absurd in the textual combinations that were due to unfold.

The resulting garden posts, tweeted every six hours, were evocative of the passions that they suggested while creatively gesturing towards the legacy of surrealist fiction, which McMullan, in a Zoom discussion, mentioned as a specific source of inspiration. Since the word list was limited, and since it had not been revisited since the bot was launched, the pleasures of British Gardens had very much to do with the repetition and perpetual recombination of familiar elements.

> You are in a British garden. Your memories are peeling. There are dandelions in the sky. The birdcall is a pack of dogs.
>
> (@GardensBritish, 9 September, 2022. 10 retweets, 35 likes)
>
> You are in a British garden. Your kidneys are hopping. There are photographers in the storm. The mist is a void.
>
> (@GardensBritish, 3 September, 2022. 2 retweets, 13 likes)
>
> You are in a British garden. In front of you is a leopard. The swifts are rising. The dark is adding insult to injury.
>
> (@GardensBritish, 21 August, 2022. 4 retweets, 10 likes)

These pleasurable repetitions and variations were almost of the musical kind. In a Lefebvrian rhythmanalysis, "Not only does repetition not exclude differences, it also gives birth to them; it produces them."[20] British Gardens produced a pulsating beat which highlighted questions of repetition and difference, continuity and change. Lefebvre's interest in a comparison of the rhythms of nature and bodies with those mechanical or machinic here finds yet another twist in the domain of absurd poetic automation and user engagement, one that also connects to the bot's surrealist legacies. British Gardens, like the other bots we address, presented an

[20] Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis*, 7.

algorithmic version of surrealist automatism, namely writing not involving a conscious mind – a connection that McMullan knowingly harbored. While Victorian spiritualists identified automatic writing with the authorship of spirits and early psychiatrists adopted it for therapeutic purposes, the surrealist movement of the 1920s and 1930s approached and promoted it as an aesthetic strategy tapping into the unconscious mind and hence, at least to a degree, circumventing conscious authorship and conventional logic.[21]

The authorship of Twitter bots presented users with a concrete lack of conscious human action and presence. These accounts continued their activities according to the parameters set, day in and day out, automatically so. As such, they facilitated what Allison Perrone and Justin Edwards, in discussing chatbots and comedy, identify as computational "transformational creativity" involving the potential to "make previously impossible ideas or actions possible, thus achieving an otherwise unreachable level of surprise and novelty."[22] The controlled randomness of absurd bot humor further highlighted what Lauren Berlant, in considering "comic disturbance," identifies as "the *copresence* of structuration and collapse."[23] Such copresence is rich in incongruity to the point that stylized incompatibility summed up much of the appeal of the bots we examine.

Incongruity – the combination of seemingly incompatible elements – is the surprise element in a joke or that which makes something funny, whether there is a punchline that serves to partly restore meaning, or if this restorative element is missing or incomplete.[24] Poorva Parashar and Parul Tewari nevertheless question the ways in which scholars treat the absurd as a specific type of humor where the incongruity between elements remains unresolved and "incongruous scenes (…) segue into subsequent incongruous scenes," as

[21] E.g., Jenny and Tretize, "From Breton to Dalí"; Rooney, "'Words of Healing.'"
[22] Perrone and Edwards, "Chatbots as Unwitting Actors," n.p.
[23] Berlant, "Humorlessness," 313, emphasis in the original.
[24] Oring, *Engaging Humor*, 18.

some forms of interpretation and resolve are necessary to the humorous experience.[25] There is, after all, little fun to the completely senseless or pointless.

Elliott Oring is similarly skeptical of divisions drawn between completely and incompletely resolved jokes. He characterizes humor in general as the perception of "appropriate incongruity" – as "the perception of an appropriate relationship between categories that would ordinarily be regarded as incongruous" where such incompatibility never fully becomes resolved.[26] He emphasizes that absurdity and the nonsensical live in all kinds of humor – indeed, that humor is always in some sense absurd and even a violation of logic, sense, and reality. This renders attempts to delineate a distinct category of the absurd humor analytically strained and problematic. Like Oring, we are less interested in delineating absurd humor as a thing apart than in considering how humor took shape through incongruity, absurdity, and plain nonsense in bot encounters.

Gender of the day traded amply in the incongruous while forming a thematically solid whole in its laconic yet consistently surprising gender definitions. Victorian queerbot was intensely contextual in how it reassembled literary snippets into a new whole (that is, its stream of tweets) and its comic angle had everything to do with the interpretations that this involved or encouraged. British Gardens, again, revolved around an imagined plot of land, its inhabitants and sensations: as McMullan put it, it was designed to keep forking like garden paths.[27] The algorithmic tactics of absurdity, as explored in this chapter, were then far from random, even as their outputs entailed constant surprise. As Henrickson points out when writing on Pentametron's "systematised incoherence", its "resultant output may be inane, but it may sometimes seem insightful, juxtaposing the disparate thoughts of unassuming individuals and thereby prompting readers to connect the disjointed."[28]

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[25] Parashar and Tewari, "Locating Humour," 71.
[26] Oring, *Engaging Humor*, 1.
[27] Zoom conversation, September 2, 2022.
[28] Henrickson, "Butterflies," 2.

The Rhythms and Functions of Bot Humor

In this chapter, we have explored a specific kind of absurd humor stemming from the rhythms of automated repetition and variation. Our humor bots can be thought of as non-human comedy actors of sorts, their rhythms and comedic timing being intrinsic parts of their (now past) social media existence. The bots' rhythms and the kind of humor they generated took shape in the context of Twitter's platform affordances, from tweets' character length to the very possibility of running bots on it. Social media content is tied to the speeds of the online attention economy which gather user attention toward that which is novel, new, and trending. At the same time, apps and platforms involve diverse, often parallel temporalities and rhythms so that there is no single unifying temporal logic to their things on offer. The idea of real-time is powerful in social media temporality, producing a sense of "the now" as that which is happening in the moment, a now that can be stretched out and contracted, compressed and paced.[29] Such feel of newness and nowness is amplified, but also modulated by algorithmic modes of anticipation and the viral logics of comments, likes, and shares, which re-organize feeds and timelines through the perpetual logic of refresh.[30]

The temporality of humorous Twitter bots was arguably little concerned with nowness or newness as such, given how they churned out variations on a theme without being grounded in or attached to trending content or current affairs, and without engaging with users. In other words, these bots operated partly beyond the temporal constraints of the present in having a timeless or less than time-sensitive quality to their output. Even as they attached themselves to the current date of the tweets, this content showed up on followers' feeds with varying degrees of predictability without there being temporal specificity to the daily posts. The tweets were part and parcel of the platform's fast pace, yet they also

[29] Coleman, "Making, Managing."
[30] Coleman, "Refresh."

provided an everything but time sensitive counterpoint to continuous novelty: the bots operated at their own, pre-set speeds and agendas, independent of trends in user engagement.

In his discussion of the speeds of Twitter news and humor, Tim Highfield points out that tweets on breaking news gain the most attention in terms of retweets immediately when the story is new, not least since the visibility of such content is amplified by trending. Meanwhile, humorous framing and commenting prolongs the tweets' life span: "A joke might receive an initial spike in retweeting and then an immediate decline in attention, but it may also receive renewed responses hours, days, or months later, without needing to be reframed or reworded."[31] Humor thus moves at a slower, more leisurely, and possibly surprising pace so as to contribute a different temporal quality to at times overheated exchanges. Operating with programmed repetition combined with random selection, humor bots provided followers with spaces and moments of joy by weaving in and out of feeds that may not have been joyful by definition. In doing so, they added an element of variation and a change of pace to the everyday rhythms of Twitter, no matter how gradual these may have been.

Apart from the pleasures of repetition, randomness, and variation which gave these bots their particular rhythms, we have also discussed how absurdity and incongruity was their common base style, or strategy. Absurd humor is often defined as either rational or logical absurdism concerned with logical breakdowns, or existential absurdism dealing with the meaninglessness of human existence. Following this division, Will Noonan argues that the rational absurd is linked to carefree playfulness whereas the existential absurd moves in much darker terrain, but he also acknowledges their interconnectedness in so far as "absurdist humor can in fact help bring out the brighter side of the lack of meaning it highlights."[32] With both Gender of the day and Victorian queerbot, the absurdities of contemporary gender

[31] Highfield, "Tweeted Joke Life Spans," 2731.
[32] Noonan, "Absurdist Humor," 4.

politics, queer and trans phobia resonated or reverberated through the more lighthearted forms of humor. For feminist and queer absurd humor have a sense of lightness and liveliness while being rooted in something much more jarring. This layering of the playful with the serious provides humorous tactics for coping with an absurd reality.[33]

It is less certain, however, whether the three bot accounts discussed in this chapter helped in outlining something akin to bot comedy as a specific genre – it would, in fact, be hard to outline something like "social media comedy" to start with. What these accounts composed were scenes and instances of comedy playing out as exchanges between authors, automated functions, word lists, databases, and heterogeneous groups of followers. The rhythm of humor in general, and that of jokes in particular, is intrinsic to how laughter moves and connects audiences, from comedy clubs to Netflix specials to social media feeds. As the locations of comedy have spread across physical and digital venues, interlinked by human and non-human relations, the rhythms of humor and its connection with audiences have equally shifted and multiplied. In their investigation of how social media shape the production and consumption of comedy, Rebecca Krefting and Rebecca Baruc argue that social media foster a form of tribalism among like-minded comedy fans in ways that influence both the making of audiences and the content of comedy.[34] While our three humor bots may be have been more flexible in terms of who followed them and why, it is reasonable to think that those disproportionally impacted by discrimination on the grounds of gender identity were particularly attracted to Gender of the day.

Social media has been examined as both an attention economy and as an affective economy, namely as a medium where attention – the so-called grabbing users by the eyeballs – translates as potential value and where attention clusters on things affording affective jolts,

[33] Massanari, "Come for the Period Comics."
[34] Krefting and Baruc, "A New Economy of Jokes."

be these ones of surprise, disgust, anger, joy, or something else.[35] Within this landscape, bot humor catered optimally serendipitous and surprising encounters that were both fleeting in the seconds that it took to read a tweet and reiterative as recurrent variations on a set theme. The accounts examined in this chapter can perhaps be best characterized as zany: to follow OED, "strange or unusual in a humorous way." It is such zaniness that, for Sianne Ngai, describes much of social media; for Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner, it is oddity that is key to sociability and humor on its platforms.[36]

The three zany Twitter bots discussed above afforded minor mundane affective lifts. Their reiterative modes of operation worked against the pervasive social media logic of the perpetual present (and the impending immediate future), according to which the perceived relevance and interest of content is calculated while also being engaging precisely due to their reiterative, autonomous nature. Whatever direction today's debates on gender pronouns took, Gender of the day ran steadily on its own course. Independent of the political or semantic takes on the notions of "gay" or "queer," Victorian queerbot remained oblivious, catering excerpts from works written more than a century ago. And be there vexations concerning Brexit or not, British Gardens kept on inviting its followers into its timeless, slightly claustrophobic and eerily animate realm, four times a day. As these bots sadly came to a full stop, making our chapter instant internet historiography, the spaces for automated absurd humor on the platform may well be a thing of the past.

[35] For an extended discussion, see Paasonen, *Dependent, Distracted, Bored*.
[36] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 14; Phillips and Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet*.

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