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Ricky Gervais's Sentimental Men

1. Introduction

Ricky Gervais's stage persona performs the part of *enfant terrible* in the current transatlantic Anglophone comedy scene. While his breakthrough as a stand-up comedian came comparatively late in his life or, as Itzkoff writes, "after his sitcoms were successful" (2012), Gervais has produced a substantial multimedia body of work which spans the radio, books, television, the stand-up stage, the big screen, streaming services, and – no less – social media. Gervais operates in front of as well as behind cameras; he is known as a workaholic who likes to be in full artistic control of his projects. He writes, directs, produces, casts, acts, performs and tweets, and has built a formidable media presence over the years.

In his work, Gervais blurs the lines between such dyads as 'author'/"protagonist,' 'author'/"narrator,' or 'autobiography/fiction.' Such doubling also complicates our understanding of different masculinities that Gervais and his characters have toyed with throughout his career. The different 'funny' versions of men highlighted in his various projects include, for example, *The Office's* (2001-2003) king of cringe David Brent; background and second-rate actor Andy Millman from *Extras* (2005-2007); Derek Noakes, whose good-naturedness and naïveté endear him to his colleagues; and, most recently, widower Tony Johnson, whose cynical and morose outlook on after/life turn him into a misanthrope.

This article focuses on the latter two shows, *Derek* (2012-2014) and *After Life* (2019-), Gervais's first original Netflix production, because they can be read together in terms of the subjects they address. Both series highlight lower and lower-middle class, simple, small-town people, and both present at their core reflective, emotional male protagonists. Derek appears as an idealised character of innocence and purity who is loyal to his motto "kindness is magic." Tony, on the other hand, portrays a form of very 'manly' mourning after his wife Lisa's death: the show's mission is to break open his hard core/soft shell behaviour in order to convert him to the ideas of goodness and hope that can be found in the community with others. Through such characters, Gervais draws attention to universal individual and societal issues, such as the end of life, death

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1 I am using the term in the plural in accordance with scholars who investigate the phenomenon "as variety and complexity" rather than with a single definition (Reeser 2010, 2), and who have signalled "dass es sich um komplizierte und instabile Phänomene handelt, die nicht einfach zu umreißen sind und die mehr sind, als sie scheinen" (Reeser 2016, 34).

2 Derek's motto is introduced right in the show's pilot episode, which first aired on 12 April 2012. A variation would be "just be nice" (S1E6). The tagline has also been used by Gervais in the promotion of the show. In a tweet from 23 March 2013, for example, he explained that "[k]indness is magic because it makes you feel good whether you're the one handing it out, or the one receiving it. It's contagious. #Derek" (@rickygervais 2013).
and grieving, and drives home to audiences a quite conservative, moralistic message to validate community and friendship.

In addition, this article will explore how both shows couple the different versions of masculinity with sentimentalism and religious inflections, which sets them apart from Gervais's other creative work. In the "surprising" projects Derek and After Life, the sentimental protagonists Derek and Tony explore what James Poniewozik calls Gervais's "squishy side" (2019). These characters are geared toward evoking sympathy and compassion in viewers and serve to transport the shows' moral messages. At the same time, Gervais's public performances as a comedian and interviewee have promulgated a rather aggressive portrayal of the upfront, white, middle-aged comic who prioritises his comedic philosophy that one "can joke about anything" (Gervais 2018) over compassion for others. As an on-stage performer and a Twitter user, Gervais employs a discourse of common sense and scientific rationality to show that today's "man of feeling" is endangered by censorship and a culture of political correctness, which in turn endangers society. This seeming clash has made it difficult for some to "reconcile" Gervais's stand-up act [...] with his TV work" (Itzkoff 2012).

In addition, the surprise over Derek and After Life might be traced back to a neglect of "sentimental men" (Chapman and Hendler 1999) and their importance in contemporary cultural production. This contribution reads Derek Noakes and Tony Johnson as sentimental men whose belonging to particular microcosmic settings reinforces Joanne Dobson's idea of the "self-in-relation" (1997, 267). The shows in question use the connection between the sentimental and different versions of masculinity to value and reward righteous behaviour and to maintain a heteronormative, ableist, conservative vision of social harmony and peace. In Jane Tompkins's words, their "cultural work" (1985, xv, 200) relies on a moralistic message of common values and rather simple truths by operating with restrictive, normative categories. This article shows that while the tone and overall gesture of his formats appear oppositional, small-screen and onstage performances can best be understood to point towards each other: Derek and After Life present the nostalgic longing for lost communal harmony and idealised microcosms which offer a sanctuary for people like Gervais who feel isolated and under attack. In promoting this binary, Gervais often ends up not performing social harmony but actively working against certain groups in society.

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3 John-Michael Bond calls After Life a "surprise" in his review and adds that "[t]his is easily the writer/actor's best work in years" (2019). By contrast, Tim Goodman's review of Derek also uses the term for "a series that moves beyond some perceptions of Gervais," but concludes that "Derek is just two-dimensional" (2013).

4 Gervais uses his Twitter account, in particular, to defend this stance. One recent expression is a tweet from 14 September 2019: "Please stop saying 'You can't joke about anything anymore'. You can. You can joke about whatever the fuck you like. And some people won't like it and they will tell you they don't like it. And then it's up to you whether you give a fuck or not. And so on. It's a good system" (@rickygervais 2019a).
2. The Persistence of the Sentimental

Reading *Derek* and *After Life* through the lens of the sentimental first means recognising the continued relevance, or persistence, of this category as "a mode of appealing to" (Williamson 2013, 1) and an "imaginative orientation" (Dobson 1997, 266) for readers and viewers. Though sentimentalism is a vexed category whose reception history remains torn between the rejection for its complicity in the restriction of women to domesticity and its acknowledgment for carving out spaces for political and reformist agendas, recent scholarship has highlighted its role beyond its 19th-century heyday and has considered it in connection with the affective turn (Ahmed 2004), contemporary politics (Anker 2014), and the public sphere (Berlant 2008). Even so, sentimentalism's potential to critique a social status quo and to point to the way of change remain contested. As I hope to show with the examples from Ricky Gervais, sentimentalism here works to conserve the status quo of idealised harmonious communities.

Traditionally, we anchor the sentimental primarily in the 18th and 19th centuries, and particularly in women's literary and cultural production, in which it is attached to the gendered ideologies of domesticity, true womanhood, and the dominance of the family. In this context, sentimentalism pursues two main strategies, i.e. "to generate compassion and seek to contribute to the moral education of its readership" (Gerund and Paul 2018, 19). In doing so, "the display, creation, and calibration of feelings serve as a means to emphasise its strong claim to moral truth and authenticity" (ibid.). This process relies on "mediating figures" who transmit such feelings (ibid.). In *Derek* and *After Life*, the male protagonists take on the function of mediators whose behaviour and display of emotions are conducive to the moral impetus of both shows and their effect on audiences.

Behind the strategies of fellow feeling, sympathy, and claims to moral education lies sentimentalism's understanding of the individual as a social being and a "self-in-relation." As Dobson explains, this particular configuration sees the individual as always connected to "family […], intimacy, community, and social responsibility." Sentimentalism's primary focus, therefore, is its "desire for bonding" as a "celebration of human connection" (1997, 266-268). In this context, it is crucial that affectional bonds take precedence over blood ties: for Jennifer Williamson, "the ideal, sentimental family is based on choice and affection" and is capable of including "outsiders and Others" who have succeeded in creating emotional bonds through their vulnerability and suffering (2013, 2, 5).

If sentimental literature, according to John Mullan, "imagines the nature of social relations" as essential to a society's survival, writers often also attempt to "make

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5 This literature review relies on Gerund and Paul (2018, esp. 18, 27-30).
6 Gerund and Paul point out that sentimental novels "dealt with major social, cultural, and political matters of their time" (2018, 25). In the United States, for instance, this impact of sentimentalism would become crucial for the abolitionist movement's fight to end slavery. However, Gerund and Paul also discuss at length ongoing scholarly debates on whether sentimental literature worked toward "resisting hegemonic orders" (27), or whether it maintained them.
exemplary a social life" (1988, 2). Both Derek and After Life pick up on this central theme and define their protagonists as selves-in-relation through their (sometimes harmonious, sometimes conflicted) relationships to others. Both shows portray their inclusion in a meaningful community, i.e. in society on the microlevel, in Derek's case, and the return to its fold, in Tony's case, as nourishing, wholesome, and healing. In this sense, the shows suggest that Derek and Tony lead exemplary or, at least, are converts to exemplary lives. At the same time, the microcosms the shows create for Derek and Tony remain conservative and restrictive: they are largely suburban, small-town, white, (lower) middle-class, and heteronormative, with little display of diversity and tolerance of divergence. Consequently, Derek and Tony are "exemplary" and representative only of a very small social setting, which, as we shall see, both shows sanction as the norm.

In addition to considering some of sentimentalism's basic tenets, this essay joins scholarship that has moved the sentimental out of a feminine context to consider its relation to masculinity and "masculine affect" (Chapman and Hendler 1999, 1) as well. Gerund and Paul already indicate that, "[a]s with the women, sentimental men may symptomatically indicate their fragile cultural status and symbolic capital as men" (2018, 31; original emphasis). After all, as various scholars have pointed out, the origins of sentimentalism are to be found in England's 18th-century cult of sensibility, "the capacity to exhibit finer feelings, such as pleasure, joy, grief, and pain, through bodily expression" (Weyler 2014, 48). Central to this idea of sensibility was the notion of the "man of feeling" (Chapman and Hendler 1999, 3; my emphasis; see Gerund and Paul 2018, 17). Mullan's study on 18th-century writers David Hume, Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne as precisely such "men of feeling," for instance, emphasises their insistence that social relations were "dependent upon the communication of passions and sentiments" (1988, 2). While Chapman and Hendler explain that the man of feeling was "a male body feminized by affect" (1999, 3), the association of sensibility or sentimentalism with femininity and women's culture occurred only somewhat later.7

Looking at Derek and After Life, this paper extends Chapman and Hendler's chronology of sentimental men to the present day and reads Derek and Tony as representations of the "man of feeling" in contemporary cultural production. The display of their emotions – positive ones, such as joy, or negative ones, such as anger and despair – and their emphatic connection to other characters define their presentation in the shows. For example, both highlight the importance of male friendships and bonding as well as heterosexual relationships, but also present uneasy ties between fathers and sons. Derek and Tony's emotional engagements highlight the "confusion or tension" that is attendant on their different versions of masculinity (Horrocks 1995, 172).

7 Chapman and Hendler also observe a geographical and chronological division between sensibility and sentimentality: "English 'sensibility' [...] acknowledge[s] the centrality of the man of feeling [while] nineteenth-century American sentimentality [...] often gender[s] sentiment female" (1999, 15, n.31). A change in the United States occurred notably after the American Revolution, when the importance of the domestic slowly replaced "republican ideology" and favoured "crying mothers and dying daughters" (ibid., 3-4).
Therefore, in the present context, it is important to consider what happens when someone like Gervais, with access to large public platforms on- and offline, chooses to use the sentimental as a male-connotated affect in his storytelling. What is the "cultural work" possibly performed by Derek and After Life? I suggest that in these two shows, the sentimental – particularly as it is explored through the male characters' capacity to show affect – undergirds their moral aim to evoke a peaceful, harmonious social life upheld by righteous characters: a constellation that is by no means new to Gervais's body of work. More precisely, the sentimentalism at work here serves a conservative project that translates into a nostalgia for simple community life that is offered as a refuge and safe haven but is predicated, at the same time, on restrictive normative categories.

### 3. Sentimental Men in Derek and After Life

Both in the show's narrative and in Gervais's public promotion of the project, Derek Noakes is introduced as the epitome of 'kindness.' The middle-aged care worker in Broad Hill Home for the elderly is, in fact, a larger-than-life, idealised character and the embodiment of innocence, purity, honesty and goodness.

Derek is also a sentimental character, in the sense that he "create[s and invites] compassion [and] foster[s] sympathetic identification" (Gerund and Paul 2018, 17). He is an allegory of our uncorrupted nature in that he seems to maintain an infallible sense of moral justice and an inclusive care for others. The show makes a point of presenting Derek in situations that centre on his connectedness to others, and scenes will often highlight expressive emotional states that, due to the show's mockumentary style, are directly geared towards viewers.

If Hannah is Broad Hill's manager, its organisational brain, Derek is its emotional centre. Deeply attached to all of Broad Hill's residents and staff, Derek is shown crying in the pilot episode, after his friend and "favourite" resident Joan Weaver has died. As the camera cuts between this testimonial scene and his good-bye to Joan at her deathbed, he recalls the lesson she taught him: "Kindness is magic." Taken together, the scene establishes Derek as a man of feeling and the show's overall sentimental tone.

However, when the pilot and first series aired in 2012 and early 2013, Derek's character was received highly critically because of his unclear mental status and, we might add, the unclear nature of his masculinity: many critics charged Gervais with having created a disrespectful caricature of a mentally impaired person and called the

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8 It is part of my ongoing work to investigate how the sentimental and masculine affect appear in different comedic formats in the current, charged political climate. In this sense, Gervais's work is important in a transatlantic Anglophone perspective as well.

9 Gervais's first two shows, The Office and Extras, in spite of their cringeworthy moments of social isolation, conclude with tentatively optimistic steps in the direction of community-building. This is also true of Gervais's feature films, particularly Cemetery Junction (2010), which he also wrote and directed together with Stephen Merchant.

10 Derek uses the mockumentary style that Gervais introduced in The Office; there is therefore a constant switch between characters' one-on-one time with the camera, their engagement with the camera in the daily routines, and scenes where the camera is merely observant of what is happening in the home.
show "an exercise in bigoted cruelty" (Lawson 2013), while Gervais has always refuted such allegations. Instead, he maintained that "the character is not intended to represent a specific disability; he is simply naïve and gullible[,] [...] merely maladroit, with a dodgy hairstyle" (qtd. in ibid.). Derek is certainly non-authoritarian, incapable of lying, selfless, and "perhaps too sweet or saintly" (Goodman 2013), but a certain unease over his ambiguous portrayal remains. It is possible, for example, to apply to him certain problematic aspects of how disability is often shown on screen, particularly when it is interpreted by non-disabled actresses and actors. For one, although Derek is accepted in the Broad Hill community, his speech, behaviour, and somewhat awkward bodily posture definitely render him 'othered' from them. Moreover, disabled men on screen are often "taken as being asexual" (Shakespeare 1999, 55). In fact, the show hardly ever problematises Derek's masculinity or (sexual) desires. Nearly eclipsed by the hypersexualised behaviour of his friend Kevin 'Kev' Twine, Derek's status as a (white, heterosexual) man only becomes relevant toward the end of the show, when his friends set up an online dating profile for him. Eventually, he goes on a date with Tracey, a young woman who shares many of his interests and socially awkward behaviour (S2E6). While they are shown dating, their relationship develops entirely in front of Broad Hill's – and the viewers' – eyes and does not become sexually intimate.

Those who see in Derek a superficial, typified rendition of a disabled protagonist, then, find indicators in the show that he is exploited along the lines of what Lennard Davis has called a "disability mascot" (2017, 40). Gervais's persistent refusal that Derek shows a disability of any kind only on the surface rejects the fact that "in an ableist culture," as Davis explains, "disability cannot just be – it has to mean something. It has to signify" (ibid., 44). Derek is certainly imbued with symbolic meaning by functioning as a type character to convey "some moral truth – that people are good, can overcome, that we shouldn't discriminate or despair" (ibid.). His status as (potentially disabled) 'other' is enhanced by his sentimental casting as a man of feeling. Gervais's choice to portray Derek clearly as an other but to refuse to explain and reflect on this alterity not only "encapsulate[s] the larger society's attitude toward disability" (ibid., 45) but also reflects on how sentimentalism here becomes a means, or "narrative prosthesis" (Snyder and Mitchell 2000), to circumvent the discussion of disability, its intersections with masculinity, and ableist appropriations.

Another important locus of the sentimental in the show is Broad Hill, which represents the microcosm of Derek's world. Within its limits, he is fully accepted for who he is and functions well, but intruders or trips to the outside world can cause disturbance. Inside Broad Hill's walls, Derek is part of a family-like community based

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11 Caretaker Dougie, one of Derek's friends at Broad Hill, characterises him as follows: "Derek. That's who I'd wanna be, if I could be anyone. He's got it right. He's always happy, he's enthusiastic. He's popular, he's funny, heart o'gold [...] he, you know, doesn't have much going on in his head, but what he's got going on, it's all good" (S1E6).

12 One such disturbance is the appearance of Derek's estranged father Anthony at the end of series 1. Initially hesitant and reserved, Derek reunites with Anthony within the protective walls of the home, and they are able to renegotiate their relationship as father and son throughout series 2. When Anthony passes away in the final episode, Derek is at his bedside.
on "sympathetic, affectional bonds" (Williamson 2013, 2). He is particularly interested in Hannah, the manager, and her well-being. For example, Derek is instrumental in bringing together Hannah and Tom (S1E1), comments on their relationship quarrels, monitors their attempts to conceive (S2E1), and witnesses their eventual marriage (The Special). Derek's best friend Kevin, who seemingly functions as his male counterpart, is also ever-present at Broad Hill. He is unemployed and presented as a loser figure with a drinking problem who is obsessed with sex. He is loud and salacious on purpose to hide his shame over secretly being a virgin, which he finally admits in the Christmas Special episode. In this respect, Kevin gives insight into "[the] damage done to men under patriarchy" (Horrocks 1995, 2). He is shown struggling with trying to conform to a "superficial and […] monolithic" (ibid.) masculine ideal that brings him to his breaking point, when he ends up in hospital after a severe drinking episode.

Kevin also inspires pity. Despite his exaggerated macho façade, he proves himself to be a caring, considerate friend to Derek. For example, when Derek is devastated after the death of his beloved dog Ivor, Kevin secretly builds him a scrap metal sculpture of his furry friend (S2E5). The gesture is crucial to underlining the bond between them and signals a sentimental climax in the show. In the end, Kevin is saved by the community, and the show suggests that within Broad Hill and with Derek's and Hannah's "kindness," Kevin's self-acceptance can be restored.

For Kevin the outcast, Broad Hill functions as a safe haven where representatives of a social underbelly find refuge, friendship, and community. The home for the elderly is in itself part of the margins of society. The show displays in great detail the harsh circumstances of running and living in such a home in the post-2008 "age of austerity," marked by "substantial public spending cuts and a programme of privatisation" (Mullen 2018, 195). Broad Hill is always underfunded, often understaffed, and functions merely on the exploitative schedule of its manager and workers. Neither does the show ignore the trajectory of its senior citizens, who arrive to eventually die in the home. It makes clear that most of the inhabitants' relatives hate paying visits as an unpleasant social obligation. However, Derek does not mind. Together with Hannah and Kevin, he treats the inhabitants with respect, a sense of responsibility, dignity, and "kindness," the key idea of the show. When resident Jack's grandson Pete, who works in finance, visits (S2E2):

Derek directs Pete's attention away from the abstraction of managing "very rich people's money" to the memories of fishing with his grandfather Jack. While Pete struggles to understand "how […] you live without money," Derek emphasises his love for the residents: "Your grandpa is interesting, he's got lots of stories, […] just listen to him." Eventually, Pete and Jack are seen fishing together in the home's garden, to Derek's voiceover concerning respect and engaging with the elderly: "that's the most important thing about kindness – it makes you feel good." In this way, Derek articulates one of the show's central sentimental messages, i.e. the importance of care work as a labour of love, the need to provide for a dignified life in old age, and the importance of microcosmic communities such as that of Broad Hill.

and explains to Hannah: "It's alright. I'm happy. 'Cause he was happy. […]'cause I had a dad, and he had a son. He loved me, he said so, he told me" (S2E6).
Overall, the show rewards those whom it casts as morally upright and honest characters. Hannah and Tom, for example, receive a ring from resident Marge so they can get married. Marge gives them the ring on purpose to withhold it from her spoilt, greedy daughter Shelley before her death (S1E4). They finally marry in the series' Christmas special, which also shows viewers Derek and Tracey as a couple. Derek has found happiness despite his father's death and sees his Broad Hill community eventually restored to peace. The finale suggests that his simple wisdoms of kindness, friendship's symbolic worth over materialism, and selflessness will be recompensed, and that happiness can only be achieved through relationality and "harmonious sociability" (Mullan 1988, 2). It also suggests that such nostalgic microcosms are necessary, both for the characters and the viewers, to provide an escape from the harsh consequences of austerity and other societal grievances.

There is an obvious overlap between Derek and After Life, which also problematises issues of the end of life and death – see the pun of the title – as well as the importance of family and community. More precisely, After Life also showcases strained relationships between fathers and sons, issues of parenthood, childlessness, and, like Derek, features characters from the social margins. With his latest project, Gervais moves from Derek's signature term "kindness" to another key term, "hope," and remains in the sentimental genre.

In this story, we see Gervais as Tony Johnson, a depressed and suicidal widower, who has lost his wife Lisa to breast cancer and, with her, all sense of purpose and his will to live. In fact, at the beginning of the series, he is so engulfed in grief and obsessed with the video messages Lisa left him for the life without her that he constantly contemplates suicide. However, he finds an excuse every time, either in his dog Brandy, who needs caring and feeding, his father, who suffers from dementia and lives in a nursing home, or his nephew George and brother-in-law Matt. Everything about Tony seems excessive emotion, or, as Poniewozik has it, "super grieving" (2019; original emphasis): from the intensity of his "grief armor" (ibid.) to the brutality of his treatment of others, which does not even spare children, Tony appears as the tough-on-the-outside, soft-on-the-inside lone male.13

For the most part of the first series, Tony's behaviour comes close to what critics have called "Bad Ricky" (Poniewozik 2019), i.e. that side of his persona that verbally destroys everything in his path and is now transplanted into a fictional setting: Tony insults and hurts those that are closest to him, not least because they do not share the idolised status of his deceased wife. In doing so, he alienates his co-workers at the local Tambury Gazette, his postman Pat, his psychiatrist, and others. The first series' narrative arc sees Tony struggle to come to his senses. If the shy and gentle Derek was an idealised, quasi-saintly character, Tony has to undergo a conversion of sorts from the isolated, morose lone wolf who gives in to dark temptations (such as drugs) to

13 After Tony finds out that his nephew George is bullied at school, he threatens bully Robbie with a hammer, posing as an "escaped lunatic" who is ready to kill a child (S1E5). He regrets it later, when he talks to his father, but takes no action until the final episode, when he gives a bike as a gift to Robbie.
become the self-in-relation and accept the advice and the promises of "hope" extended to him in his daily encounters. The narrative arc's religious undertone of Tony's conversion to life-affirmation, community, friendship and hope through repentance of his sins is the essential vector for the show's sentimentalism.

The road to accepting the message of hope from others is a long one for Tony, and proves equally testing for the audience. For one, *After Life* shows intimate moments of grief that resonate with the audience through Tony's character, such as when Tony is watching Lisa's pre-recorded videos from the hospital. She reminds him of how to take proper care of their home and tells him that he has "such a good heart" (S1E1), which creates an endearing picture of Tony's childlike dependence on her as their lives' manager.14 In this first series of *After Life*, these are the moments in which Tony is able to express his pain, i.e. alone and in isolation from others.

Another important storyline that relies on the sentimental is Tony's relationship with his father, who has dementia and requires fulltime care in a nursing home. This, too, engages viewers with topics such as age, end-of-life care, and illness. For most of the first series, Tony seems to experience their relationship as a multiple burden: his visits in the home add to his grief, as his father is unable to understand his daughter-in-law's death and keeps asking: "Where is Lisa?" (e.g. S1E1). His father is incapable of fulfilling his role as a source of solace and comfort for his son. Indeed, the show suggests via Tony's behaviour that the dementia is taking away from the father's masculinity, both from his mental abilities to provide support as well as from the control of his bodily functions. In doing so, it promotes commonly held, ableist ideas "that masculinity involves a denial of weakness, of emotions, [...] of frailty [and illness]" (Shakespeare 1999, 56). In the series' final episode, however, Tony and his father are reconciled when they are able to share a rare moment of lucidity and emotional openness: Tony is finally able to accept his father's story about the war and no longer contests its veracity. This seems to reconnect him to his father and revives the relation between father and son. Tony receives comfort and recognition in this emotional scene when his father turns to him and says: "You're a good boy. [pause] You're my boy." As in *Derek*, there is an uncomfortable nexus of masculinity and disability, or illness in this case, that is mediated through, and overshadowed by, sentimentality as a vector for a conservative morality.

*After Life* also challenges the identification of viewers with its message of hope through some rather difficult and altogether un-funny, un-comical moments that are harder to digest and that have so far been missing from reviews and critical discussions of the show. A particularly powerful example is Tony's relationship with Julian Kane. Julian figures as an exaggerated version and negative foil for Tony in his state of grief over a loved one's death. He is introduced at the lowest point of his life: Julian is a homeless drug addict, who is severely depressed and suicidal, and has given up on what will be essential for Tony's conversion: hope. He, too, is a loser figure and social outcast, who nevertheless comes to play an important part in the life of the central male

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14 It is worth noting that Lisa is played by Kerri Godliman, who is one of the recurring cast members in Gervais's work. Godliman previously played Hannah in *Derek*.
character. In *Derek*, Kevin proved a reliable and loyal friend and was a part of the show's sentimental message. In *After Life*, Julian's storyline propels Tony's conversion.

Tony strikes up a closer bond with Julian as the latter introduces him to drugs and they smoke heroine together in Tony's home (S1E2). This image can be read as a private, intimate moment of male bonding and grief-sharing, but is equally sinister and far removed from even the dark comedic moments of the show. Julian repeatedly addresses his suicidal thoughts until, in a subsequent episode, Tony gives him the money to buy a deadly dose of drugs in what is arguably one of the series' most problematic moments. If the sentimental element casts Julian as a tragic, fallen character, the moral lesson here is complicated through Tony's complicity. In the subsequent montage, we see Julian overdose and die in his garage (S1E4): it is a solitary, sad death in a filthy, untidy shed, which would be quite unthinkable in *Derek*. In this moment, "hope" is notably absent. Tony's "kindness" is eerily reversed into choosing death rather than life, and communal ties have failed to save one of its members, who was left to fend for himself.

Although Tony is touched by Julian's fate, *After Life* takes some time to problematise his morally questionable behaviour. In fact, the only one who takes Tony to task for his actions and attitude following Lisa's death is his brother-in-law Matt. For most of the series, Matt appears as the most stable male character. He is editor-in-chief at the *Tambury Gazette*, the free local newspaper, and is happy and even passionate about his job. He finds meaning and community in the paper and the social function it fulfils in the small town. He therefore encourages Sandy, who starts as an intern in the first episode, to pursue her professional interests in journalism. Matt endures Tony's behaviour in spite of his continuous derogatory comments, until Tony oversteps the line. When Matt learns that Tony has threatened George's bullying schoolmate, he forbids him to have any contact with George until Tony comes to his senses, because "I choose [the safety of] my son every […] time" (S1E5). In many ways, Matt's voice of morality can be read as a stand-in for the viewer: "[Saying you messed up] is not good enough, Tony. […] [Y]ou're doing this on purpose. This is the worst thing you've done. I don't even know what you're fighting anymore. I don't know why you're doing this. There is no enemy in this story, you are doing this to yourself" (S1E5). This also echoes one of *After Life's* central concerns, viz. that recognising relationality to others is crucial to a meaningful, hopeful life.

15 In fact, Julian's funeral only adds to the dramatic and almost grotesque depiction of a character that is both marginalised and secondary and crucial for the advancement of the plot at the same time. Tony, in fact, arrives too late at the crematorium to pay his last respects. Roxy was the only one in attendance at the short memorial service in his honour. As Tony stands outside the hall, he contemplates the smoke rising from the chimney as Julian's body is being cremated. If this is a somewhat uneasy scene for some viewers, it is heightened by Tony's cautioning the nun not to inhale the smoke as that would surely make her high (S1E6). What might have been meant as a form of comic relief seems rather distasteful in view of Tony's responsibility for and direct implication in Julian's death.

16 That is, until Tony learns about Matt and Jill's marriage problems (S1E6).
With Matt's demand that Tony reflect more critically on the consequences of his actions echoing on, the final episode of series 1 also brings Tony's narrative arc full circle. Although Matt is not the only one who gets through to Tony – the women such as Roxy the sex worker, Anne the widow, and Sandy the intern do, in their respective ways – it is important that Tony's breakthrough occurs in his brother-in-law's office. The tears following Matt's one-on-one talk have a cathartic effect on Tony, and he begins his atonement. Tony's repentance of his 'sins' begins by acknowledging, accepting, and being thankful for the help of others in his life. Eventually, he even opens up to the idea of a new relationship with another woman by asking out none other than the nurse who cares for his father. He begins to turn his negative, life-rejecting attitude into acts of kindness and respect, and his self-centeredness into connectedness to other people. In marked difference to Derek, however, these acts cannot quite close the gap to Julian as a representative of social outcasts, whose fate remains a stark reminder of the fault lines of neoliberal society and its failure in 'kindness' for the lowest classes.

Overall, Derek and After Life present viewers with a broad array of male figures: they range from the young to the old, those whose life is before or behind them. Sometimes, they are loser figures, albeit endearing ones, sometimes, they are mentally unstable, emotionally alienated, cynical, disaffected, torn between the loss of memory and unable to forget, but they can also be caring, passionate, and in love. They remain, however, close to the well-worn image of the 'man in crisis,' which is intimately connected to the use of sentimentalism in both shows. Through the 'sentimental men' Derek and Tony, the shows favour social relations over material gain and take a stand for disadvantaged and marginalised people, as well as close-knit communities of the lower and lower-middle classes. Gervais as the writer-creator of these figures fills them with meaning and importance, value and self-worth, and places them in two microcosmic, always heteronormative, settings in which they all have their parts to play in the moral pursuit of 'kindness' and 'hope.' These nostalgic, idealised settings are particularly "appealing because [they are] soothing, crossing many divisive modern boundaries and reflecting familiar beliefs" – key components, for Williamson, of contemporary sentimentalism (2013, 18). They provide solace and comfort for men in crisis and their viewers without reflecting on their own constructedness and exclusivity. Therefore, both shows engage in an ideological cultural work that relies on conservative values and morals.

4. Sentimental Comedians

With their sentimental trajectories, Derek and After Life have surprised critics who have observed a recent trend in Gervais's work that sees an increasing rift between his on-screen and his stand-up or talk-show work. On Twitter, the stage, or in the studio, Gervais seems to have settled into the image of a grumpy, white, middle-aged man. Poniewozik points out that "he plays the anti-P.C. truth teller" (2019) in such formats, which has allowed him to propagate his agenda of radical free speech in comedy, in

17 For a discussion of this controversial idea, see Reeser (2016, 30).
line with his oft-repeated conviction that "you can joke about anything" (Gervais 2018). At the same time, Gervais has been a staunch critic of what he identifies as political correctness, censorship, and the assault of opinions on comedians and their work. On 1 November 2019, Gervais tweeted a quote by the late Christopher Hitchens, which speaks to his stance on free speech in comedy: "Those who are determined to be 'offended' will discover a provocation somewhere. We cannot possibly adjust enough to please the fanatics, and it is disregarding to make the attempt" (@rickygervais 2019b). For Gervais, who casts himself as a defender of science and empiricism, this battle is epic. He pits subjectivity and identity politics against rational observation and the right to be funny – a discourse of rational objectivity that would usually oppose the use of sentimentalism.

A recent example that best illustrates Gervais's feud with his critics is the backlash against his sketch on Caitlyn Jenner and the transgender community in the Humanity special (2018). In the sketch, Gervais mocks Jenner's transition as a pick-and-choose affair, consistently calls her by her former birth name, and, as a climax, implicitly compares her to a chimpanzee. Reciting explanations of his critics that Jenner had always identified as a woman and that words such as "change" were inaccurate, Gervais proclaims: "I've always identified as a chimp, right. Well, I am a chimp – pre-op" (Ricky Gervais: Humanity 2018): He fleshes out the joke to excruciating length, musing that "I reckon that it's got to be easier for a man to turn into a chimp, we're so close, than for a man to turn into a woman, in many ways" – all the while disguising his mockery of Jenner's alleged "decision" to become a woman in scientific garb through the references to evolution. The sketch has been called transphobic (West 2018) and for some is a sign that Gervais has moved into a right-wing comedic arena: Matt Zoller-Seitz, in his review of the special, has called Gervais's attitude "Trumpian" (2018), and Garrett Martin has called the sketch "straight Bill O'Reilly turf" (2018). For the purpose of the present article, the attitude in the sketch reflects the latest version of masculinity that audiences have been getting from him, i.e. the grumpy, middle-aged, white man. He sells middle age as a position with some physical downsides, but also with some clear upsides, notably, as he explained to Jimmy Fallon in March 2018, having acquired "old people's rights […] I can say what I want" (The Tonight Show 2018).

We might say that in Derek and After Life, the microcosms of the series present those who are underrepresented and underprivileged in society in sympathetic, sentimental terms that show their worth and lovability. At the same time, sentimental men are shown to sanction ideal, romanticised versions of community. In talk shows, during stand-up and online, however, critics have identified a different strategy by Gervais that increasingly obsesses about the rights of a few. In such settings, Gervais paints a picture of current society that is opposed to what he shows audiences in Derek

18 Science, empiricism, and 'objectivity' have driven Gervais's stand-up work in such programs as Animals (2003), Politics (2004), Science (2009) and Humanity (2018).
19 Most recently, Gervais has refuted claims by the Mirror about an "awkward showdown" between himself and Jenner at the National Television Awards (Waddell 2020) and has called her "lovely and gracious" (Gervais 2020).
and After Life. As a comedian, he feels under constant attack and sees social harmony endangered and society out of sync. If we consider Brian Baker's observation that "[different] forms of masculinity [...] express something about the cultural, social and political formations of their period of production" (2008, vii), then Gervais as a white, middle-aged, grumpy male comedian under attack comes with a certain alarmism and anxiety that sees people like him at a disadvantage. Zoller-Seitz thus sees a "professional victimology" at play that also affects other comedians. He also explains how this attitude is connected to affect: "What these comedians are demanding is that we respect their feelings while they exercise their constitutionally safeguarded prerogative to hurt other people's feelings. That's not a level playing field. It's the power dynamic preferred by a playground bully" (2018).

What initially appears to be a difference in Gervais's different formats finally reveals an important connection, because they speak to each other's concerns: stylising himself as the victim of a hostile censorship culture onstage is also a way of mourning Broad Hill and the Tambury Gazette's office, without, however, considering that these communities are fraught and essentialist themselves. By promoting a binary good-versus-bad system of meaning-making, Gervais can be seen as far removed from the happy endings in the worlds of Derek and After Life. Rather, he is in the middle of socially divisive processes that might make him, as Garrett Martin speculates, "the weakest man in show business today" (2018).

Works Cited

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