

Editorial

Introduction to Painful Laughter: Media and Politics in the Age of Cringe

Wieland Schwanebeck

Institute of English and American Studies, Technische Universität Dresden, 01062 Dresden, Germany; wieland.schwanebeck@tu-dresden.de

Abstract: This introduction to the Special Issue on cringe humour briefly traces the starting point of the contemporary cringe boom, and it looks into the roots of awkwardness as a cultural phenomenon in the 1960s. Moreover, the introduction argues for the cathartic potential of cringe humour in the context of sociopolitical issues, and briefly presents the subsequent articles.

Keywords: cringe humour; awkwardness; embarrassment; *The Office*; *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; Larry David; Julia Davis; Robert Weide

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic affected our media consumption in various ways. Streaming service subscriptions went through the roof, everyone seemed to have launched a podcast, and curiously, global lockdown also sparked a resurgence of the lengthy novel (Vincent 2020). Those who lacked the patience for Tolstoy took comfort in revisiting sitcoms of the past two decades. *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) and the American version of *The Office* (NBC, 2005–2013) were among the most frequently streamed shows in 2020. Even before the pandemic started, one commentator suggested that people were “a little dystopia’d out at the moment” by shows like *The Handmaid’s Tale*, wanting to be “soothed and cheered” instead (Godwin 2019). This line of reasoning is curious if you consider the *original* incarnation of *The Office*.¹ As envisioned by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant for BBC Two, *The Office* was not exactly anyone’s idea of a comfort watch. When the show erupted onto screens in the early 2000s, it heralded a golden age of a controversial branch of humour: cringe humour, or, as it is sometimes labelled, ‘comedy of discomfort’ (Moore 2008), ‘comedy of awkwardness’ (Page 2008), ‘squirm comedy’ (Duncan 2017), or ‘sadcom’ (as explored in Nele Sawallisch’s article, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/115>). The term ‘cringe’ highlights the physical reaction many people undergo when watching the misadventures of characters like *The Office*’s David Brent, local branch manager of Wernham Hogg: a borderline tragic middle-management figure who constantly strives for attention, brings his guitar to work, and casually informs his co-workers when he can feel a lump in his testicles.

Typically, ‘cringing’ involves a “contract[ion of] the muscles”, coupled with “inward shiver[s] of embarrassment, awkwardness, disgust” (“cringe, v” 2021). Melissa Dahl summarises the experience of cringing as “the intense visceral reaction produced by an awkward moment” (Dahl 2018, p. 8). This description is quite a departure from traditional notions of laughter as something inherently pleasurable. Anthropologist Mary Douglas famously defines laughter as the releasing of tension to articulate “disproportionate joy” (Douglas 1968, p. 368), while philosopher John Morreall argues that we cannot have laughter without a “pleasant psychological shift” (Morreall 1987, p. 133). Laughter is by no means (and never has been) 100% inclusive, of course. It is just as much about enforcing social norms and thus about *excluding* those who stray too much from the enforced consensus (Martin 2007, pp. 119–20); yet most traditional accounts of laughter emphasise its sociable force when it comes to creating “a feeling of fellowship” and



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“solidarity” among a temporary community (Kuipers 2006, p. 234). Cringe comedy, by contrast, puts us through the wringer, providing “excruciating discomfort” and making us “[watch] from behind the sofa, looking through [our] fingers” (Press 2003). By the same token, where comedy is traditionally assumed to have a sociable effect, the experience of cringing is one of expulsion from the group, of isolating oneself, though be it just by shielding one’s eyes or avoiding someone else’s gaze. Cringe humour is closely related to embarrassment and awkwardness; a connection that is explored in greater detail from a sociological as well as from a psychological perspective in the articles by Patrick Wöhrle (<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/3/99>) and by Annalina Valpuri Mayer, Frieder Michel Paulus, and Sören Krach (<https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/110>).² So clearly, there are more complex forms of laughter which cannot be easily subsumed under Morrell’s general definition: helpless, mirthless, and inappropriate laughter, which arises from asymmetrical situations. Typically, a conversational mishap exposes hierarchies as well as an inadequacy of social role-play (Glenn 2003).

Since the early 2000s, cringe comedy has turned into a global brand. Comedians as diverse as Margaret Cho, Sacha Baron Cohen, Larry David, and Julia Davis have made their names by trading in unpleasantness and discomfort, particularly on the small screen, with cringe shows like *I’m Alan Partridge* (BBC Two, 1997–2002), *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (HBO, 2000–), and *Nighty-Night* (BBC Three, 2004–2005) revolving around the mishaps of socially awkward, sometimes borderline sociopathic anti-heroes. This does not mean that the experience of cringing is exclusive to the small screen. European arthouse comedies like Mikkel Nørgaard’s *Klovn* (2010), Maren Ade’s *Toni Erdmann* (2016), or the films of Ruben Östlund (*Force Majeure*, 2014; *The Square*, 2017) have found a large audience, as have more mainstream Anglophone films when they toy with cringe humour without completely subscribing to it.³ While fully fledged cringing is not so often found on the big screen, cringe *elements* will sometimes add a homeopathic dosage of awkwardness into otherwise sanitised blockbusters, particularly romantic comedies—a bit like putting vinegar into an otherwise too saccharine meal. Case in point: the cameo of Julia Davis as Nancy, the world’s bitterest caterer, in the most sugar-coated romantic comedy of all time, *Love Actually* (2003).

This phenomenon is not new to the 21st century. William Shakespeare, in *Twelfth Night* (1602), gives us Malvolio, the most buffoonish and cringeworthy character to grace the Elizabethan stage, a man cut from the same cloth as David Brent. Malvolio’s climactic humiliation and expulsion from the group balance the play’s happy ending, and in spite of his limited stage presence, he remains an unlikely audience favourite who has attracted stellar comedic performers like Alec Guinness, Stephen Fry, and Tamsin Greig. Throughout the history of theatre, cringeworthy moments and painful laughter abound. The plays of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter are not only brimming with awkward, uncomfortable pauses, despair, and alienation, they also produce a characteristic brand of “joyless laughter” (Rudnick 1998). Actor Rainn Wilson, who plays the most cringeworthy character on NBC’s version of *The Office*, has singled out Chekov as a major reference point for the show’s characteristic take on pathos and isolation (Wilson 2011). From the theatre, cringe humour would branch out onto the stand-up stage, featuring in the subversive routines of Lenny Bruce or Andy Kaufman, comedians who made a point of antagonising their audiences. Profiles of Larry David, the co-creator of *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989–1998) and the creator and star of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, typically include the legendary tale of how he went on stage in the 1970s, took one look at his audience, uttered an insult, and left the stage again (Siegel 2007, pp. 74–75). These days, performance poets routinely humiliate themselves by reading out their teenage diaries, while the contestants in reality shows on television do not shy away from being humiliated on camera. Cringeworthy ‘trash’ material circulates widely on the web, as “‘bad’ texts make ‘good’ memes” (Limor Shifman qtd. in Brilli 2017, p. 23). All of this testifies to a cultural paradigm shift that culminates in the omnipresent label ‘awkward’.

2. Awkward!

In his 2010 manifesto on awkwardness, Adam Kotsko suggests that we live “in an awkward age”, where we acutely feel at all times “the terrifying possibility that civilization itself might collapse in a simultaneous worldwide cringe” (Kotsko 2010, p. 3). In the same breath, he traces the phenomenon to the cultural revolution of the 1960s. During this decade, old normative social models became obsolete, while new alternatives were not available in a widespread form, resulting in a kind of cultural nihilism. In the place of firm social visions, gender scripts, and values, we got the awkward pause that permeates the plays of Harold Pinter (Jonathan Bignell, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/2/83>, deals with Pinter’s impact on British television in this issue). Look no further than the uncomfortable silence at the end of Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate* (1967), when Benjamin Braddock and Elaine Robinson get on a bus together. Generic convention dictates a happy ending—Benjamin, having realised that he loves Elaine, has just eloped with her—but the silence that engulfs the pair underlines that they are heading off into the unknown, perfectly uncertain about the future as well as their feelings for one another (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Awkward silence permeates the ending of *The Graduate* (1967).

The scene still neatly summarises the feeling known as awkwardness: a handy “catchall term for any situation that makes us uneasy, whether trivial or serious” (Dahl 2018, p. 6). Today, the exclamation “Awkward!” tends to be used as a personified laughter-track in order to “comically defus[e]” uneasy moments (Middleton 2014, p. 2). Once the situation has been called out, all of our attempts to keep face are doomed, and the embarrassment has to be borne. According to sociologists, embarrassment means we are temporarily isolated from society. Paradoxically, however, this means that we only *feel* society’s demands more strongly. When we are temporarily excluded from the community, we are under pressure to find our way back *into* it (see Krach et al. 2011). In his famous account of embarrassment, Erving Goffman does not explicitly address awkwardness or cringing, but he does talk about the “shadow of sustained uneasiness” (Goffman 1972, p. 100) and thus about the awkward condition, i.e., the *potential* for embarrassment that gives rise to cringing (Duncan 2017, p. 42). The worldwide web is full of testimony to that effect, with awkwardness neatly summarised in examples like: “not quite catching someone’s name, meaning you must avoid them for the rest of your life” (Very British Problems 2014). During the pandemic, many people found more items to add to the list, having taken part in too many conference calls where a half-second delay or a bout of ‘Zoom freezing’ is enough to cast a spell of uneasiness and discomfort over the whole meeting. Goffman did not live to experience video conferences, but his observations on

embarrassment seem remarkably spot-on in this day and age. He demonstrates how we will try to retain composure and to project our ‘acceptable self’ even when that performance is threatened, and how embarrassment “seems to be contagious, spreading, once started, in ever widening circles of discomfiture” (Goffman 1972, p. 106).

What is also beyond Goffman’s jurisdiction is the experience of vicarious embarrassment (*Fremdscham*), which has been addressed in social psychology and neurology: the experience of feeling embarrassment on behalf of people who are too unaware to be embarrassed themselves. Lack of (self-)awareness provokes questions about norms and values, about political correctness, and about how the cultural mainstream deals with minorities and taboo topics. Tellingly, the field of cringe comedy was for a long time dominated by white middle-aged characters like David Brent or Alan Partridge, who articulate the anxieties of white middle-aged masculinity out of step with a changing cultural climate: blissfully unaware, perfectly untroubled by genuine feelings of empathy or sensitivity. In one episode of *This Time with Alan Partridge* (BBC One, 2019-), Partridge admits that he used to applaud sarcastically when a woman was trying to parallel-park her car, but he’s learned his lesson now: “If I saw the same thing happen today, I would just shout out instructions.” (S1E5).

Because of cringe humour’s inherent ambivalence—it is not always clear whether we are meant to laugh *with* or *at* Alan Partridge—it has sparked controversial discussions. For every admirer of Sacha Baron Cohen’s committed performances exposing bigotry and prejudice, there are critical voices who accuse him of flirting with and perpetuating clichéd sexism and downright antisemitism (Page 2008, pp. 26–27). By the same token, Larry David’s modern-day comedies of manners have provoked a critical backlash. For some people, the exploits of the Larry persona merely articulate “the anger of frustrated entitlement” (qtd. in Kaplan 2004); more recently, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* came under fire for allegedly minimising the crimes of Harvey Weinstein in its #MeToo-inspired Season 10 (see Hakimi 2020).

But to suggest that cringe humour revels in unsympathetic laughter of denigration or that it makes a virtue of insulting “protected groups like blacks, gays, Jews, and handicapped people” (Siegel 2007, p. 68) misses the point. Quite on the contrary, these groups are not the *targets* of cringe comedy per se, even when scenes depict how they are subjected to more or less subtle forms of abuse. In fact, it is often hard to exactly pinpoint what triggers the audience’s laughter in cringe humour, and what kind of value system this laughter acknowledges—a situation further complicated by the mockumentary angle favoured in many cringe shows. In *The Office*, David Brent constantly fails to reconcile his actions to his words, particularly when it comes to being considerate and keeping up with the times. When Brent tries to highlight that he would never laugh at disabled people, he immediately reveals his patronising attitude and reluctance to interact with them: “It’s like when you see someone look at a little handicapped and go, ‘Oh, look at him. He’s not able-bodied. I am. I’m prejudiced.’ Yeah? Well, at least the little handicapped fella is able-minded. [beat] Unless he’s not. It’s difficult to tell with the wheelchair ones” (S1E3). While ‘the wheelchair ones’ remain off-camera for most of *The Office*’s runtime (Gesine Wegner’s article for this special issue discusses one of the most notable exceptions, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/3/105>), the comic technique used here is merely a variation on the classic ‘Stan Daniels’ turn: a verbal proclamation is immediately contradicted by word or action, with the comic effect deriving from the incongruity.

Matters are more complicated in hardcore cringe shows like Julia Davis’s *Nighty-Night*, whose protagonist has been singled out as “the most monstrous female character to appear on television ever” (McLean 2004). Jill, played by showrunner Davis herself, abandons her cancer-stricken husband to pursue her neighbour, Don. Having entered a self-help group by pretending that her husband is already dead, Jill constantly plays the sympathy card in order to get licence to harass Don’s wife, Kathy, who is suffering from multiple sclerosis. Where *The Office* pokes fun at people who attempt to partake in political correctness but merely “‘talk the talk’ without knowing what they are talking about” (Manning 2008, p. 188),

Nighty-Night goes further in order to test the viewer's allegiances, setting up grotesquely comic situations that constantly exploit the characters' inability to apply social protocol. Does Jill's 'grief' trump Kathy's disability?

3. Cathartic Cringe

In spite of cringe humour's alienating effect and its innate quality of discomfort, there is something very fruitful about its tendency to foreground unstable positions and to articulate uncomfortable questions. Yes, cringe potentially alienates people and is by definition not always clear in its allegiances, but it is also a comparatively inclusive branch of comedy, and often betrays a very strong social conscience, for instance by highlighting the contested position of minorities and so-called 'protected groups'. Look no further than comedies about mental illness (as discussed by *Linda M. Hess* in her article, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/121>) or disability comedies like *Jerk* (BBC Three, 2019-). The latter casts Tim Renkow as a man with cerebral palsy in the Larry David role of the sociopath who thinks he can get away with anything. Elsewhere, there are hidden-camera prank shows like *I'm Spazticus* (Channel 4, 2012–2013), which puts disabled people in outrageous situations to coax horrified reactions out of bystanders. The term 'awkwardness' has a special history in the field of disability studies and is used to describe the helplessness experienced by able-bodied people around disabled ones (*Dahl 2018*, p. 7). Cringe shows have done some ground-breaking work here, producing transgressive jokes with "purposeful ambiguity" (*Stonebanks and Sensoy 2007*, p. 47). Jason *Middleton (2014)* talks about "unstable jokes" whose target is by no means clear. When Sacha Baron Cohen, in the role of Kazakh journalist Borat Sagdiyev, interviews a group of feminists and scores some easy laughs (*Borat! Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*, 2006), can we really say with certainty whether we are laughing at Borat's outdated views, at the interviewees' sheer failure to see through the masquerade, or their increasingly futile attempts to keep a straight face when he claims that science has proven women's brains to be no larger than those of squirrels?

The affective dimension of cringe (a topic highlighted in the articles by *Katja Kanzler*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/114> and *Nele Sawallisch* <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0787/10/4/115>) indicates that there is a point to this uncomfortable ambiguity and to the downbeat endings that are so common in cringe comedy. Because it often has as much in common with tragedy as it has with comedy, cringe can afford a distinct form of catharsis: "Vicariously experiencing the embarrassing moments of others, like watching Greek drama, incites and purges pity and fear from an audience. [. . .] We laugh, we blush, we recognize [the] mortification—and then we move on" (*Cleland 2004*, p. 33). Like tragedy, cringe comedies can "purge pity and fear from an audience", shattering us in ways that allow us to better "navigate our way through the missteps of our sometimes awkward social lives" (*Feinberg et al. 2012*, p. 94).⁴ In this context, I am intrigued by the autobiographical tales that many cringe comics have shared, both in their stand-up shows, as well as in interviews that serve as extensions of their trademark personas, and which testify to how comedy can serve as a form of activism. To give just two examples:

(1) Tig Notaro has frequently addressed her double mastectomy in her live act, recounting how the operation left her 'breastless' and has led to her being often mistaken for a man. Notaro makes a point of stretching out these uncomfortable encounters for as long as possible, like when airport security cannot decide whether she should be padded down by a man or a woman. Observing how the staff members are thoroughly unable to read her body, Notaro clearly relishes her opportunity to rebel against the confines of the binary gender system: "I knew exactly what was happening. And I knew that all I needed to do was speak, and then she would know that I was female. But I just did not want to help her out at all. I was enjoying the awkwardness *so much!*" (*Boyish Girl Interrupted*, 2016).

(2) Notaro's belief that there is something productive about cringing and awkwardness is shared by Louis C.K., the creator of one of television's most experimental cringe comedies (*Louie*, FX, 2010–2015). At one point, he recalls how he disrupted the traditional, quasi-

segregated seating arrangement in his junior high school by deliberately sitting with the African-American students: “It was awkward and scary, but I made a lot of black friends, and that was the only way to do it. It had to be uncomfortable. [. . .] Sometimes discomfort is the only way through” (qtd. in Corsello 2014).

Even though watching a cringe show or a live performance may not come close to this type of encounter, cringe humour is quite often characterised by this potentially therapeutic flavour.⁵ Without the safety net of social protocol and with everything exposed “[t]hat we *knew* was there, but preferred to keep hidden under a carapace of play” (Duncan 2017, p. 41), the cringe can help us arrive at a degree of insight and at a more authentic understanding of otherness that comes close to a classic epiphany. Melissa Dahl defines the cringe experience as “an unpleasant kind of self-recognition where you suddenly see yourself through someone else’s eyes” (Dahl 2018, p. 8), and this comes close to the Aristotelian experience of ‘pity’ and ‘fear’. As empathic witnesses to a character’s downfall in tragedy, we get to suffer ‘by proxy’, hoping to undergo the cathartic cleansing experience and to arrive at a more profound understanding of the other. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention taps into this potential with its ‘Seize the Awkward’ campaign, emphasising that we should seek the potential of uncomfortable silence in order to forge a connection with people suffering from depression and mental illness. Their witty ads highlight that awkwardness and cringing must not be avoided at all costs. Quite on the contrary, working *through* the awkwardness together can have a transformative effect.⁶ By implication, awkward conversations revolving around racism and sexism are necessary in order to trigger a learning process.

The success of shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* is a double-edged sword in that respect. *Curb* has arguably never shied away from controversial topics, with some of its most iconic episodes revolving around whether or not one should socialise with sex offenders (S5E7 “The Seder”), whether baldness should count as a disability (S7E5 “Denise Handicap”), or how the suffering of an actual Holocaust survivor compares to the experiences of someone who has competed in the TV show *Survivor* (S4E9 “The Survivor”). Most of the time, Larry (ab)uses his privileged position to protest against the conventions of tipping, dating, or hugging. When told that it is not necessary to bring a gift to someone’s birthday party, Larry is happy to oblige, only to learn that he has offended his host, actor Ben Stiller, by obeying his wish: “Come on, Larry”, Ben tells him, “everybody knows that’s bullshit [when you say ‘no gift’]” (S4E2 “Ben’s Birthday Party”). Yet there is a danger that we delegate too much of the work to Larry, who frequently rebels against outdated social protocol, stepping on people’s toes while navigating the social minefield. In Season 8’s outstanding episode “Palestinian Chicken” (S8E3), various people ask Larry to call out other people’s annoying habits because they are too timid to do so themselves. “You know what you are?”, Larry’s friend Jeff quips. “You’re a social assassin.” He has a point. Like other cringe comics, Larry acts as a vigilante who challenges the uncertain regimes of political correctness, even at the risk of disrupting social harmony and upsetting the traditional ‘community of laughter’.

Curb’s ninth season even made this point in its ad campaign (Figure 2): the teaser poster saw the show riffing on classic Batman iconography, with Larry David’s grumpy face projected into the nocturnal skyline of New York City. While the image guarantees a quick laugh for the pop-culture savvy, the joke hits deeper than that. Batman is the antihero that Gotham City calls upon to do its dirty work and to get rid of undesirable elements, without involving state-sanctioned law, and Larry arguably performs a similar job in the context of political-correctness debates and social interaction.



Figure 2. Larry David's reluctant vigilantism (poster HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*).

Curb Your Enthusiasm's legacy also includes a rather bizarre trend that has spread over the world wide web in recent years: the 'Directed by Robert B. Weide' phenomenon, named after *Curb's* co-creator and frequent director. People have made a habit of taking short video clips (typically of people embarrassing themselves) and cutting them together with Robert Weide's directing credit on *Curb*, adding the show's musical theme. Robert Weide has nothing to do with the creation and proliferation of these videos, but not all users seem to be aware of that. When we hosted the symposium *Painful Laughter* at Schloss Herrenhausen (Hannover) in 2020, we had a chance to talk to Robert Weide about his work as a pioneering artist in cringe comedy and as a documentary filmmaker, who has made films about such iconic figures as Lenny Bruce, Woody Allen, and Kurt Vonnegut. When I asked him about the 'Directed by Robert B. Weide' phenomenon, he jocularly referred to himself as "a walking meme" whose digital fame is not to be taken seriously:

"Go to Google and just type in the words, 'Directed by'. The first thing that will come up is 'Robert B. Weide'. Nobody knows who I am, so it has nothing to do with me. What's funny is that many people think that I really directed those videos. It's taken on its own life, and it's truly all over the world. I've seen people who have had 'Robert B. Weide' tattooed on their butts and on their necks. Someone on the internet said 'The year 2020 was directed by Robert B. Weide'. I have a Facebook page that always had a modest following of about 200 people. Now I've got like 92,000 followers, none of whom know my work. It's all very amusing, and it probably will be the opening line of my obituary."

Understandably, he is not flattered when people send him emails, accusing him of claiming credit for something they have filmed, without realising that it is not him who keeps uploading this material on YouTube. It speaks for the cultural impact of cringe comedy that the climactic moments of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* have become so iconic that people are now beginning to frame their own experiences through the show, adding the appropriate paratext to their punchlines. But there is a downside to this phenomenon, too. The 'Directed by Robert B. Weide' meme has also been hijacked by reactionary groups and anti-feminists

who use *Curb's* trademark credit sequence to ridicule social activists, picking unflattering clips of them trying to take a stand against gender inequality or racial injustice.

The articles included in this Special Issue testify to these and other cultural wars that continue to be fought in cringe comedy. All of them started out as papers delivered at the 2020 symposium on *Painful Laughter* that was generously funded by the Volkswagen foundation. I am indebted to all the scholars who took part in the event, many of whom also contributed articles to this Special Issue on cringe humour.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed discussion of the key tonal differences between the UK version and the US version and their ideological subtexts, see (Kotsko 2010, pp. 36–39).
- ² Embarrassment and awkwardness must not be used interchangeably. According to Pansy Duncan, awkwardness “names a more generalized consciousness of the labor involved in social, physical and emotional being” (Duncan 2017, p. 42). Awkwardness refers to the anticipatory tension that precedes acute embarrassment.
- ³ I do not mean to suggest that American cinema is completely averse to the cringe phenomenon. Independent filmmakers like Todd Solondz and Neil LaBute have toyed with uncomfortable laughter, as has Martin Scorsese in *The King of Comedy* (1982). Moreover, the ‘mockumentary’ genre was pioneered by American comedians like Woody Allen (*Take the Money and Run*, 1969) and Christopher Guest (*This Is Spinal Tap*, 1984).
- ⁴ Frances Gray argues that our compassion protects us against a sense of our own embarrassment when watching cringe humour (Gray 2009, p. 159).
- ⁵ Cringe is not exclusive to audiovisual and/or performative media, of course. See Jaime Cleland’s insightful discussion of strategic uses of embarrassment in the works of Mary McCarthy (Cleland 2004).
- ⁶ Scope, a British charity, went for a similar effect with its ‘End the Awkward’ campaign, using educational videos to overcome the awkwardness that able-bodied people feel around disabled people (see Dahl 2018, pp. 97–100).

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