



I was late to know about Norm Macdonald. A friend sent me a link to the video of his infamous “Moth Joke” on *Conan* just about right before moth memes hit my feed. Norm slowly unfolds the plight of a moth confiding its existential dread to a podiatrist. The characters in the joke are given proverbially Russian names as if parodying a Dostoyevsky novel. I enjoy likening this unhappy protagonist to the uncannily large moth specimen that provoked and prominently features in the moth memes as it desperately flutters against a window trying to get to the light. “Honestly Doc, I don’t even know what I am doing anymore.”

Norm didn’t invent that joke. A quasi-universal tale is rendered absurd by a final punch line—both standard elements of classic comedy. The basic structure allows for the joke to unfold through individual performance and personalisation of the story’s details. Its originality resides within this oral tradition rather than in topicality of content: Norm chuckles and snickers when he almost can’t hold himself together, and he perfectly spaces his pauses, visibly savouring them as a device for a suspense that is ultimately meaningless.

I struggle with my own rage. Not that I feel prone to aggression, but let’s say there is plenty to be enraged about. Just as the premises for cultural production are increasingly pressured by the conditions of civility, art yields to fantasies of a moral high ground. But rage is a complicated proxy even if disinterested creation is not what one desires.

Norm has expressed his dislike for comedians as political pundits multiple times, like in an interview last March when he talked about parodies of Trump: “You can’t play someone and have contempt for them at the same time.”

After I had binge watched the ten episodes of the first season of Norm’s Netflix special *Norm Macdonald Has a Farm*, I was surprised to find the reviews mostly derisive. For the purposes of this exercise, however, I decided not to expound on what seems wrong about them. It seems increasingly less fruitful, as an artist, to reiterate one’s own partisan beliefs. As Virginia Woolf so memorably points out in *A Room of One’s Own*, for a woman to be a disinterested writer, that is, to write for writing’s sake and not out of the understandable grief instilled in her through discrimination, is the goal of emancipation. This can hold true for comedy and art alike. A joke is not the same as an opinion delivered as a pun. Instead, I like this article in the *Washington Post* titled “Norm Macdonald Is Right to Shun Topicality”: “The world doesn’t really need another John Oliver or Samantha Bee or Trevor Noah regurgitating the day’s correct and proper thoughts with a slightly caustic spin or a slightly dirty word in order to earn modernity’s last acceptable form of praise: clapter.”

“Clapter comedy,” as effectively coined by Seth Meyers, has become a term “to bemoan an identifiable strain of message-driven comedy that inadvertently prioritises political pandering above comedic merit.” The very physical difference between conspicuous *clapter* and the immediacy of *laughter* is useful to an understanding of Norm’s comedic style: always indebted to stand-up and full of the fragility of a joke that may well fail in launching. The humanism of such performance—even if we acknowledge the professional cunning of a veteran stand-up—is rooted in the immediacy of deliverance. The performed self—prone to both sympathy and failure—in its most effective form, extends to one’s own naked self. Here is where we find ourselves drawn in uncomfortably with laughter, willing or unwilling, and perhaps like that good comedy, can reveal fragments of truth.

Each of the ten episodes of *Norm Macdonald Has a Farm* is titled after its visiting guest: David Spade, Drew Barrymore, Judge Judy, David Letterman, Jane Fonda, Chevy Chase, M. Night Shyamalan, Michael Keaton, Billy Joe Shaver, and Lorne Michaels. The show's setup is in itself a subversion of the genre: in near-epic tradition, we are treated to a set without an audience and breaks without advertising. One of the sole props on stage is a fridge filled with Red Bulls that populate each shot like outdated product placements for television's faded glory. Norm and his sidekick Adam Eget generate a mood of overall cluelessness, which engulfs the respective guests but is never at their expense. The list may seem untimely—but what becomes apparent through each appearance is either a sincere friendship or interest in the respective character. This emphatic authenticity is strange in the context of Netflix. Casually, Judge Judy flips from her personal experience as a young woman judge within the shortcomings of the American family court to female comedians, and Drew Barrymore asks, "Do they like to fuck vampires or do they just fucking like vampires?" None of this is important, but all of it is real, not the least since the stereotypes that define the tropes of American culture here are delivered as actual people. Moments of candour include Judge Judy reaching out to touch Norm's chin in a pretended reproach after he interrupts one of her anecdotes. Or country singer Billy Joe Shaver talking about his long since severed fingers: "I can't count on my friends, I can't count on my fingers either."