

Garfield and His Relation to the Political Unconscious.

Online and in academia, there has been a long ongoing discussion about *Garfield* and whether *Garfield* is or is even intended to be funny.ⁱ Authors often quote *Garfield*'s creator, Jim Davis, in an interview in which he talks about how *Garfield* was created because of his marketing potential. In this essay, I want to consider *Garfield* as a cultural production (not solely in relation to Davis) and its use of humour as a temporary but unsatisfactory 'resolution' of contradiction and ambivalence in domestic life. This essay cannot be a comprehensive review of every *Garfield* comic as there is an estimated 14000 comic strips in existence. Likewise, the amount of *Garfield* fan art is too diverse to address as a totality. Instead, I only wish to highlight features of *Garfield* which emerge in much of its fan art. I will argue that *Garfield* and its fan art are such interesting texts as *Garfield* expresses ambivalence about domestic life, as well as an ambiguity concerning consumption and cultural production in contemporary life. In order to demonstrate this, I will first discuss *Garfield*'s genesis in market forces and some of Davis' comments concerning the creation of *Garfield*, before turning to a consideration of the comics' content, and the fan art responses it has provoked.

Jim Davis has not been secretive about his profit-driven motives for making *Garfield*. In interviews, Davis has outlined his efforts to make *Garfield* popular with a mass audience, and mass market for merchandise. This led to Davis choosing a cute animal as the main character (Snoopy merchandise sells better than Charlie Brown) to avoid talk of politics (as it would date poorly) and to even avoid talk of seasons and holidays when possible (as it had to be understood in southern and northern hemispheres and across cultures). These decisions do not seem to mean, as *Garfield* detractors would suggest, that Davis was trying to make money rather than be funny (it is logically possible to do both). Rather, they suggest a search for a broadly universal sense of humour that would be popular wherever there were potential markets for the comic and its merchandise. Market forces act as co-creators in the production of *Garfield*. This process of generalisation is potentially significant for why *Garfield* has become such a source of fan art, which I will discuss later in this essay.

Garfield grew out of previous attempts by Davis to create a successful comic. First of all, Davis created *Gnorm Gnat*, a comic strip about a gnat which failed due to peoples' *alleged* inability to relate to a bug. Following this was *Jon*, a story about an aspiring comic book artist with a cat called *Garfield*. This comic is essentially the same set up as *Garfield*—Jon and *Garfield* in three panel comics facing the same dilemmas and problems of the later *Garfield* comic. Davis rarely talks about *Jon* but it was, obviously, the precursor to *Garfield*. *Jon* is an interesting comic as a clear connection can be made between Davis and the character Jon. After the failure of *Gnorm Gnat*, Davis creates a character who is struggling with the frustrations of being a failed comic artist. Over the course of the development of *Jon/Garfield*, Jon's job as a comic artist is forgotten. This makes sense given Davis' plan to make a universal, marketable product. Jon loses his resemblance to Davis and instead becomes more of an everyman. *Garfield*'s forerunner is significant, as it suggests that originally it was Jon who was meant to be the focus of the comic, but he was slowly displaced by the more marketable *Garfield*.

In one of the more comprehensive analyses of *Garfield* fan art, *What the Internet Did to Garfield*,ⁱⁱ Youtube user Super Eyepatch Wolf (SEW) offers an analysis and breakdown of the types of jokes found in *Garfield* comics. According to his categorization, the two most common types of jokes are those that make fun of Jon's patheticness, and jokes where *Garfield* torments Jon. While the comics are famous for a cat loving lasagne and hating Mondays, the majority of jokes are in actual fact about the pain and torment of Jon. This tormenting of Jon is no doubt real, but focusing too much on this can create a one-sided view of *Garfield*. If *Garfield* merely torments Jon, why does Jon not simply get rid of him? The humour of *Garfield* works because *Garfield*, like any cat owner can understand, is the source of deep ambivalence for Jon—evil

tormentor and a cute comfort in an otherwise depressing world. The ambivalence of cat ownership in *Garfield* can be read as a stand in for ambivalence about domestic life as a whole.

The form of many Garfield jokes involves expressing an ambivalence or contradiction concerning domestic life that is not resolved. For example, in the comics above the humour works in acknowledging Jon's ambivalent feelings towards Garfield and wishing him well on his birthday, the comfort and inconveniences of maintaining a home, mixed feelings about dieting and the blessing of curses of sharing a bed with a cat. These ambivalences produce laughter as the reader recognizes a contradiction or conflict that is normally passed over in day-to-day life. It does nothing to resolve this conflict but does create a relief of tension through the use of a punchline. Garfield strips rarely offer a synthesis or resolution to the conflict, but instead result in laughter. This laughter allows for the sustaining of a contradiction between Garfield's domestication and his rebelliousness against that domestication.

One of Garfield's defining characteristics is his detached, disinterested and too cool attitude. He is, as one piece of Garfield merchandise calls him, a 'Rebel Without a Clue'. The rebelliousness that characterises Garfield seems far more accepted in the world after its creation in 1978 than it was before. With time, the counter-cultural feel Garfield may have possessed has largely dried up. In contrast to the comradeship and sincere vulnerability of Snoopy in the Peanuts comics (Davis' inspiration for Garfield) Garfield's defiance is entirely self-absorbed. He refuses to do what Jon tells him to, indulges his own vices and is free from emotional attachments to Odie and Jon. This does not necessarily make Garfield any more admirable or stronger than the tormented Jon. Garfield's rebelliousness is entirely dependent on his secured, domesticated position. He does not seek permanent change in his life, but only a temporary personal exemption from its rules and mores. His acceptance of his own laziness, dismissal of those who comment on his weight, and his non-compliance are all underpinned by Jon's willingness to support Garfield. Although he is a rebel, he is no revolutionary as Jon not only encroaches on Garfield's freedom, but also sustains Garfield by giving him food and shelter. Jon's house sustains Garfield, but the household's calls for his contribution are too much for Garfield. Instead of resolving the problem, laughter allows for a postponement of resolution and a never-ending continuation of Garfield comic strips.

Put differently, these jokes allow the *Garfield* comics to sustain their serial nature by preserving a constant tension and mutual dependence between Jon and Garfield. In an interview, quoted in a Quora post that was reprinted by Slateⁱⁱⁱ, Davis said that he drew his inspiration from the fact that "after 50 years, Snoopy was still laying in that dog house, and rather than getting old, it actually has the opposite effect". Seriality goes hand in hand with the genre, because punchlines are able to end a particular comic strip without resolving any of the problems encountered in them. Humour allows *Garfield* to address deadlocks, ambivalences, and contradictions in everyday life by making them palatable or even enjoyable. Because there is no resolution there is a need to continue the comic strips and continue the punchlines. It is not that *Garfield* is not meant to be funny, but that its funniness is intimately tied up with a certain kind of repetition and tediousness that is expressed through Jon's domestic life.

For Fredric Jameson, following Claude Levi-Strauss, art is an attempt to resolve symbolic contradictions that exist, but cannot be resolved materially. Jameson writes in *The Political Unconscious* that "cultural artifacts are to be read as symbolic resolutions of real political and social contradictions"^{iv}. The serial comedy, be it Garfield or a sitcom, can be seen to address contradictions without resolving them by treating the contradiction as a source of laughter. The punchline, as opposed to other forms of ending, is necessarily unsatisfactory. The preposterous nature of the punchline makes it funny, but also makes it a non-resolution. Laughter can be a pleasant response to a sense of unease or contradiction. Ironic art and jokes power lies in the fact that they can highlight contradictions while also maintaining the source of unease.

This is potentially why Garfield has inspired so much art and commentary. Its lack of resolution invites others to engage with the ambivalence in the work. This usually results in stressing the cuteness of Garfield or the seeming emptiness of everyday life. Some noticeable examples are the webcomic *Garfield Without Garfield*, in which Garfield is removed from the comic strip leaving Jon to talk to himself.

R/alzheimersgroup^v is a Reddit group dedicated to posting the same *Garfield* strip endlessly and people reacting as if seeing it for the first time. *Garfield's* ambivalence results in the horror art of *I'm Sorry Jon*, in which a horrific Lovecraft inspired Garfield frequently consumes Jon and *Thanks Jon* where Garfield is

depicted in equally weird ways, but as a benevolent being. These works do not get at the essence of Garfield, which (if there is one) is one of ambivalence, but instead play with different aspects of the original comic works.

As SEW has pointed out, Garfield fan art is also interesting as it so often involves the comic's creator, Jim Davis. As discussed earlier in this essay, Davis' desire to create a marketable product involved the slow displacement of his stand-in, Jon, in favour of centering Garfield. Market forces and consumers have slowly depersonalized the cartoon into generic structures or forms of jokes about an everyman. This not only makes the comic malleable in the hands of other artists, but also creates the prevailing anxiety about creation and consumption in Garfield. There are not only the jokes about Garfield's weight and love of lasagne, but also the sense in which Jon is slowly being consumed by his domestic life.

This anxiety is repeated in comics from *I'm Sorry Jon* in which Jon awakes to find the entire house has merged with Garfield and has swallowed him. It is also repeated in the finale to the YouTube series *Lasagne Cat*^{vi}, titled "Sex Survey Results." In this video, for five hours, alternating live action versions of Jon, Odie and Garfield answer the door to a mannequin. The mannequin then has a voiceover from a real-life person saying their name, and number of sexual partners. Here we can see the willingness of people, who have supplied details about their most intimate personal experiences, to turn their lives into something consumable. The procreative act is turned into something consumable and depersonalizes the pro-creator (rendered as a mannequin among hundreds of others). This loop lasts for five hours until Jon answers the door to find himself confronted with a doppelganger. The Jon at the door ages into a look-alike of Jim Davis. A video of Jim Davis then plays on a wall saying, "by virtue of being a cat he's not young or old or male or female either". Old-Jon makes his way through the city before appearing in a desert haunted by a Garfieldesque Shaman who whispers in his ear, turning him into worms. Here we see processes of depersonalization and being consumed. The film ends with a graphic depiction of a Polish school girl giving birth in a public toilet. She looks into the toilet bowl and says, in Polish, "I have given birth to humanity's curse. I ask for mercy, which I won't receive. My soul will be swallowed". Again, the act of creation is turned into a fear of being consumed. After the girl leaves the toilet, we see a red cat climbing on the toilet seat and the bloody baby in the toilet open its eyes.

So much of *Garfield* fan art continues with the use of comedy and delights in the seemingly endless repetition of the comics. This is perhaps why *Garfield* fan art is so interesting. It does not represent an attempt to overcome *Garfield* or to give it an ending but instead intensifies the absurd contradictions and repetition. This is not because *Garfield* reflects a depressed mind, but rather because it demonstrates the demands of consumerism, and the role of market forces in producing culture. Much of the fan art continues to play with the contradictions of Garfield as both a dumb cat, and a seemingly powerful tormentor of Jon. However, they restore whatever counter-cultural edge *Garfield* may have had when it was first created. It is hard to tell whether such art subverts or simply sustains Davis' goal of creating an infinitely merchandisable product. On top of the billion dollars in revenue that *Garfield* merchandise generates each year, there is also plenty of *Garfield* fan art converted into bootleg merchandise online.

Garfield fan art is also interesting as it so often plays with the endlessness that fifty years of *Garfield* comics suggest. By refusing to make cultural works resolve the contradictions we encounter in our daily lives, *Garfield* fan art and jokes leave that resolution as an open question or task for the viewer/s. Garfield can perhaps teach us something further about didactic art. It shows us how enjoyable rebellious statements can be for those, like Garfield, who know that their life is ultimately secured but how overwhelming their call can be for the worn-out Jon. Perhaps what is needed are those aspects of life Davis deliberately excluded to make *Garfield* a never-ending serial, and which were being excluded in real life by the rise of Reagan and Thatcher. What is so glaringly absent from *Garfield* and from much of its^{vii} fan art are Jon's friends. Although there was briefly a friend for Jon, Lyman, he was completely removed from the comics in 1983. It is ironic that a comic that deals with a de-personalized, generic, lonely character has generated such an intense community of online and offline creators in dialogue with each other.

As I have argued, Jim Davis' *Garfield* provides such interesting material for fan art as its humour allows for an endless repetition of punchlines concerning Jon's ambivalent feelings to domestic life. This lack of resolution invites interventions to try to resolve or to heighten the antagonisms in the original material. The

fan art draws out the anxieties about consumption at work in *Garfield* and how consumption constituted its genesis. Finally, I suggested that *Garfield* and its fandom might show us the ways in which ironic art can serve to build social connections in contrast to the potentially alienating effects of didactic art in an atomized society of Jons. It is for this reason that I believe artists, writers and critics everywhere must be ready, on behalf of those who have nothing to lose but their chains, to stand up and say meow meow meow meow.

G.P.K.

(Geoffrey Pussy-Kat).

ⁱ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1ei_eNTmCsU&t=29s *The Real Reason Why Garfield Isn't Funny...*
<https://www.outsidethebeltway.com/garfield-isnt-funny-and-was-never-supposed-to-be/>
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/its-not-just-you-garfield-is-not-meant-to-be-funny-6199556/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2C5R3FOWdE>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/03/is-garfield-supposed-to-be-funny.html>

^{iv} Jameson, Fredric. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell UP. Page 65

^v <https://www.reddit.com/r/AlzheimersGroup/>

^{vi} <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2AQkHXNVA-w9FA1m9VqO7A>