

Philomena Cunk's 21st-century expertise

Like *Drunk History* and *History of the World Part II*, *Cunk on Earth* is very funny. But the larger joke is that fake news is winning.

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [June 2023](#) issue



Philomena Cunk (Diane Morgan) in *Cunk on Earth*. (Photo © Andrea Gambadoro / Netflix)

“The ancient Greeks had lots of things that we still have today, like medicine and olives, and lots of things that have died out, like democracy and pillars,” Philomena Cunk (Diane Morgan) intones sagely, without a hint of irony. Cunk is the fictional host of the fictional history documentary *Cunk on Earth* (a joint BBC Two/Netflix production, streaming on Netflix), which promises to explain “how humanity transformed our planet” in five brief episodes that move from the emergence of *Homo sapiens* to the invention of the iPhone in less than three hours.

I’ve been a fan of Cunk since a friend turned me on to some of her earlier BBC comedy specials, *Cunk on Britain*, *Cunk on Shakespeare*, and *Cunk and Other*

Humans, all of which are easy to find on YouTube. One of Morgan's specialties as a comedian is interviewing her academic and expert guests. Because Cunk is by now a well-known character in British comedy, her guests do their level best to remain straight-faced regardless of the questions she asks them. But it is clear they have no idea where these interviews are going, and Morgan pushes each of them to the limits of their professionalism, producing some truly hilarious looks of wide-eyed astonishment as they try to process what she is saying.

"After he died, Jesus came back to earth in the form of a book, didn't he?" she asks an earnest Bible scholar. "Why do Christians call that special book the Bible?"—pronouncing it "bibble." When the scholar gently corrects her, she looks perplexed, as though sounding out a foreign word. "Is that how it's pronounced? I've literally never heard anyone say it before. How do you say it again?"

We are living in a minor golden age of this kind of reflection on history via comedy, and the friend who first recommended Cunk to me knows I am a sucker for it. I was home with a sick kid for several days this semester, and instead of catching up on committee work during nap time, I binged all of Mel Brooks's *History of the World, Part II* on Hulu, a star-studded reboot of his 1981 *Part I* movie. *History of the World* retells important historical moments in various movie genres and pop culture styles. Recurring sketches about Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman to serve in Congress, are shot like a 1970s sitcom, whereas the story of Jesus is told in two different long sketches that parody the romantic comedy *The Notebook* and the recent Beatles documentary *Get Back*. The Council of Nicaea, not exactly the stuff of popular history, gets its own sketch too, imagined as the moment when church leaders decided to remake Jesus' image from an accurate darker-skinned version to a muscle-popping White Rambo-style war hero who is introduced to the world in an action movie trailer.

There is a lot of nonsense in *History of the World, Part II*, but perhaps its most potent insight is admitting just how much our ideas about history are formed through pop culture. The point isn't to learn something new about the Council of Nicaea (there is absolutely nothing historically accurate about that sketch); it is to recognize how many of our current ideas about Jesus draw on militarized ideals of masculinity learned at the movies.

Drunk History, a Comedy Central series (streaming on Hulu and Paramount+) and one of my favorites in this genre, is more interested in what ordinary people

remember about history. Narrators are asked to tell a historical story they find particularly moving as they get increasingly drunk. Then actors reenact their stories, lip-synching their drunken, impassioned speech. I am not sure I will ever get tired of rewatching Michael Cera playing an unnamed Puritan leader, in somber black robe and white wig, mouthing the drunk narrator's summation of his opposition to radical Quaker Mary Dyer's claims to hear directly from the Holy Spirit: "No, no, no, no. Don't go just saying, 'Oh, here's my interpretation of it' and have women over for tea." Or maybe I just love the hopefulness that *Drunk History* inspires in me—I'm amazed that someone remembers Mary Dyer's story well enough to tell it while drinking a couple of bottles of wine.

Cunk, on the other hand, is a kind of avatar for a social type nurtured by our polarized, social media age. Her commentary is mostly misinformed if not outright false, full of malapropisms and mispronunciations delivered with a straight face. She regularly tells stories about her friend Paul or her ex-boyfriend Sean as a benchmark to understand historical events, dismissing any interpretation that doesn't align with her personal experience. She cites social media as an authority to contradict academic expertise—like when she insists that she learned on YouTube that numbers only go up to 700 and then just repeat themselves, but "they" gave them different names so no one would know, holding fast to this bizarre conspiracy theory regardless of how many experts refute it.

Of course, the jokes only land if you understand the gap between her confident assertions and the truth. As with all these historical parodies, those of us who get the joke are meant to take a kind of comfort in laughing at history done badly. Sometimes Morgan uses her outlandish assertions to name things that feel devastatingly true about our historical moment, like that joke about the extinction of democracy or a pronouncement in the final episode that social media represents the undoing of all human civilization that came before. While she never breaks character, these are nods that she too is in on the larger joke.

This is very funny, except the larger joke seems to be that fake news is winning. You can find countless online videos offering their own interpretations of the world that don't sound all that different from Cunk, except they aren't meant to be satire. I still find her work hilarious, but it is hard not to worry that this is just catharsis for my despair. On more than one occasion I found myself laughing so hard I was crying. Or was it the other way around?