Stand-up Comedy: Manipulation and Influence

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Abstract

This thesis interprets the craft of stand-up comedy as a series of manipulations. In a medium where interaction with the audience is often unruly, manipulation is frequently used to maintain the performer's control over his audience, and to persuade them to laugh. Comedians may also go beyond the immediate manipulation of response to have a more significant influence, persuading audiences to subvert their usual standards of morality, and shaping or re-shaping their opinions and attitudes.

By examining the work and methodology of practitioners across the current British alternative stand-up comedy scene, I aim to show some of the common manipulations used by stand-up comedians, and to demonstrate the possibilities that this medium has for political efficacy. I argue that stand-up comedy plays a significant role in influencing the attitudes and opinions of individuals, and in negotiating wider social norms.

Contents

PART THREE: Efficacy and Influence

Notes on the Transcriptions

In all quotations and transcripts, '...' is used to denote a pause. Ellipsis in my quotation is denoted '[...]'.

Interviews

Standard text denotes interviewee's speech.

(Text in italics enclosed in rounded brackets) denotes interviewee's tone, movements, laughter etc.

Comedians in performance

Bold text denotes comedian's speech (applies only to displayed quotes).

(Text in italics enclosed in rounded brackets) denotes comedian's movements, facial expressions, laughter, etc.

[Standard text in square brackets] denotes audience response.

Where the comedian pauses while the audience laughs, '...' precedes the word that breaks the pause.

Where '...' is not included, the comedian speaks through the laugh without pausing.

Occasionally the comedian continues speaking over the laugh, and begins his pause after the laugh has begun. The pause is denoted '...'

Shorter pauses are denoted '(.)'

Where the comedian presents a character, speech attributed to the character is denoted by ***bold text in italics***. For clarity, where the character changes, the speech attributed to the new character starts on a new, indented line of text.

Introduction

Manipulation, Influence and Stand-up Comedy

Manipulation and Influence

Manipulation is usually a pejorative term. When we refer to someone as 'manipulative', we typically mean to imply that they are unscrupulous: a person who plots to control a situation or other people for their own, personal benefit. When we refer to ourselves as manipulated, we generally mean to cast ourselves in the role of victim.

This is not what 'manipulation' means; or at least not always. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines 'manipulation' first as to 'handle or control something skilfully' and second as to 'control or influence someone in a clever *or* underhand way.'[1] Manipulation is a term that rightly smacks of deceit and corruption, and whose meaning can encompass the shady motivations of its perpetrator, but it can also mean the simple application of skill to control a situation or outcome: something that every craft exists to do.

This thesis reinterprets the craft of stand-up comedy as a series of manipulations. In a few instances, I will suggest that a comedian is consciously manipulating an unwitting audience. These situations are the most recognisable as manipulation in its pejorative sense. However, there are also instances where the audience is aware that they are being manipulated, and many cases in which the comedian is unaware of the manipulative nature of their own actions. The majority of what I will call manipulation, comedians themselves refer to in terms such as 'craft', 'skill' and 'technique'; usually exercised only to ensure that the performer maintains his authority over a rowdy crowd. All of these terms imply the clever use of skill to exercise control. This is manipulation, even when the perpetrator has no darker motivation than to make his audience laugh.

As the OED definition suggests, manipulation is often carried out for the purposes of influence, defined as: 'the capacity to have an effect on someone's beliefs or actions', and 'a person or thing with the capacity to

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[1] *The Paperback Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. by Catherine Soanes, 6th edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). [My emphasis].

affect someone's beliefs or actions.'[2] For the purposes of this thesis, 'influence' is the term used to signify the ongoing alteration in the beliefs, attitudes or behaviour of audience members which continues after they leave the gig. Influence differs from manipulation in the duration of its effect and in its profundity: where manipulation causes momentary behaviours, such as laughter or applause, influence seeks to have an effect upon the real, internal attitudes and beliefs of the individual. This thesis will argue that manipulation has an affinity with influence, the one often creating opportunities for the other.

The first part of this thesis examines the manipulative nature of the joke itself, and the characteristics of comic licence which form a basis for manipulation to translate into influence. Part Two examines some key techniques and conventions in stand-up as tools of manipulation. Finally, Part Three discusses the possibilities for influence that arise from this manipulative medium.

Stand-up Comedy

Stand-up comedy looks uncomplicated. The performance often consists of an individual simply speaking. This does not mean that the interaction taking place, and the craft involved, are not complex. As Stewart Lee states:

> [I]f you go to, like, a meeting with, like, big-wigs at the National Theatre[...]they're always talking about, 'How do we make this immediate? How do we connect to all these people? How do we break the fourth wall? Wouldn't it be amazing if, in a play, you could have a bit where the audience were addressed directly,' and all this sort of thing. Basically[...]a lot of highly-educated people spend a lot of time trying to figure out, in the world of 'high' art, how to do what the worst Jongleurs comic does every night! Of, like, talking directly to people with no apparent artifice or interface. It's an amazing thing, and [stand-up's] not given the credit.[3]

As this thesis will demonstrate, stand-up requires high interpretative competence from an audience who must keep up with a deeply

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[2] *OED.*

[3] Stewart Lee, Interview, The Leicester Square Theatre, London, 16 December 2009.

convoluted medium of communication, distinguishing between truth and irony and navigating the grey areas in between.

Stand-up also provides us with one of our most immediate and unmediated sources of feedback upon the world we inhabit. As Josie Long states:

> **I love stand-up comedy**[...]**I love it even more than killing** [laugh]**...that's a lot!** [laugh]**...Um, I love stand-up comedy, it's my favourite thing in the world. Erm, and I think it's my favourite thing, at the moment, because of how direct it is. Like, if you want to change what you're doing, you can change it on stage straight away. Like, if you think of an idea in the morning there's no filters, there's nothing to stop you saying it that evening. It's like a really free, pure way of expressing yourself. And I really like the fact that if you wanna run a club, you just book a room above a pub and you start running a club, it's that easy.**[4]

When a comedian relates their experiences and opinions, and when an audience responds by laughing, the exchange endorses the comment made as a valid interpretation of their shared world. For this reason, this thesis treats stand-up comedy as social criticism.

Acknowledging stand-up as social criticism opens the discussion to a range of important ideas about what comedy is and how it works. It also makes any discussion very convoluted. The practice of joking has been described in many different ways. When we speak of a 'joke' we often think we are simply referring to a text: the actual words said by the joker. However, the mere script of a stand-up act is never as satisfying as the performance itself; the jokes need a decent telling, and thus the act of performance is almost always cited as part of the joke. Similarly, the joke is generally performed in order to create a response in its audience, and so the reception of the joke by its hearer is also an indispensable element of any definition. The difficulties associated with defining joking even on these levels are discussed in Chapter Five.

To make matters more complicated, many theorists 'define' the joke not by what it is, but by what it does. Mary Douglas, for example, approaches the joke not only as an exchange between the joker and

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[4] Josie Long, 'Kindness and Exuberance', in Josie Long, *Trying is Good*. Real Talent. 2008. DVD.

individual listeners, but also as an exchange between the joker and his society at large.[5] In Chapter One I argue that, in doing so, she has provided one of the very few descriptions which may be applied to all instances of joking. This thesis demonstrates that all four layers of joking (the 'text' or action, its performance or delivery, its reception by the immediate audience and its interaction with the wider society) are important. Consequently, all four are examined, each approach being utilised where it becomes appropriate

An audience will, of course, always consist of a variety of people who differ from one another. The comedian's job is to get this disparate collection of individuals working together: the audience must be bound into a homogenous group which will respond in unison. The comedian, in turn, works in response to that unified reaction, only playing against the responses of individual audience members in relatively unusual circumstances, or when he loses control of the interaction. If the comedian's material is to function as social criticism, the audience's role is to give the affirmation (or otherwise) of this group to the ideas posited. They can agree by supporting the comedian with laughter and cooperation, or disagree by disrupting the exchange with reactions such as silence or heckling. As it is usually the mass reaction of the audience which is the important signifier of social approval in this process, this thesis often refers to the audience as a single entity, while also referring to them as a collection of individuals where it is more appropriate to do so.

The comedian can, by definition, only manipulate if he is in control of his audience. This thesis is, therefore, almost exclusively concerned with successful stand-up performances where a comedian faces a co-operative audience. Naturally, more experienced comedians have better honed their craft and can therefore play most effectively within the control that they exert. This advantage is magnified in the case of better-known comedians, who have the benefit of confronting audiences who are already convinced of their ability to be funny.[6] As Dan Atkinson states:

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[5] M. Douglas, 'Jokes', in M. Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: selected essays in anthropology*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.146-164.
[6] O. Double, *Stand-Up!: On Being a Comedian* (London: Methuen, 1997).

> [W]hen people get to the point where they're becoming famous - so, like, Russell Howard's done all the *Mock the Week* stuff, and now he's touring huge venues, and they're all people who know him[...][T]hey're the easiest gigs because everyone already goes 'I love you because I've seen you on TV.' And so jokes that you'd previously done when you were just another circuit act - that got nothing - suddenly get huge rounds of applause because people want it to be the case.[7]

For these reasons, many of the examples analysed in detail here come from established and well-known comedians whose experience and reputation give them the best opportunities for manipulation. However, this thesis also aims to survey some lower rungs on the stand-up ladder. Examples are included which range from (current) household names like Michael McIntyre and Eddie Izzard at the top, to the start-outs like Mark Simmons and Kurt Driver at the bottom, who were interviewed following gigs in distinctly crummy venues, where they performed to small audiences for no pay. In between are comedians like Robert Newman and Stewart Lee; long-established performers who have had periods of greater fame than they currently enjoy, and are still considered 'big names' in that they have a large enough fan base for their reputation to go before them, and to carry some clout in the worlds of radio and television. There are also the circuit acts such as Dan Atkinson and Joe Wilkinson who are experienced enough to mount successful shows at the Edinburgh Festival, and established enough to count comedy as their main profession, without quite being famous – at least not yet.

The result of utilising this broad range of examples is to give a cross-section of a pool of comedians that may be broadly defined as the current British Alternative Comedy scene. 'Alternative' seems an inaccurate term for a comic culture that has come to dominate the mainstream, but it is a fair way of describing the culture that grew out of the original ethos developed by the Alternative Comedy revolutionaries of the late 1970s and 1980s. As we shall see, the pool described above has sub-sections and tensions, particularly between the highly commercial top end and performers who still battle with small-to-

[7] Dan Atkinson, Interview, by telephone, 29 September 2008.

medium sized audiences in less glamorous contexts, but they are recognisably part of the same pool. They grew up through the same circuits, and if the arena-filling, bestselling-DVD-releasing household names seem worlds apart from the start-out circuit acts, these practitioners are still linked by shared interpersonal networks, experiences, and codes of practice which mark them out as members of the same comedy family. Importantly, they are also subject to the same cultural expectations, particularly as regards conformity to Alternative Comedy's ethical code. The alternative pool still defines itself partly in opposition to the likes of Roy Chubby Brown and Kevin Bloody Wilson. These comedians are utilised in this thesis as examples from a separate circuit: they highlight the cohesiveness of our alternative pool by embodying its opposite. A comedian from any level of our alternative pool could expect to be censured for telling a packaged, racist joke (or at least for doing so without the suitable level of irony): Brown and Wilson do not face the same limitation.

By focusing on this particular pool of comedians, this thesis has been able to present a detailed picture of their practice as a whole. This is not limited to their practice on stage, but encompasses the equally important issue of how these comedians perceive their methodology, the impact of their work and the ethos of their disparate profession. Their achievements in manipulation and influence cannot be fully understood without reference to these important elements of the comedian's experience. On a practical level, limiting the field of enquiry to this pool of comedians, with emphasis on certain key practitioners, has made it possible for me to access a more comprehensive range of resources in relation to them. For some of my key examples, such as Mark Thomas, Stewart Lee and Josie Long, I have been able to see live all major tours, along with some other performances, over a three year period and to interview the practitioners themselves, in addition to material released commercially and over the internet. This has enabled a depth of understanding of their work that could not otherwise have been possible. Stand-up does, however, cross generational and national boundaries and, with this in mind, comedians such as Dave Allen and Bill Hicks – both specifically cited by comedians from the current British Alternative pool as influences upon their own comedy scene - are

included. This is appropriate given their important contributions to the culture analysed, but I have avoided placing them centre-stage.

This thesis examines manipulations that are universal within stand-up performance and techniques that are widely used in each of stand-up's sub-cultures, but it also examines possibilities that are raised by a handful of practitioners. At the time of writing, practitioners like Stewart Lee, Robert Newman, Mark Steel and Mark Thomas represent a comparatively obscure gang of political comedians (although all of them have had periods of greater fame in their careers and are big names within their own field). If they feature more heavily in this thesis than is representative of the way that the average, pop-culture comedy fan experiences the world of stand-up, this is because their work raises particularly interesting possibilities for manipulation and influence. By examining these overt examples of efficacious stand-up, I hope to provide a model which will allow the more subtle forms of influence found in less overtly political stand-up to be investigated. Such a wide-ranging study is, however, too big a task to be undertaken here.

Some examples are taken from live shows where it was not possible to obtain recordings. Analysis of these is necessarily less detailed, and the account less precise, than those examples taken from recorded materials such as CD and DVD releases. This live data is nonetheless included because stand-up is, fundamentally, about live exchange: to exclude analysis of stand-up in its natural environment would be to ignore some of its most important and dynamic features. I have attempted to control the imprecision of such material as far as possible by working from detailed notes that were always made as immediately as was practically possible after a live performance. Where direct quotes are attributed to a comedian in live performance they are always taken from the notes made at the time. Live data is balanced with referral to recorded material which provides the opportunity for more precise analysis. Where recorded material is used, the 'audience' referred to is the audience who saw the show live and whose responses are included on the recording, rather than the audience of the recorded version, unless otherwise stated.

All transcriptions taken from live performance and interviews aim to communicate what happened as accurately as possible, while

maintaining clarity and ensuring that they are easy to read. Part of this has been the attempt to distinguish between types of audience laughter. Determining when a chuckle becomes a laugh, and whether that laugh is 'big', 'small' or just an average 'laugh', is necessarily a subjective process. Yet these subtle variations in the nature of laughter communicate much about how the material has been received, and it is important that they should be noted. I have therefore attempted to transcribe all laughs in a way that accurately communicates their contribution to the exchange in which they occur. What counts as a 'big laugh' in transcriptions of Jason Byrne's radio show, for example, is louder, more raucous and less controlled than what I have cited as a 'big laugh' in Robert Newman's *History of Oil*.[8] The size and quality of laughter in different shows can not be measured from the same base-rate because the situations are never comparable: Byrne and Newman, for example, are performing to audiences of different size and character, and in shows which have different expectations and intentions attached to them by both comedian and audience.

Finally, this thesis treats stand-up as the solo enterprise that, by and large, it is. There are, however, comedians who openly work with script writers, and even more who would acknowledge that friends, partners and colleagues play a role in their creative process. In the credits for the DVD of his show *90s Comedian*, Stewart Lee thanks seven individuals for 'ideas and inspiration' including his wife Bridget Christie (a fellow comedian), some-time comedy partner Richard Herring and Stephen Carlin, who later toured with Lee as his support act.[9] Christie is again acknowledged, this time both in the DVD credits and in the performance itself, for writing one of the jokes told in Lee's *41st Best Stand-Up Ever* DVD.[10] While outright plagiarism is still vilified on the alternative circuit, few comedians would be so candid about the input that those they interact with necessarily have to their writing process; the issue of authorship is often more complex than is generally acknowledged.

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[8] Jason Byrne, *The Jason Byrne Show*, BBC Radio 2, Episode 2, 19 July 2008. Radio broadcast.
Robert Newman, *History of Oil*, Tiger Aspect Productions. 2006. DVD.
[9] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian*. Go Faster Stripe. 2006. DVD.
[10] Stewart Lee, *41st Best Stand-up Ever*. Real Talent. 2008. DVD.

Stand-up remains an art chiefly concerned with lone working, from writing to performance, and stand-up's saleable product is therefore often not only the material but also the comedian through whose persona we read it. For this reason, this thesis credits all work to the comedian under whose name it is marketed. That we recognise the over-simplification involved in such an interpretation becomes especially important when discussing work such as Mark Thomas' prank-campaign achievements, where successes have been the result of efforts by many campaigners who deserve their credit. In the context of this thesis, however, such joint achievements are discussed in relation to Thomas' stand-up, and thus as part of his career. It is also for this reason that I have cited all recorded material to the comedian as author, rather than the director, and have used the full performance name of all comedians when citing their performed work.

When approached for an interview, one of the comedians who was kind enough to help me replied, 'I'm very happy to have a chat for your PhD (although I'm not sure you [shouldn't] be studying something more useful to yourself and the world).'[11] He retracted his reservations about the usefulness of my research when he found out that my thesis focused on the 'serious' issues of comedy's social and political efficacy. I would guess that, like many people, he instinctively viewed fun and entertainment as experiences that have little significance beyond their immediate enjoyment, and which certainly do little to advance our social development. This thesis does indeed look at politically-motivated work with 'serious' intentions, but it also examines routines delivered by comedians who mainly want to get paid, to audiences who want no more than an entertaining night out. We should remember that our flippant approach to that strand of comic endeavour which we think of as 'mere' entertainment is a human experience: it is as much a fact of our existence as our serious-minded approach to other material, and is therefore significant. This thesis will attempt to show that there is no such thing as 'just' being funny.

[11] Personal communication, by email.

Part One

Joking is Manipulation

Chapter One

Why comedians need manipulation

Control

Stand-up comedy is not a monologue, but a conversation. [1] The main aim of any stand-up performance is to make the audience laugh. For the performer, stand-up comedy is really about crowd control; causing a group of strangers to behave in a certain way.[2]

The importance of controlling audience responses is demonstrated by the many examples in which the audience reacts 'incorrectly'. In the worst case scenario, the audience does not laugh, or does not laugh often enough, and the comedian has simply 'failed'.[3] Commonly called 'dying', this is a uniquely painful and demoralising experience, often for the audience as well as the performer. There are other, less dramatic, instances of incorrect responses. On stage at London's Duke of York Theatre, Jack Dee notices an audience member laughing when no joke has been made, and quickly corrects the inappropriate response:

> **In itself not actually very funny, but thanks for joining in anyway.** [laugh]**...Yeah, just try and settle down, try and find your timing, how about that?** [laugh] **If you could laugh at the right point it would help me an awful fucking lot** [laugh]**...No I hate it when people laugh at the wrong point, it just kind of, it underlines the pointlessness of what I'm doing up here, you know what I mean? 'You go to a comedy show? You laugh?' 'Yeah but I laugh anyway, I'm mad.'** [laugh][4]

Dee's joke at the expense of the audience member gently but forcefully asserts his authority over the audience's behaviour; they are to laugh when, and only when, he wants them to.

In order to be successful, comedians must manipulate and control their audience's responses. I will argue that this control is asserted through a range of manipulative techniques, and that the control of

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[1] O. Double, *Getting the Joke: The Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (London: Methuen, 2005), p.106.
[2] Double, *Stand-Up*, p. 5.
[3] Tony Allen, quoted in D. Brazil, 'How to Talk Dirty and Get Arrested', *The Leveller*, December 1979, p.14.
[4] Jack Dee, *Jack Dee Live*. WEA International/ Channel 4 Television. 1992. DVD.

audience response can spread beyond the confines of the gig, affecting the attitudes of audience members in the longer term.

Joking as challenge

Joking is not merely a frivolous pursuit. On an individual level, the nature of one's sense of humour is considered very important. Lockyer and Pickering point out that to accuse someone of having a deficient sense of humour is a strong personal attack, 'tantamount to declaring us deficient as personalities'.[5] Lash saw the sense of humour as genuinely indicative of the individual personality, saying, 'you can tell a man by the things he laughs at, for in his laughter is reflected the mental company he keeps. Every laugh is a comment, conscious or unconscious'.[6]

On a wider scale sociologists, anthropologists and philosophers have long regarded joking as an important form of social comment and dispute. As Wertheim states, joking is part of an ongoing negotiation concerning the values, institutions and authorities that control society:

> [N]o human society is a completely integrated entity. In any community there are hidden or overt forms of protest against the prevalent hierarchical structure. In general a more or less dominant set of common values can be discerned – else the society would not have sufficient cohesive power to subsist. But beneath the dominant theme there always exist different sets of values, which are, to a certain degree, adhered to among certain social groups and which function as a counterpoint to the leading melody.
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> In general those counterpoints only manifest themselves in some veiled form – for example, in tales, jokes and myths, which give expression to the deviant sets of values.[7]

For Wertheim, joking is a 'veil' which allows an ever-present counter-culture to express its 'deviant' ideas. Zijderveld builds on this idea,

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[5] S. Lockyer and M. Pickering, eds., *Beyond a Joke: the Limits of Humour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p.3.
[6] K. Lash, 'A Theory of the Comic as Insight', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 45 (1948), 113-121 (p.113).
[7] W.F. Wertheim, *East-West Parallels: Sociological Approaches to Modern Asia* (The Hauge: W. Van Hoeve, 1964), p.26.

calling joking 'an important means of non-violent resistance'; for Zijderveld, joking can be a weapon.[8]

In her influential article 'Jokes', anthropologist Mary Douglas provides the basis of an explanation for the subversive power of joking. She states that 'the element of challenge' is a vital ingredient of every joke; yet, at the same time, a joke can only work if it is 'permitted' by its audience.[9] In order to laugh at a joke, the audience must both 'perceive' that a joke is being told and 'permit' its content. Jokes are rejected when they trespass on values and authorities that are considered sacred. The comedian must therefore remain, or *be perceived* to remain, within the boundaries of the audience's 'consensus,' respecting the standards of 'good taste' that the audience dictates, while also challenging existing authorities.[10] If this is true, then with every joke that a comedian makes he is faced with a difficult and potentially dangerous balancing act. If he cannot persuade his audience to accept the challenge implied within his joke, he will lose the audience's laughter and possibly cause anger amongst them. If he does not make any challenge at all, he will not be making a joke. Already the comedian must begin to manipulate, as his basic and most necessary task is to persuade the audience that his jokes are dangerous but also permissible.

From one perspective, Douglas' suggestion appears somewhat unconvincing. Douglas is not only saying that a joke can be funny if it contains the element of challenge, but that it must contain this element in order to be funny at all. If Douglas is correct then every joke must imply an attack upon, or disparagement of, something, be that a person, institution, idea, belief, value or other accepted 'authority'. Audiences must be complicit in this, for the successful challenge will be rewarded with laughter, which signals agreement. There would then be no such thing as an 'inoffensive', 'harmless' or 'safe' joke which was free from social criticism.

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[8] A.C. Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', *Social Research*, 36 (1968), 286-311 (p.311).
[9] Douglas, 'Jokes', pp.155-152.
[10] *Ibid.*

For Schopenhauer, there are different types of joke. He describes two categories of the 'ludicrous' (i.e. 'funny'): 'wit' and 'folly'.[11] Roughly speaking, 'wit' is the joke form in which the joker purposefully links two different objects together through a concept which appears suitable to both objects, only to make his audience laugh when it is shown that, from another point of view, the two objects are unsuited. 'Folly' turns the joke around on us: we carry out actions, make judgements and hold opinions in accordance with theoretical concepts, and laugh at our folly in holding to those concepts when the actions or thoughts that they generate are shown to be inappropriate in a practical situation. We demonstrate 'wit' when we produce a joke intentionally and 'folly' when our own actions are shown to be foolish. Schopenhauer states that 'to conceal wit with the mask of folly is the art of the jester and the clown', implying that our modern comedians form an exception to the rule that all forms of the ludicrous will fall distinctly into one category or the other.[12]

Like many theorists, Schopenhauer identifies a type of joking which he considers superior to others. For him, 'humour' is not a word that should be used to describe all that is funny, but rather a particular brand of commentary upon the world around us:

> Humour depends upon a subjective, yet serious and sublime mood, which is involuntarily in conflict with a common external world very different from itself, which it cannot escape from and to which it will not give itself up: therefore, as an accommodation, it tries to think its own point of view and that external point of view through the same conceptions, and thus a double incongruity arises[...]between these concepts and the realities thought through them. Hence the impression of the intentionally ludicrous, thus of the joke, is produced, behind which, however, the deepest seriousness is concealed and shines through.[13]

According to Schopenhauer, humour is the expression of a conflict between an individual who cannot accept the world as it is and a world that will not adapt to make itself sensible in the eyes of the individual. The individual tries to reconcile the two, but they are incongruous, and

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[11] A. Schopenhauer, 'The World as Will and Idea', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, ed. by J. Morreall (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), pp.51-64 (pp.52-53).
[12] *Ibid*, p.53.
[13] *Ibid*, p.62.

hence funny. Therefore the best jokes happen when the wit of the joker comments upon a serious folly perceived in the world around him. Mintz expresses this very simply; comedians provide 'a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be.'[14] Mintz' theory does, however, differ from Schopenhauer's in that it identifies 'critique' as a universal characteristic of the comedian's art, echoing Douglas' view that all jokes are challenges.

Freud similarly believed that the best jokes served a purpose. He identifies a category of 'tendentious' jokes, which are those that have the purpose of challenging established authorities and thus have the potential to cause offence, but also a category of 'innocent' jokes, being defined as those which 'serve no particular aim,' and thus constitute no important criticism.[15] It is not necessarily the case that innocent jokes cannot be funny; rather, they are not usually as funny or satisfying as the tendentious variety:

> The pleasurable effect of innocent jokes is as a rule a moderate one; a clear sense of satisfaction, a slight smile, is as a rule all it can achieve in its hearers[...]A non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes tendentious ones so irresistible. Since the technique of both can be the same, a suspicion may be aroused in us that tendentious jokes, by virtue of their purpose, must have sources of pleasure at their disposal to which innocent jokes have no access.[16]

Freud here recognises that humour can be both inoffensive and enjoyable, but states that if a joke is 'innocent' and carries no potential to offend, it has less potential to give pleasure.

Although Schopenhauer and Freud do not go as far as Douglas and Mintz in emphasising 'challenge' as a vital ingredient of all jokes, they both assert that the best (defined respectively as the noblest or most satisfying) jokes are those which constitute serious social commentary. 'Innocent' jokes have their place, but their value is limited because they offer little satisfaction and do not perform the commendable social function of those which tackle more important or contentious topics. We

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[14] L.E. Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', *Amercian Quarterly*, 37 (1985), 71-80 (p.77).
[15] S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p.90.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 96.

may, therefore, expect an intensive and largely one-sided joking relationship such as that which exists within stand-up comedy to rely upon meaty, tendentious jokes. A comedian would, by this measure, struggle to craft a lengthy set from material which did not present serious social criticism; such a performance would surely not be satisfactory.

Yet joking, rooted as it is in challenge, is necessarily tricky, and very poor at conforming to rules. Performing on BBC format *Live at the Apollo*, Tim Vine comes on to tumultuous applause and cheering. He lumbers downstage with the microphone stand in one hand, the microphone in the other, and half a football covering the top of his head like a bath cap. Having arrived at the front of the stage he leans on the mic stand and says:

> **Good evening! I don't know why, but I keep getting my head kicked in** [laugh]**...Saw this bloke, he said to me, he said 'Can you tell me your availability to run a football team in Sheffield?' I said, 'I can't manage Wednesday'** [laugh]**...I saw a football game they came on like that** *(Vine hums a tune and dances)* **It was Charleston Athletic** [laughter and some clapping]**...So I watched a football match in Japan, at the end they started doing martial arts. I said to the bloke next to me, I said 'What's going on?' he said 'There's two minutes of ninja-y time'** [laugh][17]

These are innocent jokes. They are not designed to serve a tendentious purpose. There is essentially nothing offensive in the silly puns that recognise the dual meaning of the words 'manage', 'Wednesday' and 'Athletic', nor the similarity in sound of 'injury' and the absurd, invented 'ninja-y'. Nor is there any real aggression implied in the wonky interpretation of the phrase 'getting my head kicked in'. Yet these jokes do contain the element of challenge which Douglas identifies as a crucial characteristic of joking. All are puns which emphasise the limits of our language; for example, by highlighting the dual meaning of 'manage' as a senior role within football clubs and as signifying the individual's ability to do something, Vine demonstrates that our language is deficient in providing us with a clear and infallible means of communication. The

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[17] Tim Vine, *Live at the Apollo* (BBC), *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPaZfeAYUyk>, [accessed 20 April 2010].

jokes may similarly expose the limitations of our logic, or shame us for failing to see obvious connections. These are challenges, but they do not seem very important, nor contentious.

A more tendentious element may be detected if we chose to see these as superiority jokes which invite us to laugh at a weak and foolish individual. Vine's gags claim that he is repeatedly kicked and fails to notice that this is due to the football on his head, and that he does not realise the dual meaning of his statement, 'I can't manage Wednesday'. However, this interpretation would be inconsistent with the overall context of Vine's performance. There is no pretence that this is Vine's real life-story, but rather an understanding that he is the purveyor of short, packaged jokes which each exist in their own miniature pools of alternative reality. Even if the audience did interpret Vine's persona as a poor soul, they would understand it as Schopenhauer's 'art of the jester and the clown' which 'conceal[s] wit with the mask of folly'.

Altogether, we may conclude that Vine offers a brand of humour which is innocent in as much as it does not aim to serve any social purpose beyond its own funniness, and basically inoffensive, offering no important critique or challenge to authority. Yet Vine does not merely extract the tame responses described by Freud; he gets healthy laughs from his audience, which signifies that his audience find him genuinely funny. This casts doubt upon Freud's idea that non-tendentious jokes are less successful. Despite this, Douglas' idea that jokes must contain challenge is left intact; Vine's gags are not controversial, but neither are they benign.

Joking is always part of an ongoing negotiation which challenges current thought and practice. Some challenges are gentle and others are dangerous; some targets are silly while others are of fundamental importance. Importantly, however, all are challenges.

Joking involves a manipulative transaction

Telling a joke is always a manipulative process. As I have shown, the comedian continuously works to manage his audience's perception of his material as both challenging and acceptable. The comedian manipulates further via the skilful selection of the ideas to be expressed

in the joke and the structure in which they are presented. Although the process may appear free-flowing, there is nothing random about either of these components. Joking involves an individual using his skill to present material to his audience in a particular way, in order to stimulate a desired response.

Comic theory is commonly divided into three main branches, which identify three basic causes for funniness: superiority, relief and incongruity. Current thought tends to claim incongruity as the most convincing of these theories, because it is appropriate to the whole range of joking behaviours. Superiority and relief theories may help us to provide explanations for particular kinds of joking, but they do not apply universally; we know that it is possible to laugh without feeling superior, and without relieving suppressed thoughts and urges.[18]

As no single theory is universally applicable or able to explain fully the funniness of all jokes, comic theory is best understood as a set of models which help us to interpret the behaviours of joking and laughter through established, universal truths that explain how human beings think and interact with the world around them. Although incongruity, as the broadest of the theories, is easily applied to a large range of jokes, feelings of superiority and the relief of nervous tensions are also useful models through which to understand why a group of people react in unison. Comic theory articulates those processes of the human mind and behaviour which the comedian instinctively understands and manipulates in order to control his audience's behaviour, extracting laughter.

Superiority theory sees joking as an opportunity for participants to assert their own greatness, especially in comparison with outsiders. Thomas Hobbes laid down the following version of superiority theory in the early seventeenth century:

> Men laugh often, especially such as are greedy of applause from every thing they do well, at their own actions performed never so little beyond their own expectations; as also at their own jests: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceeds from a sudden conception of some ability in himself that laughs. Also men laugh at the infirmities of others, by

[18] J. Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', in *Beyond a Joke: the Limits of Humour* (see Lockyer and Pickering, above), pp.63-78 (pp. 65-68).

> comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated[...]I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly[...]It is no wonder therefore that men take heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over.[19]

According to Hobbes, laughing with pleasure at one's own superiority does not necessarily imply the presence of an outside person to whom the joker feels superior; some occurrences of superiority humour arise from the joker's realisation that he has bested either his former self or his own opinion of himself. Even so, the superiority theory is a discomforting explanation for the behaviours of laughter and joking. Hobbes' summary is tinged with moral repulsion at the idea of finding amusement in nothing more than our own, arrogant pride. Those who laugh are 'greedy' seekers of self-aggrandisement, and they often have their fun at the expense of others who are 'derided' and 'triumphed over'. As Morreall has highlighted, superiority is not a satisfactory explanation for all instances of funniness.[20] Laughter can and does occur in situations where the superiority of the joker is either absent or comparatively unimportant. There are, however, many jokes in which superiority plays an important part.

Relief Theory supposes that laughter is the release of un-needed energy. According to Herbert Spencer, any excess of emotion or mental energy must be used up by activity of the body, mind or both, and laughter is one way of releasing this energy.[21] Freud refined this idea in reference to his interpretation of human psychology as the battle of the superego to maintain control over the ego in opposition to the id.[22] The joke creates pleasure because it allows an economy of psychological effort. As we have seen, Freud believed that some jokes were more satisfying – that is, funnier - than others. In his theory, the most satisfying jokes are those which save us the effort of policing our thoughts, which we do by blocking uncivilised ideas so that we may not

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[19] T. Hobbes, 'Human Nature', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (see Schopenhauer, above), pp.19-20, (p.20).
[20] J. Morreall, ed., *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, (see Schopenhauer, above), p.6.
[21] H. Spencer, 'The Physiology of Laughter', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, (see Schopenhauer, above), pp.99-110.
[22] Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.

take conscious pleasure in them. Such jokes may prevent the imposition of a new barrier or, most satisfactorily of all, give us a temporary relief from maintaining a barrier which already exists.[23] This is another discomforting way to explain the pleasure we take in laughter, for the implication is that our joy comes from ideas that we would not usually allow ourselves to have: in short, it implies that we take an unconscious pleasure in ideas that are hostile, bigoted or otherwise uncivilised.

The following is an extract from comedian Jeff Dunham's controversial ventriloquist act *Achmed the Dead Terrorist*.[24] Achmed is a skeleton with a turban and long, plaited beard. His catch phrase is, 'I kill you!' He has just explained that he was an unsuccessful suicide bomber whose explosive device detonated before he reached his target, and Dunham is now trying to persuade him that he is, indeed, dead (lines attributed to Achmed are in italics, and Dunham's in Roman type):

> ***'Wait, if I am dead'*** *(gasps)* ***'that means I get my seventy-two virgins!'*** [small laugh]*...(Achmed scans the crowd)* [laugh grows] ***'Are you my virgins?'*** [laugh] ***'I hope not!'*** [laugh]
> **'Why?'**
> ***'There's a bunch of ugly-ass guys out there!'*** [big laugh and applause]***...'If this is paradise, I've been screwed!'*** [laugh]***...***
> **'Well, did they say it would be only female virgins?'**
> ***'Holy crap!'*** [big laugh, applause and cheering][25]

The comments that follow this video on *YouTube* at the time of writing are divided: some express pleasure and admiration at the act's funniness, while others are outraged.[26] The debate is heated, with each side launching personal attacks on the other's offensive or deficient sense of humour. Interestingly, there are a couple of comments that

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[23] *Ibid,* pp.118-119.

[24] Ventriloquism presents a similar situation to stand-up comedy. Like stand-up, Dunham's ventriloquist act involves a solo performer addressing an audience directly with the intention of making them laugh. This is in line with Oliver Double's first definition of stand-up comedy (Double, *Stand-up,* p.4-5); his later definition, which states that the comedian communicates with his audience through 'personality' and 'direct communication', and in the 'present tense', may also be applied to ventriloquism (Double, *Getting the Joke,* pp.18-19). Indeed, ventriloquism could be claimed as a sub-genre of stand-up, if we view the puppet merely as a device through which a stand-up comedian works. Either way, what may be learned from this example is applicable to stand-up.

[25] Jeff Dunham, *YouTube,* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uwOL4rB-go>, [accessed 21 April 2010].

[26] 'Comments on Jeff Dunham Video', *YouTube,* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uwOL4rB-go>, [accessed 21 April 2010]

bemoan the extraordinarily high number of viewings that this video has clocked up, deriding *YouTube* viewers for giving their time to such fripperies and ignoring websites where they could access important information about the reality of the international political situation. Whether it is evaluated positively or negatively, it is clear that this has become an influential and powerful act.

Many people do find Achmed's ranting funny. This may be due, in part, to the incongruity of seeing the terrifying figure of the suicide-bombing terrorist resurrected as a ridiculous and feeble puppet. His suggestion that the audience might be his reward of seventy-two virgins may similarly be interpreted as an incongruity, as might Dunham's pointing out of the potential discrepancy between the suicide bomber's expectations and his actual entitlements under the technically flawed bargain he has entered into.

However, the power of this act is surely more properly understood by reference to the superiority and relief functions that it serves. In an interview with Brian Logan, Dunham recognises that the act works both by relieving tensions created by fear and by placing the terrorised back on top of the power structure. Dunham is quoted as saying that his intention is to 'make fun of those guys [ie, suicide bombers] and that mentality that most of us in the free world don't understand' and that one of the reasons for the act's success is that 'we like to laugh at our fears[...]We're poking our thumb in the eye of something most of us don't want to think about.'[27] Logan notes the 'jingoistic edge' to Achmed that 'some will find unattractive,' but also defends Dunham, saying that he is 'an equal-opportunities offender'. He notes that, '[a]nother dummy, Bubba J, sends up so-called white trash America; a third, Jose Jalapeno, draws on Latino Clichés.'[28] It is true that Dunham presents several different satirical puppet characters, but therefore all the more notable that it was *Achmed the Dead Terrorist*, an act which performs such obvious functions of superiority and relief, which shot Dunham to stardom.

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[27] B. Logan, 'Laughing in the face of terror?', *Chortle*, (3 April 2009) <http://www.chortle.co.uk/interviews/2009/04/03/8675/laughing_in_the_face_of_terror%3F>, [accessed 17 June 2009].
[28] *Ibid.*

The power of Dunham's act lies in the fact that it allows his audience to indulge feelings of superiority and to express tensions and hostility. They enjoy the assertion of their superiority, as shown in the explosive reaction to Dunham's joke which suggests that suicide bombers may have been duped into a false bargain regarding their seventy-two virgins. This not only mocks the terrorist's folly, but also suggests that the faith which they believed they died to serve was maliciously tricking them rather than looking after them. Thus the audience are invited to bask in their superior intelligence as well as their comparatively favourable situation; the joke underlines the fact that the audience are alive while the terrorists who attacked and scared them are dead and, according to dominant Western belief, not in the paradise they were promised.

Spencer may interpret the laughter as a release of tension created by an atmosphere of fear about terrorism; the incongruity of Dunham's act shuts down the usual pathways for the expression of anxiety by making the feared object ridiculous, and thus the nervous energy is released by the muscular contortions involved in laughter.[29] Using Freud's model, we see the joke as a way for Dunham and his audience to relieve themselves of the responsibility of censoring their aggressive feelings towards an ideology and a group of people to whom they are opposed.[30] They may temporarily cease their usual self-censorship and release their aggressive feelings by enjoying Achmed's ill fortune. Simultaneously, they are granted reprieve from the unpleasant emotion of fear.

Mass feelings of superiority and hostility require an 'other'; a group of people whom the audience as an in-group considers to be an outsider. In the Achmed act, there are levels of 'other' which are subtly played alongside each other. At its most specific, the act attacks middle-eastern suicide bombers, but the mockery also encompasses wider categories of 'other' including terrorists in general and Muslims. The act is often defended against accusations of racism, and of attacking Islam as a whole, on the basis that Achmed always denies being Muslim. This is a rather spurious defence, given that Achmed references, and Dunham mocks, ideas which are specific to (some interpretations of) Islam, such as the seventy-two virgins. As Allport demonstrates, human beings have

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[29] Spencer, 'The Physiology of Laughter', pp.106-107.
[30] Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.

a tendency towards 'overcategorisation', where we assume that a characteristic that we recognise in a small number of individuals will be universal among the group to which we ascribe them.[31] In the wake of incidents of terrorist activity by a small group of extremist Muslims, this tendency toward overcategorisation led to a disproportionate association of all Muslims with acts of terrorism. Hopefully, most of Dunham's audience would consciously know that this was unfair; yet Freud's theory suggests that they may perhaps enjoy the excuse of the joke, which muddies the ethical waters and disguises this act of religious discrimination and racial hostility, to express an unconscious tension towards Muslims.

Dunham's act is deeply manipulative. Dunham has admitted that Achmed is a response to the post-9/11 climate; indeed, the act could hardly have worked in its present form if it were not for the preoccupation with extremist Muslim terrorism that followed the attack on the World Trade Centre.[32] This is to say that Dunham has spotted the fear and tension present in his society, and uses his act to play skilfully upon it, spinning fear and hatred into laughter. Manipulation is used to home in on a set of uncomfortable emotions and to direct the audience to express them in a very particular way.

The creation of jokes by incongruity is in itself a manipulative process. Critchley states that 'humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality'.[33] Incongruity explains the pleasure received from jokes as the enjoyment of an incongruity between the set of associations or progression of the story which our experience of the world suggests as natural, and a different set of associations or progression provided by the punch-line to the joke. Zijderveld builds upon this principle, stating that 'joking is defined as the conscious or unconscious transition from one institutionalised meaning structure to another, without changing much of the original role and behaviour

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[31] G.W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, 25th Anniversary edn. (Cambridge MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1954), p.8.
[32] Logan, 'Laughing in the face of terror?'.
[33] S. Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.1.

logic'.[34] In incongruity theory, therefore, the success of any joke is dependent upon the joker's ability to set up a particular range of associations in his audience's minds, and then to subvert those expectations by introducing a new set of associations or meanings. Again, the basic technique of the comedian is manipulative; he manipulates his audience into setting up expectations, and then subverts them.

Dave Allen is a master of this type of manipulation. For example, in an episode of his television show, he introduces a routine that comments upon romantic writing, saying:

> **Y'know, something we've been accused of on this show is that we lack the romantic touch. And that's rather difficult when you're eight yards away from the audience.** [Laugh][35]

In a classic manoeuvre, Allen introduces a topic, and then flips its meaning around. The statement appears to be a call for innocent, sentimental romance, until Allen's retort ('that's rather difficult when you're eight yards away from the audience') implies that it is about lustful, physical romance. With this premise established, Allen's retort appears as the logical conclusion of the original statement (an accusation of lacking 'the romantic touch'). This causes the original statement to seem foolish.

So prevalent is this formula in Allen's comedy that one of his sketches comments on it.[36] A Frankenstein-style monster stumbles upon a little girl in a forest; he sits beside her and she talks to him. We cut back and forth between this scene and a woman, anxiously searching the forest, calling helplessly for her 'baby'. The woman finds the pair and cautiously approaches. She picks up the little girl, then looks boldly at

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[34] A.C. Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', *Social Research*, 36 (1968), 286-311 (p.290).
[35] Dave Allen, *The Best of Dave Allen*. BBC/ 2 Entertain Video. 2005. DVD.
[36] This BBC format presents sketches and stand-up alongside each other, so that the audience experiences the two genres as one body of work. Thus, although this example comes from one of Allen's sketches, what it demonstrates is equally applicable to his stand-up as a comment on Allen's humour as a whole.

the camera and says, 'Alright. Hands up all those who thought I was going to take...him [laugh]'[37]

The laugh that this receives is dependent upon the audience's recognition of their own folly; their familiarity with Allen's work has led them to expect a twist in the story of the lost child and the monster. Thus the last thing they expect is the congruent outcome of the human mother rescuing the human child and so the obvious outcome subverts their expectation. The joke's author is so confident that the audience will expect incongruity that he is able to rely upon their expectation and present normalcy itself as the punch-line.

Much of Dave Allen's comedy works by subverting our normal patterns of logic, often by use of what Zijderveld calls 'hyper-logic', which 'beats normal, average logic by hyper-logical, hyper-cunning intelligence.'[38] The above routine on 'romance' continues with Allen's assertion that a 'tremendous amount of rubbish' is written about romance.[39] He then reads a segment from a women's magazine, recounting a love story with a soft, tender voice, but also a fair amount of subtle, underlying cynicism expressed in his use of pauses, posture and facial expressions. His quotation finishes:

> *(Soft, lyrical voice)* **I felt his hot breath on my lips. His strong arms encircled me, and drew me close. I felt his heart (.) close to mine.**

By the time Allen finishes his reading he is looking dazedly into the distance. He then brings his gaze around matter-of-factly to point directly at the audience. The change in his demeanour gets a laugh in itself. He then continues in a lower, harder tone of voice:

> **That's impossible.** [Laugh] **I mean if you're standin' in front of somebody the heart has gotta be on the other side...**[Laugh] *(Loudly)* **This poof is standin' behind 'er** [Big laugh and applause] *(Pointing to his manuscript)* **Either that, or he's hangin' upside-down from the ceiling!** [Laugh]

The root of this joke is Allen's manipulation of his audience's expectations. Certainly Allen uses manipulative techniques for

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[37] Dave Allen, *The Best of Dave Allen.*
[38] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.301.
[39] Dave Allen, *The Best of Dave Allen.*

persuasion here; defending the lack of sentimentalism in his work and mocking the clichés of romantic literature, Allen uses hyper-logic to outdo the 'standard logic' of romanticists, making them seem ridiculous. He may thus be said to be using manipulative techniques to convince the audience of the validity of his idea as opposed to his opponents'. However, the basic purpose of the manipulative device is really to make the audience laugh. Allen purposefully builds expectations only to subvert them. When he builds up to his reading from the women's magazine by calling it 'rubbish', he does so seriously and factually, leading the audience to believe that when the attack comes, it will be in a similar vein. They do not expect a hyper-logical analysis which will make the romantic cliché of 'two hearts beating next to each other' ridiculous, nor the cartoon image of a man wooing a woman while suspended upside down from the ceiling. The use of hyper-logic subverts our expectations, bringing the 'role and behaviour logic' of a cliché in romantic writing into another 'role and behaviour logic' of logistical fact.[40] Manipulation of expectation is the fuel of the joke.

Thus, if all jokes really do hinge on the use of incongruity, then a manipulation of expectations and of associations is the basic currency of all stand-up comedy; the audience puts itself into the comedian's hands with a willingness to be 'tricked' in exchange for the reward of laughter. The laugh that Allen's monster-and-child sketch achieves shows that his audience is aware of this. The relationship between comedian and audience is a relationship based upon consensual manipulation.

'I'm not that kind of comedian'

Many comedians will assert that their material is simply not the kind of material that has a lasting impact. Isy Suttie believes that stand-up 'definitely' has the power to be a particularly effective way of influencing attitudes in the long term, but dismisses her own abilities in this area, saying, 'comics like Robert Newman and John Oliver are masters of this, but sadly I am not!'[41] Start-out comedians Mark Simmons and Kurt Driver both state that they do not perform 'topical' comedy, and thus

[40] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.290.
[41] Isy Suttie, Interview, by email, 7 October 2008.

feel that they avoid any hard-hitting political commentary.[42] Their fellow newcomer Jonathan Elston summarises the attitude:

> My material isn't really, sort of, change-the-world kind of material. It hasn't really got a moral to it or a point of view. It's just stuff that I think's funny.[43]

Critchley seems to theorise this attitude:

> Most humour, in particular the comedy of recognition - and most humour *is* comedy of recognition - simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticise the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves.[44]

To some extent, Critchley may be right. In the following segment, Eddie Izzard shares with his audience his experience of showers:

> **The same people who make toasters, make showers** [laugh] **For they have a turney-button too that lies** [laugh] **(.) For we know** *(mimes turning a dial to the left)* **turn-turn-turn-turn for hot** [small laugh] **(.)** *(Mimes turning a dial to the right)* **turn-turn-turn-turn for cold** [couple of people laugh] **(.) but the only position we're interested in is the position between there** [couple of laughs]**...** *(puts his hand out as if holding an imaginary dial then watches his hand closely as it makes a barely-discernible movement)* **and there** [big laugh]**...One nano-milimetre** [big laugh]**...between fantastically hot** [big laugh]**...and fuckin' freezing** [big laugh, applause, cheers and whistles][45]

Izzard then compares shower-users to safe-breakers, miming listening to the dial with comical 'concentrating' facial expressions, and using a stethoscope. The audience continues laughing regularly. Izzard continues:

> **You have two positions in the shower (.) One position is this** *(safe- breaker mime)* **(.) and other** *(voice gradually escalates to a panicked shout)* **is this!**

Izzard jumps back as he speaks to press himself against an imaginary wall, facing the spot where he mimed the dial to be. The audience delivers a big laugh and applause. Izzard extends the routine, shouting

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[42] Mark Simmons, Interview, The Westgate Inn, Canterbury, 11 August 2008. Kurt Driver, Interview, by telephone, 11 August 2008.
[43] Jonathan Elston, Interview, by telephone, 25 July 2008.
[44] Critchley, *On Humour*, p.11.
[45] Eddie Izzard, *Glorious*. Ella Communications. 1997. VHS.

that everyone must 'stop using taps!' Altogether, Izzard sticks solely to the topic of showers for over a minute and a half, achieving regular and enthusiastic laughter from his audience throughout.

Critchley's interpretation of this routine may be that Izzard is simply recognising an inconvenience in the lives of his audience. The audience laugh at the recognition, thus celebrating the consensus that they share on this issue. They enjoy the fact that they agree, and they celebrate the ridiculousness of the situation. By collective recognition - even celebration - of the fact that showers do not work properly, Izzard and his audience are merely reinforcing the social truth that showers are inefficient and uncomfortable to use.

This interpretation may not withstand much serious scrutiny. This is a very successful routine; the laughter is enthusiastic and has the unfettered, easy quality which signifies an audience who are comfortable in their temporary loss of self-control. These are not just observations, but finely-crafted, crowd-pleasing jokes. Schopenhauer's model may be helpful here to explain the way in which the observations, or 'recognitions', within this routine become successful jokes; the routine is an expression of a conflict between an individual who cannot accept the world as it is, and a world that will not adapt to make itself sensible in the eyes of the individual.

When Izzard recognises the common failure of showers to function in a helpful way, his audience enjoys the public sharing of experience, and is perhaps thereby released from the negative feelings of irritation and discomfort that usually surround the experience of the shower. Yet this piece of material does occupy the gap between the way things are and the way they ought to be. Izzard's material is not a celebration of the convenience of the modern shower; it is a sharing of the problems with it. The audience see that this design fault is so common that in a room containing hundreds of people, all of them recognise the same problems. Even if the piece does dispel some negativity surrounding this experience - and I would argue it is really just as likely to confirm the appropriateness of negativity as to drive it away - it is certainly 'criticising the established order', and suggesting that a change should occur to improve the situation.

Isy Suttie performs a comic song about the population of a wealthy, insular, *Daily Mail*-reading village succumbing to hysteria and accusing a newcomer of being a paedophile. When asked whether this piece aims to highlight the issues of prejudice and irresponsible hysteria-mongering involved, Suttie replies that her motives were neither so 'deep' nor so specific:

> Sadly it doesn't run that deep, it's just to take the mickey out of the tendency in some people to be narrow minded! It could have just as easily been a murderer, gypsy etc. I think it's more that I try and chime with what's already inside people and show empathy.[46]

While Suttie's point about empathy is certainly a fair one, and only she can say what her intentions in writing the piece were, she is being modest regarding the significance of 'mickey-taking'. Observational comedy - the 'comedy of recognition' - works exactly as Suttie states; it empathises with the audience's experience. Thus common attitudes and observations are brought into the open to be shared and, in this sense, enjoyed. However, the observation is more than just an observation. Suttie does not simply state, 'there appears to be a trend among well-to-do *Daily Mail* readers to accuse innocent people of paedophilia'. This would not be funny. It would be similarly disappointing if Izzard simply stated: 'the temperature of showers is notoriously hard to control'. The mockery and challenge of their statements - the highlighting of the discrepancy between the world as it is and the world as it should be - make these routines funny, and it is these same elements which give the routines the status of real, challenging social commentary.[47]

It is probable that only a small minority of comedians ever think of their work as social commentary. This is perhaps a healthy tendency; the imperative to be funny is a demanding one, and has to be the comedian's priority. As Dan Atkinson states:

> I'm always really shy of talking about comedy as anything more than an entertainment form because I think it's really important to remember that you're there to entertain people, and that's the

[46] Isy Suttie, Interview.
[47] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.77.

> job. And the other stuff is secondary, but that's not to say it's not important.[48]

What this viewpoint fails to take in to account is the fact that the imperative to be funny cannot be divorced from the imperative to deliver social commentary; the two things go hand in hand. Thus all stand-up sets offer challenge and comment, whether or not the authors themselves intend or recognise it.

Challenging positively

When jokes challenge and attack they are not solely destructive. The above segments from Eddie Izzard and Isy Suttie debunk the credibility of the current functioning of showers and thought processes of *Daily Mail* readers, but by doing so they necessarily create a vacuum for new ideas to fill.[49] Sometimes challenge can be positive in itself, belittling a negative convention by asserting a more positive idea. In a routine about making personal weaknesses into strengths, Josie Long confides in her audience:

> **I guess physically my biggest weakness, er, physically, um, is my stomach** *(Long runs her hands around her chubby midriff)* **And I've got this thing called polycystic ovarian syndrome, and it means that you carry weight around your middle and it's really difficult to shift, especially if you want to eat up to two chocolate bars a day, which some people do.** [laugh] **Naming no names** [couple of people laugh]**...And I thought, well, how can I turn the physical weakness into a strength? You know, turn the physical weakness into a strength, so what I do, is I (.) dress to flatter it!** [laugh]**...Erm and also, um, and also I've drawn a sea scene** [cheers, laughter and applause][50]

Long pulls up her t-shirt as she speaks to reveal a picture painted directly onto the skin of her abdomen, triggering a very positive response from her audience. The picture depicts a square, blue sea with peaks for waves at the top, two fish at the bottom and a boat sailing up the side.

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[48] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[49] Lash, 'A Theory of the Comic as Insight', p.119.
[50] Josie Long, *Trying is Good.* Real Talent. 2008. DVD.

There is a mermaid swimming in the patch of sea and the word 'MARVELLOUS' is written in large letters in an arch above it.

The laugh that comes in response to Long's assertion that she 'dresses to flatter' her stomach is, perhaps, in recognition of the incongruity of the statement with Long's appearance. Long wears a t-shirt and jeans, which do not conceal her shape nor suggest that she puts a lot of time and thought in to such standard vanities; she comes across as too cool to be scanning fashion magazines in the hope of finding tips for flattering the stomach. This joke also seems to highlight the futility of such beauty advice: even if she tried, Long could not change her shape by dressing to flatter it. The sea scene is a much better solution. It makes Long's stomach into something funny and cool, showcasing her talents as comedian and artist. Long continues, speaking over the laughter and excitement created by her sea scene:

> **I don't know if you can see...I've written the word 'marvellous'** [laugh]...**on it (.) there (.) 'marvellous'** [laugh]**...I just thought...what's not to love?** [laugh]**...If it says 'marvellous' on it, like, there's cynicism and there's cyni – if it says 'marvellous' on it...what's not to like?...** *(Long looks down at her stomach and then cheekily back up at the audience)* **Check this out**...

Long taps her stomach, causing ripples to run through her sea scene. Again, the audience deliver a big laugh and some clapping. Although Long goes on to admit that she has started doing sit-ups 'in quite a major way' since devising this joke, the ethos of the routine remains a celebration of Long's body and new-found body-confidence. She continues with some comments on the sea scene and more wobbling of her tummy, before concluding:

> **Tell you what though, bizarrely, I am now totally comfortable with this** *(gestures to her exposed stomach)* **which is something I never thought I would be** [couple of laughs] **If anything I am enjoying myself too much** [laugh].

Long continues by explaining how much she has come to love performing this joke, now heartily enjoying the opportunity to expose – and wobble - her belly. The routine emphasises Long's delight through her joyful facial expressions, her excited tone of voice, and her general

enthusiasm for sharing what she has done. Long does attack conventional ideas of beauty and bodily taboos but, significantly, she does so positively: the focus of the routine is not attack upon the convention, but the presentation of a delightful alternative viewpoint.

Freud recognised that joking could perform this positive function. Over twenty years after the publication of *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, in which he laid down the theory discussed above, Freud identified a special, 'fine and elevating' kind of joking which he called 'humour':

> Obviously, what is fine about it is the triumph of narcissism, the ego's victorious assertion of its own invulnerability. It refuses to be hurt by the arrows of reality or be compelled to suffer. It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure[...]Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle.[51]

In humour, we respond to pain and misfortune with defiance, laughing at troubles rather than suffering from them. This is what is at play in Long's routine about her stomach. She rebels against the world's attempt to impose anguish on her by turning what she believed to be her biggest physical weakness into something in which she can take pleasure. Thus Long triumphs over the draconian norms which dictate what constitutes beauty, and turns a physical characteristic that she was once uncomfortable with into something that she can take delight in showing off.

Kenneth Lash notes that jokes can be an effective way of presenting alternative points of view. Firstly, the comic makes us aware of our 'norms' or 'archetypes', subverting concepts and structures about which we have already decided upon fixed ideas in order to remind us that we take those ideas for granted.[52] A joke may then add to our understanding of the world by allowing us to see that concept in its totality, taking into account other points of view:

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[51] S. Freud, 'Humour', in *Freud: Collected Papers*, ed. by J. Strachey, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), v, pp.215-221 (p.217).
[52] Lash, 'A Theory of the Comic as Insight', p.117.

> [W]here the failure of the object to fit its archetype is *intentional*, as in the case of wit turning a value upside-down, the incongruity is presented for the purpose of edification through the agency of the imagination. A new norm, to supplant or to modify the original, is suggested; a new point of view is invited[...]Wit may often turn traditional norms topsy-turvy, but in so doing does it not turn up to our vision the underside, perhaps hitherto unseen or forgotten?[...]For any given situation, there exists a myriad of possible norms ranging in degree all the way from that traditionally posited to its opposite. One of them may seem more true than others, but it does not follow that the others are completely false. Norms tend to be static; reality fluid. To select one of a given number of related norms, though it may seem the truest or best, is to exclude others. Yet the totality is greater than any of its parts! The actual is not so much determined by the incidence of agreement as it is by the sum total of historical fact, whether consistent or inconsistent[...]Does not each one convey, as it were, an insight into that sector of life which, though it be not yours, nevertheless *is*?
>
> Thus we find the comic leading us to a keener perception of the totality of the actual.[53]

Lash suggests that joking can help us to understand the world better by understanding it more completely. When Josie Long exposes her stomach and sea scene she reminds her audience that their norms surrounding beauty and bodily taboos are constructed, and that the authority of those norms, however complete and dominant, is essentially tenuous. She further presents an alternative point of view, inviting a positive reaction to her stomach in its norm-defying state and suggesting an alternative approach to beauty as a substitute norm.

If Lash saw this function of joking as a way of understanding our world better, the theatre practice of Bertolt Brecht provides a way of translating this understanding into the possibility of real social and political challenge. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (A-effect) was not only intended to promote awareness among audiences, but also to drive them to act for social change. The A-effect works in just the way that Lash describes; when an object or idea which we generally take for granted is presented as an oddity, its authority as a norm is broken down and other possibilities will, of necessity, get a hearing:[54]

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[53] *Ibid*, p.119-120. [Lash's italics].

[54] P. Brooker, 'Key Words in Brecht's Theory and Practice of Theatre,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, ed by P. Thomson and G. Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.185-200 (p.191).

> The A-effect consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one's attention is to be drawn, from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected[...]Before familiarity can turn into awareness the familiar must be stripped of its inconspicuousness; we must give up assuming that the object in question needs no explanation. However frequently recurrent, modest, vulgar it may be it will now be labelled as something unusual[...]The very simplest sentences that apply in the A-effect are those with 'Not...But'[...]One might have thought that...but one oughtn't to have thought it. There was not one possibility but two; both are introduced, then the second one is alienated, then the first as well.[55]

In Brecht's theory, the intention of presenting multiple possibilities is not merely to encourage a greater awareness, but to translate that awareness into politically-useful consciousness; 'to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view.'[56]

It is therefore possible for comedy to challenge positively. Yet this positive challenge is no less an attack than its more overtly aggressive counter-parts. Long's presentation of her stomach offers an alternative view in which excess body fat is not a taboo to be hidden but a joy to be shared. Her routine may be charming and gentle, but is no less an attack upon the norm.

Even seemingly benign joking deals in challenge, and even joking that contains overt challenge must package those challenges in some form of disguise; otherwise we have observations and criticisms, but not jokes. The successful joke must also find the agreement of its audience and, because it does so via a disguise, it is necessarily manipulative. It is true that many of the challenges that comedians make are fairly harmless, such as Eddie Izzard's persecution of the domestic shower, or even positive, as is the case with Josie Long's celebration of her tummy. It is also important to recognise that comedians are not, on the whole, seeking to brainwash their audiences. Yet comedians cannot escape the manipulative nature of their form, and we should therefore question what uses that manipulation may be put to.

This thesis examines three main aspects of the manipulation employed by comedians. The first is the functional set of manipulations

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[55] *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. by J. Willett, (London: Methuen, 2001) pp.143-44.
[56] *Ibid*, p.125.

involved in getting an audience to laugh; the management of expectation, atmosphere and perception that form the backbone of successful stand-up performances. The second is the manipulation that might be at play when individuals who outwardly oppose discrimination laugh at Dunham's *Achmed the Dead Terrorist*; that which causes us to permit ideas which we would normally consider taboo to be discussed, or to be treated in a manner which we would generally consider uncomfortable. The third is manipulation in its most dangerous and exciting sense; the possibility that the comedian's influence over individuals could last beyond the immediate contact at the gig, and even take part in a wider negotiation across the whole of his society, having an impact that endures.

Chapter Two

Safe Space: from Manipulation to Influence

As we have seen, the successful joke constitutes a manipulation in itself. A further manipulation comes with the temporary suspension of responsibility which is permitted under the terms of comic licence. Part of the vital role of joking as a form of social negotiation is to provide an abstract safe space in which jokers can operate outside of the restrictions which govern most regular interaction. As Steve Linstead states:

> [H]umour is often a framework for 'non-real' or 'play' activity, an aside from normal discourse. The fact that it need not be taken into account in subsequent 'serious' interaction does allow messages and formulations to be 'risked' within its framework which would not otherwise be acceptable or possible.[1]

When something is 'only a joke', we allow the speaker licence to subvert our usual standards of honesty and decency. Joking forms a marginal safe space where this potentially dangerous experiment may be held in safety; the subversive ideas posited in joking do not have to affect 'serious' interaction.

Stewart Lee observes that, from ancient societies to the present day, it has been the comedian's duty to posit himself against whatever norms he is confronted with: 'doing the opposite of whatever appears to be acceptable'.[2] However, a protected space in which this process can occur is necessary on a practical level, if only for the comedian's sake:

> In the Soux Indians they have a guy who's called the Heyoka, and he's like the clown of the Soux nation. He's ideally gay or bisexual, he washes in dirt, walks around backwards, stands on his head, sleeps outside, y'know. Basically he lives every moment in subversion; in opposition to conventional social norms. I wouldn't like to do that.[3]

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[1] S. Linstead, 'Jokers Wild: the Importance of Humour in the Maintenance of Organisational Culture', *Sociological Review*, 33 (1985), 741-767, (p.761).
[2] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[3] *Ibid.*

Richard Herring notes that failure to adequately separate joking behaviour from everyday behaviour would risk turning social commentary into madness:

> You worry about the insanity of the act kind of *(laughs)* spilling into your real life and you actually becoming insane, y'know, because obviously, on stage you're allowed to[...]break the rules and you're allowed to[...]be crazy. Y'know I sometimes think[...]drunk men shouting - y'know, you'll be at a train station or whatever and a really drunk homeless person will be calling some respectable woman a bitch for no reason – and I kind of think there's a big similarity *(laughs)* between myself and that![...]That my job is to say the unsayable[...]But a kind of mad person in the street *(laughs)* it is the kind of thing that they do as well[...][W]hen I'm not in the performance situation I wouldn't want to be behaving like the character on stage does.[4]

Herring acknowledges that the safe space can malfunction: if the boundaries between offstage and onstage become blurred then the comedian could risk becoming the madman who says the 'unsayable' in inappropriate contexts. It is the status of the comedy gig as a protected world apart that makes it safe for interaction to occur which would be censored outside of the performance situation.

John Morreall notes that: 'in finding something funny, we are for the moment not concerned about truth or about consequences.'[5] He formulates this in to two key terms. 'Practical disengagement' involves a lack of concern with the consequences of the joke, as 'humour lovers overlook the practical needs of themselves and others.'[6] 'Cognitive disengagement' is a lack of concern with truth:

> As long as something is funny, we are for the moment not concerned with whether it is real or fictional, true or false[...]someone listening to a funny anecdote who tries to correct the teller – 'No, he didn't spill the spaghetti on the keyboard and the monitor, just on the keyboard' – will probably be told by the other listeners to shut up.[7]

Practical and cognitive disengagement are important concepts, because they form the basic rule-change by which joking is able to operate as a safe space; between them they constitute a subversion of truth and

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[4] Richard Herring, Interview, by telephone, 9 March 2009.
[5] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70.
[6] *Ibid*, p.70.
[7] *Ibid*, p.70.

decency that is manipulative in itself. However, the manipulation does not stop there; the tendency towards practical and cognitive disengagement allows joking to generate more subtle manipulations.

The ambiguous relationship with truth

Critchley suggests that 'the comedian sees the world under what some philosophers call an *epochē*, a certain bracketing or suspension of belief.'[8] For much comedy, it is vital that the audience alter their view of the world so that alternative logics and truths may dominate over every-day common sense. For example, Eddie Izzard presents a world which operates in accordance with many strange rules. In *Definite Article*, fruit has consciousness: pears actively seek to ripen at the most inconvenient moment, and oranges are staffed by a crew of submariners:

> **Inside an orange, it's like the film *Das Boot* in there** [laugh]**...With Jürgen Prochnow going:**
> *(Caricatured German accent)* ***'Don't let zem get in to ze orange!'*** [laugh]***...'Most important. All the Juice will get out and will not be good'*** [laugh]***...'Zey are breaking in with finger-depth-chargers...Let ze peel come off only in small chunks!'*** [laugh][9]

Izzard mimes the person holding the orange, tearing off small pieces of peel, then continues with a less consistent Prochnow impression: '"Zey are breaking in! Push all the pips into bits they wouldn't expect!" [big laugh]'.

Like many of Izzard's surreal routines, the idea of the orange putting up a military defence against being peeled has its origins in observational comedy. The audience's laughter is fuelled partly by their recognition of a genuine, typical experience: oranges can be difficult to peel. The joy of the routine is that Izzard offers an explanation for this difficulty which is at once absurdly logical and totally implausible. The idea that the orange is fighting back correlates with the initial observation, but is obviously not accurate. The audience gladly accepts, and enjoys, Izzard's topsy-turvy world, consenting to a manipulation of belief in which they temporarily allow the possibility that their fruit is

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[8] Critchley, *On Humour*, p.88.
[9] Eddie Izzard, *Definite Article*. Universal. 1996. VHS.

fighting back: if they did not, they could not enjoy the routine's funniness.

The importance of cognitive disengagement may be demonstrated by examining a case in which an audience is forced to re-engage with their common-sense perception of a comedian's material. On stage in Cardiff, Stewart Lee gives an analysis of a joke as told by two different comedians:

> **There used to be this Irish comic on the circuit called Michael Redmond, right, and he was great**[...]**He had big bushy hair, and a kind of long droopy moustache, and deep-set blood-hound eyes and he always used to wear a long brown mac, and carry a little plastic bag. And what he used to do, right, was he'd walk out on stage and he'd stand still in silence for about a minute and a half, looking weird, and then he would say...***(Lee looks dully out over the heads of the audience)* **'A lot of people say to me...get out o' my garden.'** [laugh] **Now I think that is the greatest opening line ever.**[10]

Lee explains that although Redmond always got a good laugh for this joke, it got a 'much better laugh' when used by Joe Pasquale in a Royal Variety Show performance some years later. Lee is certain that Pasquale has plagiarised Redmond's joke, and telephones Pasquale to ask how he thought the joke up. Pasquale replies:

> **'Well', he said, 'I thought if someone looked out of their window (.) and they saw me (.) in their garden (.) they would say, (.) "Get out of my garden"'** [small laugh]

Lee then highlights the absurdity of this point, continuing:

> **Now, that's not quite right, is it, because (.) if you looked out of your window (.)** [one person begins to chuckle] **and you saw Joe Pasquale (.)** [a few more people laugh] **in the garden (.) you'd just go** *(adopts a befuddled expression)* **'Is that?'** [laugh]**...'Joe Pasquale?'** [bigger laugh]**...'In the Garden?'** [laugh]**...'What can he possibly want?'** [laugh]**...You might even be frightened, right,** [small laugh] **'cause that, that joke only works if a kind of anonymous weirdo's saying it. As soon as you introduce a celebrity into it it's kind of structurally compromised.**

[10] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*

Lee admits that when Pasquale told this joke in his Royal Variety performance it got a big laugh. It is therefore a funny joke, even when told by Joe Pasquale. Nevertheless, Lee expertly demolishes the joke as told by Pasquale by destroying the *'epochē'* in which it makes sense - that is, the world in which Pasquale has a habit of trespassing into the gardens of strangers, and in which homeowners' response to finding celebrities on their property is simply to ask them to leave. Lee identifies that, in reality, people do not react to celebrities as they do to 'anonymous weirdos'. Lee then goes on to make a more general attack on Pasquale, during which the effectiveness of this initial assault becomes clear. As the audience laugh easily at Lee's attacks on Pasquale, they demonstrate that Lee has created consensus for the idea that Pasquale is a plagiarist and liar.

Lee implies that Michael Redmond is the superior comedian as he is the original author of the joke, and the one for whom the joke makes sense. Certainly, Redmond's scruffy appearance and anonymity adds depth and integrity to the joke that Pasquale cannot achieve, and should make the joke as told by Redmond funnier than the joke as told by Pasquale. Yet Redmond too has built his joke on an unlikely-sounding premise. His audience surely do not truly believe that he is in the habit of trespassing into stranger's gardens. Lee allows the dubious premise of Redmond's joke to remain intact while also using the destruction of this premise in Pasquale's joke to compromise its credibility. That Lee can engineer so successful an attack on Pasquale purely by dismantling his premise shows the vital importance of the audience's willingness to suspend its disbelief.

These examples deal with straightforward cases of cognitive disengagement. They refer to processes where the audience demonstrates an understanding of both the falsity involved in the joke and their own responsibility to accept that falsity if the joke is to work. However, the relationship between truth and lies in stand-up is not always so clear-cut. In the previous chapter we saw Dave Allen get a healthy laugh for criticising a women's magazine which claimed that two hearts could beat 'close' to each other, saying, 'that's impossible. [Laugh] I mean if you're standin' in front of somebody the heart has gotta be on

the other side [Laugh]'.[11] Allen's statement is essentially false. The magazine never claimed that the hearts were directly opposite each other; it claimed only that they were 'close'. The premise of Allen's joke is also subtly inaccurate. Allen takes as truth the myth that the human heart lies to the left; his routine only works if we accept that the heart beat is felt reasonably far to the left of the chest. In fact the heart is located in the centre of the chest, with the heart beat appearing to manifest itself very slightly to the left because that side of the heart beats more powerfully. Allen suggests that for the lovers' hearts to be close together they must be standing one behind the other, or one of them must be 'hanging upside down from the ceiling,' but neither of these solutions could really improve the proximity of their heartbeats.

It is impossible to be certain how far either Allen or his audience are aware of the falsity of this premise. It could be a case of straightforward cognitive disengagement: the audience and comedian are conscious of the mistake, but they also know that a decision to temporarily accept the myth as truth will allow them to enjoy the joke and that a pedantic obsession with accuracy is therefore inappropriate, so they allow the dubious premise. It could also be an example of what Oliver Double calls a 'shared misunderstanding', where some or all of the participants genuinely believe in the false idea and are able to use it as a shared point of reference despite its being untrue.[12] All we know for certain is that the audience do not care; their healthy laughter in the routine that follows demonstrates that they have accepted Allen's logic without becoming distracted by its validity.

There is, however, a limit to the falsity that audiences can easily accept. Double states that 'truth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is "authentic"'.[13] Tony Allen states that authenticity is part of the 'nebulous agreement' which governs interaction between comedian and audience.[14] Dan Atkinson feels that audiences like to believe that what a comedian tells them is

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[11] Dave Allen, *The Best of Dave Allen.*
[12] Double, *Getting the Joke*, pp.136-137.
[13] *Ibid*, p.97.
[14] T. Allen, *Attitude: Wanna Make Something of It?: The Secret of Stand-up Comedy* (Glastonbury: Gothic Image Publications, 2002), p.28.

true.[15] This is demonstrated in Rhod Gilbert's 2007 show *Who's Eaten Gilbert's Grape?*[16] Gilbert spends a substantial amount of time establishing a close rapport with the audience, before concluding the show with a heart-warming story from his own life which is intended to demonstrate that the world is a positive and hope-fulfilling place. He is sitting in a depressing, dingy hotel room feeling lonely, depressed and old, without much hope of things improving. He orders a burger from room service, and it is delivered by a woman called Bridget. Seeing that he's watching the film *What's Eating Gilbert Grape,* she stays to watch it with him. They arrange to meet again, eventually fall in love, and have just had their first child. As Gilbert has spent much of the show talking to individual members of the audience, they have a sense of community, both with Gilbert and with each other; thus they are emotionally invested in the story and engage with it affectionately.

Their connection to the piece, and to Gilbert, is then shattered when he tells them, quite bluntly, that none of the story is true. As Gilbert offers little further explanation, the audience is left uncertain as to what to believe. Most might have spotted the truth, and will take this throw-away comment at face value and disbelieve the story. However, the length of the show compared to this brief throw-away comment might suggest to others that they are supposed to read the comment as a joke and continue to believe that Bridget and the baby really exist. One way or another, Rhod Gilbert has lied about something important.

The next year Gilbert toured with a new show, *Rhod Gilbert and the Award-Winning Mince Pie,* in which he admits that the story about the baby was not true: 'there was no bloody baby, y'know [laugh]...I bloody hate kids, right [laugh].'[17] He goes on to explain that his long-running claim to originate from Llanbobl was also a lie: it is just a place that Gilbert made up. He claims:

> **The reason I've changed my ways, the reason I've stopped making stuff up, is 'cause I've had so much shit for it off (.) the press all calling me a liar, and audiences freak out, I've**

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[15] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[16] Rhod Gilbert, *Who's Eaten Gilbert's Grape,* Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 2 November 2007, 7:45pm.
[17] Rhod Gilbert, *Rhod Gilbert and the Award-Winning Mince Pie.* Channel 4 DVD. 2009. DVD.

found, if you make things up. People can't cope with you making [things up].[18]

This routine itself exaggerates the truth for comic effect. A search for UK press articles, with major mentions of Gilbert and the show's title, held on newspaper database Nexis for the year in which Gilbert toured with this show, turned up only positive reviews.[19] Add the term 'liar' and no articles appear at all. At the Canterbury performance of *Who's Eaten Gilbert's Grape*, the audience remained co-operative even after Gilbert's admission that the story they had invested in was untrue; it was recognised as a joke, and permitted. There was, however, still a tangible sense of betrayal when Gilbert stated that he had lied; indeed, this betrayal is the point of the joke. Gilbert is quoted as saying:

> Fairly early on, I realised that I could have a bit of fun with this whole idea of, 'I've had enough of telling lies, it's the truth', and then everything you say thereafter is a lie. It's funny when you admit to an audience that you're lying on one thing and you tell them 'but the next bit's true,[']' then they naturally tend to take you at your word.[20]

Cognitive disengagement is therefore not a universal trait. Audiences do sometimes invest in the truth behind a performance. Total accuracy, however, is difficult in comedy. Jonathan Elston states that much of his material comes from real experiences, but these experiences are rarely able to form funny material without some alteration: 'most of the time you have to embellish[...]most of the time you need to lie a little bit.'[21] Even these embellishments involve manipulation, as it becomes impossible for the audience to identify the exact point at which truth merges into fiction. Elston makes a robust defence of this practice, identifying that a comedian's priority is to fulfil his responsibility to the audience: 'If it's funny it's funny, and they're not there to hear the

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[18] *Ibid.*
[19] 'Search for Articles Concerning Rhod Gilbert', *Nexis*, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.chain.kent.ac.uk/uk/nexis/home/home.do?rand=0.8669958749769007%20>, [accessed 12 July 2010].
[20] M. Burgess, 'Gilbert's Grape Expectations', *Manchester Evening News*, 25 January 2008.
[21] Jonathan Elston, Interview.

truth[...]people go to watch comedy to laugh. They don't need it to be truthful.'[22]

Often, however, comedians do have other priorities. Joe Wilkinson says that, at the moment, he wants to tell stories that are as true as possible.[23] However, this inevitably leads to the tricky question of what constitutes 'truth'. Few of any comedian's stories can make it to the stage without editing or embellishment, and between the outright fabrication and the unaltered truth there exists a grey area. Wilkinson's commitment to accuracy extends to rejecting embellishments that would get more laughs through outright lies. However, it is still often necessary to indulge in some level of falsity. He explains by reference to a story he tells on stage in which he overhears a transaction between a salesgirl and a man who wants to buy a crucifix. The salesgirl informs the customer, 'we've got two kinds of crucifixes - plain ones and ones with the little men on':

> I wasn't in the shop, I overheard the man telling someone [about it], do you know what I mean? So, yeah, that is a lie, because I wasn't standing [behind him in the shop][...]he came out of the shop, told the story to his wife, I was listening. But then, if I told the story how it actually was[...]it's too convoluted. If you wanna get that story across you have to cut out all that bit[...]you can still be truthful, but it is – in a way - it's a whopper[...]The stories are true, the details are lies[...]because it just helps the stories along.[24]

For Wilkinson, the embellishment of details does not detract from the overall honesty of the story. To say that he witnessed the salesgirl describe a crucifix as having 'a little man on' is a lie in itself, but it is a lie which Wilkinson believes will allow the fundamental truth – the sense of what really happened – to be communicated more clearly. However, Wilkinson is also clear that he does not think comedians have an obligation to be truthful. Being 'as truthful as I possibly can' is what he, personally, is doing 'at the moment.'[25] Interestingly, Wilkinson's example of the crucifix story involves a type of 'embellishment' which Elston

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[22] *Ibid.*
[23] Joe Wilkinson, Interview, by telephone, 29 September 2008.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*

refers to as lying: each comedian interprets this ambiguous practice somewhat differently.

Mark Thomas' *Dambusters* is a key example of a show that has clear priorities beyond making the audience laugh.[26] The show's tour charted the progress of the Illisu Dam Campaign, which sought to prevent the building of a dam which would have caused environmental damage and displaced thousands of local inhabitants, with particularly ruinous effects for the Kurdish population.[27] *Dambusters* also reported on the widespread persecution of Kurds by the Turkish government, legal system and armed forces. Thomas ends his performance with a long and harrowing list of real and despicable human rights violations as related to him by the victims, telling his audience stories of physical and emotional violence which happened to real people whom he has met. When asked why he chose to end a comedy show in this way, Thomas is still visibly angered and upset by the memory of the stories he heard:

> The reason to include it was it would be a disservice not to. Because it was true. Because I want people to know[...]You know, they've had nearly two hours of fairly decent comedy – I think I was pleased with it, do you know what I mean? - I've earned the right[...]they will have that[...][W]e would never talk about the tour. We would talk about the campaign. For us, this was war. This was total war. And we were gonna win. And, you know, we spent three years doing this, and it was gonna be truthful and it was gonna be accurate. I thought, 'I want people to be moved. I want people to feel emotionally moved. I want them to feel motivated. I want them to try and get near, to understand what was going on.' That actually, you know, fucking, the *stuff* that went on was quite vile, and actually just kind of thinking about it now - it's just coming [back], it does kind of - its *shocking*[...]And actually, when that happens it would be a fucking insult not to report it. How callous would that be? What should I do? Turn round and go, let's put the gag first? They've had the gags. I wanted to leave them with something that would mean when they left that theatre, they wanted to do something.[28]

The ending of *Dambusters* is conspicuously lacking in jokes. As Thomas states, the decision to abandon 'the gags' was part of an intentional

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[26] Mark Thomas, *Dambusters: Live 2001 Tour.* Laughing Stock Productions. 2003. CD.
[27] M. Thomas and YWGAV Limited, *Mark Thomas Info,* <http://markthomasinfo.com>, [accessed 6 August 2009].
[28] Mark Thomas, Interview, The Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 4 October 2008. [Thomas' emphasis].

strategy: the sudden lack of joking emphasises the accuracy of the report and creates a strong emotional response. Yet truth and believability are also vitally important in many of the routines in which Thomas does aim to create laughter. His style, typically, will be highly informative, delivering new information to audiences and updating them on real campaign work, so it is important that the audience are able to trust in the accuracy of what he tells them. Thomas is, however, aware of the ambiguity inherent in the issue of truth:

> Truth. I mean, when you start saying truth it's[...]such a fantastically fucking – I mean where do we start on that one? Let's gnaw on that bone! If you're performing and your objective is to make people laugh, that's your objective. How you get there y'know[...]it depends what kind of comic you are, and what kind of performer you are.[29]

As Double notes, Thomas provides an example of the necessary subjection of truth to bias in stand-up comedy:

> [I]n stand-up comedy subjectivity is the whole point. The audience wants to hear the comedian's views, opinions and prejudices, and there is no need to temper these with fairness or balance. This is something that Mark Thomas recognises, admitting that he gives a less fully rounded picture of his opponents than his friends and fellow campaigners.[30]

In telling his stories from a biased point of view, Thomas is delivering the truth as he sees it. His decision to edit the representation of his friends and, more particularly, opponents is similar to Wilkinson's instinct to edit the facts to ensure the clearest possible communication of the vital points.[31]

Stand-up is subject to a clash of interpretations by audiences. On the one hand, audiences accept that much of what a comedian says may be implausible or highly subjective, and that honesty is rarely a priority. On the other, audiences also have a tendency to believe in the accuracy of information presented, and enjoy believing that what they are hearing

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[29] *Ibid.*

[30] O. Double, '"That shit was funny *now*!": Emotion and Intense Personal Experience in Stand-Up Comedy', in Oliver Double, *Saint Pancreas* [DVD extra]. University of Kent. 2007. DVD, p.8.

[31] As Oliver Double has noted, the use of selective characterisation to convey the performer's subjective opinion of his material has been theorised by Brecht: *Brecht on Theatre* p.123. Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.218.

is the truth. As we shall see, this contradictory approach can open up possibilities for the comedian to move from consensual manipulation to subtle influence.

Suspending values and moving moral boundaries

Henri Bergson famously observed that, 'the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart'.[32] Laughter is usually accompanied by an 'absence of feeling':

> Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity.[33]

Bergson's idea is reflected by many theorists. Morreall's idea of practical disengagement similarly implies the temporary suspension of emotions such as pity.[34] As Lash further states:

> [O]n the part of the observer, any emotion other than one expressive of pleasure will obviate laughter. If viewed sympathetically, the clown's pratfalls can be painful; his terribly strenuous efforts to arouse laughter, piteous. A minor misfortune is not funny until its effects are dissipated, until time has detached us from our angry emotional reactions to the incident. To perceive the comic element at any given moment, emotional neutrality *towards the comic object* is demanded.[35]

Morreall points out the moral implications of this lack of emotional response, stating, 'to laugh about something is not to take it seriously, and for you not to take seriously what I take seriously is for you not to take *me* seriously':[36]

> As a social species, we depend on each other for emotional support[...]Displays of solidarity and compassion may be as important as reducing physical pain, for suffering is often at least as much psychological as physiological. Compassion by itself

[32] H. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008), p.11.
[33] *Ibid*, p.10.
[34] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70.
[35] Lash, 'A Theory of the Comic as Insight', p.117. [Lash's italics].
[36] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70. [Morreall's italics].

helps reduce our suffering, and *not* showing compassion can itself harm us.[37]

In joking, we permit the participants licence to subvert the important ethical edict that human beings should show sympathy to one another. The following segment from Jason Byrne constituted the climax of the 'law' episode of BBC Radio 2's *The Jason Byrne Show*:

> **This is an old story in Ireland, you might know this story which was, which was great – this was the best suing thing ever. There was this couple have moved in to a house and, and the, the wife of the house wen - went into the garage and was cleaning out the garage. So while the husband was at work she, she got the stuff – she got like spirits and paints and stuff – and poured them down the toilet, okay?** *(Byrne chuckles as he speaks)* **While he was at work. But she didn't flush it, she just poured it down. And she went back down to the garage. He came home from work and did what every man does, got the newspaper, put it under his arm and went upstairs to the toilet, right? And he sat on the toilet** *(Byrne chuckles as he speaks)* **but the thing that he was doing, is he lit a fag** [laugh] **right?...On my life, this happened! He lit a fag, right, he threw it into the toilet when he was finished** [laughter] (.) **and blew up his arse** [big laugh] **right?...When!** [laugh]**...When the fire brigade came they just found a man on the ground with his arse blown up, right?** [laugh]**...And they got him up on to the stretcher, and this is why he sued** *(Byrne's voice creases with laughter)* **'cause when they were carrying him down the stairs, the Fireman said, 'What happened to you?' and when he told them, they started to laugh so much** [laugh]**... On my life, this happened! They dropped him off the** [laugh] **stretcher...***(Byrne begins to laugh)* **He fell down the stairs and broke his leg!** [laugh]**...This other** [laugh continues]**...This other lovely story, and this is only about three years ago, there was a bus crash, right, and what happened was, the bus had crashed and keeled over onto its side. Now, when the bus** *(Byrne corpses)* [laugh]**...when the bus crashed, there was twenty people on it. And on my life, by the time the police arrived, there was twenty-six people on it** [laugh].[38]

This is an excellent piece of delivery. Byrne tells the audience that the stories are to be enjoyed by introducing them as 'great [...]the best suing thing ever' and 'lovely', then uses his tone and pace to convey excitement about the coming punch-lines. He uses his own laughter to catalyse the audience response, corpsing at strategic moments to tell the

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[37] *Ibid*, p.71.
[38] Jason Byrne, *The Jason Byrne Show*, Episode 2.

audience that the joke to come is so funny that he can't contain his own laughter long enough to get the words out.[39] It also reinforces the authority of comic licence, telling the audience that it is acceptable to interpret the stories as jokes and to laugh at them. This is crucial because the subject matter is, if viewed sympathetically, sad and disturbing. The first story involves a man who has been seriously injured, and whose injuries are further exacerbated by the callous behaviour of the medical professionals who are supposed to care for and help him. We could interpret the audience's response as a symbolic 'punishment' for the man's crude and silly behaviour,[40] but such an interpretation could not hold true for the bus crash, which involves an accident befalling twenty innocent people. Although the point of the joke is the savvy behaviour of people who were not injured, emphasis is placed on the seriousness of the crash ('the bus[...]keeled over onto its side') and suggests that those on board were genuinely in danger. To laugh at the joke involves momentary disengagement from the plight of those twenty genuine casualties. Byrne's repeated assertions that the stories happened to real people ('on my life!') suggest that the audience are supposed to read these stories as real: far from reducing the power of his tales, Byrne's emphasis on reality is intended to make them funnier.

It is clear that audiences can suspend their sympathy and their concern with the likely practical outcome of scenarios which are presented to them as a joke. Even if Byrne's potentially tragic tales are presented as truths, they are presented in a joking format which gives the audience permission to laugh at their content even though this would be considered highly reprehensible behaviour if the information had been presented in ordinary interaction. It is not only the audience's emotion which is being suspended, however, but also their attitudes. When Morreall identifies that human beings depend upon each other for support, he is not talking about an instinctive emotional response but rather a social attitude that grows out of mutual need. We may assume that Byrne's audience would be repulsed if they witnessed a person

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[39] Tony Allen claims this as a common technique in stand-up performance: T. Allen, *Attitude*, p.29.
[40] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.75.

laughing at the site of a bus crash or serious individual casualty, or at a second-hand re-telling that was presented more seriously: society gives them the attitude that it is important to demonstrate sympathy and wrong to show lack of concern.[41] Yet the attitudes that would cause that repulsion are clearly not active as they laugh at Byrne's comic telling.

Ronald de Sousa refutes the idea that attitudes can be temporarily adjusted in order to enjoy a joke, arguing that, 'suspension of disbelief in the situation can and must be achieved for the purposes of the joke; suspension of attitudes cannot be'.[42] He gives the example of a rape joke which plays upon the assumed promiscuity of its victim, arguing that the hearer cannot find the joke funny unless they agree with the sexist assumptions upon which the joke is based. Certainly, de Sousa is correct in identifying that jokes can and do fail on the grounds that their audience finds them offensive. In Douglas' terms, the joke has trespassed upon attitudes, values and beliefs that are deemed sacred, and thus has been rejected.[43] Failure to reject the joke is not, however, the same as rationally agreeing with it.

De Sousa uses a very simple example to demonstrate the lack of flexibility in audience attitude. He sets up a 'thought experiment' within his writing, whereby he uses the word 'fuck' while making a point about attitudes to promiscuity, and then goes on to say:

> If you snickered at my language, it's because you consider it *naughty*. That is an *attitude*. If you didn't, I'm unlikely to get a chuckle out of you by asking you, just for the present purposes, hypothetically to think my language naughty.[44]

De Sousa recognises the potential for 'apparent' contradiction here, citing instances of failure to comply with his theory as the exceptions which 'prove the rule'.[45] He claims that when a person who does not have the attitude that an expletive is funny laughs at that expletive, the source of the laughter is the incongruity of considering the joke funny. Rather than a 'counter-example', it is 'an instance of the following

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[41] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.71.
[42] R. de Sousa, 'When is it Wrong to Laugh?', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (see Schopenhauer, above), pp. 226-249 (p. 240).
[43] Douglas, 'Jokes', p.152.
[44] de Sousa, 'When is it wrong to laugh', p.240. [De Sousa's italics].
[45] *Ibid*, p.241.

principle: *It can be funny to suppose that something that is not at all funny might be funny, but only if you actually think it isn't actually funny.*[46]

De Sousa is correct in identifying that such a blatant attempt as his thought experiment is not likely to make his audience suspend their attitudes. Indeed, de Sousa's suggestion of directly asking an audience to pretend that they find a word naughty is manipulative in itself; he has used a ridiculous suggestion to imply that there is no other method by which the audience may be persuaded to suspend their attitudes, thus making the very idea appear ridiculous. If we allow that there may be other ways of persuading an audience to suspend their everyday attitudes in order to appreciate a joke, the idea will appear more realistic.

To take de Sousa's example, the 'naughtiness' of the word 'fuck' is not fixed in an individual's perception, but is open to negotiation on the basis of context and usage. Mark Thomas relates an anecdote in which he attends a formal dinner at the *New Statesman*, where he admits to feeling out of his depth. Unfortunately for him, just as he is planning to leave, a speech is demanded of him:

> **Didn't go well** [laugh, one person claps]**...It didn't, I'll just be honest with yer – head down, fourteen fucks, three wanks and a cunt in five minutes** [big laugh, some clapping][47]

One of the reference points necessary to understand this joke is the fact that Thomas' regular performance style involves a notably liberal use of expletives. This joke is delivered nearly ten minutes in to the second half of the show. By this point the audience have heard Thomas use the words 'wank' and 'cunt'; instances of the word 'fuck' have been especially numerous. The words are sometimes used as an integral part of a punch-line, but are not considered funny in themselves. Thomas' audience certainly do not snicker at his use of language, so we may assume that they do not take the attitude that the expletives themselves are particularly 'naughty'.

Yet Thomas' joke depends upon the audience interpreting 'fourteen fucks, three wanks and a cunt' as inappropriate. The joke derives its

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[46] *Ibid*, p.241. [De Sousa's italics].
[47] Mark Thomas, *The Night War Broke Out*. Laughing Stock. 2004. CD.

funniness partly from Thomas' admission of failure and partly through the incongruous way in which he lists the expletives, but both of these factors rely upon the audience's understanding that Thomas' choice of words was 'naughty' in the given situation. We could interpret the joke as de Sousa suggests and assume that Thomas' stand-up audience laughs at the very fact that the unfunny expletives are presented as funny. However, this interpretation fails to account for the most obvious source of incongruity; that the audience recognises that the expletives which do not offend in the context of the gig are inappropriate in the context of the formal dinner. They laugh not because it is ludicrous to consider these expletives funny, but because they know that the expletives are genuinely incongruous in that situation. Perhaps they laugh in part because they know that they would also be shocked and embarrassed if they had been present at that dinner speech, despite their liberal attitude to swearing in the context of the gig. Their attitude to expletives is not fixed, but is open to negotiation.

A more important rebuttal of de Sousa's argument is provided by those instances in which audiences laugh at jokes which present genuinely nasty assumptions. These instances where comedians get laughs for topics which are usually deeply taboo demonstrate that audiences can be worryingly malleable. In 1992, when there was massive media interest in the topic of ritual abuse of children, following accusations against several families in the Orkneys, Jack Dee delivered the following gag at the Duke of York's theatre in London:

> **How are you gonna get people in this country to stop smacking their children? It would be nice to stop fucking them first of all wouldn't it?** *(Dee chuckles slightly)* [Big laugh, then appalled ooh-ing][48]

Dee responds to the confused response, achieving laughs both for observing a 'wave of disapproval' to his left and 'a party from the Faculty for Witchcraft and Buggeration' to his right.

This is clearly a difficult joke. The Orkneys story is still fresh, and the audience know that Dee's gag references the recent abuse of real children. Hence, laughing at the joke involves suspending the important

[48] Jack Dee, *Jack Dee Live.*

moral attitude that making light of such crimes, and turning the suffering of the victim into something to be laughed at and therefore enjoyed, is wrong. Applying the approach which de Sousa took to his rape joke, we would also need to assume that the unpleasant assumptions upon which this joke comments would need to be shared by the audience; they could not laugh at the idea of children as sex objects or at Dee's flippancy unless they genuinely believed that it was acceptable to treat children, or the topic of abuse, in this way, and did not truly condemn such practices.

Yet Dee's audience clearly do not share these assumptions. The fact that the audience's collective response is to attempt to correct the laugh with a belated (albeit fairly tame) display of disapproval demonstrates that this joke is deemed to have overstepped the mark. Yet the immediate response of this audience is not disapproval but laughter. For the first few micro-moments after Dee makes his shocking statement, the audience is hoodwinked into suspending its disapproval and delivering a big laugh. The correction could be seen as more representative of the attitudes and values by which the audience lives, and by which their society runs, than the knee-jerk reaction of laughter. In the moment that the audience laughs, therefore, they are not demonstrating agreement with the joke, but rather have been manipulated into temporarily moving their moral boundaries by the fact that they are hearing a joke.

What harm can it do?

That joking should allow the temporary suspension of our usual standards regarding truth and morality is important to its role as social negotiation. Joking is a safe space which allows 'messages and formulations to be "risked" within its framework which would not otherwise be acceptable or possible.'[49] If we did not grant jokes some freedom from our own strictures, they could not test them. However, these are tendencies that can be abused. Stewart Lee demonstrates this point in relation to a joke which he heard on a Roy Chubby Brown album:

[49] Linstead, 'Jokers Wild', p.761.

> There was this one bit where he goes, 'Ah, the political correctness has gone mad, hasn't it? These days you can't say Catholic, you can't say Protestant, you can't say Muslim' – and I'm thinking, 'well you *can* say those things', right? – and all the audience go 'ooh, yeah'. And he goes, 'you can't say Protestant, you can't say Jew, you can't say Muslim...which is a shame 'cause I like to go in the corner shop on a Sunday morning and buy the paper and go, "'ere's a quid, keep the change you Paki bastard"'[...]And he gets a really big laugh. [50]

Lee feels that this joke abuses the audience's natural tendency to forgive inaccuracy and flout social standards of decency:

> Because first of all, what he's saying isn't true. It's necessary for him to create a false premise - that we live in a society where you can't say 'Muslim', you can't say 'Jew' and you can't say 'Christian' – 'cause that looks heavy-handed and the audience go 'hmm, yeah' – but if he actually said, 'you can't say nigger, you can't say Paki, you can't say -' *(laughs)* people would go, even[...]Chubby's audience would go, 'Well...*(Lee makes a conciliatory gesture)*'. So then the punch-line doesn't relate to the set-up, because the set-up is about an imaginary Britain, in which you can't use the proper nouns of religions. The punch-line is[...]it seems to be a response to something else, right? The punch-line is a response to a set-up which he hasn't got the guts to make[...][I]t doesn't make any sense, and it annoys me that the audience think that it's striking some kind of blow for freedom. Because you shouldn't be able to say,[...]'here keep the change you Paki bastard', but you should be able to say 'Jew', 'Muslim' and 'Christian'...and you can! *(laughs)*[...]But that audience definitely feel, from the recording, like Chubby's telling it like it is and thank God for him.

Roy Chubby Brown is allowed to make the inaccurate claim that it is considered unacceptable to name religions in order that he may link that concept to the use of a racist term which is genuinely considered non-PC. He thus makes the disallowing of the term 'Paki' appear 'heavy-handed.' Brown uses the tendency towards cognitive disengagement to manipulate the audience into validating an idea which they could not otherwise have approved of: because Brown has merged the term 'Paki' into the same category as 'Christian' and 'Muslim', the taboo against the term 'Paki' appears unnecessarily restrictive.

The tendency towards practical disengagement is similarly abused. As Lee notes, this audience would be unlikely to feel that they could permit

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[50] Stewart Lee, Interview. [Lee's emphasis].

a term like 'Paki' if it was presented to them as part of a category of racist terms, but when it is presented at the punch-line to a joke the term is interpreted in the safe space where normal rules governing decency are relaxed. Therefore, the term is ambiguous: it is normally disallowed, but may be permitted if presented as a joke about that very restriction. Yet the lowering of the taboo does not stop at accepting the word within the terms of the joke. Lee believes that the gag has gone further for this audience, with the punch-line allowing them to assume that the set-up referred to genuine restrictions on offensive language and therefore to agree that 'Chubby's telling it like it is[...]thank God'.

According to Billig, when a statement causes offence, the claim that the speaker was 'only joking' acts as, 'both a claim to be doing something permissible (i.e. joking) and a denial of doing something criticisable.'[51] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah identify that this defence may be so effective that it reverses the interpretation of the event: the blame for the breakdown in social decency is assigned not to the speaker who caused offence, but to the offended party who is deemed to have behaved inappropriately by objecting.[52] Yet it is clearly possible for a joke to be considered inappropriate or offensive. As Douglas acknowledges, the problem with such unsuccessful attempts at joking is sometimes the sanctity or instability of the norm that is challenged:

> [T]here are jokes which can be perceived clearly enough by all present but which are rejected at once[...]Social requirements may judge a joke to be in bad taste, risky, too near the bone, improper or irrelevant. Such controls are exerted either on behalf of the hierarchy as such, or on behalf of values which are judged too precious and too precarious to be exposed to challenge.[53]

Morreall emphasises that context and situation are important in determining whether a joke is acceptable. For example, there are occasions when the practical disengagement necessary to enjoy jokes should not be applied: even jokers 'should not laugh at someone's problem when compassion is called for,' or, 'promote lack of concern

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[51] M. Billig, 'Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan', *Discourse and Society*, 12 (2001), 267-289, (p.270).
[52] D. Howitt and K. Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', in *Beyond a Joke* (see Lockyer and Pickering, above), pp.45-62 (pp.46-47).
[53] Douglas, 'Jokes', p.152.

with something about which people should be concerned.'[54] Yet because joking is so complex, and its interpretation affected by so wide a range of contextual factors, it is impossible to discern a hard-and-fast set of rules which may dictate what is, and what is not, acceptable joking behaviour. It is in this ambiguity that the danger lies.

This is exemplified in the debate surrounding racist humour. Kevin Bloody Wilson has often been accused of using racist material. Performing his 2009 *Dilligaf Café* show in Peterborough, he is quick to answer such accusations.[55] His set begins with a film montage of clips, pictures and captions which celebrates Wilson's continued popularity over the past twenty-five years, flourishing despite the efforts of the mainstream media to censor him. A slide bearing the legend 'Friends and Fans around the World' appears, introducing a section of the film in which we see Wilson photographed with 'friends and fans' from various racial groups: a balance which feels distinctly strategic. Early in the set, Wilson indignantly bemoans the fact that he has been accused of racism, saying, 'If you're likely to be offended - if you're an African, black, white, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and you're a bit thin-skinned about it - leave now!' Wilson points towards the door, and his demand is met with laughter, cheering and applause from his intimidatingly supportive audience.

Wilson explains that the show's title - *Dilligaf* – is based on the military acronym meaning 'Do I Look Like I Give A Fuck'. He then sings a song, also entitled *Dilligaf*, which sums up the show's ethos, and establishes Wilson as an anti-PC performer. The final chorus goes:

> Do I look like I give a fuck? Dilligaf.
> Am I politically correct enough? Dilligaf.
> Just another way of saying
> That I couldn't give a rodents rectum mate
> Do I look like I give a fuck? Dilligaf![56]

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[54] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', pp.71-2.
[55] Kevin Bloody Wilson, *Dilligaf Café 2009*, The Sovereign Hall, The Cresset, Peterborough, 8 November 2009, 7:30pm.
[56] Performed by Kevin Bloody Wilson, *Dilligaf Café 2009*; lyrics transcribed from recording available at 'Kevin Bloody Wilson', *myspace*, <http://www.myspace.com/kevinbloodywilson>, [accessed 15 September 2010].

Wilson demands that those who are not willing to play along leave his gig, and dismisses complaints about the offensive nature of his material with the word 'dilligaf'. Many of Wilson's audience already know the *Dilligaf* song, and are able to shout out 'dilligaf' along with him, sharing in that dismissive response. These introductory gestures are an assertion of how the show is to be interpreted. Wilson and his audience are there to joke; people who cannot engage with that joking on its own terms are spoil-sports and are not welcome. This reinforces Howitt and Owusu-Bempah's point that:

> Jokers are not held responsible for the joke's content[...]'It was only a joke' is held to be an appropriate apology or excuse when a listener protests in some way that the limits of this licence have been breached. Failure to accept this 'apology' results in the butt of the joke being seen as unreasonable.[57]

Anyone who chooses to take Wilson's joking seriously is blamed for failure to accept the terms of comic licence, and it is they who are considered to be at fault.

Despite the clear signification that Wilson's act is all in jest, much of his material presents genuinely aggressive content. Wilson is a white Australian, but identifies himself with 'British' culture (by which he implies 'lad' culture) by highlighting cultural similarities between Britain and Australia. He also notes that he spends a lot of time in Britain, and enjoys doing so. He then makes the following joke about Muslims:

> I just don't get why they come here. They don't like our culture, they don't let us shag their women, and they don't drink. What's the point of living in Britain if you don't even drink?[58]

It is not technically accurate to describe a joke that victimises Muslims as racist: the joke theoretically attacks its victim on the ground of religious belief and not of race. From Wilson's statement, 'I just don't get why they come here', it is clear that the term 'Muslim' is used to imply difference and 'otherness' of nationality, ethnicity and culture as well as religious belief. His statement does not acknowledge that there are many Muslims who are British by birth, citizenship and culture; he treats it instead as a category implying racial difference. It is Wilson's

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[57] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', p.47.
[58] Kevin Bloody Wilson, *Dilligaf Café 2009*.

interpretation of the term 'Muslim' that is therefore used for the purposes of this discussion, and the above is consequently treated as a racist joke.

There is some incongruity present in the juxtaposition of Muslim and 'lad' cultures, and a cosy statement of shared culture in the implication that British culture boils down to 'shagging their women' and, particularly, drinking. Above all, this statement gives its audience the pleasure of identifying what they share and contrasting this unity to the 'otherness' of the outsider:

> [L]aughter produces, simultaneously, a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders. Heartily laughing together at the same thing forms an immediate bond[...]and simultaneously draws a line. If you cannot laugh with the others, you feel an outsider'[59]

Wilson's joke implies that promiscuity and, particularly, consumption of alcohol are defining features of British culture. While this is arguably true of the culture that Wilson is addressing – or at least of the way in which his audience would like that culture to be interpreted, at that moment in time – cognitive disengagement is needed. Many non-Muslim British people would be excluded from 'British culture' by such a definition. While terrorism has given a high profile to a minority of Muslims who object to western culture, it is inaccurate to apply this attitude as widely as Wilson's statement implies. A dissenter may also point out that many Muslims are born and raised in Britain, so do not actively choose to 'come here'. Such factual niceties are not wanted: they ruin the joke. Similarly, it would be deemed inappropriate to deprive the audience of their practical disengagement by highlighting the offence that this statement could cause to those whom it is designed to exclude and oppose.

Wilson follows this gag with some jokes about blowing Muslims up, both in revenge and as a measure to prevent terrorist attack. He also sings a song about a taxi driver named Mohammad Achma-lick-my-arse. As Wilson has already placed all of the responsibility for offensiveness onto the 'thin skin' of those who are offended, it is clear that the participation of both Wilson and his audience in these exchanges is

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[59] K. Lorenz, *On Aggression* (London: Methuen, 1967), p.253.

intended to be excused by comic licence. Indeed, Wilson's suggestion that those who are likely to be offended should simply leave the gig is intended to emphasise that his material is harmless: if those who are offended simply remove themselves, the performance cannot affect them.

Michael Phillips argues that participation in an event like Wilson's gig will necessarily constitute racist behaviour. Even those who would never participate in prejudice against Muslims outside of the safe space provided by comic licence are committing a racist act because it is their actions, rather than their intentions, which define racism:

> Consider the German soldier who volunteers to march Jewish victims to the gas ovens *out of simple patriotism*, or the Klansman who ties nooses at lynchings for *business reasons*. Each may (in principle) act with heart and mind uncorrupted by racist beliefs or feelings (though obviously this is unlikely). Does this mean that they have not acted in a racist manner? Suppose that all the German soldiers at Dachau acted out of patriotism and all the Klansmen at the lynching were there for business reasons. Would this mean that none of those who participated in such events were guilty of racist acts?[60]

Phillips believes that defining racist behaviour by result rather than by intention is the more socially helpful interpretation:

> [T]he point of the moral category 'racist', to begin with, is to allow us to identify and to condemn certain pervasive forms of mistreatment (both for the sake of the victim and for the sake of justice). Accordingly, we ought to adopt that use of 'racist' that best serves this end.[61]

Wilson's implied claim that participation in these racist acts has no effect outside of the gig is spurious. As a form in which to transmit ideas, jokes have the advantage of being eminently repeatable, and thus able to spread ideas to a much wider audience: an effect that is intensified by Wilson's use of catchy and memorable comic songs. Not only does the joke package the idea in an entertaining form which rewards both teller and hearer with the benefits of humour, it also allows sentiments and stereotypes to be re-introduced in a variety of packages so that it does not become onerous. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah state:

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[60] M. Philips, 'Racist Acts and Racist Humor', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 14 (1984), pp.75-96 (p.81). [Philips' italics].
[61] *Ibid*, p.80.

> [I]t would be conversationally problematic to introduce the ideas underlying racist jokes so repeatedly in normal conversation. For example, the idea that the Irish are stupid and deposit their wages in pubs is a theme of virtually all jokes about Irish people. Conversationally though, without Irish jokes, this idea could not be introduced into conversation so repeatedly[...]It is not simply that jokes give the teller a degree of license to express such views but, provided that the teller has a repertoire of such jokes, it allows prolonged repetition of basic themes which would tax conversation otherwise.[62]

As the joke is transmitted, each new person who laughs validates the sentiment expressed.[63] The joke may be shared under the guise that it is 'only a joke', but according to Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, it is far more significant:

> Jokes, in general, do not begin and end with individuals, they are transmitted socially, changed and embellished[...]Jokes are communicative acts which play a significant role in social exchanges – a medium through which society disseminates and generationally transmits its dominant attitudes towards outgroups. Racist jokes, therefore, act as propaganda in support of a racist ideology.[64]

According to Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, jokes do not only transmit existing stereotypes, but also teach new ones. Philips claims that a joke will be incomprehensible to a person who does not have a pre-existing knowledge of the stereotype upon which it plays.[65] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah demonstrate that the opposite is true: the hearer can spot the exchange as a joke and discern that the reference point needed to interpret it is a stereotype.[66] The hearer then calculates what the stereotype is and recognises that they were expected to have a pre-existing knowledge of it. If they are surrounded by an audience who are laughing, they can discern that the validity of the stereotype is acknowledged by their peers. The joke thus succeeds in transmitting racist attitudes, keeping stereotypes alive by teaching them to the uninitiated and to new generations.

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[62] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', pp.56-57.
[63] R. de Sousa, quoted in Billig, 'Humour and Hatred', p.277.
[64] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', p.49.
[65] Philips, 'Racist Acts and Racist Humor', p.92.
[66] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', p.48.

In his influential analysis of *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon W. Allport deconstructs the process by which prejudice may come to result in the most extreme of discriminatory acts such as lynchings, pogroms and massacres. He states that 'any negative attitude tends to express itself in action. Few people keep their antipathies entirely to themselves.'[67] Allport identifies a five-point ladder of discriminatory behaviours. The first point is *antilocution*, simply talking about prejudices. The scale then escalates through *avoidance* of the 'disliked group', *discrimination* such as exclusion from certain rights and opportunities or segregation, then on to acts of violence: *physical attack* and, finally, *extermination*. The earlier stages are harmful in themselves because they are discriminatory behaviours; they also create the possibility of action progressing to its more dangerous stages:

> While many people would never move from antilocution to avoidance; or from avoidance to active discrimination, or higher on the scale, still it is true that activity on one level makes transition to a more intense level easier.[68]

Wilson's audience may be unlikely to indulge in actual violence. However, Wilson's gig is certainly guilty of antilocution, and the demand that anyone who is likely to be offended leave the theatre, coupled with the apparent absence of any representatives of the persecuted minorities at his gig, could suggest that this event has already made the transition to avoidance and discrimination. There is no explicit policy excluding minority groups, but their exclusion from this event is nonetheless a fact. In this context activity is unlikely to progress on to actual violence. However, it is only the presence of activity in these less extreme stages, Allport claims, which has made actual violence possible in those contexts in which it has historically occurred.

The fact that Wilson feels the need to rid himself of accusations of racism, and has the enthusiastic support of his audience for doing so, suggests that Wilson, and at least a sizeable proportion of his audience, do not consider themselves racist and do not want to be considered racist by others. If, therefore, they are drawn in to genuine racism, we must assume that this is the result of manipulation which allows the

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[67] Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, p.14.
[68] *Ibid*, p.15.

audience to believe – or at least claim to believe – that their actions are not racist. Just as Jack Dee's joke about ritual abuse manipulates the audience into condoning an attitude which they might disclaim in calmer moments, Kevin Bloody Wilson's material manipulates the audience into committing racist acts and perpetuating racist attitudes through the allowance of comic licence.

Comedians and audiences understand that stand-up can be an interaction in which the audience learns from the world-view presented. Within the first ten minutes of his performance of *From Caliban to the Taliban* in Aberdeen, Robert Newman declares that his task for the evening is to tell the story of American (and, as it transpires, general Western) history from a less honourable perspective than that which he says is being disseminated by the propagandist Hollywood machine. He says:

> **Now of course I know, yes, these Hollywood films and documentaries made by the Academy of Arts will reach millions - my little show, 300 of yeh,** [small laugh] **right up on the north-west bit of Europe** [laugh] **on a Thursday night, but I'm hopeful** [laugh][...]**because I believe that there's a special property about us being all in the same actual physical space together which means that I can utterly brainwash you** [laugh][69]

Although it is framed as a joke, this is a statement of intent from Newman. While 'brainwash' is an exaggeration, he believes that he can use his relationship with the audience to educate and persuade them. He states that he is actively seeking to achieve this. The implication is that he believes that the relationship that exists between stand-up comedian and audience has more persuasive power than that which exists through other mediums, in this case film-making. The audience's laugh suggests that they recognise the idea that live interaction can be especially influential.

In stand-up comedy, there is a dangerous merging of two contradictory interpretative forces. On the one hand, comedy is about laughs rather than accuracy, and it is acceptable (within limits) to abandon ethics and ideology where necessary. On the other, joking

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[69] Robert Newman, *From Caliban to the Taliban: 500 Years of Humanitarian Intervention.* www.robnewman.com. 2003. CD.

provides us with social criticism, and successful stand-up allows an individual a platform from which to have his messages heard and understood. Furthermore, audiences have incentives to comply with the ideas presented by a comedian; many theorists view laughter as an effective reward for audience co-operation. Schopenhauer describes laughter as 'a pleasant condition' to which 'we give ourselves up gladly.'[70] Freud states that laughter can be used as a 'bribe', offering its 'yield of pleasure' as a reward for 'taking sides without any very close investigation.'[71] There are also punishments for those who fail to go along with the comedian's ideas. Philips suggests that laughter can unite a group in a 'community of feeling', and further notes that the community created is so strong in its acceptance of the joke's premise that it becomes very difficult for an individual to object. Doing so would frame the individual as an 'outsider', leaving them open to isolation or mistreatment, while joining the 'community of feeling' by laughing at the joke legitimizes the premise as an attitude shared.[72] The danger is that stand-up allows the comedian's utterances to have persuasive power at the same time as removing the restraints which would ensure the quality of those comments.

[70] Schopenhauer, 'The World as Will and Idea', p.60.
[71] Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p.103.
[72] Philips, 'Racist Acts and Racist Humor', pp.90-91.

Part Two

The Tools of Manipulation

Chapter Three

Venue and Context

A good stand-up comedy performance will involve much more than just successful jokes. Like most modes of performance, stand-up comedy has its established conventions and techniques and, like most professions, its standards of good and bad practice. This part of the thesis examines some of the key conventions, techniques and practices within the current British stand-up scene, focusing on their manipulative functions. In a diverse medium in which the only unifying aim is the procurement of laughter, even the most basic of conventions amounts to the use of skill to evoke the desired audience response.

A good comedian can play any room?

The idea that 'a good comedian can play any room' is something of a proverb in stand-up culture. The exact meaning of the phrase is subject to a range of interpretations. Dan Atkinson uses it in reference to the comedian's ability to adjust their performance to fit the unique combination of circumstances posed by each gig: 'a good comedian should be able to play any room, because you should approach each gig on its own merit and play it accordingly.'[1] Matthew Crosby interprets it as a call for comedians to be flexible enough to play to any audience, and refutes this idea:

> No, I do not think that is true[...]That's a bit like saying, 'oh a good musician should be able to have everyone like their music'[...]There is such a thing as taste, and there is such a thing as opinion, and people seem to forget that in comedy[...]An example that's sort of been used by many different people, that's comparing it to music, is you would never go to a night called 'Music Night'[...]they would want to go, 'well what kind of music are you playing? Is it gonna be country and western? Is it gonna be, like, speed core? I wanna be listening to a music I enjoy.' Whereas, if someone goes, 'oh there's a comedy night happening,' you would go without sort of going, 'well what kind of comedy is it going to be?'[2]

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[1] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[2] Matthew Crosby, Interview, The Duke of Cumberland, Whitstable, 31 October 2008.

Dave Bailey, a comedian and promoter based in Chatham, interprets the phrase more literally. To him, the 'room' is quite literally the space in which the performance takes place:

> Many comics will say, 'a good comedian can play any room.' I understand this, but slightly disagree[...]The venue will always have some sort of distraction/problem going on, but it's learning how to perform and be funny whilst [these distractions]/problems are going on that makes you a better comic.[3]

The term 'room', therefore, means more than just the physical space in which the performance takes place; it is a combination of factors as diverse as the nature of the space, the way that space is set up, the character of the audience and more. To analyse these elements in isolation is difficult as, from a comedian's perspective, they are all interlinked and interdependent; a collection of factors which merge together as the context in which the material develops into performance.

The idea that 'a good comedian can play any room' puts an arduous requirement on the comedian to develop the skills to play successfully in a diverse range of contexts. The attitude that a good comedian should be able to face any live challenge can be helpful, in that it encourages comedians to diversify and develop a range which will make them more adaptable as performers and more marketable on the circuit; this is certainly the implication of Atkinson's interpretation. The responsibility that this places upon the comedian can, however, be abused. Josie Long recalls an unworkable experience:

> There are a lot of student comedy nights that are run by various promotional companies and they tend to be horrendously badly organised. Like, you know, not a proper stage, not a proper sound system[...]not a compère, kind of, people not knowing what's going on, not knowing, sort of, how it's supposed to be run and things like that – that says a lot. I had a really bad experience, on tour, with the Glee Club in Birmingham where I was booked to play a studio. This was for my first ever show[...]and it held like a hundred people, which was fine for my show, perfect. And we sold it out, and it was gonna be such a lovely night and then I got there and they were like, 'yeah we've moved you to a massive room that seats 500 people,' and I was like, 'why?', and they were like, 'we thought we could sell twenty extra tickets.' So, like, for the sake of them selling 110 tickets as opposed to ninety-five tickets, I had to do[...]an awful show. And basically I'd signed the

[3] Dave Bailey, Interview, by email, 16 August 2008.

> contract saying that I was in the studio and they were just like, 'well you'll just have to work harder, won't you?'. I was just like, 'No. You've ruined my show, and there's nothing I can do to help it.'[...]I'd never play there again.[4]

The nature and set-up of a venue can have a profound impact upon the success of the stand-up event. There are plenty of horror stories which mirror Long's complaints of poor amplification, a lack of discernible stage and general disorganisation; several of the comedians interviewed for this thesis spoke of their worst gigs with a still-tangible sense of frustration and resentment towards the promoters who had set them up for a fall. The misconception that Long could shoulder the responsibility for the difficult position that she had been placed in merely by 'working harder' is indicative of the insensitivity to the comedian's needs which is evident at some badly-run comedy nights. Such an attitude ignores the contribution of context to the overall manipulation of experience which ensures a healthy audience response. In a sense, therefore, the idea that a good comedian should be able to play any room approaches the issue from the wrong angle. This chapter attempts to pose two more helpful questions: how important are the venue and context to the success of a stand-up performance, and how can these factors be manipulated in order to produce the best possible live interaction?

Stand-up takes place in a variety of contexts, from small, struggling nights above pubs to the O2 Arena. This chapter focuses on live stand-up encounters in small-to-medium sized gigs, up to a maximum of 500 seats. These smaller gigs are treated as a suitable case study because they are both the starting point from which the larger shows grow and the most common. More importantly, it is here that we see the tricks of the trade in their rawest form; arenas tend to be dominated by big screens and a distance between performer and audience which changes the dynamic of interaction. As Mintz states:

> Perhaps the best, if not the only, place to witness standup comedy as true social and cultural mediation is in live performance, preferably at one of the small comedy clubs or

[4] Josie Long, Interview, by telephone, 27 October 2008.

intimate night-club rooms where interaction between the comedian and audience is more prominent.[5]

Context is part of the show

Location and setting are particularly significant to a stand-up comedy performance; indeed, they are an integral part of the act. One of the defining features of stand-up comedy is that it openly references the performance situation.[6] Among the more blatant techniques is actual discussion of the surroundings. For example, when performing in Canterbury's Gulbenkian Theatre, Mark Watson begins his show by commenting on the limited aesthetic value of the plain, black, semi-thrust stage, joking that it is difficult to make a grand entrance onto 'a slab'. His comments receive a healthy laugh.[7] At the Canton Arts Centre in Cardiff, Stewart Lee performs a routine on the topic of blasphemy, largely as a reaction to a hate campaign launched against him after he co-wrote and directed the controversial musical *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.[8] After drawing a comparison between his own persecution by the 'religious establishment' and the persecution of Jesus, Lee states that he is 'not claiming to be Jesus', and jokes:

> **But if I was him (.) this is the kind of place I would come and speak isn't it?** [laugh]**...Yeah. Not in the vain, arrogant Millennium Centre** [laugh]**...I would come (.) here, to this humble place...**[laugh] **And I would speak to people like you, to drunks and whores** [big laugh] **(.) I would come here...I would come here...**[laugh continues] **I would come here...in Canton** [laugh]**...to this simple, humble place,** [small laugh]**...with adequate but ultimately limited wheelchair access** [big laugh].[9]

Here Lee references some characteristics of the venue itself, such as the 'adequate but ultimately limited wheelchair access', and the wider context of Cardiff, referring to the Millennium Centre as a more prestigious venue. The mere mention of the suburb of Canton, delivered

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[5] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.78.
[6] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.19.
[7] Mark Watson, *Work in Progress*, Gulbenkian Theatre Café-Bar, Canterbury, 25 July 2008, 9pm.
[8] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian*.
[9] *Ibid.*

with an emphasis on both syllables which projects a subtle distain for the area, receives a laugh. The routine demonstrates shared recognition of the significance of context.

A similar effect may be achieved by direct reference to the psychological context of the performance, referencing that day's big national news story or a local event which an audience at that particular time and location might be especially aware of. Richard Herring feels that these more general factors play a significant role in determining audience mood, often having a greater effect than the immediate context:

> [W]hen you're in Edinburgh, and you're in the same room for twenty-five days in a row, it'll be different every night but what's quite interesting, often, is that everyone in every single venue[...]in Edinburgh will have had a similar kind of night. So[...]often it's like something that's happened in the news, or the weather, or the time of the week or whatever, but the audience will be just in that kind of mood. So the audience will be in a quiet mood because they've been rained on, or whatever.[10]

The tendency for group cognisance is strong, and referencing any shared awareness can have a powerful effect. Immediate events may be a similar source of shared reference points which translate into powerful gags. As Tony Allen states:

> There are gift moments in stand-up comedy when the audience have something on their collective mind and all that is required to get them laughing is to acknowledge it. Do it with attitude, explore some of the detail and they are yours for as long as you want them. Replying to a heckler, commenting on a dropped drinks tray, the state of the venue, the price of the beer, the weather, the big news story, the death of a celeb, the local taboo revealed. All are such gifts[...]When an audience is addressed directly about something shared but unexpressed, stand-up comedy can get very interesting, dangerous even, and depending on the accuracy of the comment, and the potency of the subject, these occasions can turn shamanic.[11]

The increased significance of the venue and context in which a stand-up performance takes place may be demonstrated by comparison with those modes of performance which employ a 'fourth wall'. The purpose of the fourth wall is essentially to allow a separate fictional world to be

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[10] Richard Herring, Interview.
[11] T. Allen, *Attitude*, p.31.

created for the audience to observe. As the Philosopher observes in Brecht's *Messingkauf Dialogues*:

> [T]hen the audience is tacitly assuming that it's not in a theatre at all, since nobody seems to take any notice of it. It has an illusion of sitting in front of a keyhole.[12]

Ideally, the fourth wall removes audiences from the reality of the performance space and transports them to the 'keyhole' of an illusionary world. This being the case, the venue has little role or significance beyond being a functional space in which this process can occur. It is, of course, vital that the venue performs this role effectively, and to ensure that the performance space achieves this efficacy may involve a complex and carefully-judged interplay of factors including good design, good architecture and much besides.[13] This is, however, different to the use of the venue as an intrusive presence in stand-up comedy.

It could be argued that stand-up is prone to this kind of imaginative transportation. In his show *The Impotent Fury of the Underprivileged,* Daniel Kitson's expert storytelling conjures up a vivid scene set late at night on a quiet London street, with Kitson tailing a terrified and demonstrably ill elderly lady in order to make sure that she is safe until help arrives. The sense of atmosphere and evocation of place is vivid and, in this sense, Kitson produces an effective illusion of another reality. However, Kitson's performance is essentially rooted in the concrete reality of his present situation, with Kitson slipping easily into, and out of, his vividly-painted scene. Kitson explains that the elderly lady eventually made her way past a fast food restaurant, outside which was a group of teenage boys on their way to pick up some fried chicken. At first, Kitson worries that the boys are a threat to the lady. Gradually he realises that they, too, are worried about her, and in fact see Kitson as the potential threat. This is an important point in Kitson's show; he has previously admitted that he instinctively assumes all hoodie-wearing teenage boys to be threatening yobs, and their compassionate behaviour is a moment of touching revelation. Despite the strength of the

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[12] B. Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (London: Methuen, 1965), p.51.
[13] W.F. Condee, *Theatrical Space: A Guide for Directors and Designers* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

atmosphere conjured here, Kitson slips easily back into a frank conversational style which references the performance situation. Facing directly forward and raising his head to look at the audience, Kitson hardens his voice into a matter-of-fact tone and says, 'Now, while two of the boys were obviously very worried about the lady and wanted to help her, one of the boys wanted chicken [laugh].'[14]

In delivering this line, Kitson changes the register in which he is telling his story. He has involved his audience in an illusionary world, but in cynically relating the more selfish concerns of this one boy, he brings the audience back to the direct realisation of their present reality. This requires the audience to look at the scene through the cold lens of practical disengagement; failure to do so would surely lead them to feel anger or concern, rather than amusement, at the boy's callous behaviour.[15] To see the boy's attitude as incongruous, rather than concerning, requires detachment. Whatever fictional world Kitson conjures up must always be read directly through the knowledge of the current performance situation. The audience are at a stand-up gig, and Kitson is telling them a story with a comic end; there is no need for concern.

The '"Now" agenda', as Allen calls it, weaves the context of the performance into the material itself.[16] On a more subtle level, the conversational mode in which the performer delivers his material creates a constant reference to the audience and thus continuously highlights the nature of the interaction that is taking place. The context of the interaction – including the space, 'distractions', geographical location, current events and the very fact that it is a comedy performance – is therefore an important component of the audience's interpretation.

The practicalities of space: energy flow and laughter combustion

The nature and quality of a venue is determined not only by the inherent qualities of the space, but also by the actions that a good promoter or assertive comedian can take to improve it. Only a small

[14] Daniel Kitson, *The Impotent Fury of the Underprivileged*, Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 31 May 2008, 7:45pm.
[15] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70.
[16] T. Allen, *Attitude*, p.28.

proportion of stand-up comedy is performed in purpose-built comedy clubs. Very often, performers and promoters have to select the best space available and improvise, finding the best way to exploit the venue's strong points and conceal its weaknesses. Some venues can have characteristics which make performance inherently difficult, as Dave Bailey outlines:

> I discounted many venues before even trying. I knew a high street pub would be impossible, as there are just too many distractions[...]A high street pub would be too noisy, and with big screen TVs, pool tables, fruit machines – the comic would be fighting a losing battle.[17]

Difficult spaces can, however, often be improved. As Oliver Double states:

> Sometimes this would mean taking obvious steps, like turning off televisions, jukeboxes or one-armed bandits while the show was on. Other times, it would mean rearranging the space, finding the best place for the stage to be set up, adjusting the lighting and rearranging the seating. Usually, this turned an undoable gig into an acceptable one, an acceptable gig into a joy.[18]

Even the broader structure of the space can be manipulated to improve the performer's chances. Matthew Crosby explains that audiences like to feel that they have come to a popular gig; encouraging the appearance of commercial success increases the audience's confidence in the show.[19] He recalls performing with sketch troupe Pappy's Fun Club at the Tobacco Factory in Bristol:

> They had 250 seats, and we were going 'oh, this is fantastic, it's a sell-out show,' and they said, 'well, we could have another 150, and we'd move the stage back and we bring in chairs at the side.' But it felt great, you know[...]I don't think anyone [was disconcerted by it][...]you know, 'cause, like, every seat was full. But Richard Herring was coming in the next night and he was going to play to 350 as opposed to 250[...]So a room you can slightly customise, or a room you can[...]fill up in[...]sections[...]The [Comedy] Store is like that as well.[20]

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[17] Dave Bailey, Interview.
[18] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.111.
[19] Iain Mackintosh also notes that it is beneficial for a show to appear commercially successful; I. Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience*, (London: Routledge, 1993), p.128.
[20] Matthew Crosby, Interview.

Despite the expectation that promoters and comedians will do their best to 'customise' the space that they have, stand-up remains an adaptable medium which can work with unexpected nuisances in performance. As Josie Long states, 'if something's on your mind, it's so hard to keep it in[...]what's great about stand-up is you can deal with things in the moment.'[21] Interruptions are often a curse, but they can also be a blessing. Speaking before a show at the Horsebridge Arts and Community Centre, Matthew Crosby explains that it is best to avoid having doors by the stage, or at least to take them out of operation for the duration of the performance. In the Horsebridge, however, this is not possible, as the only entrance door is at the side of the stage:

> There's an incredible thing - and it will happen, I guarantee it will happen tonight if there are any latecomers – [...]if you've got a performer on stage and the door opens and someone walks in, it's very, very hard for an audience – you can see the eyes drifting![...]One time[...]and it was quite exciting, we had a fireman burst in and go, 'Oh. I must be in the wrong place', which was brilliant[...]and a gift for the night because we were all making jokes about it[...]But most of the time[...]if someone walks in, you just see the eyes of the whole room drifting[...]I mean as a compère it doesn't matter, I'll just drop what I'm doing and talk to those people[...]but if you're actually trying to craft something bigger than, you know, banter or crowd work then it can be really, really tricky.[22]

Whether the space is purpose-built to be particularly conducive to stand-up, or faces the performer with one problem after another, the exploitation of the space to increase the efficacy of the performance is usually an integral part of the show's delivery. At the same club at the Horsebridge, Crosby took measures to manipulate audience behaviour. For example:

> We did this thing of moving the tables to the front. Now, a few people don't like this[...]especially because these are big tables[...]so it means that the first person is still quite far away from the act[...]but at the same time we had a problem with people not wanting to sit in the front. So we move the tables to the front, people automatically want tables 'cause they wanna put their drinks down, so you make the front seating much more appealing.[23]

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[21] Josie Long, Interview.
[22] Matthew Crosby, Interview.
[23] Matthew Crosby, Interview.

When asked what it is that makes a good space for stand-up comedy, the factors cited by comedians and promoters usually fall in to one of two categories. The first consists of the things that reduce challenges to the authority of the performer. As noted above, distractions such as fruit machines and awkwardly-placed doors can provide competition for the audience's attention, and are generally neutralised as far as possible to preserve the performer's authority. Other measures in this category include the use of lighting and arrangement of seating. As Mark Simmons states, 'the performer needs to look like the star of the show'; this is not easily achieved if the seating or lighting fails to direct attention exclusively towards the stage.[24] Dan Atkinson also feels that measures can be taken to enhance the perceived status and authority of the comedy gig itself:

> The conditions need to be right, as for any gig or entertainment where you've paid to enjoy something[...]the more polished it is, the better. People feel they're being treated to an experience. So if you have, y'know, lights down at the beginning, search lights, intro music, announcements and stuff, it makes it really exciting. And before you've even seen anything you're well-disposed because you've been primed to believe that what you're about to see is good.[25]

The second category consists of measures which enhance the flow of energy through the room. When it comes to traditional theatre architecture, practitioners and theoreticians generally agree that there is such a thing as a good and a bad space, that everybody can tell one from the other, and that it is primarily instinct through which we recognise and create such spaces. Speaking at a conference in a space which he describes as a 'glamorous, ultra-modern hall,' Peter Brook states that the room puts him 'ill at ease'.[26] He concludes:

> There are no strict rules to tell us whether a space is good or bad. In fact, all this relates to a kind of rigorous and precise science which we can only develop by continuous experiment and empiricism based on fact.[27]

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[24] Mark Simmons, Interview.
[25] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[26] P. Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty years of theatrical exploration 1946-1987* (London: Methuen, 1988) p.147.
[27] Brook, *The Shifting Point*, p.151.

The key to a good space is its ability to promote a high level and quality of interaction between performer and audience. As Iain Mackintosh states:

> The chief purpose of theatre architecture is to provide a channel for energy. Although this energy flows chiefly from performer to audience the performer is rendered impotent unless he or she receives in return a charge from the audience.[28]

Mackintosh argues that the arrangement of some spaces is conducive to this process while others destroy the possibility of such communion between performer and audience. This is echoed by Brook, again criticising the conference hall:

> I think we can all see right away that this is a difficult space. This is because what matters is for us to have a living contact with one another. If this contact isn't there, then everything we can possibly say about the theatre in theory just falls to pieces[...]looking around me in this room, I get the impression that everyone is keeping his distance[...]if at this moment I want to say something in the hope of getting an immediate reaction out of you, I'll have to speak very loudly and try to send a charge of energy through the person nearest to me, and so on, all the way to the back of the room. Even if I were to succeed, your reaction would be very slow, retarded by the gaps between people imposed by the architects.[29]

In stand-up, the aim is for this flow of energy to combust into the specific response of laughter. As Double states:

> Funny lines, gestures and mimes flow from the comedian to the audience, and laughter, applause and heckles flow back. The audience is energised and bonded into a group by the comedy and the performer is energised by the audience's responses. Comics must be able to generate this energy in the audience, or there will be nothing to fuel their performance.[30]

To produce laughter, an audience needs not only energy but also confidence. To laugh is pleasant, but can also be risky; to be caught laughing heartily when other audience members are silent could be embarrassing. It is therefore important that, as Brook intimates, the

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[28] Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience*, p.172.
[29] Brook, *The Shifting Point*, p.147.
[30] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.107.

energy that causes laughter flows freely and easily between people. As Bergson states:

> You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo[...]Our laughter is always the laughter of a group[...]However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers[...]How often it has been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience![31]

When asked what makes a good space for stand-up, the majority of comedians interviewed for this thesis suggested features which pack the audience in tightly, instinctively adhering to Brook's idea that the energy can be lost in empty space. Related to these factors is the need for acoustics to amplify the laughter, rather than letting it dissipate, so that the laughs that have already come can better fuel those being created. As Dan Atkinson explains:

> Low ceilings, hard surfaces, rowed seating - if you're having tables, very, very small tables - very dark, lights only facing the stage. Low stage, so that people feel close to the comic and they know that it's not a theatre performance and that there's going to be interaction. And, basically, what all that does - what you're aiming for - is that you have the audience as one homogenised group. If you have large tables or people are in groups and they're sitting in their groups you will never have the whole room laughing together and reinforcing each other's good time. You'll just have people among themselves, looking at their mates, going 'ah, I quite enjoyed that one, shall I go and get another drink?' and stuff. You want them all to forget that they are in a group or single, you want them all to be believing they're one lump, enjoying it all together. Which is quite a nice thing, when that does happen.[32]

When asked about the tendency to reduce empty space in a room, Atkinson replies:

> Yeah, it's crucial. That's a technicality about the laughs. Because if you've got high ceilings or a half-full room the laughs get lost a bit, dissipate. It's like doing comedy in a tent's usually shit because the fabric just lets the laugh out. So you want nowhere for the laugh to go and for it to just sort of bounce around the room.

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[31] Bergson, *Laughter*, p.11.
[32] Dan Atkinson, Interview.

All of the above has one clear drawback: comfort. It is obvious that a tightly packed space is more likely to create physical discomfort than a sparsely populated one. Indeed a successful night's stand-up with a large audience may be associated in the audience's mind with many uncomfortable annoyances: having to stand owing to lack of seats, having to perch on a table or bench, not being able to see the performer easily, having to push through a crowd to get to the bar. Yet both Mackintosh and Brook welcome these implications. As Brook states, 'Nothing is so unimportant as comfort; comfort in fact often devitalizes the experience.'[33] A comfortable audience is simply a less efficient conductor of energy. Mackintosh concurs: 'a less densely packed house seated in ever greater comfort becomes ever more passive, ever more comatose.'[34] Practical experience in stand-up comedy supports this idea. Matthew Crosby explains that the performance space at the Horsebridge is 'really relaxing,' and 'that can often be to the detriment of a room'.[35] He gives the following example:

> I've been to gigs where the front row's sofas[...]and they're using the exact same logic that I used with the tables up the front, they go, 'well obviously people are gonna want to sit on a sofa rather than a hard chair.' But if you're on a sofa[...]you're not upright, ready to laugh[...]You could become very passive and treat it like you're just watching telly.[36]

Whether a space is purpose built for stand-up or is a room which a comedy night tries to shape into something as conducive as possible, there will be a fair amount of manipulation at work. The space is laid out to direct the audience's attention toward the performer, and to enhance excitement about the gig. Occasionally, perception of commercial success is also managed by the layout of the space. The dead space in the room is minimised and the audience are prevented from becoming comfortable enough to be sedate, so that energy may flow more easily into laughter. The fact that audiences are generally ignorant of the way that both they and the space have been arranged to encourage their responses only makes the manipulation more complete.

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[33] Brook, *The Shifting Point*, p.147.
[34] Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and Audience*, p.24.
[35] Matthew Crosby, Interview.
[36] *Ibid.*

How a space communicates

According to Alain de Botton, buildings, their décor and furnishings, communicate in a complex but clear way. Fundamentally, de Botton argues that buildings are never asked to serve purely practical purposes; we also expect buildings to contribute to mood and atmosphere:

> Of almost any building, we ask not only that it do a certain thing but also that it look a certain way, that it contribute to a given mood: of religiosity or scholarship, rusticity or modernity, commerce or domesticity. We may require it to generate a feeling of reassurance or of excitement, of harmony or of containment.[37]

Even décor and furnishing may communicate particular moods:

> Consider the struts on the backs of two chairs. Both seem to express a mood. The curved struts speak of ease and playfulness, the straight ones of seriousness and logic[...]the struts abstractly represent two different temperaments. A straight piece of wood behaves in its own medium as a stable and unimaginative person will act in his or her life, while the meanders of a curved piece correspond, however obliquely, with the casual elegance of an unruffled and dandyish soul.[38]

Not only does de Botton state that buildings are able to communicate to their users, he also implies that the vocabulary with which they do so is incredibly varied, stretching from the architecture of the building itself, to the detail on its furnishings. Logically, therefore, the design of a good space is not only a matter of influencing the behaviour of the people who occupy it, but also of allowing the building itself to communicate the appropriate mood and feeling.

In applying similar considerations to theatre architecture, Iain Mackintosh quotes the result of a study which examined the influence of décor on the responsiveness of participants. This experiment by Richard Küller attested that individuals had a higher response rate to stimuli when situated in a space full of colour and pattern than they did when

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[37] A. de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2006), p.62.
[38] *Ibid*, p.89.

situated in a dull and blandly-decorated space. Therefore, Küller was able to conclude that the arousal rate of audiences who see a show in a 'festive' space is likely to be better than that of an audience in a bland and undecorated space. Thus, Mackintosh argues, it is easier to obtain laughter from an audience in a colourful setting than a bland one.[39] De Botton's observations on the communicative power of buildings and Mackintosh's observations about pattern and colour could provide a guide for the creation of particularly stimulating performance spaces. In theory, the more friendly and colourful-looking the space in which an audience is situated - the higher the 'information rate' - the more easily the audience can be persuaded to laugh.[40]

De Botton states that the power of buildings to communicate is ultimately unreliable.[41] For this reason, the communicative power of buildings and their contents is rarely a priority for consideration, and 'it remains odd to initiate a conversation about what a building is saying':[42]

> Architecture is perplexing, too, in how inconsistent is its capacity to generate the happiness on which its claim to our attention is founded[...]Endowed with a power that is as unreliable as it often is inexpressible, architecture will always compete poorly with utilitarian demands for humanity's resources.[43]

It is understandable that unreliable factors, such as the way a space is decorated, may not be the most important items under consideration when a venue is chosen for stand-up performance. For example, both Stewart Lee and Lucy Porter have not only performed, but also recorded DVDs, in the plain black Theatre space in the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff.[44] This venue is the ultimate in low information-rate spaces, featuring plain black floor, walls, stage, curtains and furniture. However, this venue was not chosen on the basis of aesthetics but rather because the independent, low-budget DVD producer Go Faster Stripe had access to it. Lee had been unable to find any company willing to record and release his show *90s Comedian*, so Chris Evans, an

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[39] Mackintosh, *Architecture, Actor and* Audience, p.81.
[40] *ibid*, p.81.
[41] de Botton, *The Architecture of Happiness*, p.17.
[42] *ibid*, p.97.
[43] *ibid*, p.17.
[44] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian*/ Lucy Porter, *The Good Life*. Go Faster Stripe. 2008. DVD.

employee of the Chapter Arts Centre, invited Lee to perform there. The show was filmed in practical, unglamorous style by friends and turned into DVDs which were then sold over the internet.[45] The fact that the Go Faster team had easy access to the venue presumably easily superseded any consideration regarding its plain, black décor. Neither does the décor of the venue appear to cause any fundamental damage to the shows, with both Lee and Porter achieving healthy laughs from their audiences.

However, the power of architecture and furnishings to communicate moods and create atmospheres remains, even if its influence can be overruled by other factors. Much stand-up does take place in spaces with high information rates. Kevin Bloody Wilson's 2009 *Dilligaf Café* tour featured a dizzyingly busy visual set-up.[46] A large projector screen showed a series of brightly-coloured cartoons and caricatures, as well as the occasional video. Curtains hung down on either side of the projector screen with bright neon-style *Dilligaf Café* logos. The stage was lit in a variety of intense, ever-changing colours, and patters of light ran speedily over the audience. Even Wilson's two guitars were covered in bright, colourful patterns.

Purpose-built comedy venues often cohere with Mackintosh's suggestions. The Stand in Edinburgh features bright coloured walls covered with colourful writing and images of human faces. The back of the stage displays a large image of the trademark cowboy, wearing a hat with an over-sized rim and holding a gun to his own head. The seats are covered in a range of fabrics in various bright colours and garish designs. The Glasgow Stand follows a similar theme. The London Comedy Store is largely bright red in colour, and features several striking comedy store logos, including one on the back wall of the stage, and several pictures of performers in the bar area. At first sight, the Manchester Comedy Store may seem rather dull; the walls are largely plain brick, encircling a black stage with a black back wall. The only sign of bright or striking décor are the large Comedy Store logos that adorn the walls and some small sections that have been painted red. Yet

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[45] C. Evans, 'About Us', *Go Faster Stripe*, <http://www.gofasterstripe.com/cgi-bin/website.cgi?page=about>, [accessed 5 July 2010].
[46] Kevin Bloody Wilson, *Dilligaf Café 2009*.

the plain brick forms a busy pattern, and the red seats and sections of red wall ensure the presence of some, if limited, colour. Where stand-up does not have the resources to customise the space in this way, it still tends to gravitate towards spaces with high information rates. Many clubs are located in pubs, with a well-lit bar littered with beer taps and bottles, as well as patterned or heavily ornamented walls and furnishings. Whether it is due to technical knowledge, instinct or tradition, the majority of stand-up comedy tends to utilise venues with high information rates. Evidently, its creators understand that the décor and furnishing in a stand-up space carry their own influence.

Implicit Manipulation of Audience Type and Behaviour

In a series of lectures delivered in 1979, John McGrath argued that it was unrealistic to depend solely upon the material delivered within a performance to determine the nature of the audience's experience. The location of the performance, the price of the tickets, the way the event was publicised and the behaviour of the box-office staff all had their effect on the audience member. These factors were generally crucial in deciding who would come to the performance in the first place, giving a clear message to a certain section of the public that the show was for them, and to others that they were not welcome.[47] Josie Long concurs that the way the audience are treated, by the venue's staff as well as the performers, matters:

> Everyone has to feel that they're a part of it[...]Everyone has to feel like they're going to have a nice time and they're not just there to, kind of, make people money[...]I've had gigs where I've been touring and I've said to people, 'Sorry, could you ask people could they sit down the front,' or something – you say to one of the ushers – and they go, 'Josie Long has *insisted* you must sit down the front!' And you go, 'No I haven't. That's awful! That's the opposite of what I wanted.'[48]

The show's publicity can also be used as a tool to ensure that the 'right kind' of audience attends. A pervasive, though subtle, thread

[47] J. McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1996), pp. 5-7; pp.75-76.
[48] Josie Long, Interview.

running through the interviews with comedians that were conducted for this thesis is the distinction between the 'comedy-savvy' audience and the more generalised, less sophisticated audience. A comedy-savvy audience is one which is highly literate with comic forms and devices, and is therefore able to accept more complex material and spot the better-disguised ironies. Their greater level of experience also means that they are less likely to make the error, which Matthew Crosby cites above, of failing to distinguish differences in comedic style: it is this error which leads to the futile attempt to consume all comedy in the same way. The savvy audience are more likely to choose to view a style that suits them, and to engage with that style on its own terms.

Understandably, many comedians express a preference for this type of audience, feeling that such proficiency on the audience's part allows the comedian freedom to indulge in the more complex material that they – themselves highly proficient with comic devices – find more interesting.[49] Dan Atkinson relates his experience with his own comedy club:

> I ran a gig for five years[...]and there were a couple set up in opposition. Where I ran my gig it was all about the experience of the audience. It was all about making everything as funny and as fun as possible. So the brochures would be, sort of, hand-drawn, thirty-two page comedy magazines. And they could sit there and read them and laugh before it, and everything was about the fun and funny. And we ended up getting a really, really high class of audience; people who were comedy-savvy, who knew what was lazy from a comedian and would genuinely love when a comedian did something comedically interesting. On the flip side of that, there was a bar next door that put on comedy in their bar and they just put posters up and then people went and they got the meat heads. So it does make a huge difference how you sell it.[50]

Stewart Lee delivers a peculiar kind of comedy in that his aim is often to create a feeling of uncertainty among the audience as to how they should respond.[51] It takes a particularly savvy audience to appreciate such an unusual approach, and Lee has a novel way of attracting them:

> I[...]always try and put some bad quote on a poster – like 'monotonous, boring and repetitive' or something – if I can find

[49] Richard Herring, Interview.
[50] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[51] Stewart Lee, Interview.

> something like that, to just try and thin the audience out a bit. I don't have to deal with the problem.[52]

By pitching the publicity, ticket price and type of venue in a particular way, a performance could implicitly invite certain individuals while excluding others. Hence the type of audience attracted to a particular performance may be manipulated. However, while this is a strong possibility for comedians like Stewart Lee and Josie Long, who have the experience and credibility to mount a solo show, comedians lower down the ladder rarely have the luxury of selecting their audiences. While Atkinson is aware of the possibility of selecting 'good' audiences to perform for, he cites this as 'a minor possibility because you've got to earn a living.'[53] The most profitable gigs are the ones generally cited as the artistic nadir; the stag and hen dos and the notorious 'corporates'. While a good gig ensures that everything works together to support the comedy, the gig provided as a sideshow at a big party confronts the comedian with an audience who have other priorities. As Josie Long outlines:

> A lot of the big clubs, the way they do it is they set up deals with offices for parties or corporate things and they set up, kind of, deals with stags and hens, and with group bookings so[...]the atmosphere necessarily changes because of that. Because it's their party so they think it's their big day, so they're a bit like, you know, 'Woo! Talk about Karen! Talk about Karen!' They're not there thinking, 'I love this comedian, I'm glad I'm going to see this comedian.'[54]

For the majority of comedians, then, there is little leeway to either select or directly manipulate the nature of the audience to which they perform. Isy Suttie sums up the situation: 'Clubs which give out home-made cakes are the nicest to play, but sadly they pay the least!'[55]

Yet promoters and more economically powerful performers can manipulate the audience through the way that they frame their shows. Even the choice of venue itself plays a part in attracting a suitable audience and dictating their behaviour. Performing at the Gardner Arts Centre in Brighton, Mark Thomas contrasts the typical 'arts centre'

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[52] *Ibid.*
[53] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[54] Josie Long, Interview.
[55] Isy Suttie, Interview.

audience with the typical late-night Comedy Store audience. Thomas explains that, despite the Comedy Store's reputation for cutting-edge comedy, it generally attracts 'wall-to-wall pissed accountants' - by which Thomas presumably means to signify a fairly narrow range of middle-class city professionals - who demand a crude and uninspiring type of comedy. Such are the demands of Thomas' typical Friday night Comedy Store audience that, by two o'clock in the morning, he's 'just shovelling off knob gags to stay afloat' (Thomas' impersonation of audience members in bold italics):

> **What I'd do is I'd talk about, sort of like, knob gags for about nineteen minutes (.) just so I could speak about East Timor for thirty seconds.** [Small laugh]**... And that was the trade off- do you know what I mean? So I'd be up there going 'Knob gag'- and they go *'Knob gag!'*** [Small Laugh]**...'Knob gag'- *'Knob gag!'*** [Laugh]**...'East Timor!' - *'Eas' Ti'- What the fuck? I don't know what the fuck that is-*** [laugh] ***do you know what the fuck tha-', 'I dunno, I think it's by the clitoris.' 'Is it? Marvellous!'*** [Big laugh] ***'Very good'*...Like knob gag by default, really** [Small laugh] **(.) And I got so pissed off with it I thought 'No, I will not haul my comedic arse around this venue any more.'** [Small laugh]**...'I will go and perform in arts centres'** [Big laugh]**...'I will be an artiste'** [Small laugh] **(.) And it's funny** *(Thomas chuckles)* **coz you jump on stage - coz you nearly fell into the trap at the beginning (.) Classic arts centre trap. Nine times out of ten you get to an arts centre you jump on stage and go 'Hello everyone', they go *'what does he mean by that?'*** [Big laugh][56]

In impersonating his audiences, Thomas gives the 'pissed accountants' of the Comedy Store a growling, drunken, wide-boy character, which grows through an estuary accent into a brief flourish of ignorant, pretentious middle-class as they try to decide what East Timor is. Meanwhile, the arts centre audience respond in a well-articulated, contemplative tone.

Thomas' performance at the Gardner Arts Centre is likely to attract a different audience to the Comedy Store by virtue of the show's structure and publicity. *Dambusters* is Thomas' own show and is likely to attract an audience formed largely of those who already know something about his work and share his political outlook; the Comedy Store is a club

[56] Mark Thomas, *Dambusters*.

which shows a range of comedians alongside each other, and is likely to attract a more generalised audience. However, the point that Thomas makes does not relate to the show's publicity, but rather to the audience that frequents each particular venue. Thomas claims to be able to predict what the collective personality of his audience will be according to the venue in which he appears. A civilised and politically-aware audience, albeit prone to over-intellectualising and showing off, frequent the arts centres, while the patrons of the Comedy Store tend to care little for Thomas' humanitarian themes and enjoy drunkenness and crude jokes. The audience's laughter indicates that they recognise the truth behind this observation.

Conversely, the venue and timing of a show are perhaps giving a clear message to the audience about the type of behaviour expected of them; the same individual may drunkenly demand 'knob gags' in the Comedy Store, but seek to demonstrate their intellect in the more civilised atmosphere of the arts centre. Perhaps this is why the arts centre audience laughs when Thomas compares their behaviour to that of the Comedy Store audience. It is partly a laugh of recognition, acknowledging that the etiquette appropriate to each venue is different.

Thomas' contrast between the arts centre and the Comedy Store also suggests that venues are able, to some degree, to tell their audiences whether they should take the material which they are presented with seriously. Baz Kershaw notes that boundaries between the fictitious world presented by a politically-motivated play and the real world in which it hopes to have relevance are somewhat permeable.[57] His analysis echoes the relationship between stand-up material and the world upon which it comments:

> It should[...]be noted that audience members always have a *choice* as to whether or not the performance may be efficacious for them. For the ludic role of spectator permits the participant to treat the performance as of no consequence to her or his life: it's only a fiction, only a 'possible world', with no bearing on the real one.[58]

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[57] B. Kershaw, *Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.26-27.
[58] *Ibid*, pp.28-29. [Kershaw's italics].

The world presented within stand-up comedy feeds too directly upon the real world to be regarded as 'fiction', but the Comedy Store audience's ineptitude with politically-motivated material suggests that audiences retain the freedom to treat it as such, disregarding the 'possible' alternatives presented. By contrast, the arts centre frames Thomas as an intelligent orator, worthy to debate important political matters and suggest courses of action for his audience. It also asserts the truthfulness of his material in as much as the arts centre audience attends the performance in order to hear about activities that have taken place in the real world and engage with issues, aiming to retain the information. This forms the basis of Thomas' joke that the arts centre audience is likely to get carried away by the idea of seeing a political artist, and try too hard to seek serious messages in the performance. Continuing on the subject of the 'arts centre trap', Thomas remarks:

> **And I got just as fucked off there (.) Coz I'd be talking about East Timor and they'd be going *'Yes very good. East Timor marvellous, very good* (.) *I've got that on my list of socially concerned items I wish to be discussed'*** [Big laugh]**...*'Shall I laugh? Shall I fuck!'*** [Laugh]**... They wouldn't fucking crack a smile.**[59]

The Comedy Store provides no such status, but rather promises audiences an entertainer who can provide easy belly laughs. In choosing to present his show in venues such as the Gardner Arts Centre, Thomas is manipulating his audience's perception of, and reaction to, the show.

It is worth considering, then, that the nature of the venue in which a stand-up performance is placed might have its own manipulative potential. Venues have the power to evoke atmosphere and to tell audiences how to behave. The communicative power of the context and space in which comedy takes place is therefore manipulative in itself.

The playground of the drinking-place

One thing which almost all stand-up comedy venues have in common is a licence to sell alcohol. Most comedians and promoters agree that

[59] Mark Thomas, *Dambusters*.

running a successful gig without alcohol would be very difficult, if not impossible. Dave Bailey generally 'discounts' immediately any potential comedy venues that are not licensed:

> No alcohol for the audience would make things very hard for the comics[...]it's very difficult to get any kind of atmosphere going. English reserve takes over and what you get is people politely listening but not relaxed enough to really laugh.[60]

Alcohol is usually not only offered to the audience, but its consumption actively encouraged. In an example fairly typical among stand-up performances, the first half of *Eric's Tales of the Sea* concludes with Eric (a former submariner who prefers not to disclose his surname in connection with the show) saying:[61]

> I do advise you to go to the bar as it's the first rule of comedy that the more you drink during the interval the funnier the second half will be.[62]

There is a direct and obvious manipulation of audience mood and receptiveness involved in the use of licensed venues and the encouragement of alcohol consumption. As Dave Bailey notes, alcohol is not a neutral element that happens to be present at a lot of comedy nights, but rather a drug which lowers inhibitions and thus encourages responsiveness. The fact that whole audiences are persuaded to imbibe chemical stimulants as a matter of convention is really a striking manipulative coup for stand-up, especially as it has become so embedded a part of the culture as to pass audiences by, largely unnoticed.

On a more subtle level, the use of licensed venues marks the gig out as space which operates in accordance with its own special rules. According to anthropologist Kate Fox, most cultures have 'specific, designated environments for social drinking,' and all share the following characteristics:

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[60] Dave Bailey, Interview.
[61] Spoonfedcomedy, 'Comic gives first aid to audience member', (12th April 2010), *Spoonfed*, <http://www.spoonfed.co.uk/spooners/spoonfedcomedy-8202/comic-gives-first-aid-to-audience-member-2597/>, [accessed 02/07/10].
[62] Eric, *Eric's Tales of the Sea*, Horsebridge Arts and Community Centre, Whitstable, 25 June 2010, 8pm.

1. In all cultures, the drinking-place is a special environment, a separate social world with its own customs and values
2. Drinking-places tend to be socially integrative, egalitarian environments, or at least environments in which status distinctions are based on different criteria from those operating in the outside world
3. The primary function of drinking-places is the facilitation of social bonding.[63]

She also identifies a strong tradition of friendly argument within pub culture:

> Arguing is probably the most popular form of conversation in pubs, particularly among males, and pub-arguments may often appear quite heated. The majority, however, are conducted in accordance with a strict code of etiquette, based on what must be regarded as the First Commandment of pub law: 'Thou shalt not take things too seriously.'[64]

The drinking-place is a venue infused with 'challenge'; challenge to social conventions, social hierarchy and seriousness in general. Interaction between the pub's inhabitants is also based on challenge, with a high incidence of banter and friendly argument. By using licensed venues and thus adopting the sub-culture of the drinking-place, comedy nights are importing a particular etiquette and audience attitude which is conducive to challenge, and thus to joking.[65]

Auslander notes that set designers working on high-budget stand-up productions for television often create artificial bare brick walls in order to recall the humble origins of modern stand-up, because 'the bare brick wall is the central icon of comedy club decoration.'[66] Auslander's statement needs some qualification in our current context: none of the comedians interviewed for this thesis mentioned the brick wall specifically when quizzed about venues. When questioned directly about it, Mark Simmons denied any knowledge of the bare brick wall having any symbolic or iconic significance.[67] This perhaps suggests that the

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[63] K. Fox, *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (London: Hodder, 2004), pp.88-89.
[64] *Ibid*, p.102.
[65] Douglas, 'Jokes'.
[66] P. Auslander, 'Comedy about the Failure of Comedy', in *Critical Theory and Performance*, ed. by J.G. Reinelt & J.R. Roach (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp.196-207 (p.200).
[67] Mark Simmons, Interview.

status of the brick wall as comic icon is being forgotten by the current British comedy scene, holding little significance for the current generation of grass-roots performers. The 'rough and ready' nature of the form still remains, however, as Joe Wilkinson states:

> [A] basement's always good, 'cause they're dirty, and a dirty room is also good[...]Stand-up by its nature's a bit on the, you know, rough and ready side[...]I think if you do it in a wine bar it doesn't feel right but if you do it in a basement of a grotty pub it feels right.[68]

While stand-up often takes place in ornate theatres and polished arts centres, its natural home is still the 'dirty room'. Audiences understand the significance of setting, and are skilled at identifying the venue's credibility as a place to learn, argue or negotiate. The effect of a location on a performance is not merely a question of the relationship between the show and its venue, but also of the relationship between audience and venue. This is a relationship that stand-up can, and does, exploit.

The perfect manipulative space would encourage a state of attentiveness in the audience and enhance their willingness to laugh. It would attract the suitable audience for a specific gig, and encourage them to either ingest and be influenced by the themes of the performance, or regard them as disposable. When a promoter chooses a venue with a low ceiling and a high information rate in preference to a venue with a high ceiling and a low information rate, and ensures that there is alcohol on hand, the promoter is making a manipulative decision to maximise the potential of the coming audiences to fuel their own laughter.

Having chosen the venue, the most directly manipulative parts of the process begin; promoters and performers arrange their space to bring the audience close together, to make the audience appear larger and more unified, to emphasise commercial success and to prevent anyone from getting comfortable enough to become sedate. The consumption of alcohol is encouraged, and the notable points of the venue observed by comedians and turned into effective, last-minute material. All of this may involve a substantial amount of work. Yet the manipulation

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[68] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.

involved is so complete that most audience members will never notice what has occurred.

Chapter Four

Delivery I: The Illusion of Spontaneous Conversation

What audiences believe in

Most comedians' material is re-usable, and its development is a long-term process. Jokes are planned in advance and routines repeated in front of several different audiences, being edited according to audience response with the aim of making them more reliable. This is no secret. Yet the majority of comedy still adopts the trappings of spontaneous, conversational interaction.

Most stand-up performances maintain the appearance of being spontaneous. Joe Wilkinson states that there are still some audience members who are taken in by the illusion of spontaneity. Even the more 'comedy-savvy' audiences, who are aware that comedians both plan and repeat material, will opt to believe in its spontaneity, suspending disbelief for the duration of the show in order to enhance their enjoyment of the material:

> The audience has to suspend their belief as well[...]but some people just literally do [believe it's spontaneous], I've had people say to me 'do you do different stuff every night?' and you're like 'Jesus Christ! Yeah, I write all that stuff in a day!' Do you know what I mean?[...]But people do, they want to believe it, even if they want to believe it [just] for that time.[1]

Wilkinson confesses that he still buys into this process himself when watching other performers, choosing to believe in the spontaneity of material which he knows is part of a well-rehearsed repertoire.

Eddie Izzard's writing process is well documented. New material tends to be loosely planned off-stage, but it is through experimentation in front of live audiences that the material is honed to completion.[2] Once formed, this material can be repeated in roughly the same shape on subsequent nights. Thus Izzard develops a show which is planned and repeatable. He experiments with new material by embedding it in the old, so that any given show is likely to feature a small amount of real

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[1] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.

[2] B. Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy, from Vic Reeves to The Office* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), pp.108-109.

improvisation.[3] His delivery style allows him to convey complex, pre-planned ideas and well-formed material in a babbling, hesitant manner which maintains the illusion of spontaneity. It is usually impossible to be certain to what extent any given moment is improvised, planned or repeated from other performances.

In the following segment, Izzard re-tells the Judeo-Christian creation story:

> **So then God created the world and the first day he created light and air, and fish and jam and soup** [laugh]; **potatoes and haircuts and arguments and** [small laugh] **small things and rabbits and people with noses and...er...jam - more jam, perhaps** [laugh] **– and, er, and soot and flies and...tobogganing and** [small laugh]**...showers, and toasters, and grandmothers** [small laugh] **and...er...Belgium (.) and** [big laugh][4]

There is a long pause here to allow the audience's loud and hearty laugh to spread out. Izzard then produces a list of the things created on the second day. This list mirrors the structure of the first; snappy and rhythmically pleasing, but also littered with hesitations and 'ers' which suggest that Izzard is searching his brain for appropriate examples.

Izzard's list purposefully juxtaposes items with no obvious connection to one another, moving from potatoes to haircuts, and abandoning objects altogether as he moves on to the more abstract concept of 'arguments'. This creates incongruous links, and the apparent randomness of their selection enhances the feeling of spontaneity. In fact, randomness is the very criteria by which items are selected. The audience may easily discern that Izzard is purposefully, and falsely, creating the impression that he is ad-libbing. Yet it is unlikely that Izzard's audience are paying attention to such a dull fact. Instead, they are buying in to Izzard's game, pretending along with him that the material is fresh and unscripted. Hence they laugh when Izzard – apparently by accident - includes 'jam' twice. The speed with which Izzard spots his 'blunder', and the ease and fluency with which he acknowledges it, may suggest that it is not a mistake at all. His delivery style seeks to underline the uniqueness of the encounter. The audience are allowed to feel that this conversation is an event which cannot be

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[3] Double, *Getting the Joke*, pp.241-242.
[4] Eddie Izzard, *Glorious*.

repeated: a live, special encounter which they share with each other and with Izzard.

Izzard does not seek to deceive his audience, and openly admits that his material is not spontaneously improvised. He states:

> What I do does have a sense of spontaneity because I start out going 'right, now...fish...er...fish'[...]but I always know roughly where I'm going to end up. The unfortunate thing is if people think it's totally improvised, then when they realize it isn't, they'll think I'm letting them down[...]I prefer everyone to know exactly what I'm doing, because that means I'm good at what I can do rather than what people *think* I can do.[5]

Yet, as Ben Thompson observes, the appeal of Izzard's style is, nonetheless, largely derived from its apparent spontaneity:

> One of the things that makes Eddie Izzard such an exciting comedian to watch is the sense that his set is evolving as you watch it[...]However honest he is about what he does, people still seem to have something invested in the idea that he's plucking it all out of the air as he goes along.[6]

At the same time, audiences are capable of accepting the fact that most comedians perform pre-prepared material, and that this material probably has been, and will be, performed to other audiences. During a performance of *The Impotent Fury of the Underprivileged* in 2008, Daniel Kitson makes no secret of this.[7] At the start of the show, Kitson says that he has argued with the management of the venue because he refused to put an interval into his one-hour-and-forty-five-minute-long show: Kitson asserts that his show has been designed in that format. Having stated that he has no interest in drawing attention to people who get up to go to the toilets, he eventually says:

> **Right, I'm going to have to address this now. It's a bit insulting if I'm performing something I have *written and rehearsed* if every time someone goes out a third of you look at them and go 'oh he's going for a wee!'** [Laugh][8]

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[5] Eddie Izzard quoted in Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty*, p.108.
[6] *Ibid*, p.108.
[7] Daniel Kitson, *The Impotent Fury of the Underprivileged.*
[8] *Ibid.*

Kitson's audience accepts these points, remaining co-operative even after the illusion of spontaneity has been dispelled. Not only has Kitson openly acknowledged the pre-prepared and repeatable nature of his material, he has demanded respect for the craftsmanship and commitment involved in his creative process.

Eddie Izzard likewise acknowledges the writing process on stage. Continuing his creation story, he describes how, by the seventh day, God began to rush his creations to meet his deadline, producing such faulty items as Rwanda, the 'Leaning' Tower of Pisa and Mrs Thatcher's heart. The next week 'the People' begin to bring the rushed inventions back. Izzard uses a whining tone to signify the disgruntled People and his 'James Mason' voice to signify God (God in bold italics):

> **'Rwanda doesn't work very well.'** [small laugh] **'Infrastructure's fucked.'** [laugh]
> ***'Terribly sorry. I'll, er, put some more jam here.'*** [laugh] ***'And, er, a mountain of cabbages,'*** [small laugh] ***'and...a radiator'*** [bigger laugh]...
> **'Thank you. That's just what we wanted'** [laugh][9]

Izzard then mimes the dejected People hauling a load on a rope and explains: 'This is them dragging Rwanda back [laugh]. To lay it out on the map.' Izzard's mime of the country being laid on to the map receives very little response; it is possible to pick out a small handful of individual laughers, but the audience as a whole has failed to follow. Smiling, Izzard acknowledges the (apparent) failure of his joke by direct reference to the writing process. Miming the jotting of a note onto a pad, Izzard says: 'No one got that. [laugh] Never do that bit again! [laugh]'

The device of making editorial notes on the mimed notepad explicitly references the fact that Izzard intends to perform his material for a different audience. Part of the comic power of this device may be its cheekiness; by acknowledging that the material may be repeated, Izzard breaks the rules and punctures the illusion which the audience and he have collaborated to maintain. Yet the device also adds to that illusion. By making notes for future performances to different audiences, Izzard highlights the uniqueness of his current encounter. The next audience will, apparently, not receive that piece of material: this material is for

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[9] Eddie Izzard, *Glorious*.

the current audience only, and they have power over it. The audience are thus reminded of their important role as collaborator, and favourably contrasted to future audiences who will play no part in developing that particular joke. By acknowledging its failure, Izzard makes the map joke appear to be a kind of secret shared between himself and his current audience.

Stewart Lee comments, on stage, upon the fakery involved in Izzard's 'improvisational' style. Lee delivers a list of three items which, although clearly intended as a joke, gets a poor response. During a routine which analyses the reasons for the joke's failure, Lee says that a friend advised him to make the items in his list more random:

> **[A]nd I thought yeah, I will, but I won't write them down. You know? I'll come out every night and I'll just make them up, I'll exist in the moment, I'll trust it to chance, I'll improvise like Eddie Izzard (.) pretends to do** [laughter, some clapping, a few 'oohs']**...No! And when you've tried to do it you realise why he doesn't. It's hard – it's hard to do. It's much easier to just go 'er' in every sentence and give the illusion of spontaneity** [bigger laugh][10]

The way that Lee's audience respond demonstrates the presence of contradictory interpretations that run alongside each other when an audience enjoys Izzard's material. On the one hand, the laughter of Lee's audience signifies that they recognise the truth: they know that Izzard's work is not as improvised as it appears to be. The 'oohs' imply that such an observation would be considered an insult: they accuse Lee of treating Izzard harshly by acknowledging that the appearance of spontaneity is mere pretence. This suggests that everyone knows that the material is not spontaneous, but that it is considered bad form to say so.

Constructing Spontaneity

All stand-up performances involve both spontaneity and planning. It is the balance of one against the other which differs widely. Even in the most meticulously-planned set, the exact nature of the material's

[10] Stewart Lee, *Stand-up Comedian.* 2 Entertain Video, Avalon Television. 2005. DVD.

delivery will usually be adapted to fit the specific situation and the particular participation of any given audience. Referring to a performance of the 2008 *Edinburgh and Beyond* tour, Dan Atkinson states:

> [Y]ou should approach each gig on its own merit and play it accordingly. So there were - what? - 250 people at the Gulbenkian, and so you have to play it slightly larger. But if there were ten people and we'd all played it like we did it wouldn't have worked because it feels false. If you're delivering to a huge amount of people, you have to make bigger gestures and if you did that, y'know, in an intimate setting[...]so yeah, I think a comedian is able to adjust the pitch of their performance, even if they're doing the same thing.[11]

It is therefore highly unlikely that any comedian would be able to produce exactly the same series of words and gestures on any two nights, even if he wanted to.

Jimmy Carr's material often takes the form of long strings of packaged jokes. On the whole, the rhythm of Carr's delivery follows a concise and repetitive pattern, with a paced set up, followed by a pause before the punch-line, the next joke being introduced just as the laugh is beginning to ebb away. This means that, in a successful performance, the laugh becomes an integral part of a repetitive rhythm so that it is not only clear when the laugh is expected, but there is a tangible void when the laugh fails to appear. The jokes themselves are tightly structured and it is often clear that they have been planned word-for-word. There is apparently little space for Carr to spontaneously tailor his set to the needs of the moment.

In fact, Carr shows elements of spontaneity even in those routines which adhere entirely to the one-liner format. At the 2008 Royal Variety Performance, Jimmy Carr's first few packaged jokes receive a rather disappointing response.[12] Carr's first joke is 'it's an honour and a privilege to be here...I imagine.' This creates an incongruity between the expectation that Carr will demonstrate the conventional humility by referring to the chance to perform as 'an honour', and the reversal of

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[11] Dan Atkinson, Interview.

[12] Jimmy Carr, 'Royal Variety Stand-up Act 2008', *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xSx0tibc0Q&feature=related>, [accessed 10 March 2010].

status which occurs when he suggests that it is the audience, rather than the comedian, who should be honoured. He then attempts to add an extra layer to the joke, his eyes travelling slowly and deliberately towards the royal box where Prince Charles and his wife Camilla are sitting. This reference to the controversy surrounding her admission into the royal family fails to extract more than a small chuckle, and this comes from only some of the audience. Carr responds to this by pointing to the box with both hands in a slightly defensive gesture and saying, 'No. Clearly not. Fine.' Again, there is little response. The second and third packaged jokes receive a muted response. While the audience do laugh, the laughter appears to lack enthusiasm and fails to ignite, giving a sense that the room is not quite pulling together. It is not until his fourth joke that Carr receives a healthy-sounding laugh, and it is unfortunate that this is followed by a less enthusiastic response for the fifth.

It is Carr's sixth joke that seems to crack the cold reception, receiving a healthy laugh: 'I tell you who I blame for all the drugs in schools...The supply teachers'. The laughter has a different quality to the previous laughs – it is loud and fairly unified. Carr then draws out the positive response, dropping the persona of the straight-faced and well-spoken orator, adopting a cheeky smile and making matey, gentle punching movements with his arms as he says, 'c'mon – it's like a proper joke!'. The audience again deliver a healthy laugh. The comment releases Carr and his audience from the unsuccessful game that they have been playing so far, commenting on the obvious fact that the set is not going well, but without admitting defeat.

While Carr's 'it's like a proper joke' response may be one that he has used before, the decision to use it in this instance is a spontaneous one. Carr makes this decision in response to the live audience, identifying the right moment to acknowledge the relative coldness of their reception with a bold but endearing appeal for co-operation. Hence even Carr's formulaic delivery and obviously-planned material must adopt spontaneous features, adapting to the demands of the present situation. As Double states, two of the defining features of stand-up comedy are that 'it happens in the present tense, in the here and now. It acknowledges the performance situation,' and, 'it involves direct

communication between performer and audience...It's like a conversation made up of jokes, laughter and sometimes less pleasant responses.'[13] Both of these features require the performer to be flexible enough to respond to unpredictable occurrences.

It is worth noting, however, that the impression of spontaneous conversation is almost always a construct. This is particularly clear in the case of Jo Brand. While she began her career in the 1980s with a concise, deadpan delivery, Brand later adopted a more chatty style which lacked the marked fluency of her earlier work. The following transcripts document two separate performances in which Brand delivers the same piece of material. The first is in her early deadpan style, and was recorded for *Friday Night Live* in the mid-1980s.[14] The second is from Brand's 1994 video *A Big Slice of Jo Brand*:

> **My flatmate actually advised me to buy *Cosmopolitan* magazine because, let's face it, all their articles are about how to get a husband, aren't they? Despite the fact that they may be rather thinly disguised as articles on more general topics for the ever so slightly feminist woman** [small laugh]. **For example, I read an article in *Cosmo* last week about how to speak knowledgeably on quantum mechanics theory,** [laugh] **whilst giving someone a blow job,** [big laugh] **and asking them to marry you all at the same time** [big laugh]**. I tried it...but the man on the cheese counter at Safeway** [laughter and applause]**...said he didn't think it was terribly hygienic** [laugh] **quite so near to the Red Leicester** [big laugh].
>
> -Jo Brand, *Friday Night Live* c.1988[15]

> **And a friend of mine said well, you know, if you wan' a partner just read *Cosmopolitan* magazine because all their articles are about how how to get a husband, aren't they? They are! Although they're disguised, y'know, as - as articles on slightly, slightly, slightly, slightly feminist issues** [couple of laughs] **But they're not really, 're they?** [small laugh] **Um, for example, you know, I read an article in *Cosmo* recently about how to talk knowledgeably at parties on quantum mechanics theory,** [laugh] **er, whilst giving someone a blow**

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[13] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.19.
[14] While *Chortle* and *YouTube* cite this appearance as c.1986, Brand herself dates it at 1988 in an interview for *WhatsOnStage.com*; T. Atkins, '20 Questions with...Jo Brand', *WhatsOnStage.com*, (25 February 2008), <http://www.whatsonstage.com/interviews/theatre/london/E8821203683281/20+Questions+With+...+Jo+Brand.html>, [accessed 3 March 2010].
[15] Jo Brand, 'Jo Brand on Friday Night Live', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTINPOKEOzQ&feature=related>, [accessed 3 March 2010].

> **job** [laugh] **and asking them to marry you, all at the same time. Now I tried that, but unfortunately** [one person laughs] **the man on the cheese counter at Sainsbury's,** [laugh] **er, didn't go for it, strangely** [laugh]
>
> -Jo Brand, *A Big Slice of Jo Brand*, 1994[16]

Brand's earlier, deadpan style is very successful. In fact, the routine as delivered in this style gets bigger laughs than the 1994 version, and some applause. There might be many reasons why the 1988 version is more successful; perhaps the 1988 audience are more alert, are excited about the possibility of being caught by the television cameras, or have received a better warm-up. The fact that the 1988 routine is part of a short set surrounded by other performances, whereas the 1994 routine comes at the beginning of a longer, solo show, is likely to have an impact. Yet some of the credit must go to the deadpan style itself. Brand uses a strong rhythm and intonation which cue her audience to laugh at the right moments. The material is beautifully concise, so that the jokes are communicated smoothly and clearly.

However, there is a danger that the marked, unnatural rise and fall of Brand's intonation and the rigid rhythm of the set would become irritating and tediously predictable after a while. Brand herself has observed that the deadpan style was essentially limiting:

> It's impossible to keep that up for any longer than about twenty minutes without the audience getting bored shitless, to be honest. Because there's something about that rhythm that's slightly sort of narcoleptic.[17]

The decision to change to the chattier style was therefore a conscious one. Brand actively took measures to achieve the change, putting herself forward to compère in the knowledge that this would force her to converse more directly with her audience and to improvise.[18]

The difference is clear in the above transcriptions. Oddly, Brand delivers the 1994 version with less fluency than she was able to do almost a decade earlier. She appears less certain of what is coming next. While the tight delivery of the 1980s implies that Brand is in total

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[16] Jo Brand, *A Big Slice of Jo Brand*. Stone Ranger Productions. 1994. VHS.
[17] Jo Brand, quoted in Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.211.
[18] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.211.

control of her material and demonstrates the meticulous planning behind its delivery, by 1994 Brand is disguising the prepared nature of her material. Fillers such as 'um' and 'er' have become commonplace in her speech, as have meaningless, accidental repetitions; for example, 'how how to get a husband' and 'as - as articles'.

Brand's whole relationship to her audience has changed. The 1994 persona seems more approachable; Brand smiles when her audience laughs, sharing their enjoyment, her bright red lipstick enhancing the effect. In 1988 Brand retains a sullen expression throughout the performance, allowing her audience to laugh while appearing bored with both the world she caustically observes and the immediate situation. In the 1994 version, Brand calls for her audience's involvement in the material via hedges such as 'you know' and tag questions such as 'right?' or 'isn't it?'[19] The use of the question 'aren't they?' in the 1980s set, with its deadpan delivery, does little to request an audience response. Brand drawls the question out so that it seems to enhance the feeling of boredom with the *Cosmopolitan* culture, rather than energising her audience to respond in agreement. This use of 'aren't they?' does not request confirmation from the audience, but rather imposes Brand's own confirmation of her statement upon them. In 1994, the same question is delivered in an open, inviting way. Although it is Brand who fills in the audience's response ('they are!') this is in keeping with the deceptively one-sided nature of the conversation, and still serves to enhance the feeling that she is inviting a two-way interaction.

Even comedians who are, genuinely, roughly improvisational in their approach tend to have a planned structure in which to frame their spontaneity, and chunks of repeatable material that may be utilised if they are needed or relevant. Ross Noble is an improvisational comedian for whom any given show is likely to contain a significantly higher-than-average proportion of ad-libbed material.[20] Noble is also among the minority of comedians in his ability to confidently improvise a whole show. However, he has also stated that he uses prepared and repeated material. In a sense, even the use of prepared material is spontaneous

[19] J. Coates, *Women, Men and Language*, (London: Longman, 1986), pp.103-106.
[20] O. Double, 'Not the Definitive Version: an Interview with Ross Noble', *Comedy Studies*, 1 (2010), 5-19 (p.6).

in this context; Noble does not plan his use of stock material, but rather mixes ad-lib and pre-formed routines in whatever proportion seems right at the time.[21] For Noble, preparation for a show is focused more upon internal structures within the performer:

> It's less about sort of coming up with a show, and more about just getting up to match fitness, you know. Just mentally – well, physically as well as mentally – just being in that headspace. 'Coz even with, like, improv, it's not necessarily about the speed of invention, it's about the application of it. And pace as well[...]The pace, if you like, that's just as important a skill – a muscle – to exercise as anything else.[22]

Noble's idea is a difficult one to articulate and his meaning is difficult to accurately pin down or develop in any terms that are not his own. The process of 'getting up to match fitness', 'being in that headspace' and 'exercising' the 'skill' or 'muscle' is itself a kind of planning. Perhaps it is even an embryonic method of writing. At root, Noble appears to be talking about a process which marshals the performer's previous experience and hones his skills, preparing him to draw, if not on actual material that has been delivered before, then upon the structures, thinking patterns and rhythms by which it came into existence.

The three main categories of comic theory define 'funniness' not by what a joke says – its content and wording – but by what it does. Those jokes that may be interpreted by the superiority and relief theories work by performing a task – the comedian either illustrates the superiority of one group or concept over another, or expresses an unspoken tension or desire. In incongruity theories, the joke is created by the structure in which ideas are placed, presenting 'some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances.'[23]

Although a focus on form and structure over individual content is a natural side-effect of processes which seek to find common ground between jokes, there is a significant trend for comic theory to posit structural and formulaic factors as the root of funniness, rather than its means of communication. This implies that there are two parts to the

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[21] Double, *Getting the* Joke, p.191.
[22] Ross Noble, quoted in Double, 'Not the definitive version', p.16.
[23] Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humour*, p.6.

writing of a joke. The idea transmitted in the joke varies widely, and is often the result of a moment's inspiration. However, such ideas are built upon the foundation of pre-determined mechanisms. This is not to imply that jokes lack variety, for there is no formula which can satisfactorily provide a comprehensive range of jokes. What this common basis does mean is that each joke is built on one of a handful of pre-determined formulae; when we create a joke, we find that some of the ground work is already done for us. While it remains an awe-inspiring feat on Noble's part to be able to ad-lib an entire show, it should be noted that there is some preparation achieved in the form of structure and experience. His ad-libbed jokes are not completed until the moment of the performance, but they find a pre-prepared base in his experience and understanding of comic forms.

Slightly closer to the pre-prepared end of the scale is newer comedian Kurt Driver. Initially, Driver performed one-liners but found that it was more difficult and anxiety-inducing to have to remember material than to create it spontaneously on stage.[24] By 2008, Driver was two years and approximately seventy gigs into his career, and still reliant on pre-planned material for longer sets. However, he had developed a shorter act which had spontaneity built into the structure. This involved beginning a story with a scenario such as, 'you and me are in a house...' and asking the audience for suggestions which would materially alter his tale as it unfolded, so that Driver was forced to improvise according to the audience's suggestions. While the show ostensibly invited input that was impossible to predict, and therefore hinged on the performer's spontaneity, in reality experience allowed Driver to predict or even manipulate the responses of the audience, limiting the range of possible material:

> It's pretty improvised[...]The thing with kind of the story set[...]when you do it so many times, is that you can kind of work out what they are gonna say. You can kind of push them in certain directions, as such. And then, yeah, if anything connects to any jokes that I've got then I can go into that and yeah, I can just take it to other material. But it generally goes alright, because like if you put people on the spot they end up saying stupid things anyway so *(laughs)* you can usually go with it, when they're on the spot![...]When I start it off with like 'me and you are

[24] Kurt Driver, Interview.

> in a house' or whatever, [the audience generally suggests] the same things[...]nothing too exciting, so I can generally take the piss out of[...]what they've come out with.[25]

Driver was therefore able to mix spontaneity with preparation in two senses. Where it was appropriate to incorporate a piece of stock material he would do so. As with Noble's methodology, such a strategy would rely on both repetition and spontaneity; some of the material would have been both written in advance and rehearsed via previous performances, but the decision to include such a piece of material would not be premeditated. Driver also states that experience enables him to predict and guide his audience's responses. While this is not pre-written material, it does allow Driver to pre-determine the basis from which he will have to ad-lib. In some structural sense, Driver has begun writing the joke before the ad-libbing begins.

Looking clever: a 'higher' kind of comedy

The techniques which enhance the appearance of spontaneity become particularly manipulative in those cases in which the comedian receives kudos for his apparent quickness of wit in responding to a supposedly unpredictable situation. Bruce Devlin regularly compères at the Edinburgh Stand. At the beginning of a show, Devlin will typically converse with the audience, picking out individuals and asking them questions about themselves. The results are unpredictable and Devlin is apparently forced to improvise spontaneous responses to the answers put forward by his audience. In reality, Devlin is able to impose certain limits. Firstly, Devlin's persona is an aggressive and somewhat arrogant one; his joking responses are already guided by the fact that he is expected to insult the audience. Devlin is also in charge of the questions, and therefore determines the direction of the conversation. He might ask punters what they do for a living. Answers to such a question may be very varied, but will typically fall into a series of categories which allow Devlin to apply tried-and-tested responses. When an audience member says that he is a student, Devlin might ask him what he studies before pointedly asking, 'and what call centre do you

[25] Kurt Driver, Interview.

hope to work in?' Anyone who works with children may expect to have their job title reinterpreted as 'paedophile'.

In November 2005, Devlin performed both of these gags during the audience warm-up.[26] They seemed like fresh, ingenious responses, and the audience's laughter was perhaps due in part to their appreciation and respect for Devlin who, although cruel, appeared very quick and clever in his ability to produce spontaneous put-downs. In November 2006, both gags appeared again in the audience warm-up, and the audience reaction was just as keen.[27] These jokes have probably been performed on many other occasions, and each time their success relies upon the audience's perception that Devlin is spontaneously ad-libbing to an unpredictable stimulus. Without this impression, the joke would probably fail.

Devlin cannot be accused of dishonesty regarding the level of spontaneity involved in his interaction with his audience. Anyone who visited the Stand regularly could spot the formula and tumble the ruse. Like many other comedians, Devlin adopts the trappings of spontaneity in order to give his material the important feeling of freshness and excitement which characterises comedy. As we have seen, many stand-up comedians tend to flavour their delivery with an appearance of spontaneity which is faked to a greater or lesser degree. However, many consider genuine and successful ad-libbing to be the more exciting and artistically commendable part of their work.

Dan Atkinson spends much of his stage time compèring, but aims to avoid the 'bag of tricks' approach that is evident in Devlin's work:

> There is a bag of responses - there are stock lines that all compères are allowed to use, and I try desperately not to. And I have my own stock responses - more than responses, I have a stack of experience and I've been in these situations many, many times before, so I'll find the same situations cropping up, the same kinds of people cropping up. And I try as hard as I can to not use them[...]I've learned to be fairly quick and so it's a shame not to use that. And I try to respond to everything on its merits and its own circumstance. So I have got them and I do use them, but my default is to not use them, because I think that's when

[26] Bruce Devlin, *The Stand: The Saturday Show*, The Stand, Edinburgh, 27 November 2005.
[27] Bruce Devlin, *The Stand: The Saturday Show*, The Stand, Edinburgh, 25 November 2006.

> you're being a real comedian. If you're delivering prepared material, yeah you're still a stand-up, but on some level you're being a comic performer. I think being an actual comedian is when you're dealing with a situation that is unprecedented, never come up before, and you deal with it in a funny way, on the spur of the moment, in an improvisational sense, genuinely[...]You'll be surprised how indulgent audiences will be if you are being genuinely improvisational. They will allow you to fail a couple of times on the search for something good.[28]

Knowing how to successfully utilise stock responses as Devlin does is a skill in itself; as Atkinson notes it takes a 'stack of experience' to develop this repertoire. Yet Atkinson feels that spontaneous reactions force him to develop as a performer in a way that is not possible when he chooses to fall back on stock responses and structures. Improvisation allows him to be 'a real comedian', as opposed to the comic performer who recites pre-formed material. This is perhaps an unfair view in that it implies that the writing of the joke is the whole act of creation. In fact, joking is a social process, existing only in interaction with a hearer; as Zijderveld points out, 'a joke[...]is only meaningful in the interaction between human beings. It is also in this interaction that the joke is born.'[29] Thus the act of performance is an integral part of the joke's creation and involves a great deal of creative skill. Yet Atkinson is not alone in citing real spontaneity as both the essential heart of the form and the aim to which it aspires, but for which there can be no prescribed method. As Atkinson elaborates:

> I think it's more exciting. That's why stand-up's crucially such a live art form. The best gigs are the ones that you're going to where you'll see stuff that couldn't happen anywhere else, and you've been part of a special moment. And that's what everyone strives for. But ironically, you can't force it. You have to forget about that for it to happen.[30]

The illusion of spontaneous conversation is one of stand-up's most pervasive manipulative tools. Audiences want to believe that they are participating in a unique and spontaneous encounter. As Zijderveld notes, 'stale' jokes lose their attraction, 'a joke[...]draws its power from

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[28] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[29] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.287.
[30] Dan Atkinson, Interview.

being new and rare.'[31] Stand-up generally needs to give the impression of spontaneous conversation in order to allow the material to feel fresh, and to create the chummy atmosphere in which jokes work best. We must remember, however, that this impression is constructed in order to manipulate audience responsiveness. This trick can also be manipulative in the deceitful sense. Audiences and comedians have great respect for genuinely ad-libbed material: when a comedian is able to create the impression that old material is genuinely written on the spot he gains respect for a piece of magic that he never delivered.

[31] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.291.

Chapter Five

Delivery II: Manipulating Responses

The extent of Control

When compèring the *Edinburgh and Beyond 2008* tour, Dan Atkinson demonstrates the control that a comedian exerts over his audience with great assurance.[1] Atkinson's demeanour is friendly, and expertly manages the contradiction of talking to and controlling a crowd while maintaining a persona that appears slightly shy and awkward. Atkinson chats several times to audience member Sam, who is sitting in the front row. Sam becomes known by the audience; a kind of supporting character. Once Sam's celebrity is established, Atkinson pulls the following stunt: he makes a joke about paedophilia - one which is purposely 'crass' and 'not particularly funny' - and then hops off the stage, holding up his hand as if to elicit a high-five, crying 'Paedos Sam!'.[2] Sam automatically raises his hand to high-five Atkinson, at which point Atkinson lowers his own hand, failing to meet Sam's high-five, and, turning away, retreats back onto the stage chiding, 'Now, that's not ok, Sam!'. The audience deliver a big laugh. Atkinson has tricked Sam into an inappropriate response, displaying approval for an unacceptable topic.

Asked offstage about this joke, Atkinson describes it in the following terms:

> Yes it's cruel. Basically, the point behind it is an abuse of status. And it works every single time[...]It's partly to do with picking the right person, someone who's open to the gig and enjoying it and happy to chat[...]So you chose someone suggestible, and then there's an ambiguity as to whether they're high-fiving the joke or the notion of paedophiles. And you sort of dress it up so it seems like, maybe to them they'd be high-fiving the joke, and then you pull out. And the comedy comes through abuse of power.[3]

This demonstrates a couple of crucial points about the nature of the control that comedians exert over their audiences. Firstly, the control is not limited to ensuring that audiences recognise a joke and laugh at it,

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[1] Dan Atkinson, *Edinburgh and Beyond 2008*, The Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 26 September 2008, 7:45pm.
[2] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[3] Dan Atkinson, Interview.

albeit that this element of control is absolutely vital. The audience's determination to deliver the 'correct response' extends to an audience member attempting to participate in an excruciating social *faux pas.*[4] Secondly, the incident demonstrates that audiences are aware of the fact that they are complying with the performer's attempts to control their responses: the joke references this very aspect of the performer-audience relationship.

Reflecting on the incident offstage, Atkinson describes Sam as 'an excellent audience member'; one whose consistent co-operation with the comedian showed that he would be the perfect victim for such a practical joke: 'He was very good[...]he played it straight. He didn't try to take his own laughs but he still answered the questions. It was just what you want.'[5] It is Sam's competence at delivering correct responses which gets him into trouble. He has been a good supporting character within the show because he plays along, recognising the response that the comedian requires and delivering it. The joke is that Atkinson uses this against him; the incongruity that the correct response of co-operating with the comedian should also be a fundamentally taboo response in the wider social context. That the audience recognise their own drive to co-operate, and thus their own submission to the comedian's control, is a prerequisite for their understanding and appreciation of this joke. The fact that Atkinson's joke 'works every time' suggests that this is a universal, reliable trait among comedy audiences.

Nick Helm bursts onto the stage of the Horsebridge Arts and Community Centre as the audience applaud, crying, 'Keep it going!'.[6] The audience comply, continuing their applause until Helm is ready to start speaking. Helm's tall, heavy-built frame roams the stage as he belts out one-liners in a growling, west-country accent. His material includes such gems as, 'I won a swimsuit contest...I ate fifty-seven swimsuits!'; 'My mate was in the army, he ate all the pudding rations...He got shot for desertion!' The timing and pace are all wrong, and the aggressive way in which Helm screams through his lines

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[4] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics* (London: Methuen, 1984).
[5] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[6] Nick Helm, *Horsebridge Comedy*, Horsebridge Arts and Community Centre, Whitstable, 30 April 2010, 8pm.

squashes any charm and playfulness that the jokes might have had. Helm does not allow his audience space to respond, but rather celebrates his comic dominance immediately after each punchline, kicking and punching the air or thrusting his pelvis forward, crying out phrases such as, 'You're welcome!' and 'Oh (.) my (.) God!'. By any conventional measure, Helm's delivery is very poor.

Therein lies Helm's genius. The Horsebridge audience are laughing from the outset, but seem initially uncertain of how to take Helm's belligerent style. Helm does not step out of his aggressive persona, nor give his audience any direct sign that his act is meant ironically, but rather keeps barking out jokes, relying on the audience's knowledge of stand-up to provide them with the appropriate interpretation. Gradually, the audience start to feel at ease, and join in with the game. After several of his poorly-executed one-liners, Helm addresses the uncertainty in the room growling: 'This is happening. Get on board!' The audience deliver a big laugh, and proceed to respond confidently and in unison to the material that follows. Helm has got his audience under control.

The set evolves into a gentler mood as Helm delivers some comic poetry and finally finishes with a sing-along, providing accompaniment on the guitar. He briefly tells the audience that they are required to sing:

> I love you
> You love me
> We love each other we're like family
> I need you
> You need me
> We're together for the world to see[7]

The song is simple, but Helm has told the audience their lines too quickly for them to really catch on. The first couple of attempts to sing as a group are a shambles, and Helm demonstrates frustration at the audience's incompetence - which he knows he has manufactured.

There is then a detour, as Helm identifies an audience member who has not been joining in and attempts to bully him into doing so, trying to haul him up on stage and eventually moving the microphone down into the audience, placing it directly in front of the man and standing

[7] *Ibid.*

over him until he sings. By the time Helm gets back to the stage, the words to the song and the accompanying chords have been repeated interminably. So when Helm, apparently despairing, tells his audience to give it one more go, the audience are able to deliver the song in perfect and harmonious unison. Helm looks up, his facial expression demonstrating impressed surprise, and keeps the music going so that the chorus is sung again. Thus the initial, messy confusion ends in a harmonious group rendition.

It is impossible to tell how much of the routine was pre-planned and how much of Helm's act was worked out in the moment. Whatever the balance of pre-meditation and spontaneity, the result was a performance which led the audience through seismic changes in pace and atmosphere orchestrated by Helm's expert control of their responses. As we have seen, extracting laughter by successful joking always involves some level of manipulation. What Atkinson and Helm demonstrate is that the manipulation of response extends beyond the procurement of laughter, with comedians being able to control a greater range of audience behaviour. When a comedian performs, he is not just relying on good jokes: some other manipulative effort is being made, and a large part of this effort consists of the way that the material is structured, packaged and presented.

The other reasons for laughing

Defining the word 'joke' is no easy task. At the outset of their book about jokes, Carr and Greeves provide the following definition:

> A joke, for the purposes of this book, is defined primarily as something you say deliberately to evoke amusement. It's a thing of words, a unit of communication. Not simple slapstick, not just storytelling, not mere wordplay – although it undoubtedly can contain all of these. It's a formulaic verbal construction designed to elicit a response – laughter. Beyond that, it gets a bit more complicated.[8]

That Carr and Greeves impose the broad qualification 'for the purposes of this book' is a clue to just how slippery the concept of joking is. It

[8] J. Carr and L. Greeves, *The Naked Jape: Uncovering the Hidden World of Jokes* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.3.

seems safe enough to claim that evoking amusement is a universal purpose of jokes, but even this fails to adequately explain some joking situations. The motivation of jokers is often not so simple: for example, a joke can be told in order to hurt or exclude, or to frustrate an opponent's argument, and can be recognised as a joking statement even when there is no third party present to laugh at it. If we perceive a joke as cruel or lack the ability to interpret it, or if we understand the joke but do not find it funny, we will still generally refer to the utterance as a joke. That we can recognise a cruelly-intentioned or unsuccessful example as a joke implies that we recognise joking by characteristics other than intention and success. Laughter is a measure of a joke's success, but not a defining feature. Even in stand-up, unified laughter is not always the sole aim. In Mark Thomas' *Dambusters*, for example, informing audiences and motivating them to act was at least as important an aim as the promotion of laughter.[9] Often, Stewart Lee actively avoids unified laughter, feeling that 'there is something unpleasant about lots of people all laughing at the same thing *(laughs)* in the same way. It seems a bit like a – a rally, you know.'[10]

Determining how successful a joke has been is similarly tricky. John Limon claims that:

> A joke is funny if and only if you laugh at it[...]A joke at which the audience smiles or nods its approbation is a failed joke; a joke at which the audience laughs is a good joke in proportion to its laughter.[11]

The idea that only jokes which procure laughter are funny is, perhaps, fair enough in situations where all audience members respond in unison, but it is of little help in defining the funniness of jokes which receive a mixed response. The idea that jokes are good 'in proportion to [their] laughter' has a similarly limited application. This thesis contains transcriptions of routines by both Josie Long and Michael McIntyre. The laughter that McIntyre gets in his segments is louder and more hysterical than that present in Long's routines. Commercially and in terms of volume of laughter, McIntyre is undoubtedly the more

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[9] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[10] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[11] J. Limon, *Stand-up Comedy in Theory, or, Abjection in America* (London: Duke University Press, 2000), p.12.

successful comedian. Yet among certain factions of the comedy world, Long is the comedian who commands greater respect. Laughter and ticket or DVD sales are not universally considered the most important markers of success, and nor is laughter the only thing ever demanded of comedians. As Dan Atkinson states:

> The best comedian is not necessarily the one who gets the most laughs, in my view[...]I think the best comedian is the one who has some sort of a synergy of, yes, making people laugh - that's the first thing, you have got to be funny, if you're not being funny or making people laugh then you're failing - but it's how you're making people laugh, and also giving them something to think about as well.[12]

As we have seen, joking is fundamentally about the subversion of boundaries, and for this reason it tends to have trouble sticking within its own limits. Designing a definition of the word 'joke' that can satisfactorily represent all of its forms is as difficult as designing a comic theory that fully explains all of the ways of being funny. Yet there are few instances, certainly within stand-up, where the human competence to recognise joking fails: audiences can usually tell a joking utterance from one that is intended to be taken seriously.

The following discussion focuses on the construction of jokes, in terms of text and performance. For the purposes of this chapter, a joke is defined by content rather than response, and by the joker's intention to make a joke, rather than their intention for that joke to result in laughter. As incongruity is the only element in comic theory that is generally considered to be universal, the current definition states that a joke must contain incongruity. It must also be instinctively understood by the audience to be a joke: the comedian must signal that the utterance takes place in the safe space where cognitive and practical disengagement are permitted. This enables us to examine the fact that the relationship between joking and laughter is not necessarily a straightforward matter of cause and effect.

In his study of the techniques that characterise successful speeches by political speakers, Max Atkinson demonstrates that much of positive audience response stems from the audience's co-operation with the

[12] Dan Atkinson, Interview.

speaker.[13] Like comedians, political orators will seek 'displays of approval' from their audiences; just as a comedian cannot claim to have given a successful performance if he does not draw laughter, a politician relies on the applause and supportive utterances of his audience.[14] Co-operation between audience and speaker is vital; the speaker must give clear signals as to when a response is wanted and when it should begin, and must pause to allow the display to occur. Meanwhile, the audience must give the desired response, starting at the right moment and continuing for the right length of time, not interfering with the continuation of the speech.[15]

The audiences of stand-up performance and political speaking share the same incentives to co-operate. In either case, the audience may have a personal loyalty to the speaker. As Max Atkinson states, this is the case when leading politicians speak to their own party: it is similarly true when a famous comedian faces an audience who have paid for a ticket specifically to see him. The audience know, instinctively, that their response is necessary for the success of the event, and are committed to making the required effort to ensure that the event is indeed a success. Above all, the audience will not want to risk giving an incorrect response. As Max Atkinson states:

> We tend to feel very uncomfortable when, as members of a collectivity, we fail to co-ordinate our own behaviour with that of everyone else[...]When we are seen to step out of line, we draw attention to our ignorance of how to behave properly on such occasions, and may find our social competence called into question. It threatens exposure to the horrors of public ridicule and humiliation[...]At public gatherings, there is thus considerable pressure on all those present to conform and 'go along with the crowd'.[16]

Atkinson argues that audiences do not applaud only because they hear an idea that they like, but rather when the linguistic packaging of the utterance tells them that it is time to do so. The same process is at work in stand-up comedy. The following segment is from a stand-up act delivered by David Hyde Pierce at the *Just for Laughs* comedy festival in

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[13] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices.*
[14] *Ibid,* p.13.
[15] *Ibid,* pp.25-31.
[16] *Ibid,* p.18.

Montreal. Hyde Pierce is an actor most famous for his role as psychiatrist Niles Crane in the television sitcom *Frasier*. The set ends with *The Therapist Song*, a comic rap accompanied by a string quartet. The audience are highly cooperative throughout the set and when the first joke in the song comes, they demonstrate that their instinct to co-operate with Hyde Pierce overrides their instinct to laugh at the gag:

> **So you walk into my office and you're feeling kind of low**
> **You're depressed, confused and anxious,**
> **You've got no place to go**
> **Well, I'm the one to talk to**
> **I'm the man who understands**
> **You just take a-hundred-fifty bucks**
> **And pop it in my hand** [quiet, small laugh]
> **And hit the couch** [laugh]
> **Hit the couch** [laugh][17]

The main joke consists in the incongruity of the ostensibly caring therapist showing his true colours and conforming to the cynical stereotype of the psychiatrist as a man who greedily cashes in on the vulnerability of his clients. 'You just take a-hundred-fifty bucks/ And pop it in my hand' is the incongruous turning-point and, on paper, is probably a more effective joke than 'Hit the couch'. However, the blatant and accessible rhythm of the song both makes the possibility of stopping at 'pop it in my hand' impossible - the rhythm of the rap demands that another line follow immediately - and allows the audience to easily identify the point at which a response is necessary. Thus the vast majority of the audience hold the laugh back until the line 'hit the couch' is delivered, with all its pleasant musicality, and obediently issue the laugh once the utterance is complete and there is no danger of the response interrupting the speaker. Interestingly, when the line 'hit the couch' is immediately repeated, sounding almost identical to its first appearance, the laugh that follows is almost identical too. This suggests that the laughter is not just an organic response to humour, but is an 'appropriate response' devised by the audience to co-operate with the speaker.

According to Max Atkinson, 'three out of every four displays of approval occur in response to about half a dozen verbal devices'.[18] These

[17] David Hyde Pierce, in Various Artists, *World's Greatest Stand-up: Volume One*. Channel 4 DVD. 2006. DVD.

techniques constitute ways of structuring utterances which signal clearly to the hearer that a display of approval is wanted, and when it should begin.[19] Hyde Pierce's routine demonstrates a heavy reliance on two of Atkinson's commonly-used techniques for inviting displays of approval: contrastive pairs and favourable references to persons. This Montreal festival is held bilingually in English and French, and Hyde Pierce is therefore able to assume that his audience will be able to follow both languages:

> **Thank you, *Merci*** [laugh]**...Hello, *Allo*** [laugh]**...In keeping with the bilingual spirit, *En gardant l'esprit bilingue*** [small laugh]**...Everything I say in English, *Tout ce que je dirai en anglais*...I will repeat in French, *Je le dirai aussi en francais!*** [big applause and cheering][20]

Each of Hyde Pierce's early lines is spoken in English and translated into French, with the result that every line becomes a contrastive pair. The first and second laughs follow genuinely incongruous statements - the phrases are so simple, and in the second case the French sounds so similar to the English, as to render translation unnecessary. The French translations are delivered with a cheeky smile and tone of voice which signals that they are intended as comic utterances. The third, admittedly small, laugh follows a statement that is neither complete nor particularly comic. It is not really incongruous for Hyde Pierce to continue his pattern, and he does not signal that the utterance is a joke either physically or verbally. Significantly, the audience not only laugh when no joke has been made, but wait until the completion of the contrastive pair to do so. They have already picked up the pattern and are laughing in response to a perceived cue.

Hyde Pierce then breaks the pattern, getting a laugh for translating his next English phrase, 'thank you very much', into Japanese. From here on, the translation becomes comically subverted:

> **When they asked me to do this festival, I said 'yes' immediately.**

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[18] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices*, p.xvii.
[19] *Ibid*, pp.48.
[20] David Hyde Pierce, in Various Artists, *World's Greatest Stand-up*. [French transcription by K. Bonello Rutter Giappone].

> ***Quand ils m'ont demandé de faire ce festivale...***[laugh] ***j'ai dit 'oui, mais seulement si vous me presentiez...a Mitsumi Takahashi'***[21] [Big laugh and long applause]**...This Festival has produced dozens of sitcom superstars. *Ce festivale a produit des centaines de losers*** [22] [big laugh and applause]**...Er, I'm sorry, I'm going to stop this bilingual thing. Obviously there's a problem with the translation** [laugh]**...I, I don't know why. It was prepared...by Maris** [big laugh, applause and cheering]

The final two English-French utterances actively use the contrastive pair as a joke structure, the French part putting a cynical twist on the phrase spoken in English. The mention of Mitsumi Takahashi also functions as a favourable reference to a liked person. The joke is that Takahashi is a popular local news anchor, hence Hyde Pierce's self-serving request subverts the conventional expression of enthusiasm for participating in the event which is expressed in the English utterance. Takahashi is used as a reference particularly because she is local to Montreal, where this routine is performed. In this joke she becomes a source of local pride, and unites the audience and comedian in recognition and appreciation.[23]

Hyde Pierce gets an even greater response for his mention of 'Maris', the wife of his sitcom character. This laugh is explosive and uncontrolled. As Tony Allen states, '[t]here are gift moments in stand-up comedy when the audience have something on their collective mind and all that is required to get them laughing is to acknowledge it.'[24] Hyde Pierce has here recognised that the audience will be consciously associating him with his sitcom character and, by acknowledging this fact, he allows them to enjoy the shared preoccupation. This joke is, of course, the reason for the laugh, but it is possibly significant that the cue to laugh - which works so successfully - is a reference to a person from that fictional world to which the audience's thoughts may be turned.

These 'packaging' techniques, which get the laugh more through the way that statements are delivered than the actual incongruity of the material presented, are common in stand-up. They are ingeniously

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[21] 'When they asked me to do this festival, I said "yes, but if only if you introduce me...to Mitsumi Takahashi".'
[22] 'This festival has produced hundreds of losers'.
[23] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices*, p.37.
[24] T. Allen, *Attitude*, p.31.

manipulative, partly because they can be very hard to spot. Well into the second half of the show filmed for his 2004 DVD *Monster*, Dylan Moran embarks on a long critique of romantic relationships and gender differences.[25] Moran manages his audience's response expertly, and seemingly effortlessly. While the performance of this highly successful routine relies on a complex range of skills, it is possible that part of the reason for the apparent ease with which Moran cues his audience to laugh is the fact that they are working to a pattern. Max Atkinson demonstrates that audiences are skilled at identifying patterns and discerning how and when to react to them.[26] One such pattern for Dylan Moran is the list of three items. In the following example, Moran compares male and female attitudes to falling in love:

> **Because it's actually men...you'll find (.) who are the far more romantic.** [couple of laughs] **Men are the people you will hear say:** *(Moran pauses to light a cigarette)*...**'I've found somebody'...**[few laughs] **'She's amazing...If I don't, if I don't get to be with this person, I'm fucked.'** [laugh]...**'I can't carry on.'** [laugh starts, Moran cuts it off] **'I - no I mean it - I, she's totally transformed my life. I have a job, I have a flat, it mea, means nothing. If - I can't stand it, I have to be with her. Because if I don't, I'm gonna end up in some bedsit, I'll be alcoholic, I'll have itchy trousers. I can't'** [laugh]...**'I can't walk the streets anymore'...That...is how women...feel about shoes.** [big laugh and applause][27]

This segment demonstrates two main uses of the list of three. The first, 'I'll end up in some bedsit, I'll be alcoholic, I'll have itchy trousers', is based on the commonly-used joke structure of 'establish, reinforce, surprise'.[28] The first item is 'bedsit', and introduces the idea of lonely and inadequate living conditions. The second item, 'alcoholic', reinforces the image. The third item, 'itchy trousers', is a surprising twist on the theme; the joke lies in the surprise. The 'list of three' pattern is also described by Atkinson as a commonly used 'claptrap'; audiences well understand that the completion of a three-part list is a prompt to applaud.[29]

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[25] Dylan Moran, *Monster*. Universal. 2004. DVD.
[26] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices*, pp.55-56.
[27] Dylan Moran, *Monster*.
[28] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.207.
[29] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices*, p.58.

This pattern is so well established that its form can be used even when there are not three items in terms of content. Thus Moran's second three-part list is actually a break down of one concept expressed in a single sentence; by pausing twice Moran turns 'that/ is how women/ feel about shoes' into a three part list. The fact that a list of three is being used signals to the audience that a response may soon be necessary; thus although the joke is funny in terms of content, the response it receives is also partly due to the fact that it is delivered in such a way as to elicit response.

Most strikingly, Moran's use of three-part lists becomes so successful that it plays a greater role than content in dictating the point at which a joke is deemed to have been completed. Here Moran is discussing the comparative abilities of men and women to argue against each other:

> **And the arguments do seem to be unfairly racked in, in, in, in women's favour because of the, the, I think the arguments are made in different places; all male arguments are very early-seventies, Soviet-made, uni-directional,** [small laugh] **trundling behemoths** [small laugh] **(.) That say the same thing again and again and again.** [small laugh][30]

On paper, 'uni-directional' is an inadequate punch-line; it is certainly no more incongruous than the idea of an argument being 'early-seventies' or 'soviet-made'. Yet it receives a laugh, albeit a small one. In a sense, the audience is applying the pattern inappropriately; having learnt that the completion of a three-part list is usually a good joke, they laugh in response to the list even though no joke has been made.

Moran is only able to extract laughs through packaging because his show contains many genuinely funny jokes; therefore it could be argued that the tendency to laugh in response to a verbal device is, in real terms, unimportant. However, this view underestimates the importance of what a laugh does. The effect of a laugh extends beyond the moment in which the laugh takes place, creating and reinforcing feelings of consensus and unity both between the members of the group who laugh together, and from the audience towards the joker.[31] Furthermore, it confirms the status of the comedian as a successful and funny

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[30] Dylan Moran, *Monster.*
[31] Lorenz, *On Aggression*, p.253.

performer, each laugh increasing the audience's vital faith that the comedian can make them laugh again, and telling them that laughter is indeed the correct way to respond.[32] By structuring material to keep the laughs coming regularly, the comedian manipulates the atmosphere and attitude of his audience to his own advantage. By utilising the audience's instinct to respond to verbal devices, giving them clear cues regarding when and how to respond, the comedian can make the most of the unity that laughter implies, and the pressure to conform that accompanies it.[33]

It is unlikely that many comedians consciously apply these techniques. These verbal devices are used instinctively even in everyday conversation;[34] comedians, similarly, utilise them naturally, by instinct. Whether the thought process behind these devices is as detailed as knowingly using a list of three items or contrastive pair to create a prompt for responses, or is merely the result of a comedian having a vague, instinctive knowledge that it will 'sound better that way', analysis of stand-up demonstrates that they are widely used to manipulate audience response.

Patterning and the 'unfinished' gag

Comedians are aware that their audiences can learn patterns and respond to them. This phenomenon was at work in Dave Allen's 'Mother and Monster' sketch (discussed in Chapter One), which played on the audience's assumption that Allen would have written the same kind of incongruous perception-flipping outcome for this sketch as is the basis for so many of his jokes.[35] Richard Herring explains that he often jokes about the joke pattern itself, building the expectation that the punch-line is coming before changing the direction of the joke altogether.[36] He notes that even surprising patterns are essentially utilising the audience's competence with patterning:

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[32] Double, *Stand-Up*, p.132.
[33] Philips, 'Racist Acts and Racist Humor', p.91.
[34] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices*, pp.57-58.
[35] Dave Allen, *The Best of Dave Allen.*
[36] Richard Herring, Interview.

> I think it is about surprise, but I think that means that - certain audiences, you know, are more sophisticated[...]and certain comedians are more sophisticated with the way they hide stuff[...]I [might] see a comedian who tricks me with a basic[...]pull back and reveal joke, [because] you can set it up so beautifully that you don't see the twist coming, you know. Whereas a lot of comedians who will just do[...]these jokes[...] - 'I was sitting in my nappy doing a poo, and my Mum came in and said "what are you doing?"' and, you know, 'I was twenty-eight years old at the time', it's that basic kind of joke - which a comedian will see that coming a mile off, but occasionally you'll get a comedian who can really hide those[...]You've gotta keep moving and you've gotta keep changing and you've gotta, kind of, surprise yourself[...][But] Peter Kay's continued success shows that some people just like to be spoon-fed[...]they obviously know what's coming and they love it[...]that's fine.[37]

Stewart Lee comments directly on the patterning tendency in performance. Having identified that one half of the audience are more in tune with the jokes than their counterparts on the other side of the stage, Lee teases the section on his left for being slow to adapt to the ethos of the show, and points out that this is going to be a problem, implying that the material in the second half of the show will be difficult and harrowing.[38] Lee intersperses jokes about the 'mixed ability' level of the audience with other material which focuses on the show's key themes of terrorism and religion for a few minutes, and then he comes to the following:

> **I don't know if you know but the Catholic Church are very worried about you all reading *The Da Vinci Code* and in fact in January last year the Vatican actually issued an official statement reminding Dan Brown readers that the books are largely fictional and full of historically unverifiable information.**[39]

The line is delivered with a subtle, wry smile, but the tone and pace are calm; vocally, Lee gives no signal that this is anything other than a simple statement of fact. The statement is accompanied by a repeated downward bounce of Lee's left hand, which accompanies each new syllable and draws attention to the utterance as an important point containing specific detail which requires close attention. This is one of

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[37] *Ibid.*
[38] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*
[39] *Ibid.*

Lee's joke patterns: the joke is not made explicit but demands that the audience make some of the imaginative effort to complete and interpret the joke themselves. Thus, although Lee does not explicitly make the link between this comment and the Bible, the attitudes and information he has conveyed before this point give the audience sufficient hints that they should identify the Vatican's statement as hypocritical: we are able to assume that Lee would take the view that the Vatican has based its existence on a text that is, itself, 'largely fictional and full of historically unverifiable information'. Koestler's theory of bisociation provides a useful model through which to interpret this process. According to Koestler, jokes are 'the perceiving of a situation or idea[..]in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference'. Diagrammatically, he expresses this idea with a line representing a concept (M_1) crossing an incompatible concept (M_2), creating a joke (L) at the point where those lines cross.[40] Lee's joke works on a subversion of this incongruity theory: M_1 is given, but the audience must discern M_2 from hints that litter the surrounding context, and then follow the concepts through for themselves to point L.

Having delivered the line, Lee pauses for a long time, taking a pace forward then back, keeping his eyes on the floor and waiting confidently until some of the audience catch on. Franklyn Ajaye identifies such pauses as a useful technique for allowing an audience to catch up with a 'cerebral' or subtle joke; it gives them time to make the links and leaps of thought that the joke leaves them to create for themselves.[41] In this case, some of the audience not only laugh, but commit to keeping the laugh going while Lee goes on to draw a sharp intake of breath and make a gesture which seems physically to weigh up the extent to which each side of the audience is now following along. On this occasion, however, the laugh fails to envelop the whole audience. Lee goes on to turn to the left-hand section of the audience - the side that he has said are lagging behind - and says:

> **Six minutes time, I tell you (.) you'll be fine, right? But you're right not to laugh at that. It's not a proper joke, right?**

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[40] A. Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p.35.
[41] F. Ajaye, *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand-Up Comedy* (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 2002), p.14.

It's just (.) based on a shared set of assumptions, doesn't work.[42]

A little under six minutes later, Lee is talking about the fact that the funeral of Pope John Paul II was arranged for the same day as the wedding of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, causing the wedding to be moved to avoid a conflict. Lee jokes that they should not have cancelled the wedding because 'that's what split screen television technology was invented for,' before going on to make another 'cerebral', or perhaps incomplete, joke:

Although it is hard, isn't it, to imagine which one of those events would have been the most distressing to watch... [laugh] **you know?** [laugh continues]**...the public veneration of a wrinkled old corpse...**

This, admittedly, is an easier joke for the audience to 'get' than is the *Da Vinci Code* joke. Lee utilises a common joke structure, making a statement which would be appropriate to one of two concepts that he has introduced ('the public veneration of a wrinkled old corpse' as a description of the Pope's funeral – a statement which is itself incongruous in its irreverence) and then matching it instead with the other concept ('the public veneration[...]' as a description of the royal wedding). Unlike the *Da Vinci Code* joke, which provides minimal information from which 'M2' may be discerned, this latter joke directs the audience straight to it. Both, however, make use of the audience's awareness of Lee's pattern. Like the *Da Vinci Code* joke, this latter joke makes an observation, hints at a shared reaction to it, and then leaves the audience to identify the funny angle associated with it. This is Lee's pattern in terms of content, and is accompanied by a verbal and physical pattern which cues the audience to pay attention and identify it. In this latter gag, Lee slows his pace as he comes to the end of the utterance, and then leaves a long pause. Having made a sharp downward movement with his left hand during the final section of the utterance, he now repeats that movement twice with more emphasis, mirroring the movements that accompanied the *Da Vinci Code* joke. Once the line has been said, he opens his mouth and closes it again, giving an emphatic nod, as if he had been about to carry on speaking

[42] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*

but had stopped upon realising that the audience, finally, are able to keep up. The laughter now sweeps around the whole of the room.

Although Lee stops speaking, his movements suggest the carrying-on of the utterance, clearly signalling that the audience should be filling in the remainder of the words in their own minds. Now familiar with the formula, knowing that such a simple statement of facts is supposed to lead them to search for the presence of incongruity, the majority of the audience deliver the laugh. Lee goes on to recognise the pattern that he has established, saying that they now have a section of the room ahead of the punch lines, and emphasising that the audience should indeed be making the effort to complete the jokes in their own minds:

> **And if you, if anyone had anticipated that joke and was holding back from laughing out of kind of politeness to me** [laugh]**...thinking, 'oh he won't like it if we guess his jokes' right,** [laugh]... **I don't care, I would welcome it. I think it's good, right, 'coz if you think about it (.) I have to write about an hour and a half of jokes every [year] - that's quite hard, right?** [couple of chuckles] **but what's just happened suggests (.) that with the correct (.) encouragement of audiences,** [small laugh] **I wouldn't have to write any jokes.** [laugh] **I could just come out with a list of topics** [laugh], **read them out** [couple of chuckles], **and you (.) could think of something amusing about them** [laugh starts] **in your own heads** [laugh] **then if you didn't like the show (.) that would be your fault** [laugh].

While this joke is built on the premise that Lee is reacting to an unexpected behaviour from his audience, the whole incident has been created by Lee's own expert craftsmanship. Over the course of just under ten minutes, Lee is building his audience's capacity to work to a specific pattern. He rewards their cooperative tendencies while punishing the uncooperative, in a bid to create the unity that will be essential to get the show through the challenging and controversial material that follows. These jokes reflect upon this process, identify those who are and are not 'up to speed' - meaning those who do or do not recognise the pattern and respond accordingly - and praise those who are 'ahead of the punchlines', indicating that Lee is well aware of the process in which he is involved.[43]

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[43] *Ibid.*

Offstage, Lee states that he is aware that he actively trains his audience to work with the unusual pattern of his joking.[44] This much is manipulative, as it involves using his skill to lead the audience to adopt certain cognitive patterns. However, the purpose of Lee's oblique style goes beyond manipulation to influence:

> [P]art of the pleasure of any piece of art (and I think stand-up is art), is having the fun of figuring out for yourself[...]I build that in quite self-consciously, giving the audience the pleasure of figuring it out for themselves. People often say as a criticism of me that it's so slow and it's really obvious where it's going. But it isn't obvious where its going, always, it's like what I do is I give them just enough information for them to figure it out for themselves, and they laugh before I've actually finished the thing off. Y'know, and I like that, 'cause it means they're, sort of, engaged[...]I often don't finish [jokes]. You sort of do half a joke, and just leave it[...]and also that has the effect that there's normally about ten per cent of the audience going, 'What was that? What's everyone laughing at? He hasn't finished!' And then I feel they've got to raise their game[...]Because basically, I think everything's so passively consumed in the world today, and spelt-out for people, that you're trying to remind an audience that they are having an actual live experience, that they will have to listen.[45]

For Lee, then, re-educating a modern, hyper-mediated audience to connect with live performance presents both a challenge and an opportunity:

> As well as everything being spoon-fed today there's, like, amplification and noise, fast editing[...]So you kind of feel[...]the way to get people's attention is to kind of do the opposite of that, because you can't compete with that level of volume and speed and information. The only thing you can do is, like, go right back to basics.

For Lee, the 'unfinished' joke is a mechanism for engaging an audience more deeply; forcing them to do some of the work so that they cannot consume the material passively. This enhanced level of engagement necessarily means that audience members who are able to follow the odd patterning of Lee's material will connect with it, and cognitively process it, in a more profound way than other modes of performance, with their 'noise' and 'fast editing' can ever encourage.

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[44] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[45] *Ibid.*

Chapter Six

Delivery III: Comic Licence and Manufactured Consensus

Manufacturing Consensus: The structure of an act, and the establishment of comic licence

In his essay, 'Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', Mintz suggests that all jokes, even those which appear benign, serve as social challenge; they 'contain a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be.'[1] Both the comedy event and the person of the comedian must therefore operate under comic licence, allowing a 'dysfunctional' persona to revel in 'dysfunctional' views of the world which can easily be discounted and rejected, so that the gap may be identified and attacked within a safe structure. Equally, however, the comedian's marginal observations may be 'publically [*sic*] affirmed under the guise of "mere comedy," or "just kidding,"' in which instance the comedian becomes the 'comic spokesperson', revealing that gap and championing the attack upon it.[2] This view is reflected in Linstead's idea of joking as a 'bracket' in which ideas may be experimented without the danger of infecting everyday interaction.[3] The point is that, for the joking to work, all of the participants in the stand-up event must recognise that what is said occurs under the auspices of comic licence.

Mintz identifies two key processes that comedians undertake at the start of their acts in order to establish an atmosphere in which social practices may be questioned, and the boundaries of consensus tested. Firstly:

> The comedian must establish *for the audience* that the group is homogenous, a community, if the laughter is to come easily. 'Working the room,' as comedians term it, loosens the audience and allows for laughter as an expression of shared values rather than as a personal predilection.[4]

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[1] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.77.
[2] *Ibid*, p.74.
[3] Linstead, 'Jokers Wild'.
[4] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.78.

The comedian will then establish his own comic persona, a process that, 'allows the audience to accept that comedian's marginal status and to establish that the mood of comic license is operative.'[5]

Here Mintz is deconstructing the complex process of 'warming-up' the audience. This is not only a matter of relaxing the audience and ensuring that they are capable of producing laughter easily; the warm-up also allows the comedian to establish that comic licence is in operation, and that all following statements are to be read within the safe bracket of the joke. Furthermore, the comedian asserts that the disparate collection of individuals in attendance is in fact a unified group with a shared consensus, thus allowing the group to feel secure in the knowledge that their laughter is acceptable to their peers, and any potentially risky value-judgements involved in the joking are shared with others. The comedian is established as the focus of this group, and their immunity as a 'dysfunctional' accepted.

Although Mintz discusses these functions in relation to the earliest moments of a stand-up set, stating that they occur before, and essentially as a separate entity to, the 'comedy routine itself,' this is only part of the process.[6] The 'warm-up' may in fact involve an ongoing process which extends throughout the set, allowing the comedian to extend into more controversial, complex or difficult material as the audience become more attuned to the ethos of the gig and the persona of the comedian. Indeed, it is this ongoing attention to the need firmly to establish and maintain comic licence that allows Stewart Lee to pull off an impressive feat of crowd-control: obtaining applause for the terrorist activity of the IRA.[7]

This moment occurs during a routine about the 2005 London Bombings, performed in Cardiff in 2006, in which Lee compares Al Qaeda to the IRA:

> **But, Cardiff, who are these inhuman bombers that strike, they strike at the very heart of our society with no respect for human life, without even the courtesy of a perfunctory warning? It makes you nostalgic, doesn't it, for the good old days of the IRA.** [laugh] **'Coz they gave warnings, didn't they?**

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[5] *Ibid*, p.79.
[6] *Ibid*, p.79.
[7] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian*.

> **They were gentleman bombers.** [laugh] **The finest terrorists** (.) [small laugh] **this country's ever had** (.) [small laugh] **we'll not see their like again.** [laugh] **Let's, let's have a little clap for the IRA, come on, give them a little clap.** [Audience applauds] **Give them a clap, right. 'Coz the IRA, they were decent, British terrorists. They didn't wanna be British,** [laugh] **but they were.** [big laugh] **And as such they couldn't help but embody some fundamentally decent, British values.** [laugh] **We'll miss 'em now they're gone.** [small laugh][8]

Perhaps Lee has some mitigating factors to rely upon here. It is likely that many of Lee's audience are too young to remember the time when the threat of IRA bombing was a dominant public concern. This routine is performed in Wales, while the main threat of IRA bombings, and indeed of Al Qaeda attacks, was focused on England. Thus it could be argued that the notion of the IRA will be more distant and less emotive to this audience than it might be to an audience of older Londoners. Yet it cannot be argued that Lee is on safe ground here. Some of his audience are old enough to remember the IRA bombings of the 1980s. The resurgence of terrorist activity by Al Qaeda, and the death and injury that accompanied it, made terrorism a current and emotive topic when this routine was performed in March 2006. That Lee successfully persuades his audience to issue applause for the terrorist activity of the IRA is a striking demonstration of the comedian's ability to manipulate the boundaries of consensus.

Remembering this routine over four years later, Lee recalls the rationale behind this piece:

> Well, I can't remember exactly[...]what the set up for that bit was[...]I think basically[...]that the extent to which Islamic terrorism – well, Islam's - been so demonised and yet, when I was a kid in Birmingham and the IRA were blowing up nightclubs and killing teenagers[...]there used to be trade union marches, you know, by the *left* into Irish ghettos complaining about them. And the notion, forty years later, that you would have Irish theme pubs just seems impossible, you know. And everyone loves Ireland now. So I thought that it would be an interesting thing to do to, sort of, use the language in a manipulative way[...]to say that the Irish terrorists were better; that they had *(laughs)* like, achievable aims and they always phoned in warnings and stuff like that. But also there's an element of truth in it whereby that style of terrorism, whereby it was a bargaining tool, seems just so old-fashioned now, compared to things where the aims seem

[8] *Ibid.*

> much less [clear] - or more simple in a way, which is just, sort of, punishment[...]for being sinful and wrong; there isn't like, necessarily an obvious bargaining chip in it. But, I mean, it was really, really good fun using that - doing that in Northern Ireland, particularly, somewhere like Derry or places with a real history of sectarian issues. Because people applaud it, I think, before they realise what they're applauding, because you couch it in a language that sounds reasonable. But[...]around the time that I did that, [Patrick] Kielty and Andrew Maxwell, who are both Irish - Paddy Kielty's from Northern Ireland and Andrew Maxwell's Republic of Ireland but he's protestant – [...]they both used this very similar phrase about the 'nobility of Irish terrorism,' which suggests to me it must have been out there. Somebody must have said it[...]But yeah, the thing there was definitely to, sort of, wrong-foot the audience, and I try and do that a lot to get them to[...]applaud or laugh at things that I then criticise them for laughing or applauding at.[9]

As Lee states, the use of 'a language that sounds reasonable' is one way in which this set manages to convince the audience to applaud. Lee presents his subversive idea in such a way as to make it seem logical. Close analysis of this set reveals that structure – the positioning of this moment within the show as a whole and the build-up to it – is also vitally important in allowing Lee to perform this contentious piece of material not only safely (in that he does not lose the cooperation of his audience or suffer serious reprisal), but with an explicit, if perhaps reluctant, display of approval in the form of applause. Lee has arranged his material in such a way as to deliver the controversial idea that the IRA were 'decent', 'gentleman bombers' within a logical order and time frame which allows the audience gradually to warm up to the point where, around eighteen minutes into the show, he can request and be granted applause for IRA terrorism.

Having begun his show with a brief set of jokes about its unusual length and structure, and the behaviour expected of the audience, Lee begins the show proper with an immediate, but so far inoffensive reference to the July 7 bombings:

> **Now on, um, Thursday the seventh of July, 7/7, I woke up, in London, er, at about midday. And already I can sense people going yeah, 'course you did Stew, you slept through that (.)**

[9] Stewart Lee, Interview. [Lee's emphasis].

major (.) news event, because you are a lazy...stand-up comedian (small laugh)[10]

Although Lee's joke poses no serious ethical dilemma - it chastises his own failings, and says nothing about terrorism or its effects - this introduction already begins to minimise the emotive impact that a reference to that day, and those events, may have. While the device of beginning the story with a significant date is rather dramatic, the way that Lee phrases his date - 'Thursday the seventh of July,' which suggests a date in the calendar, rather than '7/7', which more specifically denotes the July bombings - functions to begin a process of detachment which distances the audience from traditional reactions to the events which happened on that day. Lee further minimises the impact of the event by saying that he slept through it, despite being in the very city in which it occurred. Rather than describing the bombing from the perspective of its immediate victims and witnesses, as is the common and more emotive approach employed in the mainstream media's handling of the story, Lee gives us an account formed from the point of view of one who was not immediately connected to events. The result is that the terrorist activity, and the damage and pain that it inflicted, are placed into wider perspective and deprived of the iconic power that made '7/7' a widely emotive topic.

This first joke completed, the topic of terrorism immediately gives way to less dangerous material, as Lee goes on to explain that his over-sleeping was due to his having arrived home late the night before following a gig in Lincoln, with the routine easily evolving on to a set of jokes which mock the lack of sophistication of the Lincoln audience, and Lee's own foolishness in dealing with them. He then loops briefly back to the topic of the July bombings, describing how he, not having heard the news that London had been bombed, incongruously misinterprets his emails and text messages:

> **And the first thing I did on 7/7 when I woke up, was I checked all my emails, right, and the first one in was from an American comic called Jackie Kashian, that I'd worked with in Perth in June, and it was just one line it just said...'are you alright?'** [couple of laughs]**...So I emailed back (.) 'yes, fine, thanks how are you?'** [laugh]**...And the next one was**

[10] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*

> **from a New Zealand comic called Ben Hurley who I'd worked with in Auckland in May, same thing, one line, 'are you alright?'**[small laugh]**...so I emailed back 'yes fine thanks how are you?'** [small laugh]

Lee explains that he got approximately fifteen further emails and twenty text messages from friends around the world, all asking 'are you alright?', and gets a good laugh as he goes on to explain: 'Now, as you may or may not know, I did have quite a difficult year'. Lee deviates onto the various medical and legal problems that had beset him, and returns only very briefly to the story of his own personal and insular experience on the day of the London bombings. Again, the joke is at the expense of his own ignorance, rather than the events of the day:

> **So it had been** (.) **a difficult year, and** [laugh]**...while I was touched** [laugh]**...that all of my friends had chosen to enquire after my welfare, it did seem strange** [couple of laughs]**...that they had all chosen** [couple of laughs]**...the same morning to do that** [laugh]

From here, Lee launches into a routine about an endoscopy that he had earlier that year, leading smoothly into a routine that discusses Joe Pasquale's theft of a joke from lesser-known comic Michael Redmond (discussed in Chapter Two). Again, this material puts Lee on safer ground. The topics are not as emotive, nor are Lee's approaches as taboo, as Lee's later discussion of terrorism. Lee talks about his endoscopy in such a way as to expose his own embarrassment. The routine also relates ignorant and insensitive comments made by Lee's doctor and nurse on the fact that his medical notes describe him as a 'famous comedian'. There is no moral dilemma caused by Lee's mockery of either himself or the people who, in the context of the endoscopy, hold a high status. It is mockery of those with low status and genuine anguish, as is the case when a tragedy with many victims like the July bombings is discussed, that causes moral difficulty.[11] Similarly, when Lee comes to attack Joe Pasquale, he frames Pasquale as the high-status 'mainstream' performer, attributing to Redmond an obscure and more vulnerable status. Altogether, this detour on to safer subjects

[11] J. Levinson, *The Morality and Immorality of Jokes*, Research Seminar, University of Kent, 25 November 2008.

allows Lee to talk for over ten minutes without any reference to terrorism or the July bombings.

Returning to the story of the seventh of July, Lee now arrives at the routine which will culminate in asking the audience to applaud the IRA. He is now just over fifteen minutes into his show, and has laid the ground for more controversial material. We rejoin the story at the point at which Lee has realised that something must have happened; he switches on the television news, paving the way for the first bit of really dangerous material on the subject of the July bombings. Lee reads (what he presents as) direct quotations from victims who had survived the terrorist attacks in an impassive near-monotone, which serves to place the statements out of context and suggests that they should be taken literally, in which circumstance they appear deeply ridiculous. The audience's uncertain reaction to the joke paves the way for Lee to explicitly address his audience's discomfort surrounding the treatment of this topic as entertainment:

> **By now it was about three hours after the London Al Qaeda bombings, and on TV news there was all these kind of insensitive news journalists, running around, trying to get statements out of bomb survivors that weren't really in a fit state to give statements. And I, I started writing them down, right. This was, um, a guy (.) that had survived the King's Cross Bomb, and he said to camera, he said, 'the rescue workers have been amazing, really amazing. I mean, I take my hat off to them...I'm not wearing a hat'** [laugh]**...'obviously'** [laugh]**...'but if I was'** [laugh]**...'I would take it off'** [laugh]**...Laughs over here, a smattering of applause, and then (.) doubt spreading towards the back corner** [laugh]**...Now, don't judge me for this, ok, don't be uncomfortable, I am a human being like you, I'm a member of society, I watched that news report, I thought I hope these people are ok, and things don't pan out too badly, er, for the world situation. But on the other hand I am also a comedian so I was thinking, 'mind you, it's quite funny I should write it down'** [laugh][12]

By beginning this routine with a reference to the 'insensitive news journalists' and 'survivors that weren't really in a fit state to give statements', Lee excuses the survivors and places the blame for the ridiculous statements that they made on to the journalists. While in

[12] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*

reality the bomb survivors remain the butt of the joke, by accusing the journalists of exploiting the survivors Lee gives the audience a way out of the moral dilemma; the journalists are at the root of the ridiculousness of these statements, and it is they, not the audience, who are the opportunists guilty of exploiting the pain of the survivors. The audience may therefore redirect blame for any trespass of decency towards the journalists, and away from themselves and Lee. In talking about his own dual reaction to the bombings - as a compassionate member of society and as a comedian - Lee emphasises both the licence and protection afforded by his status as comedian, and that it is possible to operate in this mode while also remaining a responsible and compassionate individual.

Lee has given his audience an easily-discernable set of rules; by highlighting both his status as comedian and the marginal nature of the stand-up event, Lee tells his audience that here, within this performance, it is acceptable to laugh at serious and emotive subjects. Following this gag, Lee delivers one more statement from a bomb survivor. The audience laugh, reaffirming the acceptability of the topic. From there, Lee immediately goes on to the section transcribed earlier, asking, 'But, Cardiff, who are these inhuman bombers[...]?', and going on to gain applause for the IRA's approach to terrorism.

It is important to recognise that Lee's audience are not delivering an unqualifiedly positive response. There is an uncomfortable quality to the laughter given in response to the bomb survivor statements. When Lee asks for applause for the IRA, the DVD footage offers close-ups of various audience members, revealing that some are not clapping. Those who do applaud appear uncomfortable, both during the applause and afterwards. Interestingly, the applause is very short. Max Atkinson demonstrates that audiences instinctively and regularly keep this kind of display of approval to a length of between seven and nine seconds, and that applause may usually be expected to 'begin to get underway either just before or immediately after the speaker reaches such a completion point.'[13] This applause lasts for a mere three seconds, and the audience hesitates, leaving a pause between the completion of Lee's request and the beginning of the applause, which begins in a gradual

[13] M. Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices*, p.25; p.33.

and uncertain canon rather than bursting out in impressive unison. Several of the audience members who can be seen during this routine have their hands held up to their faces, covering their mouths. One woman, having applauded the IRA, fiddles with the fingernails of her right hand and briefly glances at the fingers, seemingly unsure about whether she should be going along with the joke and allowing herself to become complicit in the statements Lee is making, or pointedly withdraw her participation from the event.

According to Lee, this is success:

> [It's] counter-intuitive in a way, because the most obvious thing to do in stand-up is to try and get everyone on side, but I like to create a feeling of confusion in the room where people don't really know if they're supposed to be laughing or not. And that was reflected when I've shot stuff for DVD and video, and for television, over the years[...]I've tried to find a way of filming it where you don't cut away to reaction shots. If you look at something like Michael McIntyre or *Live at the Apollo* or whatever – or in fact the way that all stand-up is shot – after a line you cut away to a reaction shot of an individual or a collection of individuals. And they're all doing something – either frowning or laughing or gasping – that, presumably, is what you, the viewer at home, are supposed to be doing. Whereas with[...]the DVDs I've shot, I tried to get reactions that were mixed. Or to show me against a backdrop of people who might all be reacting in different ways, to try and preserve for the viewer that feeling of not being sure how you're supposed to respond[...]I would ideally try to create a number of varied and contradictory [responses] by using language that's manipulative in such a way as some people might respond to it differently to other people. But I also like the audience to be aware that they're being manipulated, I think; y'know, that's half the fun of it[...]part of the joke.[14]

In Chapter Eight we will come to a further discussion of why Lee takes this unusual approach to stand-up comedy, and the influence he exerts by doing so. For our present purposes it is important only to note the level of Lee's manipulative skill and his awareness of it. He seeks purposefully to create a feeling of uncertainty and discomfort among both his live and DVD audiences. The audience will be aware that they have been manipulated; that they know that they have been tricked is part of the joke; the enjoyment of Lee's skill in orchestrating the manipulation is 'half the fun of it'.

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[14] Stewart Lee, Interview.

By contrast, when Lee states that the IRA 'didn't want to be British but they were', thus turning the bombers from heroes to victims of mockery, the laugh is louder and more comfortable; perhaps embodying a feeling of relief that the IRA are once again placed in the position of 'other', being criticised rather than praised. This example represents a common technique employed within Lee's work. By including safer gags among more controversial ones, Lee ensures that laughs come regularly, asserting that comic licence is still in operation.

There are many factors which make the IRA routine work. Lee's audience have come specifically to see him, and are therefore likely to be well-prepared for the controversial flavour and ambiguity of attitude which characterises much of Lee's most distinctive material. Part of the joke is the outrageousness of what the audience is being asked to participate in, and Lee's blatantly manipulative abuse of power. However, it is the structure of Lee's material, the gradual build through various stages which expose and refute the taboo of discussing the bombings in such frank terms, which allows Lee's audience to come to terms with the topic, and provides them with a moral escape route. Through the expert structure of this routine, Lee builds a network of mitigating factors which absolve the audience of responsibility for their compliance. Most importantly, he emphasises to them that the whole activity takes place under the rule of comic licence, and therefore need not have any consequences in the 'real' world. That they are still left in some doubt about the acceptability of their actions is part of Lee's joke and a testament to his expert management; that they comply at all is a product of the set's ingenious structure.

Manufacturing Consensus: The (selective) use of logic

Zijderveld sees jokes as powerful entities which expose our dominant ideologies; in fact, evidence of what a society jokes about is a better indicator of its preoccupations than the evidence of a more straightforward opinion poll.[15] Like Douglas and Lash, Zijderveld sees the element of 'challenge' as vital to joking: for Zijderveld joking is about deviating from the 'norm' in order to expose the perceived notion of

[15] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', pp.307-308.

normality and allow us to question why it should be so.[16] Zijderveld therefore identifies four categories of joking, which represent four areas of human experience in which the joker may deviate from the norm: 'socio-cultural and political life at large'; 'the meaning of language'; 'traditional emotions', and 'traditional logic'.[17]

Zijderveld identifies two ways of deviating from traditional logic:

> [T]he joke can deviate from normal logic in that it transports logical thinking into the realm of the absurd, or it can deviate from our standard logic in that it beats normal, average logic by hyper-logical, hyper-cunning intelligence.[18]

Taken together, Zijderveld's idea about the function of logic in humour, and his suggestion about the very real social impact joking may have, create important opportunities for the comedian as manipulator. 'Hyper-logic' implies that the joker has created an idea that, although ridiculous, is based upon a logical, often rigorously factual, premise. Human beings harbour a set of characteristics which may make them susceptible to the use of biased logic and hyper-logic. Firstly, as Allport identifies, effort is 'objectionable'; people are innately lazy when it comes to testing received opinions and ideas, and it stands to reason that we might be especially reluctant to test ideas when rewarded with laughter for not doing so.[19] Lippmann further states that human beings necessarily have a rather detached and contrived relationship with reality; unable to know of every event and occurrence in the world around us, or to comprehend the complexity even of our own limited experience, we necessarily interpret our environment by simplifying it, thus creating a pseudo-environment based on the limited information we are able to obtain and process. Self-interest also plays its part in constructing the pseudo-environment:

> For the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations[...]we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model

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[16] Douglas, 'Jokes', p.155.
Lash, 'A Theory of the Comic as Insight'.
[17] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.299.
[18] *Ibid*, p.301.
[19] Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, p.21.
Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, p.103.

> before we can manage with it. To traverse the world men must have maps of the world. Their persistent difficulty is to secure maps on which their own need, or someone else's need, has not sketched in the coast of Bohemia.[20]

This combination of theories points to some significant possibilities for stand-up comedy. If an audience thinks in the way suggested above then they have both the incentive to adopt the comedian's logic as a premise, and the experience and well-practiced skills to traverse the world using the given 'map'.

Analysis of stand-up demonstrates that this is a staple method for manufacturing consensus. Consensus is particularly vital in Mark Thomas' work. While it is true that Thomas attracts a rather specific audience who are likely to be predisposed to agree with him, his material does challenge the consensus of even this specialised audience. Much of Thomas' material is potentially controversial, with past shows having encouraged audience members to harass the police by creating excess paperwork and to participate in protest demonstrations, as well as praising the efforts of campaigners who have broken the law with various acts including trespass and vandalism.[21] As Thomas encourages his audience to see the purpose and virtue of potentially dubious actions that have physically taken place in the real world, he discusses and encourages activities that the mainstream of the British populace would not contemplate carrying out for themselves.

Just as Stewart Lee gradually builds consensus for the controversial use of terrorism as a topic for amusement over the first fifteen minutes of his show, Thomas will generally make an early effort to assert the moral virtue of his standpoint and justify his position. His 2007 show *Serious Organised Criminal* attacks part of the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act (SOCPA) which made it illegal to hold demonstrations in a designated area surrounding Parliament Square without first applying for, and receiving, police permission.[22] The show discusses Thomas' campaign to have this law repealed, which hinged on the tactic of

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[20] W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: The Free Press, 1922), p.11.
[21] Mark Thomas, *Serious Organised Criminal.* Phil McIntyre Television. 2007. DVD.
Mark Thomas, *The Night War Broke Out.*
[22] Mark Thomas, *Serious Organised Criminal.*

submitting as many applications to demonstrate as possible. This would create administrative difficulties, waste police time and make the law costly to maintain, while at the same time exposing the foolishness of having such a law in the first place. It is vital that the audience agree that the law is not only unjust, but also defeatable; if Thomas cannot muster consensus on these points his audience will neither enjoy, nor be persuaded to act upon, the material that he will present. He thus sets to work almost immediately to dismantle the authority and validity of the law.

Thomas begins his story by introducing SOCPA:

> **I should explain, tonight's show is about the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act. It's the bit of the law that David Blunkett brought in to get Brian Haw the peace campaigner.**[23]

By introducing SOCPA in these terms, Thomas subtly reduces the law to an attack upon one individual, which implies a rather cowardly and disproportionate approach by Blunkett and the government to persecute one person. That the law should have been brought in to attack a peace protestor, whose right to protest we may assume Thomas' audience would broadly uphold, appears suitably despicable, and from this starting point Thomas easily establishes the idea that to quash Haw's rights by limiting everybody else's rights is tyrannical. Thomas further explains that a judge has decreed that the law cannot be applied retrospectively, and thus does not apply to Brian Haw, 'so the very man they brought the law in to get, it doesn't work for.'[24]

Thomas goes on to continue to reduce the authority of the law, showing it to be ridiculous in detail and application as well as in concept. Finally, he comes to one of the more outrageous examples of SOCPA's unreasonably oppressive application:

> **It then gets weirder. My mate Sian** (.) **is having a picnic on parliament square** (.) **and the police come up to her and go 'you've gotto move, move right now', she goes 'no, no it's a picnic', 'no, no, no unlawful demonstration.' She went 'no, for the love of god, doily, cucumber sandwich'** [laugh]**...'picnic' The cops go, 'ah, cake' and point at her cake.**

[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*

> **It's a Victoria sponge with one word iced upon it, and that word is 'peace'. And the police deem her cake to be a political cake** [laugh]**...and she therefore needs permission from the police six days prior to breaking the Tupperware seal [and] exposing said cake to the public arena** [laugh]**...And I thought any law** (.) **that means we can be arrested** (.) **for a cake...we can play with** [laugh]

In delivering this segment, Thomas emphasises the words 'picnic' and 'cake', popping their satisfyingly short and punchy syllables out so that the bouncing hardness of the sounds is juxtaposed with each word's homely, innocent connotations. Thomas also places stronger emphasis on each of the words 'deem her cake to be a political cake', again creating an incongruous juxtaposition between a soft and innocuous object and the criminal purpose which the police are claiming it serves. He delivers the lines with an increasing sense of frustration, until by the time he says 'arrested for a cake' he is virtually shouting; he then draws back with a cheeky expression and wry smile as he says, teasingly, 'we can play with'. Turning the ridiculousness of the law back against the law itself appears noble and just; Thomas can therefore proceed to tell stories in which he and his colleagues create a nuisance, safe in the manufactured consensus that he has created for such activity.

Mark Thomas elicits consensus by appeal to logic, and, in the above cases at least, that logic is intended as a serious argument. When Thomas asserts that SOCPA is an unsuccessful attack on one man and allows innocent people to be arrested for a cake, a critical audience may perhaps identify that he is over-simplifying the situation. Nonetheless, despite the manipulative selectiveness with which Thomas has chosen to tell the truth, he has taken undeniably sound logic as his premise; he asserts as a fact that the most high-profile demonstration in the SOCPA designated area is unaffected by the law, and at root Sian's story does boil down to police intervention over a Victoria sponge. Both these facts lead to the logical conclusion that the law is ridiculous.

Thomas' 2009 tour *It's the Stupid Economy* placed particular emphasis on the participation of the audience in his political activism.[25] The audience was invited to submit policy ideas which were then debated in

[25] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy: The Manifesto*, Hazlitt Theatre, Hazlitt Arts Centre, Maidstone, 28 April 2009, 7:30pm.

the performance. Audiences cheered for the policy they wanted to keep through a series of knock-out rounds, until one winning policy remained. This policy was incorporated into the *People's Manifesto*, upon which Thomas immediately started campaigning and which was eventually published as a book.[26] The *Manifesto* was even represented by an official candidate in the 2010 General Election.[27] When audiences suggested and cheered for policies, it was in the knowledge that these were intended to result in real action, having real, practical effect.

Thomas observes that some policies went against the grain of his own social and political views:

> Not all the policies voted through were ones I agreed with, and some nights I found myself at odds with the proposers and indeed the audience. In Darlington the policy that won that evening was: 'Institute the Sky test on benefit claimants, so if you suck on the teat of Murdoch, no benefits for you.' Basically, if you are unemployed and have Sky, you get your benefits cut. I said to the chap who proposed it, 'You can't tell people on the dole what to do with their dole money.'[...]'But,' he said with a grin, 'if you campaign on this and are even halfway successful, you will force the *Sun* to run a counter-campaign arguing for the right of the unemployed to sit on their arses and watch telly.' And I have to admit, that nearly won me over.[28]

The forty policies that made it in to the published manifesto, however, come from the same broad political position as Thomas' other work. Even the policy proposing that Sky customers should get their benefit entitlement cut was couched as an attack against the right-wing tabloid press. Many of the published policies are attacks on the favourite targets of the left such as politicians, police, the wealthy and big business, and reinforce principles such as civil liberties. For example:

> Policy 1 – *Party manifestos should be legally binding.*

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[26] M. Thomas, *The People's Manifesto* (United Kingom: Ebury Press, 2010).
[27] Ebury Press, publishers of *The People's Manifesto*, pledged the deposit money for one candidate who was chosen by national competition. Entrants were required to select their key policies from the manifesto and state how they would fund and publicise their campaign. The winner was Danny Kushlick who stood in the Bristol West constituency, winning 343 votes (0.6%); BBC, 'Election 2010: Results, Bristol West', *BBC*, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/constituency/a73.stm>, [accessed 5 August 2010].
[28] M. Thomas, *The People's Manifesto*, Introduction.

Policy 2 – *Shut down tax havens...Bomb Switzerland.*

Policy 10 – *There should be a maximum wage.*

Policy 13 - *If MPs want a second job in order to gain a greater understanding of life outside government, then their constituents should chose which job they think would best expand their MP's horizons.*

Policy 14 - *The police should wear badges which display the words, 'How am I policing?' and 'I'm here to help.'*

Policy 26 - *Those in favour of ID cards should be banned from having curtains.*

Policy 27 - *Anyone found guilty of a homophobic hate crime shall serve their entire sentence in drag.*

Policy 29 - *Private health companies that use NHS-trained staff[...]should pay a levy worth 25 per cent of the staff pay to the NHS to reimburse them for the training costs and help with training in the future.*[29]

At the Maidstone performance, the vast majority of the policies read out on stage, and certainly of those supported by the audience, similarly embody the kind of leftist and liberal values that characterise Thomas' work both as stand-up and activist.[30] So embedded is the assumption that his audience will have a certain ideological make-up that Thomas is able to make a joke which refers to it, saying that he had received a viciously bigoted policy suggestion which ended in, 'Am I at the wrong gig?'. The audience acknowledge the truth implied in this statement (that Mark Thomas' audience is fervently liberal and humanitarian) by delivering a good laugh. Support act Will Hodgson observes that Thomas 'tends to bring out the good people' in any town. Although Thomas has insisted that he is not 'preaching to the converted', it is certainly the case that the majority of his audience are on his side before he begins. This is vital to the mechanics of this show: Thomas' audience must be willing to accept the premise that Thomas has directed both his support and his hostility in the correct directions and with a proportionate degree of intensity if his long, comic expositions on each topic are to be enjoyed and the audience united enough to agree a winning policy.

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[29] M. Thomas, *The People's Manifesto.*
[30] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy.*

Yet, although this audience is broadly united in political and social opinion, there are some topics which remain contentious even in this context of heightened unity and consensus. The policy suggestion 'Make assisted suicide legal, not difficult' receives a mixed response, perhaps partly due to the way in which Thomas delivers the suggestion - by pausing after the word 'legal' he makes 'not difficult' sound like a joke and attracts a sprinkling of giggles. Thomas successfully mongers support by identifying assisted suicide with compassion and personal freedom: 'let people choose to die with dignity? I think so.' He then puts the piece of paper on which the proposed policy is written defiantly on top of the pile of suggestions that have made it through to the next round. The audience give a solid display of approval, delivering strong, full applause. The policy does not gain sufficient support to win, but is taken seriously and supported throughout the rest of the show. That the audience response goes from uncertainty to definite support suggests that Thomas has won the audience's consensus on an issue about which they were initially uncertain. He has done so by creating a 'map of the world' upon which the audience's approach to the issue of euthanasia is solely about dignity. With such a map in operation, the audience have little choice but to accept euthanasia as a humane practice, and its denial as a callous means of inflicting humiliation and suffering.

When handling the similarly controversial topic of abortion in 1998, Thomas begins his routine by establishing for his audience that the correct approach is to support his view in favour of the legalisation of abortion, which he achieves by highlighting the illogical premise at the heart of the 'pro-lifer's' fundamental argument:

> **They have this whole *shit* of, like, 'we are here to save lives'. Now, the year before abortion was legalised two hundred and fifty women died at the hands of backstreet abortionists, so technically speaking you're not actually saving fucking lives.**[31]

In a later routine on the same subject, Thomas mongers support for his pro-choice approach both by calling on the expert opinion of his mother, explaining that she was 'a midwife in Glasgow before abortion

[31] Mark Thomas, *Mark Thomas Live*. Laughing Stock. 1998. Cassette.

was legalised, and she's militantly pro-choice', and subtly categorising women who have abortions as victims, and the pro-life demonstrator as aggressor.[32] He explains that his father was both a lay preacher and the 'rudest[...]man in the world', and celebrates the 'heckle' that he used to launch at pro-life protestors who demonstrated outside a Marie Stopes clinic near their home:

> **My Dad would drive past, lean out the window and go 'you fucking zealots!** [laugh and few claps] **What the fuck are you doing fucking intimidating vulnerable women like that? Call yourself a Christian? Read your bible: John 3!'** [laughter and applause][33]

Thomas employs a combination of appeal to basic values and logic, highlighting the emotional distress that the protestors caused to women who are obviously vulnerable by publicly chastising their decision to terminate pregnancy. It is easy to gain consensus for the idea that causing further distress to the vulnerable is morally wrong, and thus Thomas gains consensus for his approach to the topic.

Furthermore, the use of a joke (in the form of his father's ingenious heckle) to make the point means that the premise receives immediate validation from the audience. In this way, the audience fulfils its vital function as a reference group in such a way as to reinforce Thomas' point. As Lane and Sears note, every individual will identify themselves with particular groups and will be motivated to demonstrate agreement with them. This is a crucial factor in determining that individual's opinions: in deciding how to approach the world, the individual is guided by their wish to share characteristics with some people and separate themselves from others.[34] By giving the audience a cue to laugh, Thomas provides the opportunity for the audience to express its support for the pro-choice premise. That support becomes the collective norm. Having established this, the following, more controversial, joke achieves laughter with little difficulty. Thomas relates an encounter with a pro-life supporter which took place at a *New Statesman* dinner:

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[32] Mark Thomas, *The Night War Broke Out.*
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] R.E. Lane and D.O. Sears, *Public Opinion* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), Chapter 4.

> **I'm sitting thinkin', 'fucking hell, if you're one of these people who thinks all life-giving fluid is sacred I'm off to the fucking toilet for a wank'** [laugh]**...'I've just committed genocide, love'** [laugh]**...'There you go, there's a massacre on your napkin,'** [laugh] **'now shut the fuck up'** [laugh and a few claps]'[35]

Thomas then mimics his Edinburgh audience, saying, tuttingly and in a Scottish accent, 'there was no need for that'. This is a device Thomas has established and used several times previously in the show, imagining that some of the audience will dislike his more vulgar moments and characterising them as stern puritans. This allows him to voice the disagreements that he imagines his audience might have.[36] In this case, his comment addresses the vulgarity of the preceding jokes but, interestingly, not the controversial premise. Thomas has done all the work necessary to persuade the audience that, for this routine at least, they need to take the pro-choice side of the argument; it is the vulgarity, not the politics, of his statement that receives comment. The audience is trapped by a persuasive cycle: their laughter reinforces the validity of Thomas' stance, but it is Thomas who is creating scenarios in which cooperative responses such as laughter, which validate his points, are the natural – indeed the only 'correct' – response.[37]

Comedians themselves show awareness that controversial material can be made palatable. Start-out comedian Mark Simmons summarises a seemingly common view. When asked whether his sweet, naive persona causes difficulties for him in tackling difficult, contentious or offensive subjects he replies:

> Not really[...]because you can have any sort of take on any sort of subject - as long as you put your own take on it[...]I think you can hand-make a joke about anything and it not be offensive, like you can make it not offensive.[38]

More experienced comedian Joe Wilkinson expresses a similar attitude:

> I don't think there is anything that you shouldn't [talk about], any subject that is taboo, really, because it depends how you do

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[35] Mark Thomas, *The Night War Broke Out.*
[36] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.225.
[37] M. Atkinson, *Our Master's Voices.*
[38] Mark Simmons, Interview.

> it[...]Every subject is there to be, sort of, pulled apart but it depends[...]In very skilled hands it's funny and it's insightful and it's not just shock, in the wrong hands certain topics should never be talked about.[39]

Wilkinson gives the example of the high-profile case of the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, and the abduction of Shannon Matthews, which received much less media attention. While the topic of Madeleine's disappearance was one that preoccupied the public and formed an obvious point of reference for stand-up comedians, Wilkinson felt that to joke about this story was not worth the trespass of moral boundaries involved, explaining: 'Comedy isn't the most important thing in the world[...]its not important enough to get a laugh out of a tiny[...]girl going missing.'[40] However, Wilkinson felt that when comedians made jokes about the discrepancy between the levels of media coverage surrounding the disappearance of Madeleine McCann as compared to the similar story surrounding Shannon Matthews, a worthwhile point was being made:

> Some people have made some great points on stage[...]about the story, not about the girl[...]about the media's perception of this story[...]So there are things of that story that are worth talking about[...]the fact that [Madeleine] is[...]a beautiful little girl made the story more exciting to the public. And when [Shannon Matthews was reported missing], there wasn't the same energy to the story[...]because she wasn't...er...as delightful-looking as Madeleine[...]So there are things around the issues...so no topic is taboo.'[41]

Although Wilkinson links his comments strongly with personal preferences - noting, importantly, that the decision of what he should talk about generally comes from his personal sense of what he wants to say rather than what he feels he can get away with - in practice, Simmons and Wilkinson are referring to the same techniques that are at play in Mark Thomas' various pieces of consensus-building. When Simmons and Wilkinson talk about having a specific approach, such as tackling the topic of Madeleine McCann from the safe angle of an attack on the media, they are talking about finding a point on which consensus

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[39] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.
[40] *Ibid.*
[41] *Ibid.*

is easily established and building outwards from there. So in the case of the media-focused Madeleine McCann joke, the comedian may use the ostensible premise of an attack on the media to air a topic which is certainly going to be very sensitive and raw to the audience. For Mark Thomas, the starting premise is incontestable values and ideals such as decency, humanity and freedom, from which he is able to construct a logical pathway to consensus on more thorny issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

It is clear that Thomas' Maidstone audience were not wholeheartedly in favour of euthanasia, and it is unlikely that abortion was really such a clear-cut issue for the Edinburgh audience as their hearty laughter suggests. This is the danger of comedy logic. Issues do not need to be considered in full, nor assertions backed up with incontrovertible evidence; comic licence excuses the speaker from the demands of such rigorous quality-control. Yet the effect on the audience's thinking is ongoing, with the joking premise being carried over as the logical foundation on which the rest of the show is laid; it creates a feature on the audience's 'map of the world', which they use to traverse the rest of the show.[42] Examples such as those discussed above show how this principle may easily be carried further than we think. The danger, with any of these techniques of consensus-mongering, is that they allow ludicrous and immoral ideas to be validated with reference to the real, rather than the joking, world.

[42] Lippmann, *Public* Opinion, p.11.

Chapter Seven

Persona

Is persona a manipulative device?

In 2007, a full Gulbenkian Theatre waits for Jenny Éclair to take the stage.[1] The audience already know what their comedian looks and sounds like, and can even make an educated guess at the topics they expect Éclair to address, and the attitudes that she will take towards them. In buying their tickets, the audience have invested in the Éclair image: a cool, trashily sexy glamour girl with masses of energetic cynicism, who pays no heed to the sacred boundaries that surround bodily and behavioural taboos.[2] Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of Éclair's audience are, like her, female and over forty years of age; the public do not need to see the show to understand that Éclair's comedy will be tailored towards a specific demographic.

The stage is unusually cluttered for a comedy performance at this venue. There is a *chaise longue* covered with a fluffy pink throw and cushions, a pink table sporting large, sparkly gems, and a large picture frame suspended from the ceiling, framing a projector screen. When Éclair herself appears, she is decorated with similar glitz; a purple shirt covered by a sparkling gold jacket, and glittery gold shoes with a killer heel. Éclair's material, like her appearance, suggests that she is an extreme personality. She is often outrageous, relating tales of behaviour she has indulged in which her audience would not dream of replicating. Yet Éclair is easy to relate to. This show focuses on the reality of getting older, and Éclair discusses in detail the changes in her body, lifestyle and attitude that have come with middle age. Her language is littered with tag questions such as 'don't you?', 'wouldn't you?', 'don't we?', which call upon the audience for confirmation that they share her experience. She has soon established a strong sense of bonhomie. By talking about embarrassing experiences and expressing cynical attitudes

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[1] Jenny Éclair, *Because I Forgot to Get a Pension*, Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 27 October 2007, 7:45pm.
[2] C. Barker, 'The "Image" in Showbusiness', *Theatre Quarterly*, 3 (1978), pp.7-11.

as if they were universals of human experience, she de-stigmatises such bodily taboos as incontinence and gives her audience permission to indulge cynical attitudes: they can admit that their partners' attempts at romance bore them, and feel that they are entitled to read their teenage daughters' diaries.

Éclair tells the audience how her life has settled into gloomy normality with middle age. She relates an incident which she feels demonstrates that her dull ordinariness has reached embarrassing levels. She is sitting at home with her husband when, in great astonishment, he calls her over to the window to see a frog which is sitting in their pond. 'Well!' says Éclair, *'I put down my knitting!'* The audience deliver a loud, bursting laugh.

The joke is successful, and it relies for its success upon the audience's understanding of Éclair's persona. The word 'knitting' focuses the clash between the image of Éclair the party-girl and the cosy domesticity she has described, and moves it up a notch. That she can rely upon her persona as a key reference point for a joke demonstrates one of the key functions of the comedian's persona: that of economy. Éclair does not need to explain for the audience that she is not the type of person who knits because the clarity of her persona tells them this. They can thus deduce, quickly and effortlessly, that the word 'knitting' is intended as a joke, and that it is a good one. As Dan Atkinson states:

> The theory is, to be successful, you need a very clearly-defined stage persona. If you look at any well-known, successful comic you can probably sum up what they do in two or three words. And that's very crucial, because you want as few barriers between yourself, the audience and the comedy. So if they know who you are and where you're coming from very early then it's easier - they know what you might think on a subject[...]and if the audience can pre-empt how you might address a subject, it allows it to be funnier. It allows them to buy into it.[3]

Clive Barker theorises this professional knowledge, and in fact sees the persona as an essentially limiting structure, stating:

> [A]udiences are remarkably eclectic in what they will take at large and yet discriminating within very narrow boundaries as to what they will accept from individuals[...]The unifying principle seems

[3] Dan Atkinson, Interview.

> to be that the audience like to know where it is in a relationship and tends not to like being disturbed.[4]

Barker also makes a separation between the performer's 'image', which is 'the residual memory of a performer outside the performance,' and the persona, which is the representation that the audience encounter on the night. Image and persona have different functions, because 'the image attracts an audience to a theatre. The performance persona is what sends them home happy.'[5] As Barker further notes; 'The image or persona is a fabrication. It is a part played as consciously as the actor assumes his role.'[6]

In his 2008 documentary *Rob Brydon's Identity Crisis*, Brydon allows his search for a comic persona to be shown with a striking level of candour which reveals the stage personality for the construct that it is.[7] Although he had already established a successful career as a stand-up comedian, Brydon had previously performed in character as Keith Barret. Faced with the task of putting together a show that explores his personal sense of national identity, Brydon is forced to create an onstage personality which represents the 'real' Rob Brydon. Although he is an experienced performer, the seemingly simple task of 'being himself' proves difficult. The first show in which Brydon delivers material about Welsh identity, performed at the Glee Club in Cardiff, receives a negative response from the audience. In retrospect, he lays the blame on the aggressive negativity of his persona. He admits that he had been 'mean' and 'very judgemental'.[8]

To tackle the problem, Brydon decides to adopt a more cheerful, optimistic persona. He demonstrates that this is a conscious manipulation of audience perception, saying:

> So what I'm going to do is smile a bit more and be a bit friendlier, and I'm gonna be wary of making the Welsh character in my jokes the victim or the[...]butt of the joke every time.[9]

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[4] Barker, 'The "Image" in Showbusiness', p.8.
[5] *Ibid*, p.7.
[6] *Ibid*, p.8.
[7] Rob Brydon, *Rob Brydon's Identity Crisis*, BBC Four, 29 February 2008, 9pm. Television broadcast.
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

Brydon then puts this into practice, changing the standpoint from which his material is delivered. We see him going over material from the Glee Club gig, saying, 'I should, sort of, change "we couldn't have a Welsh rapper" to "we've got welsh rappers" - to make it more positive.'[10]

Brydon's final gig demonstrates his honed new positive persona. He opens by declaring everything 'lovely'; it is 'lovely to be here', the audience is lovely, the building is lovely, he's feeling lovely.[11] When he mocks the Welsh, he does so from a positive starting point. For example, he introduces a routine about Welsh pilots by claiming that they are 'the best in the world'. He then plays on the traditional stereotype that the Welsh are dim-witted by introducing the character of a Welsh pilot who attempts to fly an aeroplane without knowing how. Although the actions of the Pilot character are extremely dangerous, he is given an endearing optimism and determination. Throwing his arm forward in an enthusiastically blasé gesture, he cries, 'You know what? I'm gonna 'av a go!' The audience responds well, and Brydon clearly feels more comfortable with his new persona. This friendliness has longevity: a review by Steve Bennett written a year later describes Brydon as 'a natural wit with a disarmingly charming manner. He's the hot towel of comedy: warm, cosy and refreshing.'[12]

It may be that Brydon's original, 'mean and judgemental' act did not contain funny jokes. However, the fact that Brydon kept much of the same material, changing mainly its attitude and approach, suggests that the content and observations within it were sound. In reviewing the gig, Brydon observes, 'It shows what you can do if you just change[...]the attitude to it - you can say anything, really.' The reverse has also been demonstrated; if the audience will not accept a comedian's attitude, they will not accept his material. While Brydon makes the fair point that audiences do not want to be abused, the fact remains that several comedians do succeed with exactly the kind of attitude that Brydon adopted in the Glee Club gig. The difference may not be that the audience would not tolerate anti-Welsh material – for the edited material

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] S. Bennett, 'Rob Brydon Live', *Chortle*, (February 2009) <http://www.chortle.co.uk/shows/tour/r/16027/rob_brydon_live/review?id_review=16027>, [accessed 27 June 2010].

is still a thinly-disguised jibe at the Welsh – but that they would not tolerate it from Brydon. Barker suggests that we could:

> [C]onsider the material in terms of consistency with the persona and as an enabling set of structures through which the entertainer works, rather than in terms of literary excellence or comic invention.[13]

This implies that the persona can actually dictate the material, imposing limits on the comedian as writer.

In his best-seller *The Tipping Point*, journalist Malcolm Gladwell observes the following difficulty in comprehending the complexity of other people's inner make-up, even when we know them well:

> If I asked you to describe the personality of your best friends, you could do so easily, and you wouldn't say things like 'My friend Howard is incredibly generous, but only when I ask him for things,' or 'My friend Alice is wonderfully honest when it comes to her personal life, but at work she can be very slippery.' You would say, instead, that your friend Howard is generous and your friend Alice is honest. All of us, when it comes to personality, naturally think in terms of absolutes: that a person is a certain way or is not a certain way.[14]

Allport further notes that we tend to assume all people who give the appearance of belonging to a particular category will embody all of the characteristics we assign to that category:

> *Overcategorisation* is perhaps the commonest trick of the human mind. Given a thimbleful of facts we rush to make generalizations as a large tub[...]There is a natural basis for this tendency. Life is so short, and the demands upon us for practical adjustments so great, that we cannot let our ignorance detain us in our daily transactions. We have to decide whether objects are good or bad by classes. We cannot weigh each object in the world by itself. Rough and ready rubrics, however coarse and broad, have to suffice.[15]

The persona is clearly manipulative in that it is a skilful presentation of the performer's personality which controls perception in order to limit

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[13] Barker, 'The "Image" in Showbusiness', p.8.
[14] M. Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (London: Abacus, 2000), p.158.
[15] Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, pp.8-9. [Allport's italics].

the audience's interpretation and facilitate the gag. It would be possible for Éclair to enjoy both parties and knitting, but she knows that the fact that she aligns herself with one of those things leads her audience to overcategorise; because she likes parties, they assume that she will shun knitting. Thus the statement 'I put down my knitting', which would be dull and ordinary in most contexts and from most other people, is turned into an effective joke.

As we have already seen, the relative truth of stand-up material is usually ambiguous. The level of falsity in a persona is similarly difficult to pin down. In some cases, the fictional nature of the persona is overt. When Brydon performed as Keith Barret it was always clear that Barret was a character and not intended to represent the performer's off-stage personality. In the vast majority of cases, however, the correlation between the off-stage personality and the on-stage persona is complex and slippery.

Mark Watson talks about many aspects of his life that are verifiably true: he has a wife; he went to university; he has worked as a regular panellist on television quiz show *Mock the Week*.[16] There is no reason for the casual observer of his work to imagine that he is not representing himself and his life accurately. There has, however, been a striking element of untruth in Watson's persona: for the first few years of his stand-up career, Watson chose to perform in a Welsh accent, while his natural accent is English. The accent was accompanied by a bumbling, wriggling, babbling persona which mirrored stereotypes of Welsh identity. Thus the audience was drawn into a collection of spurious assumptions about Watson's background and heritage, assuming him to be Welsh not only in accent but by nationality, upbringing and culture. Watson was never entirely deceitful about the fact that his accent was artificial; this information was always in the public domain and was, for example, referenced several times on the *Chortle* website by 2007.[17] Yet the 'Welsh' persona was successful only because Watson upheld the falsehood onstage.

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[16] Mark Watson, *Work in Progress*.
Mark Watson, *All the Thoughts I've Had Since I Was Born*, Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 31 January 2009, 7:45pm.
[17] 'Mark Watson: Comments Page', *Chortle*,
<http://www.chortle.co.uk/comics/m/62/mark_watson> [accessed 30 July 2007].

Watson is not alone in deceiving his audience. No comic persona can accurately and fully represent the person who exists off-stage, nor can any character act divorce completely from the real-life performer. Double has suggested that there is a spectrum of types of persona, ranging from the 'naked self' to the character comedian.[18] For different points on the spectrum, the persona will bear very different relationships to the offstage personality. Some comedians, like Joe Wilkinson, see the stage persona as a genuine part of themselves exaggerated.[19] Josie Long says that she is consciously trying to develop the persona into 'a small part of myself amplified; like the best part of myself amplified.'[20] Towards the other end of the spectrum are placed comedians like Alexei Sayle. Sayle does not appear as a character act in the way that Rob Brydon appears as Keith Barret, but still refers to his stage persona in the third person, thus keeping the identities strictly separate.[21]

All personas, wherever they fall on the spectrum, must involve some manipulation of perception and some honest reflection of the perfomer's real attitudes. As we have seen, personas such as Mark Watson's, which appear to be plausible representations of the off-stage personality, are often the most deceptive. As Double observes of modern stand-up comedy:

> Truth is a vital concept in most modern stand-up comedy because of the idea that it is 'authentic'. The boundary between offstage and onstage is blurred and, in many cases, the audience believe that the person they see onstage is more or less the same as the person they might meet offstage. This inevitably means that there is an assumption that what the person onstage says about his or her life is more or less true.[22]

At the other end of the spectrum, character comedians present an obvious element of invention, in that the characters in which they perform are discernibly fictional. They may therefore be excused from any charge of 'not being what they appear to be,' by virtue of the fact that they are not pretending to be anything other than a comedian performing a piece of fiction. Yet there is a basis of truth behind

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[18] Double, *Getting the Joke*, pp.73-81.
[19] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.
[20] Josie Long, Interview.
[21] Alexei Sayle, Research Seminar, University of Kent, 18 January 2006.
[22] Double, *Getting the Joke*, pp.97-8.

character acts which is crucial to our enjoyment of the performance. When performing for a live audience as Hospital Radio presenter Ivan Brackenbury for a recording of BBC Radio 2's *The Jason Byrne Show*, comedian Tom Binns does not allow the live audience to see him out of character.[23] When coming onto or off the stage, and in-between takes, Binns maintains the fixed moronic expression, and moves with the awkward and childish gait, of his character. The illusion that the person on stage is Ivan Brackenbury is, in this sense, comprehensive, and even extends to Brackenbury's name, rather than Binns', appearing in the show's closing credits.[24] However, the audience remains aware of the presence of Binns within this coherently-performed comic character. For example, part of Brackenbury's act is to select deeply inappropriate songs and make untactful, but often telling, comments (song lyrics in italics):

> *(Music begins in the background)* **And we're kicking off with this one. I've got a text here from Josh it's very weird actually. 'Oxygen bottle. Needs Changing.'** [laugh] **'Quick. Nurse is on tea break please help'** [small laugh]**...**
> *'Is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe'...*
> **Maroon 5!**
> *(Song fades up) 'Is there anyone out there 'cause it's getting harder and harder to breathe'* [Big laugh and applause] [25]

Brackenbury's mistake would cause both anxiety about Josh and embarrassment at the tactless choice of song, were the audience to take the situation at face value and read it within the 'Hospital Radio' reality in which Brackenbury exists. However, because of the presence of Tom Binns, the comedian behind Brackenbury who has invented this fictional scenario and chosen this song particularly to make Brackenbury appear foolish and tactless, the joke receives a healthy and confident laugh. The audience are not laughing at poor, inadequate Brackenbury, but rather laughing with Binns' joke.

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[23] Ivan Brackenbury, *The Jason Byrne Show*, BBC Broadcasting House, London, 28 June 2008 [Live].
[24] Jason Byrne, *The Jason Byrne Show*, BBC Radio 2, Episode 3, 2 August 2008. Radio broadcast.
[25] Ivan Brackenbury, quoted in Jason Byrne, *The Jason Byrne Show*, Episode 3. Transcribed from radio broadcast.

Al Murray performs as 'The Pub Landlord', a ridiculous bigot whose attitudes and arrogance are not shared by Murray himself.[26] That audiences will be competent at spotting the intention of the author is vital to Murray's act; it is the audience's knowledge of the author's intention which allows Murray to mock the Pub Landlord's attitudes by enacting them. Again, the creator of the stand-up character is a discernible and important presence within the character act.[27] If we can identify the creator and share his attitude towards their character, we can laugh comfortably.

However, the comedian's manipulation of audience perception can prove unreliable. Al Murray has a relatively high profile as a celebrity in his own right, and any reasonable interpretation must be that he and the Pub Landlord two are separate entities. Yet Murray has been accused of performing in contexts where the ironic intention of his material might be lost on, or ignored by, an audience who appreciate its bigoted qualities. Stewart Lee only half-jests when he jibes that Murray's audience are, 'Missing the point, and laughing through bared teeth, like the dogs they are [laugh].'[28] A more direct accusation comes from Facebook group 'Al Murray is the LOWEST form of "Humour"'. Their mission statement declares:

> This group is here to highlight the fact that Al Murray is without doubt the lowest form of 'humour'. His idea of humour is to get a mob of people disguised as an audience and then basically accuse various members of the audience of being gay, others of being 'a real bloke' and to try and flirt with any attractive women. He gets his mob to wave British flags and they cheer any comment where Al Murray slates foreigners.[29]

Even in the seemingly clear-cut example of Al Murray's Pub Landlord, there is an ambiguity surrounding the effect of the persona and the

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[26] D. Maxwell, 'Why Al Murray is a Vintage Whine', *Sunday Times*, 27 October 2007.
[27] A. Clayton, *The Layering of Intention: A New Theory of Comic Performance*, Research Seminar, The University of Kent, 20 February 2008.
[28] Stewart Lee, *41st Best Stand-up Ever!*. Murray has laughed off Lee's criticism: 'But then Stewart has a rather old-fashioned view that people like that shouldn't be allowed to go and see things'; in Maxwell, 'Why Al Murray is a Vintage Whine'.
[29] J. Hardwick, 'Al Murray is the LOWEST form of 'Humour', *Facebook*, <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=2237201107> [accessed 28 June 2010].

audience's interpretation of the comedian's intentions. Murray himself has courted this ambiguity, and is quoted in a 2007 interview as saying, 'that's what's fun about doing this. People still don't know what I think.'[30]

While Murray has courted misinterpretation, Jo Brand has been plagued by it. Brand is a married, heterosexual woman, who often references her husband and children in her act. Before her marriage, boyfriends and trying to find them were staple topics. Nonetheless, rumours that Brand is homosexual have achieved such prominence that Brand says she has had petitions from lesbian groups asking her to tell people that she is heterosexual; the public association of Brand with lesbianism has been so strong that these groups feel that she is 'giving them a bad name.'[31] That such a misinterpretation of Brand could take root, despite both a lack of supporting evidence and the existence of evidence to the contrary, shows how stubbornly we adhere to our own overcategorisations.[32] Matthew Crosby discusses a similar problem in relation to Josie Long:

> She got an email from a website that said they wanted to champion 'pro-cardigan, anti-punch-line comedy' – that's what they described it as – and they said 'we think you're an example of that', and I remember[..]just being so furious hearing that phrase, because what Josie does isn't anti-punch-line, she writes really, really good jokes but[...]they're almost so good you don't see them, you don't realise that you're laughing at set-up – punch-line[...]And the fact that, you know, she would wear a cardigan or that she would be interested in, I don't know, fucking Belle and Sebastian or something, informs but doesn't dictate what she does. So yeah, I hate people who see[...]glasses, or who see a reference to an obscure movie, or who see, you know, like an interesting indie band T-shirt and think that's the act.[33]

Clearly, comedians can find the process of presenting themselves difficult to control. While Dan Atkinson is aware of the theory that a defined and easily-interpretable persona can be very useful, he has found that establishing such a thing is very difficult in practice. It appears that part of the difficulty is in seeing this necessarily personal

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[30] Maxwell, 'Why Al Murray is a Vintage Whine'.
[31] O. Double, *Jo Brand in Conversation with Oliver Double,* University of Kent Open Lectures, 13 February 2008.
[32] Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, p.23.
[33] Matthew Crosby, Interview.

process from the outside. Atkinson states, 'I don't really know how I come across', and later elaborates as best he can, 'I'm quite amiable onstage, I think, maybe slightly charming or whatever - I don't know - friendly, a friend of the audience in a sense.'[34] Although Atkinson does not feel that his persona has yet taken form, as an audience member it is possible to spot defining characteristics in the persona presented on stage. Atkinson is indeed 'amiable', 'friendly' and 'charming', perhaps also little chaotic. Even if Atkinson struggles to find consistency or simplicity in his own persona, the audience are still looking for, and identifying, what absolutes they can. It is all they can do. Audiences, being human, are programmed to simplify people into easy-to-use categories.

There is a natural basis for the ambiguities between representation and reality experienced by both the audience and the comedian themselves. Erving Goffman interpreted what we might think of as 'personality' as a series of day-to-day performances in which the individual presents their part.[35] We have seen how comedians claim certain characteristics for themselves and implicitly demand that the audience play along; Éclair's knitting gag relies upon exactly this process. Our everyday interactions involve a negotiation of the perception of self which is, in essentials, the same:

> [W]hen an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things that he does not appear to be and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals.[36]

Our performances are not always intentional deceptions: as Goffman states, 'the performer can be fully taken in by his own act.'[37] Indeed, we are well-trained never to think of some of our most important

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[34] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[35] E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmodsworth: Pelican, 1959).
[36] *Ibid*, p.24.
[37] *Ibid*, p.28.

performances as representations, and instead confuse them with indubitable reality:

> And when we observe a young American middle-class girl playing dumb for the benefit of her boy friend, we are ready to point to items of guile and contrivance in her behaviour. But like herself and her boy friend, we accept as an unperformed fact that this performer *is* a young American middle-class girl. But surely here we neglect the greater part of the performance.[38]

We would be quick to identify the 'guile and contrivance' of the girl's 'playing dumb' as manipulative, yet the more complete manipulation is surely the one that goes unnoticed even by its performer: the girl is also taken in by her own performance of behaviour appropriate to her age, nationality, class and gender. Just as Goffman's exemplar is more controlled by her 'young American middle-class girl' role than in control of it, comedians may also find themselves trapped by their own image. We see an example of this when Rob Brydon is prevented from presenting his material as the attack on Welsh identity which he originally wanted to express, and when comedians are unable to fully control the perception of their personality, leading to spurious assumptions about who they are.

Often, then, the comedian is not so much manipulator as manipulated. They are not always able to maintain control over the presentation of their own personality, and have can difficulty seeing themselves from the outside. Furthermore, as Goffman demonstrates, the manipulation of one's own image is a process in which we are all engaged during every interaction we undertake. The comedian is, therefore, arguably no more manipulative than anybody else. Yet it is clear that the persona is a manipulative device and, often, it is one that the comedian can use quite consciously to manage their audience's interpretation of their material. When Éclair uses her manufactured image as a short-cut to a laugh, she demonstrates the application of an advanced skill which allows her to control both the audience's perception of her and the way in which that perception is utilised. Joe Wilkinson demonstrates just how controlled the use of persona can be,

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[38] *Ibid*, p.81 [Goffman's italics].

showing not only an acute awareness of how he is perceived, but also a sense of assurance regarding his ability to manage his own representation:

> I'm a bit grumpy, I guess, a bit, like, of an outsider[...]I'm definitely aware of what I'm doing, and also I change that[...][as I'm sure] a lot of comedians [do], I change that kind of slightly dependent on the room[...]I did a gig in Aldershot on Saturday night and they were a slightly older audience and a slightly smaller audience and[...]maybe less comedy savvy, you can just tell. And so I wasn't quite as grumpy about it, do you know what I mean? I was slightly more upbeat[...]They needed to know that I was enjoying it rather than hating it[...]Whereas I did, last night, a gig in Greenwich which was really rowdy, and then I do a lot less in that and I'm grumpier, because[...]it's a bigger clash. The less I do in a rowdy room the bigger the show looks[...]So you have a persona but you have to, sort of, scale it up or down depending on where you are or what the situation is.[39]

Is the comedian merely a marginal figure in a marginal world?

In his discussion of the comedian as social critic, Kaufman interprets the practice of joking through Johan Huizinga's analysis of the special rules governing 'play'.[40] Huizinga produces a somewhat confused account of the relation between 'play' and the 'comic', asserting that these are independent concepts, but also acknowledging that they are linked, with the comic having a 'subsidiary' relation to play.[41] Kaufman demonstrates that joking is, in practice, governed largely by the rules of play, following which it seems logical to revise Huizinga's model such that the 'subsidiary' practice of joking takes place within the play-world; for play, like joking, involves 'a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own'.[42] According to Huizinga, 'all play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course'.[43] 'Play-grounds' are 'forbidden spots, isolated,

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[39] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.
[40] W. Kaufman, *The Comedian as Confidence Man: Studies in Irony Fatigue* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).
[41] J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), pp.24-25.
[42] *Ibid*, p.26.
[43] *Ibid*, p.28.

hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain' [*sic*].[44] Huizinga's examples of play-grounds include the temple, the law court and the card table: places where the rules of etiquette and norms of behaviour deviate from the mainstream. The stand-up comedy gig is an apt addition to this list. As we have seen, the use of venues licensed to sell alcohol imports the culture of the drinking-place; additionally, just as the joke is said to take place in a theoretical safe space under the terms of comic licence, the performance room is a physical space which operates in accordance with marginal rules.[45] The gig is a 'playground' - quite literally a space where the rules of interaction differ from the mainstream - but it also permits the comedian to create his own, imaginary 'world', and give it validity.

In the year after his deceptive *Who's Eaten Gilbert's Grape*, Rhod Gilbert toured with a new show, *Rhod Gilbert and the Award Winning Mince Pie*. As outlined in Chapter Two, Gilbert admits that he has had difficulty living in the real world, and has, in the past, built his persona upon a few blatant lies.[46] He has therefore been trying to live in the real world and desist from making things up, because 'apparently, people don't like it.'[47] The show that follows is superficially about Gilbert's attempt to live in the real world, but is structured to deteriorate into tales of implausible events that took place in his imaginary world. As Gilbert states at the beginning of his show, living in the real world is not the sensible choice: 'I don't how you all do it. It's madder than anything I could make up [laugh].'[48]

Foremost among Gilbert's previous deceptions has been the invention of his 'hometown' Llanbobl. Gilbert has previously been in the habit of asking audiences if they had ever heard of Llanbobl, and says that various confused and fraudulent people had claimed that they have, or even that they have been there. One man claimed that his daughter had moved there. Gilbert expresses his befuddlement that a place he made

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[44] *Ibid*, pp.28-29.
[45] Fox, *Watching the English*, pp.88-108.
Linstead, 'Jokers Wild', p.761.
Critchley, *On Humour*, pp.87-88.
[46] Rhod Gilbert, *Rhod Gilbert and the Award-Winning Mince Pie*, Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 22 January 2009, 7:45pm.
[47] *Ibid.*
[48] *Ibid.*

up has actually been attracting new residents. He invites the audience to imagine what would happen if the daughter married a local boy. On one side of the church would be her family, and on the other side, 'people I made up!'[49]

There has been an ongoing dispute with a 'Rugger Bugger'; an audience member whom Gilbert met following a gig and with whom he has since communicated via MySpace. The Rugger Boy insists that his team thrashed Llanbobl, and eventually drives Gilbert to take revenge. He creates a map upon which Llanbobl is shown, and sends it to the Rugger Boy, inviting him to visit. A projector screen behind Gilbert then shows footage shot secretly from Gilbert's car, following the anti-hero as he drives around Wales trying to find the fictional town. The Rugger Boy stops at a pub and goes in to ask for directions. Gilbert hurriedly jumps out of the car and goes to perch a mince pie on Rugger Boy's windscreen (a reference to the show's title, but one which Rugger Boy can have no hope of understanding). Rugger Boy emerges from the pub, with an amused-looking barman, and gets back into his car. He then notices the mince pie and gets out to pick it up, looking bemused. The video ends with a black screen across which is written 'Llanbobl 1 - Reality 0'.[50]

If Gilbert's show is ostensibly about trying to live in the real world, it is really a demonstration of the real world's inferiority. It is delightful to think of Llanbobl, a place which Gilbert invented, full of people he made up and refugees from reality. In defeating the arrogance of the Rugger Boy, Llanbobl scores a symbolic win against the real world. This is mirrored in the rest of Gilbert's show. Gilbert embarks upon a realistic, observational piece about motorway service stations, but the honesty of his initial observations quickly develops into implausibility as he makes improbable claims about his service station experience. He explains that he was offended by a fellow customer who gave the toilets a lower rating than he had on the customer feedback board. Other people saw it happen, and Gilbert is embarrassed by the implication that his standards are lower than those of the other customer. The story is plausible enough, until Gilbert claims to have thrown that other customer into a toilet cubicle and locked him in there in an attempt to

[49] *Ibid.*
[50] *Ibid.*

terrify him into reconsidering his verdict. The story concludes with Gilbert sitting on a camp chair in the service station, refusing to move until the discourteous staff tell him what award the mince pie they have sold him is supposed to have won. Gilbert's sit-in forms a symbolic protest against the validity of the real world; a ridiculous place that does not work as well as the one he makes up.

If comedians offer us a 'better' world, they also offer us better ways of dealing with the one we already have. Mintz claims that the comedian's weaknesses are a vital tool for persuading the audience to permit the element of social challenge in their material. If the comedian appears to be abnormally cynical, promiscuous, idiotic, and so on, the audience can ascribe any attacks that they do not like to the comedian's dysfunction. They can 'forgive and even bless his "mistakes"', because he is considered 'physically and mentally incapable of proper action.'[51] However, if the comedian stumbles upon a piece of social commentary that expresses the shared but repressed view of his audience, he becomes their 'comic spokesperson.'[52] It is true that many comedians work hard to suggest that their relationship with the real world is deeply dysfunctional. For example, Dylan Moran appears drunk and socially awkward, as well as unhealthily cynical. Lee Evans is incompetent; he is clumsy and foolish, unable to comprehend, or interact normally with, the world that surrounds him. However, neither comedian occupies a low status in their audience's perception. Moran showcases his talents and intelligence, using poetic language and a wide and often complex vocabulary. He often performs in front of projections of his own sketches, each one signed by him so that the audience may be aware that it is he who possesses this talent.[53] Similarly, Evans has showcased his musical abilities. At the end of a show at Wembley arena he performs a song which does not get many laughs, but is rather intended to be impressive. He plays the piano and sings, eventually introducing a large choir and his father, who performs a solo.[54] It is not necessary for comedians to be wholly sad characters. Far from wanting comedians to

[51] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.74.
[52] *Ibid*, p.74.
[53] Dylan Moran, *Monster*.
[54] Lee Evans, *Wired and Wonderful: Live at Wembley*. Little Mo Films. 2002. DVD.

be dismissible dysfunctionals, audiences will happily accept and admire a comedian's talents.

Indeed, dysfunction is often presented as a way in which to triumph over life's imperfections.[55] If Lee Evans suffers from the dysfunction of being unable to use an aeroplane without becoming anxious and awkward, he is also able to enjoy the fact, making others laugh at his anxieties and even earning money and fame for doing so.[56] If Dylan Moran is a cynical drunkard, he is a very successful and likeable one. From his 'dysfunctional' standpoint, he is able to issue advice that might help us to lead better and happier lives. For example, during a routine that disparages self-help books, Moran makes the following, seemingly popular suggestion:

> **Or release your potential, that's another one.** [Small laugh] **Now that's a very, very dangerous idea.** [Small laugh] **You should stay away (.)** [Small laugh] **from your potential,** [Laugh] **I mean that is something you should leave absolutely alone.** [Laugh] **Don't, d, you'll mess it up...** [Laugh] **It's potential, leave it...** [Big laugh] **And anyway it's like your bank balance, you know, you always have a lot less than you think.** [Big laugh] **So don't look at it, n-no, leave it.**[57]

A 'functional' person could not suggest such a course of action, knowing that it is much safer to pay close attention to their bank balance and that they will find life more fulfilling if they examine their 'potential' and try to make use of it. Moran, however, is able to offer us a comforting alternative which promises an easier existence. Thus his dysfunction seems rather appealing.

Although the dysfunctional characteristics of comedians may be useful in giving them licence to criticise and subvert conventions with the excuse that it is all in jest, such characteristics are eclipsed by those abilities which demand respect and admiration. In the playground of the gig, the comedian occupies a very high status, and is able to create and manage the rules of interaction. This provides opportunities for manipulation, as within the playground the comedian can dictate his own terms. Yet the comedian so far remains a marginal figure in a marginal world. Dylan Moran may permit his audience to lazily ignore

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[55] Freud, 'Humour'.
[56] Lee Evans, in *World's Greatest Stand-up* (see David Hyde Pierce, above).
[57] Dylan Moran, *Monster.*

any potential for improvement, but the joke relies in part upon the damaging illogic of such a course of action.

If the comedian is solely the occupant of a marginal reality, this must necessarily reduce his power to influence. The fact that his material exists in the playground may grant it comic licence, but it also takes away its relevance to the real world. In the ideological safe space of the comedy gig, comedians are separated from the mainstream world; this implies that they can do no harm in it.

The separation of the comedian from 'real life' is only emphasised by the line of theory which marks the comedian out as a marginal figure, occupying a hallowed status. That such a lofty status should have been connected to comedians makes sense when we consider the role that they play within all social structures. As Orrin E. Klapp argued, the 'fool' contributes to 'group organization and discipline,' chiefly functioning as 'a device of status reduction and social control', 'discrediting leaders, movements, or individuals which show weaknesses in terms of group norms'.[58] Douglas framed the 'joker' in a role of similar significance, but adopted a different focus.[59] While Klapp's term 'fool' includes a range of both intentional and unwitting behaviours that are deemed comic or ridiculous, Douglas limits her discussion to those who deliver jokes. Klapp concludes that the 'fool' serves largely to reinforce group norms by punishing deviation; Douglas, crucially, asserts that the 'joker' challenges the norm itself. Their conclusions are complementary; comedians may challenge both deviation from the norm and adherence to it.

It has often been suggested that comedians, because of their role in the social structure, have a mystical origin and power. Tony Allen links the modern comedian to the shaman in ancient cultures, identifying parallels between the two roles. Each occupies a powerful status, and serves the tribe as one who 'investigates the dark side' and questions the tribe's (or audience's) actions and place in the universe.[60] For E.T. Kirby this link is direct and practical; he suggests that the practices of entertaining through comedy, and many of the techniques for doing so,

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[58] O.E. Klapp, 'The Fool as a Social Type', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 55 (1949), 157–162 (pp.161-162).
[59] Douglas, 'Jokes'.
[60] T. Allen, *Attitude*, pp.51-53.

are directly descended from the curing rituals performed by shamans in ancient cultures.[61]

Jimmy Carr and Lucy Greeves further make the case for seeing 'comedian' as a special status by linking him to the Jungian archetype of the trickster.[62] According to Jung, all of humanity shares a collective unconscious, in which we find patterns that all individuals and societies perpetuate.[63] Thus every society has 'mothers' and 'heroes', and every society has 'tricksters'. Trickster is the seditious force to which we attribute subversion and mischief of all kinds.[64] Furthermore, he is an expression of 'shadow'; the archetype where lurk the characteristics that the conscious, civilized part of the psyche – both individual and collective – dislikes and wishes to deny. Trickster is, in part, a piece of the collective shadow shared by the social group. Thus the trickster is easily equated with the subversive and challenging functions of a comedian, for both expose our weaknesses and undermine and question those 'truths' which we take for granted. Yet it is healthy to confront, and come to terms with, the natural instincts buried in our shadow: the trickster is equated with the saviour, just as the comedian liberates through his challenges to convention.

The very existence of the above theories demonstrates that we intuitively endow the comedian with a mystical or special status. Thus, when we talk about the comedian's licence, we are talking about the licence granted to one who is perceived to operate over and above, or in the margins of, our own plane of existence. His contribution is, then, a mere theoretical alternative to normal life. When Stewart Lee referred to the Heyoka in Chapter Two, it was to exemplify the incompatibility of the Heyoka's behaviour, which 'defies all definitions of "common sense"', with the practicalities of real life.[65] The following statement made by

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[61] E.T. Kirby, The 'The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments', *The Drama Review*, 18 (1974), 5–15 (pp.12-14).
[62] Carr and Greeves, *The Naked* Jape, Chapter 3.
[63] *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. by H. Read, M. Fordham and G. Adler, 20 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957-79), IX (1959).
[64] C.G. Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
[65] F. Ballinger, 'The Euro-American Picaro and the Native American Trickster', *Melus*, 17 (1991-92), 21-38 (p.35).
Stewart Lee, Interview.

Carr and Greeves, which relates to 'trickster spirits' generally, exemplifies the perceived separation:

> The anarchy they represent, the unrestrained sexuality and the potential to turn orderly society upside-down, means that they have to be pushed to the edge of things so as not to upset the main current of everyday life. But somehow their natural habitat – the tightrope edge of what's acceptable – turns them eventually into sentries, into guardians of the status quo. With these wild jokers at the gates, we feel safer; we are actually protected by their very existence from all the chaos they represent.[66]

Attributing the comedian with a fully marginalised status implies an immunity which belies the reality. Comedians can trespass the boundaries of licence and suffer the consequences: both in terms of immediate failure to get a laugh, and the wider repercussions of public anger. When Johnny Vegas allegedly molested a female audience member onstage, he became the target of a great deal of personal abuse as both press and internet commentators viciously reproached his behaviour.[67] Stewart Lee became the victim of an organised hate campaign at the hands of the Christian right following his involvement with *Jerry Springer: The Opera*.[68] Comedians are not marginal figures who are safe from reproach, but mortals who are vulnerable to attack.

The above statement from Carr and Greeves also suggests that the trickster's marginality means that he only has the power to subvert within his own playground: his existence protects mainstream reality from 'chaos' and reinforces the status quo. If the comedian is a fully marginalised figure, then it is only logical to infer that his challenges will have little practical relevance in the mainstream world. When dealing with a comedian like Mark Thomas, whose work demands empirical efficacy, these models fail to reflect reality. Thomas proves this point with reference to political pranks undertaken as part of the campaign against the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act (SOCPA) which, while comic in form, had practical effects which could be evidenced:

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[66] Carr and Greeves, *The Naked Jape*, pp.44-45.
[67] Chortle, 'Did Johnny Vegas Go Too Far?', *Chortle*, <http://www.chortle.co.uk/news/2008/05/01/6719/did_johnny_vegas_go_too_far%3F> [accessed 3 May 2009].
[68] Stewart Lee, 'The Trouble with Blasphemy', *Stewart Lee.co.uk*, <http://www.stewartlee.co.uk/youtube/youtubedontgetmestarted.htm>, [accessed 18 July 2009].

> [T]his stuff is true, y'know, those demonstrations were done[...]we did form the company, we did demonstrate in Downing Street, we did this stuff[...]I am in the *Guinness Book of Records*.[69] You can look at the *Guinness Book of Records*, it's there[...]It's about activism but it's also about something that exists outside the theatre. If it doesn't exist outside the theatre at the end of it, I've failed.[70]

This problem may be solved if we reverse the above concept. Instead of seeing the comedian as the source of comic licence in his own right, we should remember that it is the activity of joking which gives him his licence. He commands a special respect, but this springs from the joke itself and does not grant him personal immunity. To suggest that the joke exists only in a marginal reality implies that its attacks cannot penetrate the mainstream, so that public opinion cannot be harmed by, or do harm to, the joke. In reality, jokes deal intimately with the social structure in which they are told.[71] Jokes are made because they are a necessary means of negotiation. The material from which they are formed is social comment. Comic licence provides a bracket of safe space within social interaction, but it is social perception of 'decency' and 'fair play' which sets the boundaries around that bracket. The marginal reality is a somewhat misleading metaphor: the joke actually permeates its society.

Ostensibly, this may seem to lessen the comedian's power. This model requires us to see comic licence as a limited protective cover, because without the immunity conferred by a marginal reality or a special status, the comedian is left hemmed in by the limits of consensus at every turn. Thus, to succeed as a comedian, and avoid rejection as one who oversteps the boundaries, the comedian is left unable to say what is truly revolutionary, or provoke the will to change. As Douglas states:

> [T]he joker is not exposed to danger. He has a firm hold on his own position in the structure and the disruptive comments which

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[69] 'The company' refers to McDemos, a 'protest solutions company' which would protest on behalf of members of the public who lacked the time, energy or courage to do it themselves in return for a small fee (prices started at 99p): *McDemos*, <www.mcdemos.com> [accessed 3 October 2010].
Thomas' entry in the *Guinness Book of Records* is for the greatest number of political demonstrations in one day.
[70] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[71] Douglas, 'Jokes'.

> he makes upon it are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself. He merely expresses consensus.[72]

Mark Thomas is emphatic in his opposition to this interpretation of the comedian-audience dynamic:

> It's about play, it's about interplay. It's about expectation and defying expectation, and if you can't make that political and change people's minds, then you're in the wrong fucking game. It's intrinsically there.[73]

For Thomas, playing with or within consensus is not a case of preaching to the converted, but rather of informed debate:

> That interaction exists in no other art form in this dynamic[...]there's actually a kind of democratic feel to it, if you like[...]that actually the voice of the audience affects the outcome. Y'know, your laughter affects the outcome, the way you react affects the outcome, what you shout affects the outcome[...]actually comedy is more open than any other art form to put-down and challenge.[74]

For Thomas, there is no question of riding roughshod over the audience's moral boundaries because, for him, the audience are equals in the discussion: they are welcome to question and able to damage the ideas which he presents. Stand-up is a medium for debate and discussion, and this is the key to its unique power as an educational tool. Consensus is not, therefore, a question of avoiding certain topics or refusing to attack the sacred: within the consensus formed by the forum of comedian and audience, nothing is indisputable, and everything is subsumed within the peculiar rules of 'play':

> The whole point about this is it should be fun, but it also should have a significance. If you can't play with these big ideas, then[...]what you're saying is that some things are sacred, and we can never change them. And as soon as you say that, it's just like you've just become part of the obstacle[...]The whole point is it's open to change[...]change occurs all the time. It's about whether you can shape or change or influence its direction.[75]

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[72] *Ibid*, p.159.
[73] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[74] *Ibid.*
[75] *Ibid.*

For Mark Thomas, it is vital for the comedian to be rooted firmly in the world upon which he comments. Consensus does not limit his licence; rather it translates that licence into the possibility of real social and political change.

'Democracy' and the force of personality

Most comedians take a fairly modest view of their own power to influence. Few comedians see themselves as dictators of opinion, even within the gig's playground. Like Mark Thomas, Josie Long describes the interplay between comedian and audience as a two-way process, but with the emphasis on a friendly sharing of interests. Long has run various projects alongside her shows which allow the audience to join in with the show's theme. Audiences of Long's *Trying is Good* were encouraged to take postcards away with them and draw or write about any eccentric or 'odd' people they encountered, sending them back to Long when they were completed.[76] The *Trying is Good* DVD, which Long released at the end of the tour, features a gallery of contributions sent in by audience members. When asked why she includes interactive projects in her shows, Long replies:

> My dream of doing stand-up was getting to meet other people who were kind of like me[...]I wanted to meet people who were doing creative things[...]I just really like the idea of, like, getting to bring out little creative parts of people, getting to engage with people and make people a bit kind of fired up to doing their own little projects[...]I also think it gives the show some heart, you know? Like, it's not just you coming on going bang-bang-bang goodbye[...]it's making it live a bit.[77]

For Josie Long, therefore, the whole point of stand-up is to have a genuine interaction, to share personal interests with others and see what interests them: this is not compatible with the idea of a comedian who imparts wisdom from on high, but rather with a reciprocal relationship where the status gap between performer and audience is kept to a minimum.

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[76] Josie Long, *Trying is Good.*
[77] Josie Long, Interview.

Joe Wilkinson hopes that the issue is simpler. When asked whether he thinks stand-up is a particularly effective means of persuasion he responds; 'I'd like to give people more credit than that - do y'know what I mean? I'd like to, but maybe I'm wrong.' For Wilkinson, stand-up is essentially no more advanced as a method of persuasion than everyday conversation:

> I think that's as simple as someone hearing someone's opinion. I don't think it matters whether it's stand-up or a conversation, really[...]Yeah, of course[...]taking on any new piece of information can change your perception [but][...]I don't think[...]it will have a profound effect on people[...]If me and you were talking about something in a pub, that's got as much chance of changing your perception as hearing something onstage.[78]

Wilkinson concedes that a comedian may be at a slight advantage because the position they are in appears 'exciting' to the hearer, but, like Thomas and Long, he assumes his audience to be formed of intelligent people capable of bringing their own analysis to the debate. The extremity of Wilkinson's idea seems somewhat unlikely. The fact is that the comedian and audience member are not in the position of equality afforded by a pub chat.[79] By placing themselves on a stage and in front of the only microphone in the room, demanding the attention of everyone present, comedians adopt a position of leadership, and it is necessary to the functioning of the gig that the comedian maintain the authority that comes with it. Even Mark Thomas' idea of a rough-and-tumble democracy may be under threat when we consider just how powerful the comedian needs to be.

Thomas is undoubtedly committed to establishing democracy within his gigs. As he observes, the audience plays a crucial and powerful role via their responses, in particular their laughter. Thomas actively encourages more articulate participation, for example inviting the audience to correct him if he quotes a fact or statistic incorrectly, or asking them whether they went on some of the public demonstrations that he mentions.[80] Thomas views the right of the audience to intervene as a welcome component of the democratic process, even when hecklers

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[78] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.
[79] Fox, *Watching the English*, p.101.
[80] Mark Thomas, *The Night War Broke Out.*

attack the comedian rather than cooperate with him. The audience's right to redress bolsters their power at the expense of the comedian. As Thomas has further stated:

> It is often the case that articulate hecklers can express the mood of an audience and beyond that can challenge the comic on a host of issues[...]There have been cases where the audience can express outrage at an idea and rein in comics.'[81]

Dan Atkinson reinforces this point with reference to a comedian who was booed off stage in Liverpool after material which referenced the abducted child Madeleine McCann and murdered child Rhys Jones badly misfired. Atkinson states:

> I believe in the case of the much-publicised gig in Liverpool, it was genuinely a case of misjudgement rather than malice: a terrible idea, badly executed and punished by the audience.
>
> Yet for all the offence caused, it actually displays one of the finest points of stand-up comedy: the right of the audience to interact with the performer and express immediate and forceful disapproval. It is emphatically and instantly democratic.[82]

However, the means by which the audience may challenge the comedian are, in practice, limited. To heckle successfully requires great courage and eloquence. Even when an audience member is willing and able to introduce and uphold a challenge, the democratic ethos of the interaction can be difficult to maintain. During a Mark Thomas gig at the Gulbenkian Theatre in Canterbury, a heckler called out 'Get a radio mic!', and went on to express dissatisfaction that Thomas had been 'fiddling with the [microphone] wire the whole time!' The heckler's input seemed to irritate rather than amuse the audience, and Thomas' response was firm. He first suggested that the heckler was 'in the wrong meeting', which achieved a laugh, and went on to jibe that he had often been heckled on the basis of ideology or factual evidence, but never electrical equipment. The response was effective, isolating the heckler on the outskirts of the crowd who had come to this show particularly to appreciate the informative, ideologically charged material for which

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[81] Mark Thomas, Personal Communication, by email, 6 October 2008.
[82] D. Atkinson, 'Is anything off-limits?', *Chortle*, <http://www.chortle.co.uk/correspondents/2007/12/10/6142/is_anything_off-limits%3F> [accessed: 29 September 2008].

Thomas is known. The irrelevant heckle was turned into an example of ignorance from an outsider who did not sympathize with the atmosphere of the gig. Thomas then turned to the heckler and rammed the point home, saying, 'in case this is your first time heckling, you've just been put down, ok?' The heckler called out 'I don't care,' to which Thomas gently responded: 'that's fine, but your carer, who will be sitting very close to you, will.' Again, the audience laughed: they were on Thomas' side.[83]

Thomas admits that responding to heckles like this involves using his superior status and experience. He knows that the audience have come to see him and are likely to be on his side. These advantages allow him to belittle the heckler and maintain his own control over the room.[84] In doing so, Thomas is doing his job; responding to a challenge is what is required of any comedian in such a situation. As Tony Allen states:

> There are those occasions when an external event so demands attention, that a failure to deal with it reveals the deceit and nullifies the potency of the live performance. For the comedian this amounts to a dereliction of duty.[85]

The battle is, by Thomas' own admission, rather uneven. This suggests that the form is barely 'democratic'; when dealing with an experienced comic the audience are at a crippling disadvantage if they wish to issue a challenge. This suggests that audiences in stand-up lack the means to assert the boundaries of comic licence which would be available to them in ordinary joking between individuals. More troublesome, however, is the possibility that the comedian can hide the fact that those boundaries have been trespassed at all.

Douglas implies that our consensus draws a firm line to divide the socially acceptable from the unacceptable. In actuality, these boundaries are not rigid, but under constant renegotiation. This is evidenced in Oliver Double's detailed account of the altering perception of Billy Connolly's controversial joke about Ken Bigley. While Bigley's imprisonment by terrorists was a high profile news story, Connolly joked that a callous part of him was hoping to hear news of Bigley's murder.

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[83] Mark Thomas, *Mark Thomas*, Gulbenkian Theatre, Canterbury, 4 October 2008, 7:45pm.
[84] Mark Thomas, Personal Communication, 6 October 2008.
[85] T. Allen, *Attitude*, p.30.

The joke eventually created a torrent of media outrage. Double, however, saw the joke performed and observes that the live audience were more easily pacified:

> The theatre is filled with the sound of the audience going, 'Oooooo!', in a wave of disapproval that rushes towards the stage, but before it can crash over him, Connolly defiantly shouts, 'Fuck off!', transforming it into a big laugh.[86]

For the reporters and members of the public who heard this joke via hearsay, it was inexcusable. For the audience who were at the live performance, though, the controversial joke was quickly subsumed under comic licence. As this example demonstrates, many contextual factors affect the limits of licence and skilled comedians can utilize context and other mitigating factors to manipulate the boundaries.

This manipulation is a necessary part of stand-up comedy. As we have seen, audiences cooperate to deliver 'appropriate responses'.[87] Held in check by the fear of failing to do what is required of them, and rewarded by the cosy feeling of unity that comes with acting in unison, audience members skilfully interpret and follow subtle signals which tell them not only when to deliver a response, but also what that response should be. The crucial importance of this factor in determining the comedian's manipulative potential is demonstrated by a show which takes absolute democracy as its premise – Mark Thomas' 2009 tour, *It's the Stupid Economy.*[88]

Theoretically, Thomas' project should be a consultation exercise, allowing the nation to express its wishes and have them acted out. In practice, there is some fairly blatant manipulation of the outcome; Thomas, after all, gets to pick which policies make it on to the stage and reserves the right to discard any policy that he does not regard a worthy winner. This is accepted within the contract between Thomas and his audience. The principle that Thomas should lead the audience is vital on a practical level if the show is to run smoothly and fulfil its dual purpose as entertainment and selection process. Yet, when we look at this show in closer detail, a more subtle form of manipulation is revealed; this

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[86] Double, *Getting the Joke*, p.154.
[87] M. Atkinson, *Our Masters' Voices.*
[88] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy.*

show puts consensus at the forefront of proceedings, thereby demonstrating just how malleable that consensus is.

At the Maidstone performance, Thomas read out the suggestion 'Treat asylum seekers with humanity and fairness'.[89] The audience responded with a mixture of applause and groans – most notably a female audience member somewhere near the front issued a loud 'nah'. Obviously, there was little consensus on the issue of asylum seekers among this Maidstone audience, and many people opposed the suggested policy. Thomas' response was firm; in a gesture terrifyingly reminiscent of an angry head teacher, he looked piercingly over the top of his glasses in the direction that the 'nah' came from and said, 'The exact words used are "humanity" and "fairness". What's so despicable about that?'. The audience responded with enthusiastic applause. Over the applause, Thomas made the point more controversial; if his initial scolding was about the abstract idea of 'humanity and fairness', the comments that followed were specifically about welcoming asylum seekers into Britain, as he added that we should not send them back to persecution and torture.

By building on the easily-accepted premise of humanity and fairness, Thomas made his own standpoint incontestable. The idea was immediately subjected to the test of social acceptability, as the audience as peer group were given the opportunity to demonstrate their support and reinforce that this was indeed the appropriate response. This manufactured – even artificial – consensus was lasting; when the policy reappeared in subsequent rounds there was no repeat of the opposition that greeted its first reading. The audience agreed that one of their shared values was the fair and humane treatment of asylum seekers. This, then, is an example of the methods of consensus-building noted in the previous chapter. What is important to notice here, however, is that Thomas achieves this feat largely by sheer force of personality. In asserting the principles of 'humanity and fairness', Thomas uses his status as performer, his quiet, authoritarian tone asserting that he has a right to be listened to. He also uses his physical presence; a stance which emphasises his physical strength is coupled with a gesture that belittles the opposition. The assurance with which the performance is

[89] *Ibid.*

carried through, up to the point at which Thomas places the piece of paper where *he* thinks it should go, underlines the fact that he is managing this interaction, and is in charge of the show's mechanics. Even the technique of building out from a point of definite consensus relies upon Thomas' personality. It is his name and image that has attracted this specialised audience, and it is knowledge of Thomas' own politics which tells the audience that it is correct to follow suit and prioritise egalitarian principles.

The practice of joking takes the comedian into the safe space of the playground and provides him with a marginal status. These factors are helpful in allowing the comedian to challenge social norms within that playground. In addition, the comedian holds a privileged status, which is expressed in the various theories which imbue the role with an aura of mystery, and originates partly in the simple, practical need for the comedian to control the audience and keep his dialogue with them flowing. It is this which prevents comedians from creating the fully democratic interaction which often seems to be their aim. Part of joking is ignoring both the accuracy and ramifications of the material at which we laugh.[90] The comedian must, of necessity, manipulate this tendency, and can therefore dictate his audience's responses within the playground to a striking extent. This is not merely a meaningless game in a marginal reality, but an important instrument in an ongoing social negotiation.

[90] J. Morreall, 'Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange, and Other Reactions to Incongruity', in *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (see Schopenhauer, above), pp.188-207.

Part Three

Efficacy and Influence

Chapter Eight

Is Stand-up Comedy an Appropriate Medium for Debate?

How important is entertainment value?

John Oliver and Andy Zalzman write:

> Does political comedy change people's minds? There are two answers to that - a short one, and a slightly longer one. The short one is: no, it doesn't. The slightly longer one is: no, of course it doesn't, don't be ridiculous.[1]

This is indicative of the school of thought that sees popular culture and entertainment as something separate to the serious, heavy-weight body of material that 'should' influence public opinion. Yet, as we have seen, joking is fundamentally an exercise in social criticism; hence stand-up, which finds its basis in joking, is necessarily a political art form.

For Mark Thomas, material consumed as entertainment was a vital influence in forming his political ideals:

> My hero of comedy is Bertolt Brecht. That's the guy who fucking switched me on to everything. That was the stuff that, for me, listening to Joe Strummer and listening to Crass, they changed my mind about things. D'y'know what I mean? It was like, that got me into Rock Against Racism and Anti-Nazi League and all that kind of stuff. That's the stuff that actually got me thinking and changing my mind[...]and I was just absolutely amazed at that.
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> The comedy influences[...]people like Dave Allen, who I adored[...]I learned about apartheid through a Dave Allen sketch[...]He did this little sketch where he walks in as a South African Priest into this little[...]church, and there's a black guy on his knees. He says, 'What are you doing, boy?' and the black guy goes, 'I'm cleaning the floor' and he goes, 'Ah, thank goodness. I thought for a minute you were praying!' And it's just this incredible gag and I laughed just because it's funny because Dave Allen is funny, and because it's got great delivery, and then I asked my Dad what's it about and he explained apartheid on the back of a Dave Allen sketch. So for me all of this stuff intrinsically - I was brought up in this culture, y'know, unwittingly - that actually art did influence people's decisions, that actually art could change people's minds. But also it wasn't just about that -

[1] J. Oliver and A. Zaltzman, 'Close to the Edge', *The New Statesman Online* (22 August 2005) <http://www.newstatesman.com/200508220031> [accessed 11 March 2009].

> it was about someone actually being in the fucking moment, so that you're part of the debate, you're part of the argument, you're part of the forces that are going on[...]Dave Allen was a political comic. And people forget, he took on religion, and he took on, y'know, the authority of the popes and all of it and he fucking just chucked it up the air and said 'there's nothing sacred'. Hugely political[...]In fact, I'd even argue that *Steptoe and Son* was massively political, and I'll tell you why, it's because it is absolutely, rock solid, working class comedy[...]So for me, art was always about something[...]Art and culture was always – had a purpose to it, it had a point to it, it was about engaging in something.[2]

As a student of drama, Thomas was subject to influences, such as Brecht, which would perhaps have been inaccessible to many of his contemporaries. What is striking about the other influences mentioned is that they are drawn from popular culture: the punk rock groups Crass and The Clash (of which Joe Strummer was lead singer and lyricist), comedian Dave Allen's television shows and sitcom *Steptoe and Son*. These were not influential despite their status as 'low art' or their popularity, but precisely because of it. As popular forms they were accessed by a large proportion of the population. By participating in these pieces of popular culture, Thomas was joining a debate and discussion that was not limited to the elite, but crossed social boundaries.

It is also important to note that popular forms were a channel by which Thomas received messages that may not have reached him so early, or so successfully, by other means. As a child, Thomas did not seek out information about the South African apartheid regime in books, newspapers or other news media, yet this information was presented to him in the course of an ordinary evening's entertainment. Similarly, popular music and television sitcom presented him with political information and ideas in a format which he sought out for reasons that were, in large part, to do with entertainment and cultural identity rather than education.

The importance of enjoyment in determining what material we choose to expose ourselves to should not be underestimated. As Lippmann points out, we need to simplify the world in order to comprehend it, 'for the attempt to see all things freshly and in detail[...]is exhausting, and

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[2] Mark Thomas, Interview.

among busy affairs practically out of the question.'[3] We cannot reasonably absorb or process all of the information available to us, and must necessarily decide what to take on board. We do so partly by selecting and manipulating what information we expose ourselves to.[4] If we are to take an interest in information it must be presented to us in an appealing and interesting shape, for 'being flesh and blood we will not feed on words and names and gray theory.'[5]

Maria Credé offers an extreme, real-life example of this principle in action. She was the child of a middle-class German family during the rise of Nazism:

> Becoming a member of the Hitler Youth wasn't a problem. In fact, it looked good. No school on Saturdays anymore. Instead – a day of talks and games with the pals I had always been with and with 'leaders' we knew well as the older girls in our schools. Yes, we had to wear a uniform – rather poorly designed as it were – but that didn't bother us too much. We went on long country walks, slept in barns or tents, sang at the camp fire. It was fun. Yes, there was something like 'Schulung' [political instructions] but most of it – I thought – passed me by[...]We thought it was fun, we didn't take it seriously and WE DID NOT LISTEN. We didn't realise how much we accepted without criticism. I was shocked when I came across slogans I had written down and kept. Nothing aggressive or nasty – just submissive to an ideology of the Party which was to rule our behaviour.[6]

For Credé's generation of German children, the Hitler Youth was fun. 'Falling for' the promises of Hitler himself was similarly easy, for adults and children alike, because he promised an end to serious economic and political strife: 'no wonder so many fell for his enormous power of speech which took you along even when you really didn't want to.'[7]

By contrast, information about the Nazis' intentions and the deeper political context was boring, and motivation to access it fundamentally lacking. Credé believes that the worst excesses of Nazism, and the

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[3] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p.59.
[4] E.M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, 4th edn. (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p.164.
[5] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p.104.
[6] M. Credé, 'Are There Lessons to be Learned?', *The British Lutheran*, April 2010, p.7. [Credé's emphasis]. Credé now lives in London. She has visited local schools to talk about her experiences, hoping to impress upon young people the need for critical thinking over blind acceptance.
[7] *Ibid.*

holocaust in particular, could have been avoided if German people – even children like herself – had been more critical in their appreciation of Hitler's promises and immediate, seemingly positive, influence and had gone to the effort of finding out what his full intentions were. She explains the mass failure to do so in terms of the attractiveness of being 'taken along' and the tediousness of finding out the full truth. It was only this tediousness which prevented the mass of Germans from realising the impending horror before it was too late to stop it. As Credé puts it, 'it was so much easier to accept things':[8]

> When I was in Jerusalem in the 80's, we visited Yad Vashem, the memorial for the victims of the Holocaust[...]They had a copy of Hitler's infamous *Mein Kampf* open on the page where he talked about extermination of the Jews. It was there for all to see. But who saw it? It was an extremely boring book, too tedious to read. I don't know of anyone who has read it. BUT WE SHOULD HAVE DONE.[9]

What the very different examples of Thomas and Credé show is that popular culture, entertainment value and fun actually have their own, crucial role to play in creating opinion and in mediating the individual's interaction with, and understanding of, their world. Credé believes that she, and her contemporaries, chose to expose themselves to information that came in packaging that was fun or cognitively easy to process. In Thomas' case, sources that were sought out primarily for entertainment value served to educate and inspire political consciousness.

Stand-up comedy has a particularly strong position in that it is immensely popular, highly accessible, produced in prolific volume, enjoyable and fundamentally political. Hundreds of live Stand-up performances happen across the United Kingdom every week. Television schedules are packed with stand-up comedy. This may come in fairly conventional formats such as the recordings of live, full-length concerts that are released as DVDs, or straight stand-up recorded directly for television such as *Live at the Apollo* (BBC) or *The World Stands Up* (Comedy Central). Stand-up also appears repackaged as game shows such as *Argumental* (Dave), *QI* (BBC) and *Mock the Week* (BBC).

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[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.* [Credé's emphasis].

Although the format of such quiz and panel shows is very different to the straight stand-up set, much of the material presented is drawn directly from the stage acts of the practicing comics who make up the bulk of the participants. Segments such as *Mock the Week's* 'Scenes We'd Like to See' and 'Stand-up Challenge', in which contestants take turns to deliver brief segments or one-liners straight to the audience from behind a traditional mic-on-stand set-up, are little more than an opportunity for comedians to offer short routines from their repertoire. The internet provides continuous on-demand access to an enormous range of stand-up, including those who are not famous or moderate enough for television. Some practitioners are big celebrities and household names. In the live performance and internet arenas, it is difficult for official authorities to police or censor the material offered. Stewart Lee feels that this makes stand-up the ideal medium for the discussion of marginal views:

> Because stand-up needs so little funding and it's so easy to throw together, there's the least interface, probably in any art form, between the writer-performer's brain and the stuff coming out of his mouth. You know, it's not mediated in many ways. And that's both a good thing and a bad thing. Sometimes you can hear someone say something and you think 'what a shame you never had to discuss that with *anyone* before you said it'...*(laughs)*. And other times you think, 'Well, that's such a unique point of view and a unique way of doing it that had that gone to committee it would never have got [through].'[10]

Stand-up comedy is a wide-spread and dominant form of entertainment, but it is necessarily more than that. As we have seen, stand-up comedy can not function without commenting on social structures. What each of those hundreds of live, and thousands of recorded, performances are doing is pumping out social criticism to audiences of millions.

There are aspects in which this mass consumption of stand-up may be seen in a negative light. Television, and particularly quiz shows, may be seen as a force that tends to sterilise and narrow the form, turning stand-ups from uniquely-rebellious tricksters into conformists who deliver material according to somebody else's agenda. As John Fiske and John Hartley illustrate, television is a 'conventional' medium which merely articulates and reinforces the dominant culture, demonstrating

[10] Stewart Lee, Interview.

the agreed value-system and implicating its audience within it. They state that 'television functions as a social ritual, overriding individual distinctions in which our culture engages, in order to communicate with its collective self.'[11] A combative medium like stand-up would necessarily find its claws blunted by such innate conservatism. A more serious problem for those stand-ups who are more consciously revolutionary practitioners is the feeling, commonly held among political performers, that 'non-political' art does its own damage. Baz Kershaw states:

> There is a sense in which even shows that aim solely to promote ephemeral entertainment have long-term designs on their audiences. By encouraging a taste for escapism they may push social and political questions to the background of experience.[12]

Brecht puts a similar idea in very simple terms: 'for art to be "un-political" means only to ally itself with the "ruling" group.'[13] Mark Thomas translates this strand of thought into a practical example: 'In most of the media, impartiality just means not being too critical of the prevalent ruling class perspective'.[14]

Thomas feels that television's adoption of stand-up has had the effect of reducing the range of stand-up comedy with which the general public are familiar, setting narrow expectations:

> When [Alternative Comedy] started there was something very different about the attitude towards it now as there were then. And the attitude is about television expectation. Alright? So, when I started doing stuff[...]you get performance artists and you get a whole range of people doing stuff and you'd go along and see things and you didn't know what you were going to see[...]you had an open mind to it - you might see something you didn't expect to see and it would be fine. Now you go to see stand-ups with a very clear view of what you want to see because you've seen them on telly[...]So there's a consumerist dynamic within going to see stand-up[...]Lots of people think political comedy is *Mock the Week*, because[...]that's what they've seen and so they'll go along and they'll go 'I know what to expect'[...]That's why I sort of think 'that's fine, we'll talk about economic growth right at the

[11] J. Fiske & J. Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978), pp.88-89; p.85.
[12] Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, p.2.
[13] *Brecht on Theatre*, p.197.
[14] A. Otchet, 'Mark Thomas: Method and Madness of a TV Comic', *The Unesco Courier*, <http://www.unesco.org/courier/1999_05/uk/dires/txt1.htm> [accessed 02 May 2009].

> beginning just to fucking show we can talk about whatever we want.'[15]

Stewart Lee likewise acknowledges that expectations have been limited by television. For Lee, part of the problem with television is packaging: straight stand-up formats such as *Live at the Apollo* fail to serve any comedians who work outside of the limited range expected, and the panel show format is at odds with anything but short, simple jokes. Lee agrees that there is now a sameness evident in much mainstream comedy:

> I think partly that's because...even on something like *Live at the Apollo* where they have long sets – they're doing about seven minutes – and most stand-up you see now is, like, tiny jokes on panel shows and then the next joke comes on. Whereas what I like to do is kind of say something, and then wait while it, kind of, settles in, and that pause isn't available on panel shows. That breathing space has gone, so a lot of what I do wouldn't work for that. Also, on those sort of panel show programmes everyone's pulling in the same direction, whereas I always feel obliged to go in the other direction, so it doesn't really fit. But there's loads of people doing different stuff, it's just it doesn't really work on television. What I thought might happen with my show, because it was well received on the telly, was that they might think, 'ooh God,' you know, 'there's all sorts of people you could have on now.'[16] But they don't seem to have done that, at all. *(Laughs)*[...]I would have thought that would mean you could have Daniel Kitson, or[...]you could have all the people that we all know are really good, but that don't work on panel shows. But I don't think it's been taken on board - that we developed a visual grammar there which would serve all the comedians which are poorly served by *Live at the Apollo* or panels shows.[17]

Many panel shows also take a collaborative approach to writing, so that the comedian's material is presented alongside jokes and banter contributed by a team of writers. One of the revolutionary aspects of Alternative Comedy was that it took pride in individuality of authorship; an attitude evident in Lee's routine about Joe Pasquale's plagiarism of Michael Redmond (discussed in Chapter Two).[18] By contrast, panel

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[15] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[16] Refers to *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*; Stewart Lee, *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle*, BBC Two, 16 March – 20 April 2009. Television Series.
[17] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[18] W. Cook, *The Comedy The Comedy Store: The Club that Changed British Comedy* (London: Little, Brown, 2001).
Stewart Lee, 90s Comedian.

shows typically regard jokes as interchangeable. Asked whether this lack of individuality is a problem for comedians, Lee replies:

> Yeah, it is, yeah. [The jokes are] not personal and you can't, you know[...]you might say something, and then you intend to say something else to change the impression that that first line has given. What happens on a panel show is Jason Manford comes in and changes it to what he wanted to say, which is often something that wouldn't have been what you would have wanted. But then, you know, it's a great skill to have. I mean, someone like Frankie Boyle and Jimmy Carr, they manage to get good jokes on to those programmes, well-written little jokes.[19]

A further problem is presented by the conventions of interpretation typically adopted by television audiences. Stewart Lee quotes a description of live comedy which he attributes to American comedian and film-maker Paul Provenza:

> I think he said something once along the lines of, 'When you walk in to a comedy club, you understand that everything you see is happening within a giant pair of inverted commas.' It's sort of like, the people are sort of in character, up to a point. And the audience kind of understands that[...]but I think a television audience aren't as sophisticated in the same way. Y'know[...]they kind of take it more at face value.[20]

Lee suggests that television audiences are less able to use the valuable operational tool of the 'play-ground', which demarcates the comedy performance as a marginal bubble in which everything is to be read through the special terms of comic licence.[21] Although stand-up reaches a greater audience through television, both Mark Thomas and Stewart Lee feel that this experience lacks the vitality and efficacy of the live comedy club. As a necessarily conservative medium, television limits the range of comic material presented, and even serves to marginalise the more revolutionary work that takes place on the live circuit.

Crucially, Thomas and Lee both exclude themselves from their own comments about the standardisation of comedy, seeing themselves as practitioners who operate outside of this subgenre. If television has made it easier for a certain brand of comedian to achieve national fame

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[19] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[20] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[21] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p.28.

and commercial success, it has not quashed the variety of the live circuit to such a degree that the likes of Mark Thomas and Stewart Lee are unsuccessful, artistically or commercially. In an episode of the radio version of his *Manifesto* show, Thomas states that his annual income is in the region of one hundred thousand pounds per year.[22] Although Thomas 'sells' much of his comedy in formats other than stand-up, the fact that he is able to make so comfortable a living demonstrates that there is demand for his work, even though he is not mainstream. Both Thomas and Lee have had successful television series. They can hardly be cited as commercial failures, despite the fact that the main outlets for television comedy do not suit them.

The discussion that follows, in this chapter and the next, begins from the above recognition that popular culture is influential in shaping the opinions and world view of the people who partake in it, and the further recognition that stand-up plays a significant role in that cultural discourse in contemporary British society. The following discussion aims to identify the differing intentions or effects that comedy may have within this discourse, and goes on to examine the potential for producing real change in attitudes through stand-up comedy.

Joking and the mob mentality

As we have seen, comedy functions as social critique, challenging established norms and positing alternatives for our consideration. This does not, however, mean that all comedy is driven by the desire for change, nor that it communicates this desire to its audience. In Chapter One, we met Critchely's idea of the 'comedy of recognition'; some instances of joking may have the effect of 'simply [reinforcing] consensus and in no way [seek] to criticise the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves.'[23] I argued that a joke can not function on these terms, as it must necessarily 'criticise the established order' and thereby pose some alternative to it. Critchley's observation is, however, based upon the fair observation that these criticisms spring

[22] Mark Thomas, *Mark Thomas: The Manifesto*, BBC Radio 4, 18 February 2010. Radio broadcast.
[23] Critchley, *On Humour*, p.11.

from differing intentions and are made with different levels of intensity. While some jokes make a vociferous push for real change, others make only a superficial attempt to depose the status quo.

By the end of 2009, Michael McIntyre was firmly established at the top end of the comedy scale, with sell-out gigs at the 02 Arena, his own primetime BBC show and the fastest-selling stand-up DVD of all time.[24] In an article published in November 2009, Stephen Armstrong describes McIntyre's stage persona as the embodiment of the comfortably-off, middle-class experience:

> McIntyre's on-stage persona is the jovial party host. He bestrides the vast O2 stage as if he's stepping between the drinks cabinet and the CD player, delivering his anecdotes and world-view as he waits for his wife to bring the nibbles. His routines are about everyday life: the awkward rituals of men in gym changing rooms, elaborate pretences when trying on shoes, and a sharp deconstruction of restaurant eating.[25]

The following routine, delivered on BBC format *Live at the Apollo*, is tremendously successful. Although McIntyre is only just over a minute into his set, he has gained the full and responsive cooperation of the audience, as they deliver loud and brimming laughter at each completion point, with the laughter often carrying on until after the following sentence has begun. The laughter soon develops a hysterical, strained quality which suggests that the audience members are no longer in control of their own responses:

> **Recently, I had to do some work in central London. It's unbelievable. People are so desperate to get home. The trains come very regularly: you see them, one minute, two minutes, three minutes - it means nothing to people. As soon as you get on the platform it's a level playing field.** [laugh]**...'I don't care when you arrived, I'm getting on this train.'** [laugh]**...Everyone's trying to work out, where are the doors going to stop?** [laugh][26]

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[24] S. Armstrong, 'Comic Relief', *Sunday Times*, 15 November 2009.
[25] *Ibid.*
[26] Michael McIntyre, 'Michael McIntyre Live at the Apollo', *YouTube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Es2l4yUBY6M> [accessed 11 February 2010].

McIntyre gains laughter and a smattering of applause as he runs, clownishly, sideways up and down the stage, demonstrating the ludicrous process of trying to second-guess the unpredictable outcome. He then comes to a halt saying:

> **Here! I feel good about here. But other people are gathering over there, maybe they know!** [laugh]

McIntyre shuffles across the stage and positions himself with the imaginary group of commuters. He then moves a step back in the direction he came from, saying:

> **I'm gonna stay here. For no reason at all. I feel lucky about this!** [small laugh] **Other people are gathering around me. They think I know! I don't know!** [big laugh and some applause]

The challenges in this routine are obvious. McIntyre is mocking a very common behaviour, demonstrating that it is ridiculous and illogical. Yet the material also celebrates the very stupidity of that behaviour. This high-energy routine sees McIntyre moving speedily, clownishly, but elegantly up and down the stage. His movements are fluid and distinct. As he says the words 'level playing field' he adopts a firm stance, legs in parallel, shoulders squared, eyes narrowed as he looks menacingly round at his 'competitors'. When he mentions the people gathering around him he looks behind himself, as if they were really there, turning to call 'I don't know!' in a high pitched, excited tone into the imaginary crowd. He speaks very quickly, as if his eagerness to tell us of his observations is too great to be contained, and yet maintains clarity and fluency. Like Izzard's Shower routine (analysed in Chapter One), McIntyre's Tube routine highlights the shared experience of the audience: it allows them to enjoy laughter at a shared human foible. It also adds a joyful dimension to an unpleasant experience, importing the energy and skill of McIntyre's heightened representation on to the drudgery of the daily grind.

Like all jokes, McIntyre's jibes at the ridiculous behaviour of commuters challenge the status quo. Perhaps some of the audience will remember the routine when they next find themselves in the situation

described. The likely effect would be that the behaviour that they take for granted is alienated: they may gain a better sense of perspective on their actions, remembering that even if they can't squeeze on to one train, it will only be a minute until the next one and they may as well rise above the ridiculous actions of their fellow passengers.[27] The recognition, or even celebration, of shared experience does not necessarily mean that the experience is idealised. It is pleasurable for McIntyre's audience to convert their experiences of isolation on the London Underground – a place where conversation or even eye contact with fellow human beings is famously considered to be bad form – into a communal one, but they are doing so by acknowledging the absolute lack of common sense in their actions. Their laughter is aimed at their own ludicrousness; this is not praise, but mutual criticism.

Yet, McIntyre's material it is not generally referred to as 'political'. Comedians such as Mark Thomas, Robert Newman, Stewart Lee and Mark Steel are generally classed in a different genre, where the challenge presented is thought to be more practical and destructive. John Oliver and Andy Zaltzman, themselves generally classed as 'political' comedians, reject this idea, saying, 'let us not forget that political comedy is just a subject choice, and not a genre.'[28] Yet many comedians and their commentators do draw a distinction, acknowledging a difference between these types of comedians.

Defining what it is that separates one from the other is difficult. Robin Ince sees the difference as, in part, an audience being told what they already know and do versus learning something new. Using the example of Lee Evans, Ince describes the type of joke-laughter exchange described above in relation to McIntyre as a 'call and response'. Ince's theory is that Evans' material principally represents him calling, 'didn't you all do this?' and the audience responding, 'yes, we all did this' repeatedly for the length of the set. The outcome is that the audience are able to have parts of their lives 'underlined' so that Evans may implicitly affirm that they are behaving correctly, and the audience can find

[27] *Brecht on Theatre*, p.125.
[28] Oliver and Zaltzman, 'Close to the Edge'.

validation.[29] In this sense, the joke which comments upon a shared behaviour could indeed be said to affirm the status quo: it merely tells the audience that their current behaviour is acceptable and should continue.

Seen in this light, McIntyre's Tube routine may be interpreted as one which, rather than encouraging change, merely gives the audience the means by which to enjoy their ludicrous behaviour when they notice it in themselves and others. More importantly, their laughter affirms that this is indeed a constant of the London city-worker experience, perhaps even of the British or human experience. Although this norm is rightly challenged for being ridiculous, the implication is that one should adhere to it if one wishes to appear 'normal'. The kind of comedy that Evans and McIntyre offer could therefore be seen as an example of what Franca Rame, wife and collaborator of radical Italian dramatist Dario Fo, has described as a 'whipping' that 'boosts the blood circulation': it is mockery that reinforces, rather than deposes, the status quo.[30]

Robin Ince highlights the absurdity of this process, pointing out that hearing what you already know and do repeated back to you should be a dull experience. Surely, he opines, it is more interesting to hear about things you did not already know, or had not already thought of.[31] Stewart Lee emphasises that this is a matter of personal taste:

> I suppose people do like to see...Well, in a club, right, in somewhere like The Comedy Store or Jongleurs[...]there'll be a guy talking about things, and the people in the audience nudge each other going, 'that's what you're like', 'you say that', 'oh, I did that'. Whereas what I like, is I like to be in an audience going 'I would never have thought of that!', or 'I would never have said that!', or 'why would you possibly think that?!' Right? That's what I like, I like to be taken by surprise. So I think it just depends what people want.[32]

Lee concludes, 'I think most people, sadly, like to see their own opinions bounced back at them, and that's why people like McIntyre do so well.'[33]

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[29] Robin Ince, 'Geoff Rowe and Robin Ince in Conversation', *Playing for Laughs*, Conference, De Montfort University, 6 February 2010.
[30] F. Rame, in D. Fo, *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1994), p.xxi.
[31] Robin Ince, 'Geoff Rowe and Robin Ince in Conversation'.
[32] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[33] *Ibid.*

For Lee, the difference between the brand of comedy that he produces, and the commercially-driven populist comedy of performers like McIntyre, is found partly in the integrity of the comedian's role. While many comedians manipulate audiences into believing that their material exists on the fringes of dominant thought, most of it reflects mainstream attitudes:

> I am also aware that to some extent I am actively cultivating a sort of *Independent/Guardian*-reader audience who will like the, sort of, liberal stuff but are also open-minded enough to be confronted with things they don't agree with. That audience really suits me[...]If you think of, like, [Jeremy] Clarkson or whatever as comedians, what they're very good at doing – that school of comedy – is very good at taking something which is the dominant cultural narrative in British life, the views of all the best-selling newspapers – that there's too many immigrants, that we don't need to worry about global warming and that political correctness has gone mad – and yet selling this dominant cultural view as if it were, somehow, a subversive minority view[...]That kind of comedy[...]is able to make its audience feel special. It's like going to them, 'You and me, we think this don't we? They don't, but we think this.' Whereas, in fact, they are the majority, but they manage to give it the flavour of being an interesting, subversive point of view.[34]

Bill Hicks is quoted as saying, 'to me, the comic is the guy who says, "Wait a minute" as the consensus forms[...]He's the antithesis of the mob mentality.'[35] This is a principle with which Lee heartily agrees:

> I think it's the role of the court jester and the clown, historically, to be on the outside. Simon Munnery has a really funny line[...]'If the crowd have got behind you, then you're facing the wrong way'[...]and you sort of do feel obliged to take an opposition point of view[...]That's what I think's really weird, as well[...]When I started doing comedy in the '80s, like the idea that alternative comedians could ever be celebrities was unthinkable, because they were like scum. And I don't see, to be honest, how you can be on all these awards ceremonies and on all these programmes and whatever, and still be making jokes about all the crapness of the world, because you're part of it[...]The BBC are prevaricating about doing a second series and I don't think they will, and my agent went 'oh, maybe someone at Channel 4 would be interested.' And I thought, well, you know, the money would be

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[34] *Ibid.*

[35] J. Lahr, 'The Goat Boy Rises', *The New Yorker* (1st November 1993) <http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1993/11/01/1993_11_01_113_TNY_CARDS_000365503?currentPage=all>, [accessed 05 September 2010].

> nice, but actually – I mean, we'll see what happens – but at the moment I think I don't really know if you could do my comedy on Channel 4, because Channel 4 is so symptomatic of everything that's crass about popular culture. I don't really know what I would talk about on Channel 4, because I'd be on Channel 4, which sort of means you're part of the problem[...]You're supposed to be a bit of a sort of loser or a bit...You're supposed to be the person asking uncomfortable questions, I think, even if they're about trivial things, rather than the person agreeing with everyone. You shouldn't be agreeing with everyone. You should be disagreeing with them just for the sake of it.[36]

Lee is willing to take this principle to an unusual extreme. Disliking the 'mob mentality' signified when a group laughs in unison, Lee designs his comedy to create uncertainty among his audience about how to respond. As we have seen, successful control of responses in Lee's case is not necessarily about producing regular and hearty laughter:

> The most obvious thing to do in stand-up is to try and get everyone on side, but I like to create a feeling of confusion in the room where people don't really know if they're supposed to be laughing or not[...]I don't like consensus, really. I hate that feeling of...well...I just think when there's loads of people laughing at the same thing it just feels nasty. I like the idea that there's some kind of exchange or process going on.[37]

It should be noted that to adhere to his anti-mob principles, Lee must sacrifice the comedian's typical measure of success and so his methodology may differ significantly from that of most comedians. However, the way in which he theorises his work goes some way to define the difference between the type of challenge present in the work of Michael McIntyre and Lee Evans, and the type of challenge present in the more overtly 'political' comedy presented by the likes of himself, Mark Thomas, Robert Newman and Mark Steel. Lee purposefully avoids consensus, 'disagreeing[...]just for the sake of it'. His preference for avoiding the forms of the Establishment is difficult to maintain, and could become commercially damaging. At the time the interview was carried out, Lee was unable to state categorically that the principles which led him to object to Channel 4 as a forum for his work would actually prevent him from taking the opportunity for earnings and a

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[36] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[37] *Ibid.*

wide audience. Lee also stated that he does not involve himself with panel shows and thus is using a less efficient 'bush telegraph' system to recruit audiences, yet he has featured on panel shows in the past.[38] The anti-mob principle, however impractical its application, has steered Lee into a distinctively oppositional kind of comedy which aims, not for consensus, but to highlight oppositional ideas.

As has been discussed, consensus and the sense of community that Stewart Lee avoids are vital tools in the work of Mark Thomas. Yet consensus has a very particular function in Thomas' work; it is a tool used to recruit people to his ideology, and to impart information which will inspire them to new ways of thinking and, he hopes, action.[39] Robert Newman similarly seeks to build consensus in order to move his audience on to a new awareness. He acknowledges that he must necessarily function on the outskirts of his society's thought and experience in order to do this. His 'euro-dollar' theory of the origins of the Iraq war, for example, which suggested that the war could be understood as a 'punishment beating' for Iraq's decision to trade oil in Euros rather than US dollars, would not be palatable on *Question Time.* Newman explains that he refused the invitation to appear as a panellist because if you espouse counter-mainstream views like his, 'you're just off the spectrum; they can't even hear you[...]there'd be a real danger that I'd just come across as some sort of anarchist nutter!'[40]

Although Zaltzman and Oliver have stated that 'political' comedy is not a genre but a topic choice, it seems that there is a definable methodology and ideology that marks out this kind of comedy as something different to that created by the panel-show produced, commercial mainstream. McIntyre's material may challenge the communal experience of the dominant social group, but it is this latter group of comedians who challenge dominance itself and deliberately press for an alternative practice or reality to replace that which is challenged. It is therefore representatives of this more consciously political group of comedians who are drawn upon as a case study

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[38] *Ibid.*
[39] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[40] Robert Newman, *History of Oil.*

through which to examine the potential of stand-up comedy to persuade.

Joking and the Establishment

Joking may be seen as an inappropriate mechanism by which to effect social change. Stand-up comedy may be part of an influential popular culture, but some have argued its influence is limited by the sheer inappropriateness of comedy as a means of influence. Yet, as we have already seen, there exists a body of practitioners who do believe that their art can have real efficacy. The following is a discussion of some of the main refutations of joking's ability to function as serious debate.

1) Joking sweeps contention under the carpet

Some accuse joking of hiding the complexities of important issues: joking does not always highlight issues for debate, but may rather be used to sweep them under the carpet. As we have seen, comedy can involve the use of simple maxims which allow an audience to develop a straightforward value-system (a manipulated 'map of the world', in Lippmann's terms) with which to navigate their way through the gig, pointing them towards the 'correct' response with the minimum of cognitive effort.[41] Morreall further suggests that humour can be used as a cynical ploy to settle controversial issues. He has interpreted a joke which occurred during a 1984 debate between presidential candidates Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale in this light:

> In their first television debate, Reagan had seemed uninformed and confused. Critics pointed out that he was an old man; some suggested he might be suffering from Alzheimer's disease. So Reagan's speechwriters prepared two sentences for the second debate. When someone asked about the 'age issue', Reagan said, 'I will not make age an issue in this election. I will not exploit for political gain my opponent's youth and inexperience.' That made Mondale rather than Reagan look foolish, and for the rest of the campaign the age issue was dead.[42]

[41] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p.11.
[42] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.75.

In his *Manifesto* show, Mark Thomas regularly uses a related technique to manage the delicate balance of group consensus and genuine debate that is necessary if the show is to function as both entertainment and the means to create a people's manifesto. Where there is a complex debate surrounding an issue or Thomas' own reasoning is two-sided, he is able to use short, punchy jokes to reduce complicated issues to simple points and gain consensus for this re-packaging of the debate. The show tours during a period of recession; a popular image of rich, fat-cat bankers pocketing billions of pounds in bonuses while steering poorer families into crisis prevails in the public imagination. The 'bonus culture' is widely attacked for rewarding incompetence, and with Members of Parliament also under fire for fiddling expenses, high salaries and generous perks for the elite are becoming an increasingly sore point. Counter to this is the traditional capitalist view that highly skilled jobs which manage important areas of British life must be awarded high salaries in order to retain the most talented personnel.[43]

Thomas reduces the debate to a simple, funny observation which earns the laughter and agreement of his audience: '"pay peanuts, get monkeys": pay bonuses, get wankers!'[44] In itself the argument is flippant and simplistic, but it is persuasive enough to sweep away the counter-argument and form a solid basis for more radical statements. Thomas states that he is in favour of a maximum wage, and relates a conversation with an economist who suggests that this would be best arranged as a formula in which the maximum wage was a fixed multiple of the average wage. Thus the level of the country's highest pay would be linked to the fate of those on lower salaries. This more radical suggestion would cap potential earnings in Britain, and necessarily

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[43] Mark Thomas summarises what he perceives as the key counter arguments that he must refute in the published version of the manifesto, along with a written version of his rebuttal: "You can't introduce a maximum wage", they cry, "or the wealthy will leave the country." Really? Can we have that in a legally binding contract?[...] "Oh", the bankers will moan, "you can't have a maximum wage. If I don't get my bonus I won't feel motivated enough to work". Most people manage to get out of bed without the promise of a Learjet at the end of the year, so what makes them so fucking special? "We should get our bonuses", they reply, "because we are worth it", thus confusing want with worth and reality with L'Oréal adverts."; M. Thomas, *The People's Manifesto*, Policy 10.

[44] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy*.

mean that there would be higher earning potential for elite professions overseas. Thomas directly acknowledges this criticism: 'If you can't live on two-hundred-and-fifty grand, I'll drive you to the airport myself! [laugh]'.

These jokes perform a similar function to those analysed in the discussion of delivery. They use the evidence of the occurring economic crisis as an unarguable point upon which to convincingly build an argument formed from simplistic evidence. What is important to note for the purposes of this discussion, however, is what happens to the counter-argument. By quoting the phrase 'pay peanuts, get monkeys,' and thus acknowledging the maxim that only high salaries may procure talent and experience, it seems as if Thomas has confronted the issue head-on. In fact, he has swerved around the debate altogether. Neither statement really tackles the counter-argument, unpicking its complexities or allowing it to have a voice. Indeed, Thomas has made it clear that he considers the idea that such professions really employ the best 'talent' to be spurious in itself. Rather, Thomas makes brief reference to the counter-arguments, acknowledging their existence while allowing his audience to enjoy the fact that such points do not get a fair hearing. In fact, his blasé treatment of the old maxim that the current pay structure rewards talent and performance, and thus benefits society at large, implies that he considers this view to be worthless, not meriting serious discussion. The economic crisis is evidence that the system does not work, and those who benefit from it have done so inconsiderately: 'pay bonuses, get wankers'. Those who want to perpetuate that system are a hindrance rather than a help, and their removal is something to be strived for: 'I'll drive you to the airport myself.' It is as simple as that.

Thomas also uses this show to update his audience on the work that has been done so far to campaign upon the policies in the Manifesto. One of the policies that has already been voted into the Manifesto states that 'Margaret Thatcher should pay for her own funeral.'[45] A petition has already been drawn up, and the audience is invited to visit Thomas' website and download a postcard that can be printed off and sent to the Queen, pledging all kinds of comic and destructive acts designed to undermine and ruin the state funeral, should it occur. Thomas has

[45] Thomas and YWGAV Limited, *Mark Thomas Info.*

drafted a letter to Thatcher reminding her that she 'believed people should stand on their own two feet' and would therefore surely wish to stand by her own principle and insist upon paying for her own funeral expenses.[46] The letter is currently with Thomas' lawyers, and Thomas confesses that he is faced with a dilemma as to whether to actually send it. Margaret Thatcher is a fixed point in the ideology of alternative comedy; a fail-safe figure of hatred.[47] Yet Thomas is aware that he is contemplating sending a letter to an elderly lady about her own death. Seeking to torment an elderly person whose health is deteriorating is hardly in line with the humanitarian principles by which Thomas works; but neither is sympathy for a figure seen by many as alternative comedy's ultimate ogre.

In this instance, Thomas uses the flippant nature of the joke somewhat differently. He lays out the case for sympathy towards Thatcher with tortured reluctance, saying 'I know, I know' as less sympathetic audience members express their preference for harsh treatment. He then reasserts his status as a Thatcher-hater, allowing his body to appear permeated with tension created by the sheer effort of loathing her as he says, 'I do hate her. I mean, if she was here I would stab her [laugh].'[48] The idea is a ludicrous one, and the quick, hard sound of the word 'stab' reinforces the flippancy of the remark. Yet it is a sufficiently harsh pledge, and a vicious enough fantasy, to reinstate Thomas in his traditional position of Thatcher-loathing. Joking encourages flippancy, and it is this which Thomas manipulates to reduce the complex issue to simplicity. The real, vicious act may not be carried out; but the disappointment is alleviated because it is replaced with an imagined act of violence.

In each case, Thomas' audience may be fully aware that he has replaced reasoned debate with flippant argument. What is remarkable about the genre of political comedy is that this does not matter. In many political shows it is likely that the audience are there to learn and to see important issues debated as well as to be entertained; with this show it is a definite and central part of the mission statement. This audience

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[46] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy.*
[47] Cook, *The Comedy Store*, p.13; p.102.
[48] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy.*

knows that its support of certain policies will have an effect in the real world, and that some of the actions which it supports and encourages with laughter and cheering have already taken practical, tangible effect. The stakes are therefore high; that this should be so is part of the contract. However, the contract also states that Thomas' work is to be taken as comedy. As such, flippant remarks, shoddy logic and partisan accounts of complicated issues are all considered legitimate. The discrepancy between serious consequences and silly processes is accepted. This provides stand-up with great power.

2) Joking does not urge us to change the wrongs of the world; it gives us the means to cope with them.

As was discussed in relation to Michael McIntyre, some instances of joking could be argued to celebrate or de-stigmatise their topics, rather than exerting a genuine push for change. Critchley provides one such argument in his assertion that most humour comments upon the world without seeking to change it:

> Such humour[...]simply toys with existing social hierarchies in a charming but quite benign fashion[...]More egregiously, much humour seeks to confirm the status quo either by denigrating a certain sector of society[...]or by laughing at the alleged stupidity of a social outsider[...]Such humour is not laughter at power, but the powerful laughing at the powerless[...]reactionary humour tells us important truths about who we are[...]humour can reveal us to be persons that, frankly, we would really rather not be.[49]

The comedian does not offer a call to change the situation, but rather provides us with a way to come to terms with its disagreeable elements. While he may adopt the trappings of the dysfunction which Mintz identifies as an important component of the comedian's persona – such as uncontrollable cynicism or abuse of alcohol - he remains representative of the powerful majority.[50] Given the prevalence of white, middle-class males with centre-left politics in the current British Comedy elite, the criticism that comedy has become a mechanism by

[49] Critchley, *On Humour*, pp.11-12.
[50] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation'.

which the dominant, and not the oppressed, express themselves is worth examining.

Morreall notes that amusement is not the only way in which human beings react to incongruity: it can also be perceived as a threat and cause reactions of puzzlement or 'negative emotion' such as fear. Amusement differs from these reactions in that it allows us to enjoy the incongruity.[51] We could therefore suggest that humour is a useful tool for the comedian in his role of exponent of marginal ideologies, as humour provides a mechanism by which incongruous view-points, and information which contradicts the hearer's pre-existing attitudes, may be presented in a non-threatening manner. For the hearer, humour is useful in interpreting the incongruity in such a way as to provide pleasure rather than discomfort.[52] The use of humour gives the persuasive speaker an advantage in that his message may be received warmly when it could otherwise have triggered negative feelings or reactance.

However, Morreall's theory also implies a serious disadvantage for persuasion; if the hearer is enjoying the incongruity itself, he is not motivated to change the situation:

> Because we enjoy the incongruity in amusement, our only motivation might be to prolong and perhaps communicate the enjoyable experience; we do not have the practical concern to improve the incongruous situation, nor the theoretical concern to improve our understanding of it.[53]

Morreall interprets 'humorous amusement' as a reaction to incongruity that eliminates the motivation either to resolve the incongruity or to adapt the factors that create it. He acknowledges that this idea does not sit comfortably with the theory of cognitive dissonance, which is the leading explanation for opinion change offered by social psychology.[54] Cognitive dissonance theory states that when an individual has conflicting opinions, or is exposed to information which contradicts his current world-view, this creates a state of psychological tension which

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[51] Morreall, 'Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange'.
[52] *Ibid*, p.196.
[53] *Ibid*, p.196.
[54] Hogg and Vaughan, quoted in R. Gross, *Psychology: The Science of Mind and Behaviour*, 3rd edn. (London: Hodder, 1996), p.452.

he will seek to resolve by adapting or reinterpreting the existing cognitions until they achieve consonance. A change in attitude is an important method by which this can be achieved; thus it is discomfort caused by the perception of incongruity which motivates attitude change.[55]

Morreall criticises the cognitive dissonance theory for failing to take into account the instances in which incongruity may be enjoyed.[56] There is a type of humour in which our inability to achieve consonance forms the basis of the joke. Morreall gives the example of the nonsensical question, 'What's the difference between a duck with one of its legs both the same?' which is funny precisely because none of the schemas into which it should fit can make it sensible.[57] We could also interpret Stewart Lee's IRA routine through this model; the joke draws humour from the embarrassment caused by a socially awkward situation, which is created by trapping the audience in a difficult cognitive conundrum. On the one hand, applauding the IRA for their terrorist acts is definitely wrong; on the other, Lee has given an ostensibly logical reason to do it (the 'gentleman bombers' suggestion), and, most importantly of all, it is only a joke. The routine purposefully creates dissonance which is not supposed to be resolved, but enjoyed. As Lee himself has stated, the cognitive challenge is part of the fun.[58] Thus a comedy audience, arguably, cannot be motivated to resolve incongruities through puzzlement or the need to resolve dissonance.

Negative emotion is similarly dismissed as a potential motivator. As we have seen, it is widely acknowledged within comic theory that laughter involves emotional detachment. This idea is expressed in Morreall's model of 'practical disengagement', and in Bergson's oft-quoted maxim that 'laughter has no greater foe than emotion.'[59] Neither Morreall nor Bergson claim that we lack the ability to laugh at things which inspire negative emotion - our sympathies need only be temporarily suspended – but the fact remains that sympathy is deemed to be incompatible with laughter. If this is so, and if joking is not concerned with normal

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[55] Gross, *Psychology*, p.448.
[56] Morreall, 'Funny Ha-Ha, Funny Strange', pp.196-200.
[57] *Ibid*, p.197.
[58] Stewart Lee, Interview.
[59] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70.
Bergson, *Laughter*, p.10.

standards of morality and decency, then it follows that an appeal to the hearts of audience members will go unheeded. As Morreall notes, reacting with humour to a situation that causes someone pain is often counter-productive:

> Humour can be irresponsible, for example, by supplanting some action which we should have taken to remedy a serious problem. Suppose that I have diabeties and my physician tells me that I must follow a special low-carbohydrate diet or risk blindness and early death. If I laugh off the problem with a quip that the physician is fatter than I am, and I ignore the diet, then my joking has supported my failure to treat my disease[...]
>
> Even when it does not block actions to remedy a problem, humour can be objectionable by showing insensitivity or cruelty toward a person who is suffering from a problem.[60]

Morreall suggests that humour makes a positive contribution by promoting critical thinking, helping us to deal constructively with mistakes and decreasing stress in unpleasant situations. In the latter two instances, humour deals with the issue of negative emotion: through humour we are able coolly to analyse our mistake unencumbered by feelings of remorse or misery, and can use practical disengagement to divorce ourselves from the negative emotions inspired by a stressful situation, boosting our morale.[61] Crucially, Morreall traces all the benefits of humour back to its capacity to 'block' emotion, and does not concede that the negativity highlighted in a joking register can, itself, motivate change.

We must be careful, however, not to confuse the willingness to suspend practical concern with a universal inability to care. Practical disengagement is not best understood as a universal element or defining feature of joking. It is a more helpful model if we see it as a tool that joking uses profusely, but somewhat selectively. Experience tells us that the separation between our amusement and our sympathetic response can feel very insignificant. In his *Dambusters* show, Mark Thomas relates the experiences of Kurdish human rights expert Kerim Yildiz. Thomas explains that Kerim has a habit of beginning his stories with the words 'was hilarious!' This becomes Kerim's catch-phrase, and sets up a joke which plays on the incongruity of his overly-positive attitude

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[60] *Ibid*, pp.70-71.
[61] *Ibid*, pp.69-74.

to his past, for, as Thomas states; 'I quickly[...]found out whenever he said "was hilarious," I'm about to hear something really fucking bad.'[62]

Thomas explains that Kerim was arrested on a false pretext, and celebrates the victory of Kerim's cunning over the dull-witted attempts of the Turkish police to extract false confessions. Kerim confesses to twenty-three murders under duress, but the court case becomes a farce when he demonstrates that he could not have killed any of his supposed victims: in some cases they died before he was born. Thomas achieves some enthusiastic laughs in response to the description of the corrupt judge's increasing frustration, the police's stupidity, and Kerim's incongruous but admirable insistence upon describing the experience as 'hilarious'. When he cannot be found guilty, Kerim is not released but imprisoned again, this time solely on the grounds that he is a Kurd. In the following, Thomas relates a conversation in which Kerim continues the story (italics denote Thomas' characterisation of Kerim):

> ***'Was hilarious!'*** [laugh] ***'There were ten of us in the prison cell and we decide that when the prison guards come to collect us to take us away to torture us, we will attack the guards and beat them up!'*** [laugh]...
> **'You fucking nutter!'** [big laugh]...
> ***'No, no, no - no, was psychology 'cause we attack the guards, the guards get very cross, when they are cross they cannot torture properly, you pass out quickly, doesn't matter what they do to you!'*** [laugh]...
> **'Fuck!'**
> ***'Was hilarious!'*** [laugh][63]

This section, like much of Thomas' material, is unusual among stand-up performances for the emphasis it places upon truth. While much comedy places the importance of the gag above factual accuracy, this audience know that Kerim's story really happened, and cannot tell themselves that it is 'only a joke'. This means that even as they laugh at Kerim's catch-phrase and the hyper-logical solution of physically assaulting the torturers, the audience are simultaneously being given some harrowing information.[64]

Thomas makes it easier for the audience to laugh by employing various techniques which allow them some detachment from the story.

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[62] Mark Thomas, *Dambusters*.
[63] Mark Thomas, *Dambusters*.
[64] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.301.

He does not relate events directly, taking the audience to the moment at which the atrocities were committed, but rather relates a conversation between himself and Kerim. This provides an extra layer of distance, and shows that Kerim is alive, well and laughing at his oppressors. Thomas filters the story back via the character of his past self, and thus directs and segments the audience's reaction. When the Thomas-character says 'you fucking nutter!', he directs the stand-up audience toward the incongruity of the prisoners' plan, prevents them from becoming overwhelmed with sympathy towards Kerim's ever-worsening predicament, and reassures them it is acceptable to laugh. Similarly, once it has been established that laughter is an appropriate response despite the difficult nature of the material, the Thomas-character is used to acknowledge the audience's shock at Kerim's explanation and its implications ('fuck!'), voicing both the audience's sympathy and the incomprehensible awfulness of the information. The audience are quickly given the means to release the tension that this creates through the reappearance of the catch-phrase, which provides the opportunity for an easier laugh.

There is a sense in which the Thomas-character is used to promote practical disengagement, and this is vital in allowing the audience to laugh. However, this does not mean that Thomas' message loses its power. *Dambusters* exists to raise awareness, and this is one of many routines within it designed to convey shocking information and capitalise upon the audience's response.[65] If the audience are incapable of appreciating the practical and emotional implications of what they are hearing, the educational purpose of the show is lost.

However, the audience are clearly capable of engaging their empathy with the topic at the same time as they disengage from the social imperative to demonstrate empathy which would make laughter an inappropriate response outside of a joking situation. The quality of the laughter in this section is distinctly different to the section that precedes it, in which Thomas relates the more comfortable experiences of British human rights campaigners. When Thomas relates the story of his friend Nick, who cleverly finds a way to expose and humiliate an under-cover police officer in a public meeting, the laughter is an enthusiastic and

[65] Mark Thomas, Interview.

celebratory burst. The laughter accompanying Kerim's story is comparatively muted and restrained. We could make sense of this by applying the theory that laughter is incompatible with negative emotions; in this case our pity and anxiety for Kerim. However, the audience are still laughing. The material is not less funny, but differently so. What the more muted reaction signifies is perhaps a sense of respect for Kerim's suffering, and, crucially, that even while they laugh, the audience are indeed cognisant of the practical and emotional implications of the material.

To say that enjoyment of incongruity removes the wish to change the situation is to deny the complex and layered reactions that audiences may simultaneously experience in response to a single event. The audience enjoy certain incongruities of Kerim's story, but to say that this removes the motivation to change the situation is to believe that they are left accepting of Kerim's brutal treatment – or even pleased that it occurred, so that they may enjoy the story. This, of course, is not the case. The audience laugh, but their laughter heralds increased awareness of, and passion for, the need for change. If the jokes encourage the audience to separate the incongruities presented from their negative emotions, then that separation is rather insignificant. The fact that the information is presented in a humorous forum does not remove the wish to change the situation.

3) Joking is a harmless form of protest which just keeps the oppressed happy.

The third accusation is related to the second: while the joke certainly issues challenges, these bolster the establishment which they purport to attack. Zijderveld makes reference to Wertheim's theory that joking is an expression of resistance to the dominant hierarchy. The oppressed use jokes to express their latent hostility to the powerful. In the institution of the court jester, the royal ruler finds a means of subsuming this force into his own domain, allowing the attack and protest but in a harmless, authorised form. According to Zijderveld, if the establishment is clever, it will consciously turn the challenge to its advantage:

> The social sublimation of protests and conflict by means of joking, therefore, is not just a relief from the social frustration of those who are dominated, but may also be a technique manipulated by the powerful in order to keep protest and conflict within certain limits and to provide society at the same time with a possible outlet. Joking in this case functions as a safety valve, installed on society by those in power[...]Brecht's statement, "one should not fight dictators, one should ridicule them," therefore holds true only in those societies in which the powerful leaders are still not acquainted with the possibilities of a manipulatory use of joking.[66]

Such mastery is, however, difficult to achieve:

> [J]oking, it seems to us, appears to be a much more appropriate weapon for the Establishment than sticks, clubs and tear gas[...]the art of good joking admittedly is infinitely more difficult to master than the handling of clubs and guns.[67]

Zijderveld states that the opposite situation can also occur; where the Establishment fails to use joking as a weapon on its own terms, the joke can be an empowering form of rebellion. Franca Rame claims to have experienced both sides of this paradox. Performing in Italy's traditional theatres, she provided a boost to the audience she had sought to attack:

> We[...]realised that, despite the hostility of a few, obtuse reactionaries, the high bourgeoisie reacted to our 'spankings' almost with pleasure. Masochists? No, without realising it, we were helping their digestion. Our 'whipping' boosted their blood circulation, like some good birching after a refreshing sauna. In other words we had become the minstrels of a fat and intelligent bourgeoisie.[68]

However, the problem was not the material, but the forum:

> This bourgeoisie did not mind our criticism, no matter how pitiless it had become[...]but only so long as the exposure of their 'vices' occurred exclusively within the structures they controlled[...]We had to place ourselves entirely at the service of the exploited, become their minstrels. Which meant going to work within the structures provided by the working class.[69]

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[66] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', pp.306-307.
[67] *Ibid*, p.311.
[68] Rame, in Fo, *Plays:Two*, p.xxi.
[69] *Ibid*, pp.xxi-xxii.

Rame also makes the comparison between the work of her own company and the court jester, noting that, while the potentate authorises the jester's work inside the court itself:

> [W]e well know that, if the fools had been impudent enough to leave the court and sing before the peasants, the workers and the exploited, the king and his sycophants would pay them back in a different currency.[70]

For Rame, the move from performing in the traditional, bourgeois theatre to the workers' clubs was the equivalent of giving up the King's patronage and protection and allowing the Jester's jibes to become weapons in the hands of the people.

Zijderveld's model of joking as a gentle release of social tensions fails to reflect the reality of Rame's experience. Even while she was still working in the traditional theatre, the Establishment was a constant threat to Rame and her colleagues:

> The script of the *Archangels* was taken away from us because of the many unauthorised jokes we had added to it during the performance. For the same show we collected 'reports' to the police superintendent of every single town we visited. I was reported for making a remark against the army in a play about Columbus. While running the same *Columbus* we were assaulted by facists outside the Valle Theatre in Rome, just at the moment when, by a strange coincidence, the police had disappeared. Dario was even challenged to a duel by an artillery officer, for having slighted the honour of the Italian army, and, crazy as he is, he even accepted the challenge on condition that the duel should be fought barefoot as a Thai boxing match, of which he boasted regional champion. The artillery officer was never seen again.[71]

In 1973, Rame was kidnapped, beaten, mutilated and raped by neo-fascists. Many years later, evidence was uncovered which suggested that the attack had been ordered by senior police officers, themselves following orders from the upper echelons of government.[72] In these instances, the Establishment was using 'sticks, clubs and tear gas', rather than effective manipulation of joking, to control the counter-

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[70] *Ibid*, p.xxii.
[71] *Ibid*, p.xx.
[72] A. Gumbel, 'Dario Fo Looks Back in Anger', *Independent*, 7 March 1998.

culture.[73] Rame's experience does, however, demonstrate that in some cases comedy is not a gentle poking at the opposition, but war. As we saw in the chapter on Persona, even in current British comedy, where comedians enjoy much greater protection against physical violence and such extremes of censorship, they can still expect to be censored and personally attacked in vicious terms if their challenges are deemed to overstep the mark.

Joking's efficacy in the debate

In 1995, Radio 4 series *The Mark Steel Solution* put forward the ludicrous idea that 'everyone should have to be gay for two years'.[74] The show proposed that such a decree would make people more comfortable with their sexuality and increase freedom by eliminating homophobia. Steel contributes to the current debate by deconstructing stereotypes about homosexuality and highlighting the ridiculousness of homophobic attitudes (characterisations in italics):

> **And if you're gay you've got these ridiculous images of what you're 'supposed' to be like, from sitcoms and that stupid bloke who used to go:**
> *(Camp voice)* ***'Ooh chase me!'*** [laugh]...
> **As if gay people all behaved like that. If that was true Oscar Wilde's most famous witticism would be,** *(deadpan)* **'ooh, Duckie, look at the state of her'** [laugh]...**And in Ancient Rome the rulers used to have male sex slaves, so we know for a fact that Julius Caesar had gay sex. But there's no record of him ever going:**
> *(Camp)* ***'ooh is that a dagger in me back or are you just pleased to see me?'*** [big laugh and applause]...
> **It must be terrible for girls who start to think, er, 'well I seem to find women attractive. Am I a lesbian?' coz then they must think, 'well I can't be; I don't wear dungarees, I haven't got tattoos and I'm no good at tennis!'** [laugh]... **And then there's this paranoia that people have:**
> *(Cockney wide-boy)* ***"ere, here's that poof. Watch yourself!'***
> **Like, do these people honestly think that if they're not careful this gay bloke's gonna come in the pub and think, 'ooh, good, they're off their guard, I'll 'av the lot o' them'** [big laugh]...**Just because someone's gay doesn't mean they want to have sex with *you*, ya slob!** [laugh]...**These blokes**

[73] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', p.311.
[74] Mark Steel, 'Sexuality', *The Mark Steel Solution* (BBC Radio 4, 1995), <http://www.marksteelifo.com/audiovideo/default.asp> [accessed 24 May 2010]. [Steel's emphasis].

must think that gay men are like a sexual version of the Terminator, an unstoppable force:
(Arnold Schwarzenegger) ***'Gender (.) Male (.) Mission (.) Have sex (.) Hasta la vista Duckie!'*** [laugh][75]

The audience's laughter signifies that they recognise such homophobic attitudes as something they genuinely encounter. The 1980s had seen an atmosphere of overt homophobia, typified by the linking of AIDS paranoia to homosexuality and open declarations by Manchester's Police Chief James Anderton that homosexuality should be criminalised.[76] In 1995, the same year that Steel's show was first broadcast, the Appeal Court refused to view the dismissal of four servicemen on the grounds of homosexuality as unlawful. *The Daily Mail* ran an article stating that the government had indicated that the ban would 'never' be lifted, quoting the then Defence Minister, Nicolas Soames, as saying:

> We are absolutely delighted. The Armed Forces do not go along with politically correct claptrap. Homosexuality and its practices are simply not compatible with service life and that policy has now been vindicated by two courts in Britain.[77]

The ban was finally lifted in 2000. The attitude attributed to the judges who heard the case suggests that attitudes were changing even by 1995:

> The judges rejected accusations that the policy was 'absurd, outrageous, perverse and impossible to justify', although one did say it was 'ripe for reconsideration'.[78]

That the ban was upheld by the legislature, but considered 'ripe for reconsideration', gives a picture of Britain c.1995 as a society evolving from a dominant attitude of homophobia towards a greater degree of acceptance. Attitudes towards this issue were evidently in flux for Steel's 1995 audience.

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[75] Mark Steel, 'Sexuality'. [Steel's emphasis].
[76] The Guardian, 'Prejudice and the Police Constable: James Anderton's Comments on the Aids Epidemic', *Guardian*, 13 December 1986.
[77] S. Rayment, 'Judges Back Forces' Ban on Gay Recruits', *Daily Mail*, 4 November 1995.
[78] *Ibid.*

Steel begins his show by summarising the awkwardness and difficulty that surround sexuality, highlighting the need for change. He then announces:

> **So, what's needed is a whole new approach to sexuality that would make everybody content with the way they are, which is why tonight's solution is:** *(fanfare)* **that everyone should have to be gay for two years.**[79]

From the moment that Steel announces his 'solution', it is clear that the audience are on side. Although the announcement is delivered without excitement, Steel's matter-of-fact tone upholding the premise that the ludicrous solution is intended as a serious suggestion, it is greeted with an immediate, loud, surprised laugh, followed by applause and cheering which lasts for a full seven seconds. This is, perhaps, not surprising. It is likely that the majority of the live audience are familiar with some of Steel's previous work and have chosen to come to his show specifically to see him; thus they are likely to be in agreement with his world-view, and his liberal attitudes towards sexuality. We might certainly expect the majority of people who knew that they were unlikely to agree with Steel to avoid the performance, both live and on the radio. We could therefore argue that Steel is 'preaching to the converted', and this is not so much a debate as a pep rally. However, given that tickets for BBC recordings tend to be free, we may also assume that not all of the audience are specifically fans of Mark Steel who would be willing to seek out and pay for the experience of seeing him live. The wider audience who listen to the broadcast on the radio are even more likely to consist of a mixture of real fans and people who listen only because they are not asked to make any great investment of effort or expense. We may therefore see Steel's audience as a mixture of the 'converted' and the 'undecided'.

Even if we take the view that Steel's broadcast is aimed at like-minded people, this does not preclude it from constituting important debate. When asked about the issue of objectivity and 'balanced reporting', Mark Thomas replies, 'We are the balance':[80]

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[79] Mark Steel, 'Sexuality'.
[80] Otchet, 'Mark Thomas'.

> Look at any television programme that deals with supposedly serious political news and you'll find interviews with government spokesmen or women on an initiative or piece of legislation that they've created. Maybe they'll address an issue the government is being attacked about. But nearly all the interviews will be done with politicians, in studios with reporters who have to come back to those same officials the next week for more news. If they decide to actually question the relationships of power instead of focusing just on the intricacies of elite policy, then they're quite often going to run into trouble[...]The idea of objectivity doesn't exist in media – just the veneer of it. One of the greatest quotes came from the British film-maker Ken Loach over a film he did about union bosses and how often they betray the workers. There was a big row about this film, with critics saying 'we demand the right to reply.' Ken Loach turned and said, 'I am the right to reply'.[81]

Unsurprisingly, Steel's show has not been successful in getting his solution that everyone should have to be gay for two years legislated. Yet, fifteen years on, it is clear that social attitudes towards homosexuality have progressed somewhat since the original broadcast of this show in 1995. In 2000, the age of consent for gay sex was lowered from eighteen to sixteen, bringing it into line with the heterosexual equivalent. In 2002, the government repealed Section 28, which had prevented schools from 'promoting' homosexuality.[82] In 2004, Civil Partnerships were introduced in order to make the rights available to married, heterosexual couples available to same-sex couples.

In Steel's case, the debate is not between differing factions in his audience, but is part of a debate on a wider social scale that was building towards the changes in attitudes and legislation that have since reduced discrimination against homosexuality. In this sense, Steel does not need to debate the issue even-handedly; his performance is the 'balance' and the 'right to reply' to comments such as those of Nicholas Soames.

Stand-up comedy can make an important contribution to social change. It is one of the catalysts which enables renegotiation of attitudes, and the dissemination of new ideas, to occur. For a medium to communicate to the mass of people it must, by definition, be popular. With so much stand-up comedy being produced, and with the incentives

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[81] *Ibid.*

[82] J. Taylor and A. Grice, 'Clegg Lays Down Law to Cameron on Gay Rights', *Independent*, 13 January 2010.

of fun and laughter to encourage its wide consumption, this medium of debate is well-placed to play a vital role in formulating the ideas and attitudes of its society. When comedians choose to place their own views in serious contention, they necessarily make a contribution to the wider social debate. In the next chapter, we turn to the question of how effective this contribution is likely to be in influencing individuals to adopt new attitudes.

Chapter Nine

Can Stand-Up Change Your Mind?

Performance and the thinking trap

When a magician performs a trick, his techniques encompass much more than the concrete skills which deceive the beholder into perceiving a magical event. The palming of a coin and the sleighting of a handkerchief are not extraordinary in themselves; it is the mystique and narrative which surround these mechanics that create the illusion of magic.[1] Much of the skill in magic consists of controlling the audience's emotional relationship with events and, particularly, utilising the common traps that our thinking processes will lead us into.[2]

Famous illusionist Derren Brown illustrates this point in relation to a simple coin trick.[3] The performer appears to pick a coin up from a table at which he is sitting, holds it in his fist, and then opens the hand to show that the coin has 'disappeared'. The trick's mechanism is simple: the performer appears to slide the coin toward him and pick it up in his fist; in fact the coin has been slipped into his lap, and the hand is empty from the start. In itself, the sleight is 'barely magic'; 'because the chain of events is so short and easy to reconstruct, it is more than possible that an acute observer[...]could work out the trick.'[4] The magician must therefore add embellishments that shroud the trick in misdirection and turn the simple mechanics of sliding a coin into the lap into a piece of magic. He might add some actions to the routine which do nothing to further move or conceal the coin, but which make the sequence of events more complicated and therefore harder for the spectator to retrace to the point where the coin 'disappeared'. He could even try to persuade his audience that they saw the coin after the sleight had already occurred:

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[1] D. Brown, *Tricks of the Mind* (London: Channel 4 Books, 2006), p.36.
[2] J. Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible* (London: Arrow Books, 2003), Chapter One.
[3] Brown, *Tricks of the Mind*, pp.25-30.
[4] *Ibid*, p.26.

> [B]efore you pass the 'coin' across to your left hand, mime showing it at your fingertips. Hold it for half a moment, as if you're fairly displaying it between your thumb and first two fingers. Now anyone studying your fingers will see that there's nothing there. But if you make it a quick and casual gesture[...]they will, once you are relaxed and you time it just right, swear that you showed them the coin in that hand.
> That is an extraordinary thing.[5]

More extraordinary still is Brown's assurance that he can cause the audience to create a false memory. The magician ensures that there are two coins on the table, and takes a moment to appear to be deciding which to pick up: 'this secures in the spectator's mind the image of two coins fairly on the table.'[6] The magician 'attempts' the trick with one coin, actually picking it up, fiddling with it, and allowing the spectator to see the coin in his hand. The magician then admits that he has made a mistake and starts the trick again, this time performing the sleight with the coin so that it never is in his hands:

> You are now performing the sleight when the spectators are paying the least attention. Their eyes may still be directed at you, but for the vital moment they are off-guard. As long as you can make them relax in this way, you'll get away with anything during this vital 'off-beat'[...]Moreover, you have, by unsuccessfully going through the trick once with Coin A, given them some snapshots that will confuse them later in their reconstruction. They have seen a coin being picked up directly from the table. They have seen a coin clearly in your left fist. Later, they will confuse what they saw the first time with what they saw the second time. No-one should remember that you picked up the second coin in a slightly different manner.[7]

Brown is stating that he, as a performer, can work with the way that audiences perceive, interpret and remember in order to manipulate them into perceiving a dull and benign event (a man slipping a coin into his lap) as magic. Steinmeyer concurs:

> Magicians guard an empty safe. In fact, there are few secrets that they possess that are beyond the capacity of a high-school science class, little technology more complex than a rubber band, a square of mirrored glass, or a length of thread[...]The simple

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[5] *Ibid*, pp.27-28.
[6] *Ibid*, p.28.
[7] *Ibid*, p.29.

> explanation is that seldom do the crude gimmicks in a magic show – those mirrors, threads or rubber bands - deceive people. The audience is taken by the hand and led to deceive themselves.[8]

As Brown's analysis of the simple coin trick shows, the ability to cause an audience to deceive itself relies upon an understanding of the fallacies of the human mind, whether that understanding be gained through technical knowledge or simply through instinct and experience. These techniques of enhancement are the bread-and-butter of every magician; tried-and-tested tricks for capturing the imagination and trapping the analytical powers of the audience.

Such knowledge is available via a combination of instinct, experiment and experience to other performers. Comedy also works closely with the failings of the human brain to see the full complexity, or interpret the true nature, of its surroundings. For example, as we have already seen, joking itself utilises the brain's love of cognitive and emotional short-cuts: in cognitive and practical disengagement we allow ourselves a break from analysis of truthfulness and concern for effects.[9] As shown in the first chapter of this thesis, joking involves playing on an audience's thought processes by tapping in to the tensions, denials and fixed structures that are largely unacknowledged in their everyday lives and subverting their usual treatment by disregarding the structures of normal logic or releasing feelings that are normally repressed.

How opinions behave

We have already seen that comedians can persuade audiences to agree with controversial or poorly-evidenced ideas in the short-term in order to facilitate the smooth running of the performance. This is at play when audiences demonstrate cognitive and practical disengagement with the comedian's material, and in cases where they deliver responses which would not usually be deemed socially acceptable; Stewart Lee's audience applauding the IRA and Dan Atkinson tricking an audience

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[8] Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant*, pp.16-17.
[9] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70.
Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*.

member into high-fiving paedophilia are dramatic examples.[10] While these instances demonstrate that audience members can be persuaded to outwardly demonstrate an attitude contrary to their 'real' or everyday beliefs, it seems unlikely that either manipulation will have led to those attitudes becoming fixed in the minds of the audience. Similarly, cognitive and practical disengagement are temporary states; Morreall's model assumes that when audiences emerge from the marginal practice of joking, they will once again prioritise honesty and empathise with suffering.[11] The manipulation is impressive, but short-term, and in itself may demonstrate a mere willingness to facilitate the gig.

Anyone who seeks to alter attitudes and opinions in the long-term is faced with a considerable challenge. As we have seen, the comedian has advantages in terms of forming a logical argument, because even spurious logic created in jest can be taken as a serious basis for the comedian's argument. This is at play in Stewart Lee's routine which consciously over-analyses Joe Pasquale's allegedly plagiarised 'a lot of people say to me...get out of my garden' gag.[12] We have also seen that comedians can use their status to obtain their audience's agreement, for example when Mark Thomas demands that his audience alter their reaction to the topic of asylum seekers. However, evidence suggests that even the most logical and well-founded arguments will come up against fearsome competition if they seek to replace those opinions that the individual already holds. According to Lane and Sears:

> Opinions are often learned as mere affective tendencies, as 'pro' or 'con' feelings, without adequate informational support. They are formed on the basis of biased exposure to information, and selective perception and selective learning[...]In short, most citizens are not[...]notably 'rational' in their political thinking. Their main interest lies in defending emotionally derived and poorly considered opinions - opinions based on early imitation of parental beliefs, partisan adherence to the norms of various groups, and selfish economic or personal interests. [13]

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[10] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*
Dan Atkinson, *Edinburgh and Beyond 2008.*
[11] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', pp.69-74.
[12] Stewart Lee, *90s Comedian.*
[13] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, pp.74-75.

Analysis of the process by which people develop, use and change their attitudes and opinions is complicated by the fact that not all people, attitudes or opinions behave in the same way. Individuals are subject to different influences, hold different things to be important, and are educated to assimilate new information in different ways.[14] Individuals also hold the opinions they have with differing intensities; some opinions are not important and are therefore more easily altered or discarded, while others are of fundamental importance to the individual's understanding of both themselves and their environment.[15]

Attitudes and opinions have some characteristics which most theorists agree to be universal. Firstly, opinions, especially intensely-held ones, are rarely arrived at or altered by a cool process of balanced reasoning in the light of fairly-judged evidence. We seek little factual evidence on which to form an opinion, and it is usually after we have decided on an attitude to take that we develop supporting cognitions.[16] We allow ourselves more exposure to, and take more notice of, the evidence that supports our decision and ignore, avoid or otherwise disregard such information as may contradict our viewpoint. Oswald and Grosjean add that, even when we allow ourselves to be exposed to, and take on board, evidence that contradicts our current hypothesis, we tend to assume that such evidence is less relevant than that which confirms it.[17] In summary, Lane and Sears rather pessimistically conclude that 'it is one thing to be informed and something else to have an opinion.'[18]

In 1922, Walter Lippmann put forward a similar and influential idea, identifying what he called 'stereotypes' which enable us to interpret a world that is too complex to comprehend in full and in which we can not expose ourselves to every relevant piece of information. Stereotypes precede the formation of opinion, intervening at the very moment in which the individual first receives and interprets information from the world around him, and thus manipulate the individual's experience even before a value-judgement is made. Stereotypes appear in many different

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[14] Gross, *Psychology*, pp.447-448.
[15] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.9; pp.53-54.
[16] *Ibid*, pp.70-75.
[17] Oswald, M. and S. Grosjean, 'Confirmation Bias', in *Cognitive Illusions: a Handbook on Fallacies and Biases in Thinking, Judgement and Memory*, ed. by R.F. Phol (Hove: Psychology Press, 2004), pp. 79-96 (p.89).
[18] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.63.

guises in writings about opinion and prejudice, and are similar to what psychologists call 'heuristics': 'simple and approximate rules' which allow us to interpret the world with the necessary efficiency, but which sometimes cause us to interpret it incompletely or inaccurately.[19] According to Lippmann, people are deeply motivated to defend their 'stereotypes' against contradictory evidence:

> A pattern of stereotypes is not neutral. It is not merely a way of substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing confusion of reality. It is not merely a short cut. It is all these things and something more. It is the guarantee of our self-respect; it is that projection upon the world of our own sense of our own value, our own position and our own rights. The stereotypes are, therefore, highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them. They are the fortress of our tradition, and behind its defenses we can continue to feel ourselves safe in the position we occupy.[20]

Each individual has a commitment to his own series of opinions and beliefs, and is motivated to defend them. Any heavy-handed attempt to change a strongly-held attitude, opinion or stereotype is likely to lead to 'reactance', where the individual responds to the message by thinking or doing the opposite of what he was asked. Gross points to the example of smokers who know that smoking is dangerous to their health and yet develop cognitions to support their behaviour. The smoker may, for example, decide that the mass of evidence which shows smoking to be dangerous is flawed, associate with healthy people who are also smokers in order to provide evidence for the view that smoking is not damaging, convince himself that smoking is an important recreational activity or perhaps reinterpret the behaviour as indicative of a romantic, 'devil-may-care image'.[21]

Bill Hicks famously celebrated smoking in his material, frequently performing routines which denied the importance of health implications and cast smokers in an image of cool defiance, often comparing them positively to 'whining' non-smokers.[22] In the following segment, Hicks recalls an anti-smoking television advert which featured Yul Brynner. The advert was released after Brynner died from cancer caused by

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[19] M. Piattelli-Palmarini, *Inevitable Illusions: How Mistakes of Reason Rule our Minds* (Chichester: Wiley, 1994), pp.19-20.
[20] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, pp.63-64.
[21] Gross, *Psychology*, pp.447-449.
[22] Bill Hicks, *Bill Hicks: One Night Stand*. Good Cut. 1991. VHS.

cigarettes. Hicks relates this to the fate of Jim Fixx, a celebrity known for fitness and, particularly, for making jogging a mainstream activity. Italics denote Hicks' characterisation of the two celebrities:

> ***'I'm Yul Brynner and I'm dead now, 'cause I smoked cigarettes'.***
> **It's pretty frightening, y'know?...But they coulda done that with anybody. They coulda done it with that Jim Fixx guy just as easily.**
> ***'I'm Jim Fixx and I'm dead now...and I don't know how the fuck it happened'*** [laugh]***...'I jogged every day, ate nothing but tofu, swam five hundred laps every morning. I'm dead...Yul Brynner drank, smoked and got laid every night of his life. He's dead'*** [small laugh]***...'Shit!'*** [laugh, applause begins gradually][23]

Hicks interprets Brynner's smoking as part of a glamorous and fulfilling lifestyle. The contrast with Jim Fixx makes the potentially terminal effect of smoking appear less frightening: it points out that healthy people die too, and suggests that a life in which health and fitness are priorities will be less fun, and harder work, than a life lived with a view to hedonistic indulgence. This routine exemplifies Gross' point: Hicks outlines cognitions which subvert the facts in order to demonstrate that smoking is an intelligent choice.

In a BBC video designed to give practical advice on improving persuasive speaking, Alastair Campbell offers the following summary of his experience as a political speaker and speech-writer:

> Maybe this is a bit naive, but I have quite an old-fashioned belief that most people will listen to a well-constructed argument. So if you make a case founded on factual analysis, values, your own experience, history, colour, bringing in human stories and so forth [I think] you can[...]usually persuade somebody closer to your case, even if, ultimately, they're not going to necessarily agree with you[...]Sometimes you're never going to persuade somebody. What you might be able to persuade me is actually 'you've got a point I hadn't thought about - you made the case rather well.' So[...]you're not always persuading somebody to go from A to Z, you might be persuading them to go from, kind of[...]G to J.[24]

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[23] Bill Hicks, *Flying Saucer Tour. Vol 1.* Rykodisc. 2002. CD.
[24] Campbell, A., 'Persuasive Speaking: Define Your Key Message', *The Speaker,* (BBC) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/speaker/improve/persuasion/> [accessed 17 May 2010].

Campbell's experience supports the idea that persuading any individual to change his mind is difficult and often impossible. The evidence suggests that Campbell's belief in 'factual analysis' and 'a well-constructed argument' is indeed naive, and it is interesting that Campbell himself goes on to bury this strategy beneath a heap of techniques designed to play upon the audience's emotions and partisan tendencies such as 'values' and 'human stories'. As the logic of Gross' smoker demonstrates, human beings are adept at resisting logic when it conflicts with their perceived interests and established, comforting world-view. Far from weighing up facts against each other and making a cool judgement, we will go to extremes to defend those attitudes and opinions that are important to us, and are even willing to counter overwhelming evidence with beliefs that range from the bizarre to the ridiculous. This could be a serious disadvantage for the speaker who wishes to persuade by sensible logic; for the comedian, it only serves to bring the fight on to home ground.

It is not true that comic packaging automatically undermines the strength of a persuasive message. The comedian's message can be powerful, and its status as comedy does not preclude it from being taken seriously. Indeed, the fact that the message is delivered in the form of humour may be an advantage for persuasive purposes. We are more likely to be persuaded by a message if it is delivered in an informal, face-to-face context and when we do not suspect that the speaker's main aim is to influence us.[25] The drive to comply with our peers is also a crucial factor in determining what we choose to believe.[26] In general, all three factors work to the advantage of the comedian in live stand-up comedy. The situation is informal and allows face-to-face contact with both the speaker and a reference group in the form of the audience. While political speakers may suffer from the audience's perception that the speaker is trying to influence them, which may lead them to resist the manipulative effort, stand-up comedians have the advantage of disguise. As Broderick Chow states, whatever else stand-up seeks to do, we can always assume that the comedian has one distinct priority: 'Stand-up comedy may be edifying, challenging,

[25] Gross, *Psychology*, pp.433-7; pp.447-8.
[26] Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, pp.37-41.

subversive, or educative, but it need not be any of these things. What it *needs* to be is funny.'[27]

Furthermore, successful comedy demands laughter and applause, and thus positively requires audiences to demonstrate their agreement with the suggested attitude. It is generally recognised that individuals will be more committed to an attitude once they have publicly aligned themselves with it.[28] The context in which stand-up comedy is received creates advantages for the transfer of persuasive messages.

To claim that any politically-motivated routine is 'only a joke' is to fundamentally misinterpret what a joke is. Far from preventing the persuasive message from being taken seriously, the joke lends a disguise which may enable the ideas to escape the usual resistance and censorship inflicted on our own thinking by our own cognitive processes. Effective persuasion relies upon the combination of positive evaluations of a source and its message overpowering existing attitudes. When the message can be packaged, appropriately and successfully, as a joke, the effects are all to the advantage of persuasion.

Opinion change as dissonance-resolution

If a comedian is to influence his audience through stand-up comedy, we have a situation where one speaker (the comedian) delivers a persuasive message to a group of individuals (the audience). Lane and Sears describe the resolution of dissonance in such situations as a battle between three sets of cognitions:

> In any influence situation, someone ('the source') is attempting to persuade someone else (the 'influencee' in the audience) to adopt a given position[...]In a simple influence situation, the influencee has three basic sets of 'cognitions' or 'thoughts': his *evaluation of the source*, his *judgement of the source's position*, and his own *opinion* on the issue.[29]

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[27] B. D.V. Chow, Chow, B.D.V., 'Situations, Happenings, Gatherings, Laughter: Emergent British Stand-Up Comedy in Sociopolitical Context', in *Comedy Tonight!*, ed. by J. Malarcher, Theatre Symposium Series, 16 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), pp.121-133 (p.121).

[28] Gross, *Psychology*, p.448.
Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.53.

[29] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.44. [Lane & Sears' italics].

The influencee's cognitions may easily clash, creating cognitive dissonance. For example, a source that the influencee is predisposed to like may say something that the influencee does not agree with, or vice-versa. Equally, a positively-evaluated source may deliver a positively-evaluated message that contrasts with the individual's own opinion.[30] Lane and Sears state that the dissonance is resolved by altering whichever cognition can most easily be changed.[31] They explain the process using the example of a liked and respected college President who is reported to have said that admission of Jews to the college should be limited to ten per cent of the next year's student intake. When this report reaches an influencee who instinctively dislikes the idea of a discriminatory quota system, a tension is created between his positive evaluation of the President, and his negative evaluation of the statement that the President is reported to have made:

> This tension may be relieved in several obvious ways: perhaps by changing your opinion on the proposed quota system (e.g., 'we should have a balanced school body,' or 'I'll bet that's all the qualified Jews that apply, anyway'), perhaps by changing your evaluation of the President (e.g., 'Anyone who would take such a bigoted position as that must be a real SOB'), or perhaps by changing your perception of his position (e.g., 'It was only a rumour,' or 'He must have said that's the proportion that is coming in next year, not that only 10 per cent *should* come.')[32]

Thus a persuasive message has the greatest chance of achieving the desired effect upon its audience if it comes from a source who is liked or respected, and is itself palatable and well-argued. Only under these circumstances is the influencee likely to resolve the dissonance by altering the opinion to accommodate the message.

If the equivalent situation occurs in a stand-up show, the audience may, of course, choose to resolve the situation by negatively evaluating the comedian. This can and does happen, as in the example of Bruce Devlin, whose reviews on the *Chortle* website contain a mixture of praise and vicious outrage. Devlin is called 'vile' and 'one desperately unfunny

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[30] The term 'message' is used as equivalent to the 'position' of the source in Lane and Sears' terminology.
[31] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.47. [Lane & Sears' italics].
[32] *Ibid*, p.45.

and eyebleedingly unpleasant compère'.[33] However, in a case where the positive feelings towards the leader outweigh any contradictory feelings about what the leader says, the affection or respect that the influencee holds for the leader will bring the influencee into agreement with them. It therefore follows that a leader who is funny and exciting, in a position which usually inspires affection, will find himself at a distinct and important advantage when it comes to exerting influence and persuading an audience.[34] An example of this tendency might be Josie Long, whose personal charm is surely the main reason that her audience are willing to accept, and even share, her admiration for the rather dull and eccentric career of nineteenth-century quaker artist Edward Hicks.[35] Long celebrates the fact that, in his whole career, Hicks painted 'a hundred versions' of his *Peaceable Kingdom,* 'and nothing else', for fear that he would become decadent and ungodly. Hicks could easily be dismissed as a 'religious zealot', 'mad', 'stupid' or plain 'boring', but Long manages to establish respect among her audience for his achievements.

Yet the greatest protection for the comedian's status in this situation is perhaps the influencee's tendency to distort the perception of what was said or meant by the leader. We instinctively give jokes immunity; hence the 'it was only a rumour' of Lane and Sears' example could easily be substituted for the most robust of get-out-clauses: the audience member tells themselves that 'it was only a joke'.[36]

Hence the affection felt for the comedian, and the need to affirm social competence by joining in with the group, constitute pressing reasons for audience members to agree with the comedian's attitude if possible, or at least to act as if this were the case by laughing.[37] This could be seen as a problem for influence: if the audience use distortion to make the comedian's message more palatable then they are not taking the intended message seriously, and are unlikely to be persuaded to adopt it

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[33] T. Backs and P. Robertshaw, 'Comments on Bruce Devlin', *Chortle,* <http://www.chortle.co.uk/comics/b/614/bruce_devlin/comments/> [Consulted 12 November 2008].
[34] Double, *Getting the Joke,* pp.60-63.
[35] Josie Long, *Trying is Good.*
[36] Douglas, 'Jokes', p.158.
Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', p.47.
[37] Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 'Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour', p.47.

in the long term.[38] From this point of view, distortion is helpful to the comedian as protection from negative evaluation, but not for influence. Yet it is worth remembering what laughter does: whether the laughter signals genuine agreement, misinterpretation or is a deception by the audience members designed to make themselves appear socially competent, the laughter serves to legitimize the joke's premise among the audience as a whole.[39]

The human mind is prone to all kinds of 'thinking traps'. Those internal mechanisms which Walter Lippmann describes as 'stereotypes', what Gordon W. Allport calls 'categories', what psychology refers to as 'heuristics' and 'cognitive illusions' and Derren Brown simply calls 'bad thinking' are all part of this category of human thought which limits our powers of reasoning and leaves us fundamentally incapable of understanding the world in its mathematical and empirical entirety.[40] The intention of what follows is, firstly, to suggest some possible ways in which comedians, like magicians, utilise an instinctive understanding of the fallacies of human thought on the part of the performer, in order to manipulate the audience member and, secondly, to propose a model by which we can deduce the possibilities for this to translate into influence.

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[38] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.51.
[39] Philips, 'Racist Acts and Racist Humour', pp.90-91.
[40] Lippmann, *Public Opinion.*
Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice.*
Piattelli-Palmarini, *Inevitable Illusions*, pp.19-20.
R.F. Pohl, ed. *Cognitive Illusions* (see Oswald and Grosjean, above).
Brown, *Tricks of the Mind*, Part Six.

Case Studies: *Robert Newman's History of Oil* and *The Mark Steel Revolution:* 'The French Revolution'

Intensity, reactance, compatibility with existing opinions

In the first of his Radio 4 lectures in his 1998 *Revolution* series, Mark Steel aims to persuade his audience to change their view of the French Revolution.[41] He begins by outlining the problem with the typical British perception:

> **On the whole, I don't think we're supposed to like the French Revolution because usually it's portrayed as this period in French history when, for some reason, people just couldn't help guillotining each other. People would just invite round their friends and say:**
> (French accent) ***'ah, Henri, Marianne, so nice to see you, how are you?'***
> **Woosh!** [laugh]...
> ***'Henri, I'm so sorry, I have guillotined your wife!'*** [laugh][42]

Steel explains that this perception is based on the Terror, a vicious and dysfunctional aspect of a revolution which was really about progressive social change. Around 20 minutes into the show, he comes to explaining the changes that occurred during the Jacobins' first year in charge. This was 'the most radical year of the Revolution':[43]

> **Spurred on by all that had happened, the Jacobins imposed a maximum price for bread; plans were made for the first ever welfare state; payments were made to the relatives of injured soldiers; a national plan was drawn up for comprehensive education; and as far as I know Robespierre was not caught sending his own son to a selective school in Hammersmith** [laugh]

Steel's list of Jacobin reforms paints a picture of a progressive society; these are measures which provide security and education to the poor, and are likely to appeal to an audience who themselves grew up in a welfare state. Indeed, the comparison of Robespierre to the audience's

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[41] Mark Steel, 'The French Revolution', *The Mark Steel Revolution* (BBC Radio 4, 30 June 1998) <http://www.marksteelinfo.com/audiovideo/default.asp> [accessed 1 March 2010].
[42] *Ibid.*
[43] *Ibid.*

Prime Minister, Tony Blair – who had claimed to prioritise the comprehensive education system but chose not to put his own child in to it – suggests that the Jacobins were more genuinely progressive than the audience's own government.

Steel goes on to explain that religious reforms replaced the Catholic Church with the more proletariat-biased Cult of the Supreme Being, and granted full citizenship to Jews for the first time. The Jacobins introduced the metric system of weights and measures that we use today, and abolished slavery in the colonies. Steel concludes: 'In fact, there had been greater social change in those three years than in the previous five hundred, and yet, hand in hand with that change went the Terror.'

On the whole, Steel's audience is unlikely to demonstrate much reactance against the change in opinion that he suggests. The idea that the French Revolution represents violent mass murder is pervasive and has emotive implications, but the audience's commitment to that opinion is unlikely to be intense. The horror of the events is dulled by their distance in time, and the opinion is unlikely to be one of the 'pattern of stereotypes' which Lippmann sees as an important 'guarantee' of our sense of self and our place in the world.[44] Indeed, Steel is able to use this fact to his advantage: the audience need a way to relate to the topic, which Steel provides by highlighting similarities between the Jacobins' reforms and their own social structure. The Jacobins were in favour of a welfare state, metric currency and education for all: we may assume that a British audience in 1998 broadly agreed with their world-view thus far. For this reason, the audience's positive opinion of Jacobin reform is likely to be more intense than the negative opinion towards the Terror.

This technique is manipulative in that it works with the audience's prejudices in order to gain agreement for Steel's point of view, and it would be available to any kind of speaker. The audience would, presumably, not have sought out information about the French Revolution if it had not been offered to them as entertainment, but we can tell from their continuous reactions to Steel's performance that they pay close attention to the material that he presents. As noted above,

[44] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, pp.63-64.

such a format also carries benefits for long-term change of opinion, owing to the informal context and face-to-face interaction.[45]

Robert Newman sets himself a more difficult task in his *History of Oil* show, seeking to influence his audience to take seriously the threat of an imminent collapse in their economy and social structure.[46] Newman's argument also involves a reinterpretation of the audience's own national history which is likely to be disturbing. While Steel's audience have little connection to, or personal investment in, their original attitudes to the French Revolution, Newman is dishing up some very uncomfortable truths. If the audience choose to adopt his ideas they will be choosing to believe that the ideological reasoning by which their country has justified its wars are really just excuses for bloodshed aimed at the preservation of cold economic and strategic interests: that their Prime Minister is a war criminal who would be hung if the Nuremberg laws were applied to him, and that they have been 'uniquely ignorant' about their own past. Most importantly, they must accept that they are faced with impending doom – oil is running out. There will not only be no fuel to run their industries and gadgets; no fuel to produce and transport food; their industrial civilisation faces the same obliteration as the Mayans or Ancient Romans before them.

Yet despite the discomfort that such ideas may cause, Newman can utilise the audience's pre-existing opinions to his advantage. An audience that chooses to see him perform live are unlikely to be surprised by his anti-war and eco-friendly credentials. While the audience who watched the show on television channel More4 need commit little time or energy to seeing the performance, they are still likely to be broadly sympathetic: those who dislike left-wing politics or oppose environmentalism are likely to avoid the broadcast.[47] Newman can assume that the audience will at least be sympathetic towards his own anti-war position and will be aware of, and believe in the validity of, information suggesting that carbon emissions from the use of fossil fuels are having a negative effect on the earth's climate. As identified by both Lippmann and Lane and Sears, opinions are not developed in a great

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[45] Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, pp.194-195.
[46] Robert Newman, *History of Oil.*
[47] First broadcast on More4, 12 April 2006.

deal of detail, but rather as vague 'pro' and 'con' tendencies.[48] In this case, the tendencies towards cynicism regarding the motives for the Iraq war and rejection of fossil fuels may prepare the audience to accept a thesis which rejects both war and over-reliance upon fossil fuels.

Creating reference points and reference groups

Both Steel and Newman use strategies which emphasise the feeling of consensus among their audiences. This allows each comedian to draw upon his audience's power as a reference group. Each individual in the audience experiences social pressure to conform to the idea presented; if the group accepts an idea by delivering the cooperative response of laughter, the individual is faced with a choice between joining in with the laughter or finding themselves isolated. However, those individuals are also under the influence of their wider reference groups. As Lane and Sears state, individuals learn to identify themselves with numerous categories defined by characteristics such as gender, nationality, political persuasions and religious belief.[49] The established norms of these groups will function as reference points, which help the individual to decide how to assimilate the new information:

> When a group's norms serve as reference points for an individual, the group may be described as one of his *reference groups*. A reference group may be positive, with the individual adopting its norms as his own opinions; or negative, with its norms telling him what *not* to think[...]Clearly, a person does not have to be a member of a group for it to serve a reference function for him.[50]

According to Lippmann, if a person is to be able to care about and adopt a theoretical idea, he must be able to picture it vividly, and relate to it by 'taking sides':

> In order[...]that the distant situation shall not be a gray flicker on the edge of attention, it should be capable of translation into pictures in which the opportunity for identification is recognizable. Unless that happens it will interest only a few for a little while[...]We have to take sides. We have to be able to take sides. In the recesses of our being we must step out of the

[48] Lane and Sears, *Public Opinion*, p.74.
[49] *Ibid*, pp.33-42.
[50] *Ibid*, p.34. [Lane & Sears' italics].

> audience on to the stage, and wrestle as the hero for the victory of good over evil. We must breathe into the allegory the breath of our life. [51]

Lippmann's idea finds support in the practical experience of Alastair Campbell, as quoted above.[52] The persuasive argument needs not only factual merit but - perhaps more importantly - an appeal to 'values, human experience, history, colour, bringing in human stories.' All of these elements serve to make the material more vivid and provide reference points on which the individual may hang his interpretation of the new information. Part of the comedian's craft is to make his abstract ideas vivid and entertaining. Joking also requires us to 'take sides' because, as Douglas states, joking is the challenge of one social pattern by another. Douglas defines a joke in combative terms, defining a recognisable joke as, 'the juxtaposition of control against that which is controlled, this juxtaposition being such that the latter triumphs.'[53] When the audience laugh, they are taking sides.

By accurately assuming that the audience will sympathise with reforms which made French society more like their own, Steel is able to use the shared politics of his audience as the basis upon which to form a positive reference group. The group is further strengthened by the subtle identification of a negative reference group. Even the opening line of the show - 'On the whole, I don't think we're supposed to like the French Revolution' – implies the existence of somebody who demands that they agree to a spurious view of the historical events. Contrasting positive and negative reference groups against each other can be an effective tool for creating consensus. One example of this comes when Steel addresses the most difficult aspect of the revolution, seeking to neutralise the controversy surrounding the Terror. Steel draws a parallel between his own society and eighteenth-century France:

> **[The guillotine] was created by a man called Doctor Guillotine as a humane method of execution because, before the guillotine, victims were hung or strapped to a water-wheel until their back broke. So the thing is that when Doctor**

[51] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p.107.
[52] Campbell, 'Persuasive Speaking'.
[53] Douglas, 'Jokes', p.150.

Guillotine invented his machine, there will have been, at the time, a French Michael Howard going:
(Impersonation of a French Howard) ***'Doesn't this prove that the Jacobins are soft on crime?!'*** [laugh]***...'But Mister Robespierre doesn't care because he is the burglar's friend!'*** [laugh]
And there would have been someone down the pub going:
(Low voice) ***'Them bloody guillotines, they're an 'oliday camp!'*** [laugh]

As was noted in the previous chapter, Mark Steel is likely to attract an audience who broadly share his politics, or at least are not opposed to them. By drawing a parallel between those who opposed the guillotine and Michael Howard, Steel utilises his own, contemporary reference groups. In this period immediately following the defeat of the Conservative government in the 1997 General Election, the Conservative Party was an easy target: many people regarded the Party, and particularly key right-wingers such as Michael Howard, as a negative reference group. By suggesting that Howard would have opposed it, Steel affirms that the use of the guillotine was a liberal approach to law enforcement in its own time. This also has the side-effect of compromising Howard's image for any audience member who would usually regard him as a positive reference point, as Steel equates Howard's contemporary views on crime with support for torturous methods of execution.

Robert Newman similarly utilises the tendency towards partisanship in order to clear the cognitive pathway so that his audience may make the difficult opinion change asked of them. Newman's opening lines seem oddly narrow in their criticism:

So, I did a twenty-six city tour of the United States last year and it was a very interesting time to be over there. I was in North Carolina, reading the papers in the back yard with a guy who lived next door to where I was staying, and it was the day that news first broke, from Iraq, of this united Sunni and Shia joint uprising against the US-led occupation. Same day, there was news of an African Union declaration condemning US foreign policy. And the guy next door said to me, 'I'll tell you this much about the United States, we are sure bringing about world unity. 'Coz the one thing unites the entire planet – hatred of us.' [laugh] **'It's like you all became one big nation called The Rest of the World!' And I said to him, 'Well actually we did.'** [laugh] **'In fact, we have**

even got our own flag.' He went, 'Oh yeah? What is it?' I said, 'Same as yours, but on fire.' [big laugh]

This criticism solely attacks the USA, and the chance for this British audience to enjoy a superiority laugh at the unpopularity of American imperialism seems out of place in the broader context of a show which will also criticise British foreign policy and behaviour. In the previous discussion on delivery, we saw how a comedian may manufacture consensus by starting from a point of agreement and building outwards from there. Newman's opening gambit utilises the same technique. By reminding the audience of their consensus in evaluating American imperialism negatively, Newman creates this as a negative reference point. Having accomplished the relatively easy task of establishing that the audience dislike American dominance and self-serving foreign policy, Newman can utilise this reference point when he highlights the similar nature of British foreign policy. Having already declared their dislike of American imperialism by laughing at Newman's opening gags, the audience will face cognitive dissonance if they decide to positively evaluate British behaviour despite the similarities.[54]

It will, however, be no good to Newman if the audience decide to classify themselves as part of a 'British' category which includes themselves, the British government, the British media and the mass of British people. Newman will be asking the audience to take action to rectify some of the difficulties that poor government decisions and ignorance among the media and the masses have got them in to. It is therefore important that they see themselves as a separate group who are able to take up that challenge. It is also likely to be important that the audience do not feel that they are being personally attacked; if they feel that they are being accused of wrongdoing they may demonstrate reactance and lack the morale and confidence to be persuaded to fix the problem. Therefore, the opening ten minutes of this show also serves to separate the audience from those elements of the British establishment which Newman attacks.

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[54] Gross notes that opinions that have been publicly expressed are more likely to bring about an overall change in attitude than those which have only been expressed in private: Gross, *Psychology*, p.448.

Immediately following his aggressive joke at the expense of Americans, Newman moves on to explain that he was 'skip-diving in Kentish Town' when he came across a book entitled *Marching to the Drums: From the Kabul Massacre to the Siege of Mafikeng*:

> **At the top of each chapter, there was this little introductory, stand-alone, paragraph in bold, just explaining what the British army happened to be doing in Afghanistan, Egypt, Sudan...And, because the people who read gung-ho military histories like *Marching to the Drums* are really only interested in one thing...weapons** [laugh]**... Weapons, and maybe tactics, but on the whole weapons** [laugh]**...there was a refreshing honesty, candour, a lack of hypocrisy, about this little, introductory, stand-alone paragraph...**

Newman adopts a toffish, Colonel-Blimp tone, represented here by italics:

> ***'With its opening in 1869, the Suez Canal became the principle waterway to Britain's most valuable overseas possession – India. It was therefore imperative for the British army to control all traffic through the Suez Canal which meant first of all crushing the indigenous, independence movements of Egypt and the Sudan'*** [laugh]...

Newman speeds up his pace to mimic the author's excitement as attention turns to the real subject of interest:

> ***'Now, the Webley Automatic battle-gun was able to fire five hundred rounds a minute. This proved more than a match for the scimitar swords and wicker breast plates of the Mahdi Army'*** [laugh]**...**
>
> **And this bold stating of the geopolitical facts of life strikes the modern reader with the force of revelation...for there is, in our own time, an absolute taboo among the corporate news media and the political class against mentioning anything to do with the strategic and economic reasons for war. As witness, just over a year ago, I'm listening to the *Today* programme on Radio 4, and there was this little phrase they kept repeating on the half hour, every half hour - 'The G8 has today endorsed an American plan to bring democracy to the Middle East'**

Newman has subtly widened the negative reference point of American imperialist foreign policy to include the 'corporate news media and the political class' of Britain, referring to the flagship *Today* programme

which represents the voice of the 'political class' as offered by the BBC. By contrast, Newman emphasises the marginality of sources which deviate from this counter-establishment viewpoint. Ian Knight's *Marching to the Drums* is a military history which Newman claims is written for a marginal group who enjoy 'weapons, and maybe tactics, but on the whole weapons.'[55] The greedy tone with which Newman says this sentence, and the particular relish with which he says the word 'weapons', serve to cement the idea that the readership have a child-like obsession with the 'toys' of battle, and are thus disinterested in the ideological discourse that surrounds the subject of war. Knight and his audience are presented as people too naively ignorant of the taboo to abide by it. Newman himself comes across this source while engaging in the marginal activity of 'skip-diving'. That Newman finds the truth buried in the rubbish that mainstream society has thrown away is a subtle symbol of the way that truth has been marginalised and rejected by the establishment view.

As for the idea that either the G8 or America are motivated by the wish to 'bring democracy to the Middle East':

> **The level of naivety necessary before you can talk about 'an American Plan** [small laugh] **to bring democracy to the Middle East', you will not find that level of naivety anywhere outside of 1970s porno films** [big laugh]**...'Gee Mister, you mean the time machine only works if I take off *all* my clothes?'** [laugh]

Newman then points out an irony in the 'democracy' premise: Iran was one of the first countries under discussion, and this *was* a secular democracy until 1953, when British and American interference installed a dictator to prevent the Iranian nationalisation of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (later known as the highly profitable British Petroleum, now BP). One of the key players was Kermit Roosevelt, a CIA operative who co-ordinated the *coup d'état* against the Iranian democratic government. Having outlined Roosevelt's part in the overall story, Newman addresses the obvious association to a more famous Kermit – the Frog puppet in the *Muppets*:

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[55] I. Knight, *Marching to the Drums: From the Kabul Massacre to the Siege of Mafikeng* (London: Greenhill Books, 1999).

Incidentally, I hope you're all impressed by the way I'm just letting the whole Kermit angle slide [laugh]**...For I feel that other comedians would not have had the self-discipline** [small laugh]**...to walk away from that rich storehouse of comedic possibility** [laugh]**...but would instead have become mesmerized (.) by a mental comedy graph (.) whose X axis was Middle Eastern politics, and whose Y axis was children's TV programmes of the 1970s** [laugh]**...and would have attempted to plot the intersection points (.) and asymptotes thereon. But I feel that yes, we could have that laugh, but at a terrible psychic cost** [laugh]**...which would be that from here, to the end of the show, there would be a tinny (.) hollow sound to the laughter (.) and a collective, shared sense...of disappointment** [laugh]**...of the spectrum of possibility having been (.) brutally diminished. And we would have got through this show fine, like any other, and gone our separate ways, but...there would've been this sense – perhaps on a pre-conscious level,** [small laugh] **but real (.) nonetheless – of (.) disappointment** [small laugh]**...And it would all have been traceable back to this moment** [small laugh]**...had we gone down that particular comedic pathway** [small laugh]**...which is why we shall not be taking** [laugh]**...that particular route...That said however** [laugh]**...be advised, I shall shortly be using the phrase puppet regime** [big laugh]**...I don't want you to get overexcited or to overreact in any way, you are a sophisticated More4 audience, you will credit me that that is the given (.) socio-political terminology** [couple of laughs]**, the only accurate phraseology, wherewith to describe how[...]**

Newman then goes on to explain that Roosevelt installed the Shah, Mohammad-Rezā Pahlavi, as absolute dictator. Rezā Pahlavi went on to preside over horrific human rights abuses.

Having established a negative reference group in the form of the corporate news media and political class, this section moves on to define the audience as a separate, unified, in-group. Part of the joke here is the way that Newman smuggles in the hint of a cheap jibe at the name Kermit; by stringing out the topic of 'not acknowledging' the obvious gag, Newman cheekily plants the idea and continues, teasingly 'not talking about it' for a minute-and-a-half. In doing this, however, Newman also establishes for the audience some facts about their collective character.[56] They are people with higher aims than these cheap laughs, and while they are collectively capable of taking 'that particular comedic

[56] Mintz also comments that the warm-up functions to establish the audience as a cohesive group, although he does not go so far as to state that the comedian dictates the collective character of this group; Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', pp.78-79.

pathway', this would only end in 'disappointment'. This is a 'sophisticated More4 audience' who are interested in a higher form of comedy, and whose participation in this comic event has more worthy aims of debate and learning. The phrase separates the audience not only from the media and political class who adhere to a damaging taboo, but also from less 'sophisticated' British people who would have preferred cheap gags and failed to appreciate the higher purposes of this show. Thus Newman compliments his audience on their intellect, making the audience in-group appear special, and even more appealing.

Furthermore, Newman tells the audience that such a positive in-group 'will' agree with the interpretation of events that follows: 'you *will* credit me that that is the given (.) socio-political terminology [...], the *only* accurate phraseology.'[57] Thus Newman establishes his audience, both live and via television, as a group with particular values which will lead to agreement with his thesis.

Newman goes on to imagine the response of the news media, who will recognise that the events of 1953 were unacceptable but will feel that the actions of the government in their own time are different, being based in the ideology of democracy. Newman points out that there are fourteen permanent military bases being built by American forces in Iraq:

> **But so profound is the corporate news media's acquired naivety, the learned ability not to see or hear the uncomfortable fact, that they could be interviewing a four-star US General while he is laying bricks on the very building site of one of these US military bases and still notice nothing wrong!**

As he speaks, Newman puts his hands over his eyes as if to demonstrate the 'see no evil' attitude, then brings them to his head in frustration and disbelief. He then impersonates the 'four-star US General', speaking in a harsh, Texan accent and miming the laying of bricks as he says:

> ***'That's right, soon as the Iraqis have an election we're out o' here, don't worry about that.'*** [small laugh] ***'Just waiting for them to vote for us to leave, we're gone.'*** [laugh]...***'They vote***

[57] [My italics].

> ***to turn this four-billion dollar base into a youth club, we'll just swallow that, don't worry about that'*** [laugh]

Having spent his first ten minutes discrediting the comfortable world-view peddled by the news media and political classes, and defining common narratives concerning Western intervention in the Middle East as a negative reference point, Newman finally brings his critique down upon British society:

> **'An American plan to bring democracy to the Middle East.' And the reason they can foist such phrases upon us...*daily!*...is 'coz the British are unique among nations in their naivety about geopolitics – about the strategic and economic reasons for war – because we are unique among nations in our ignorance about our own history...How curious, for example, that the First World War is never taught in our schools as an invasion of Iraq.**

This is a difficult concept for the audience. British people are not taught to see their role in the First World War as that of aggressor, let alone as the invaders of a weaker country. The implication that this war might have been motivated by similar factors to the contemporary Iraq war, and justified by a false ideology, should be hard for Newman's audience to stomach. However, he has laid the ground work well. The audience have already had to concede that there is a propaganda machine at work in their country disseminating spurious interpretations of international events both past and present: they have laughed at Ian Knight's accidental revelation of the truth; the naivety of the premise that the war is 'bringing democracy to the Middle East', and the lies of the Four-Star US General. The related idea that even interpretations of the First World War might have been mangled by the same propaganda machine seems consistent with the reference points thus created. Newman may therefore hope to avoid reactance and persuade his audience to give his idea a fair hearing.

Resolving cognitive dissonance

As has been stated, the audience of Mark Steel's 'French Revolution' are unlikely to face severe cognitive dissonance. Steel's persona is charming, and his audience are people who have chosen to listen to

him. He is able to give precise facts, thus demonstrating a depth of historical knowledge which few of his audience are likely to share. This is an example of the 'preciseness paradox'; itself a cognitive illusion. As Karl Halvor Teigen points out, an expert's prediction is necessarily more likely to be more accurate if it is general, yet it will sound more authoritative, and thus more convincing, if it is precise: 'It is more impressive for a political commentator to announce that Iraq will be attacked on January 27, than simply that war will break out sooner or later.'[58] The same principle is at play in Steel's reinterpretation of the French Revolution. His facts are carefully chosen and interpreted to cohere with his line of argument. The information would necessarily be more complete if Steel examined other approaches in detail, for example by focusing on the genuinely bloodthirsty nature of some of the revolutionary zeal. Yet the preciseness paradox states that if he did so he would sound less convincing: he would appear unconfident and inexpert. As it is, the combination of a likeable 'leader' and a convincing message should easily overpower the loose commitment that the audience has to its previous opinion of the French Revolution. Cognitive Dissonance is likely to resolve itself by a change in that opinion.

Robert Newman faces a harder task. He shares Steel's advantages in terms of a likeable persona and apparent expertise. The marginal rules of stand-up comedy strengthen both his position as leader and the strength of his message. When he suggests that it is 'curious' that the First World War is not taught in schools as an invasion of Iraq, he goes on to acknowledge that the idea will seem far-fetched to his audience and attempts to neutralise any negative response, saying, 'not all of you are coming with me on that one. [laugh] That's okay, don't worry.' He then delivers a very interesting line; 'I will say many things in the course of tonight's show that you will not agree with.'[59] This is a useful starting point for Newman. In Linstead's terms, it places him in a bracket on the edge of conventional thinking; a playground where he can experiment with ideas without prompting an immediate negative reaction.[60]

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[58] R.V. Teigen, 'Judgements by Representativeness', in *Cognitive Illusions* (see Oswald and Grosjean, above), pp.165-182 (p.175).
[59] Robert Newman, *History of Oil.*
[60] Linstead, 'Jokers Wild'. This idea is also reflected by Baz Kershaw who states that performance contains a 'duality of conventions which allows performance

Newman later adds, 'if I went on *Question Time*, there'd be a real danger that I'd just come across as some sort of anarchist nutter.'[61] As he says 'anarchist nutter', Newman pushes his eyes wide open and produces an expression of maniacal and misplaced glee. The audience laugh; they have identified Newman's intention to play up to the label of 'anarchist nutter' by pretending to have an abnormal liking for the title. Newman then responds to their laughter by raising his head and adopting a stern expression which chastises the audience for the laughter which his (transparently fictional) new, serious attitude has chosen to take as an insulting confirmation that he is perceived in that way. The implication is that Newman occupies a dual role; he is, indeed, someone who cultivates the appearance of 'anarchist nutter', but he is also a sane and intelligent individual who adopts that appearance as a fictional guise.

In Mintz' terms, Newman's 'anarchist nutter' persona gives him the status of a dysfunctional individual who does not read the world in a 'normal' way, allowing us to 'forgive and even bless his "mistakes."'[62] However, Newman is also clear that he wants to bring the audience into agreement with him, and that the purpose of the show is to do this. Through his story-telling and use of video clips, Newman creates an alternative world over which he has very strong ownership. He plays several key characters in his story, from Salvador Dali to the country of Venezuela, thus emphasising his ownership of, and control over, his world. However, the intention is not to slip ideas past the audience in the guise of a harmless dysfunctional's rantings, but to show them that the world thus constructed is the correct one. Newman's world is where the audience can discover the truth, and it need be marginal only because their own world is so dysfunctional that the truth is not permitted there. Here, Newman has turned his dysfunction into a strength. Not only does his likeability as the comedian strengthen his position in the battle of cognitive dissonance, the cultivation of the idea of a better world adds authority to both himself and his argument.

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to "play" with the audience's fundamental beliefs, and to provoke a potential crisis in those beliefs, *without* producing immediate rejection': Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance*, p.28. [Kershaw's Italics].

[61] Robert Newman, *History of Oil.*

[62] Mintz, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', p.74.

Furthermore, Newman is able to strengthen his argument with a shoddy logic typical of joking interaction. Acknowledging that he and his audience 'began to part company' at the point at which he interpreted the First World War as an invasion of Iraq, Newman continues:

> **But I feel that if we retrench back to a position of consensus, we can build outwards from there. So going back to where I believe some consensus to exist...between us...possibly** [laugh]**...I am sure (.) many of you, like me, have never been entirely satisfied with the standard explanation we were given at secondary school for the causes and origins of the First World War...The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand...I mean no-one (.) is that popular** [laugh][63]

Newman then launches into a sketch which teases with the idea of Archduke Ferdinand's popularity:

> **Lovely fella, he helped when me car broke down and when the DJ didn't show up me sister's wedding he went home, got his own records, played all night, wouldn't take a penny. And every Sunday there he'd be refereeing the disabled basket ball.**

This segment is accompanied by a series of pictures of Newman, dressed as 'Archduke Ferdinand', in full Austrian military raiment, undertaking the activities mentioned. This ensures a steady stream of audience laughter throughout this segment, thereby confirming that the assassination theory is, indeed, ludicrous.

It is notable that while much of Newman's show does rely on detailed information given to substantiate his argument, this particular section functions without the support of any factual evidence. Newman ridicules the idea that one death could take the world to war, but does not offer a factual explanation as to why this interpretation is false. The joke transcribed above, which states that the naivety of believing America can bring democracy to the Middle East is comparable to the behaviour of characters in pornographic films of the 1970s ("'Gee Mister, you mean the time machine only works if I take off *all* my clothes?"), is a similar short-cut which makes the argument without the support of factual information. Instead, Newman's jokes stand in for the facts, constituting the entirety of the evidence offered to support the discounting of two

[63] Robert Newman, *History of Oil.*

pervasive 'truths'. These pieces of evidence rely not upon reason, but upon a hyper-logical interpretation of the facts which both Newman and his audience know to be flawed.[64] Nonetheless, they are accepted as the premise for the jokes and teaching that follow, the audience supporting Newman's argument as it develops with their rapt attention, and with a demonstration of consensus in the form of laughter and other co-operative responses. The rules of joking excuse Newman from the need to be factually accurate, and yet his joke is allowed to function as a piece of factual information. The logic is spurious and yet it is influential. Here we see the danger of stand-up comedy's use of hyper-logic: such a pairing could be dangerous if utilised for a morally reprehensible cause.

Newman is still faced with a difficult persuasive task. Clearly, though, joking provides him with advantages which would not be available to speakers who operated in the mainstream. We now move on to examine the advantages that the use of a comic and popular form may have for disseminating complex new material.

The comedian as translator

Both Steel and Newman present their audiences with dense and difficult information. For Steel, one of the challenges is the distance of time that separates his current audience from the Revolutionaries. Newman is dealing with recent and current events, but is addressing aspects of them which are, as he says, alien to mainstream thought. Their audiences are capable of understanding the French Revolution as the result of the feelings of real human beings, and of understanding Newman's complex 'geopolitics'. The difficulty lies in finding terms in which to express this information which the audience can relate to. Lippmann expresses the problem:

> We cannot be much interested in, or much moved by, the things we do not see. Of public affairs each of us sees very little, and therefore, they remain dull and unappetizing, until somebody, with the makings of an artist, has translated them into a moving picture[...]Not being omnipresent and omiscient [*sic*] we cannot

[64] Zijderveld, 'Jokes and their Relation to Social Reality', pp.301-302.

> see much of what we have to think and talk about. Being flesh and blood we will not feed on words and names and gray theory.
>
> Being artists of a sort we paint pictures, stage dramas and draw cartoons out of the abstractions.
> Or, if possible, we find gifted men who can visualize for us.[65]

Steel and Newman each find it necessary to translate their dense material into structures that their audiences can relate to, translating the 'gray theory' into vivid pictures which allow their audiences to more fully understand the information offered.

In order to translate dry, historical information into material that the audience can vividly picture, Steel draws several comparisons between events in the French Revolution and their imagined equivalents in Britain in 1998. Steel tells his audience that King Louis XVI was forced to wear the Cap of Liberty, a symbol of the revolution, as he travelled from his palace at Versailles to Paris. In itself, this is a fairly dry fact which does not encourage the audience to make the imaginative leap to understand the depth of humiliation and absurdity that Louis would have experienced. In order to communicate this, Steel translates Louis' predicament into a picture that the audience can more readily understand, using a high-profile Conservative politician:

> **[T]he King was eventually taken back to Paris and made to wear the Cap of Liberty *en route* (.) Which would be like making Michael Heseltine walk from Henley to Westminster selling copies of *Socialist Worker*** [laugh]

By translating the experience of King Louis XVI across to a contemporary equivalent, Steel is able to bridge the gap of two centuries and give his audience a vivid picture of the experience of a key player in this historical event. That the audience now engage with the full implications of this concept is illustrated by their somewhat derisive laugh, which expresses satisfaction at the idea of inflicting so pitiless an incongruity upon an individual.

Steel uses this technique to emphasise that the figures who drove the Revolution were real people, driven by similar motivations and as prone to mistakes as the modern-day audience. Explaining Louis XVI's unwise

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[65] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p.104.

trampling of the Cap of Liberty at a party as a drunken misdemeanour, Steel imagines a universally-recognisable scene: 'The brilliant thing is, the next morning he must've woken up on the floor and gone, "*(groan)* there's the Cap o' Liberty, oh I never did I?" [laugh].'[66] Steel also emphasises the humanity of the mass of French people. He explains that the representatives of the Third Estate, having declared themselves to be the French Parliament, called a mass meeting to ask that each district provide two hundred men to fight in a revolutionary army:

> **In truth, this meeting was probably as chaotic as any mass meeting. There'll have been some people going, 'well maybe if we just talk to the King politely', and there'll have been some getting over-enthusiastic and going:**
> *(Cockney)* ***"ere, my brother, 'es a builder – maybe 'e can knock us up a castle'*** [laugh]
> **And then some hippy going:**
> *(Droning)* ***'I'm no good at fighting but I can play the flute'*** [laugh]

By importing language and reasoning that the audience recognise from their own time on to the Revolutionaries, Steel translates the dry history into a story about real people with whom his audience can empathise.

Robert Newman similarly acts as a bridge between the dense theory upon which he draws and the audience's prior experience. Having established that 'bringing democracy to the Middle East' is not a credible explanation for the motivations behind the Iraq war, he presents his 'Euro-Dollar' theory as one of the genuine reasons for the conflict. The Euro-Dollar theory states that the war was a 'very public punishment beating' which attempted to prevent other nations from following Iraq, Iran and North Korea in trading their oil in euros rather than US dollars. Such a decision would have meant that the billions of dollars that were safely tied up in oil trading would have been released and the value of the dollar would collapse; thus the 'beating' of Iraq was a way for the USA to demonstrate its strength and threaten similar aggression against any other nation which tried to damage its interests.

In order to fully and clearly explain his Euro-Dollar theory, Newman needs his non-expert audience to understand the laws of economics which make the US dollars harmless while tied up in oil transactions

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[66] Mark Steel, 'The French Revolution'.

and destructive when released. He must also help his audience to visualise so large and far-reaching an event as a war as a straightforward 'punishment beating'. Newman begins by describing the dollar as used in oil trade as a 'magic chequebook'. He illustrates this by reference to Salvador Dali's practice of drawing sketches on the back of his cheques: with so valuable a piece of art upon it, the cheque, although legitimate, would never be cashed and so Dali would never have to pay for the extravagant habits in which he indulged. The release of the US dollar, Newman explains, is equivalent to all Dali's cheques being cashed at once. Newman makes the example vivid, playing the character of Dali and, in the version edited for television, including a sketch in which we see Dali write out his cheque, draw on the back of it, and look at the camera with a cunning smile as the restaurant owner says, 'Signor Dali! You do me a great honour! A signed original from the Maestro? I will never cash this cheque!'. A canny laugh from the audience illustrates that they follow the logic.

The idea of the Iraq war as a punishment beating is made similarly vivid. Newman acts out a metaphorical tale in which the world is a Bronx housing project and the USA is 'the number-one crack dealer' and local bully, trying to keep control of everybody else's actions and quash dissent. Iraq is violently beaten by America and Britain for continuing to sell crack, as an example to others who may be tempted to challenge their authority. Venezuela looks on, disparagingly teasing America, no longer impressed or threatened by his power: America is growing increasingly desperate. Like Steel, Newman acts as a bridge between the audience's understanding and a theory that they may find inaccessible owing to lack of interest or expertise.

Everett M. Rogers analyses the successful spread of new ideas as the 'diffusion of innovations'. An innovation may be 'an idea, practice or object'.[67] In Steel's case, the innovation is mainly an attitude: the item that he is trying to disseminate is a more positive or balanced view of the French Revolution. For Newman, we could see a better understanding of history and the current situation as the intended innovation. More importantly, however, the *History of Oil* show seeks to

[67] Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations*, p.11.

urge a change in behaviour: Newman wants the audience to adopt the innovation of action to rectify the fuel and climate crises.

In Roger's terms, the comedians act as 'change agents'; 'an individual who influences clients' innovation-decisions in a direction deemed desirable to a change agency.'[68] Although Rogers' language is perhaps more appropriate to the diffusion of technologies, where a 'change agent' could be a direct employee of a government or corporation which wishes to promote the use of a specific product, he states that the theory is equally applicable to the diffusion of attitudes. For Steel and Newman, the change agency is unlikely to be cohesive group but is rather a body of ideologically-charged political opinion. Steel and Newman each perform all of the roles which Rogers cites as the function of a change agent.[69] They identify the difficulties that their audiences ('clients' in Rogers' terms) face in adopting the innovations, and offer solutions. They make their audiences aware that they need the innovation, and develop a relationship with the audience which allows them to persuade the audience to adopt the innovation. Like commercial change agents, the comedians aim to 'stabilize' the audience's adoption and 'achieve a terminal relationship', meaning that they hope that the audience will adopt the innovation in the long-term, and that the innovation will continue to influence the audience once contact with the comedian has ceased. As Rogers states, 'the end goal for a change agent is to develop self-renewing behaviour on the part of the clients.'[70]

By seeing the role of political comedian as that of change agent, we discover the importance of the comedian's role in social change: performing in an accessible and popular medium they act as ambassadors for political awareness, diffusing the innovative views which they promote. As we saw in the previous chapter, the existence of such innovative views is the 'balance': the existence of that which operates outside of the mainstream viewpoint is an important check and counterweight which balances and enlivens social negotiation. As Rogers shows, the diffusion of innovations is also a necessary and decisive part of behavioural change. Recognition of the comedian as change agent is

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[68] *Ibid*, p.335.
[69] *Ibid*, p.337.
[70] *Ibid*, p.337.

one way in which we might view the place of stand-up in the development of genuine, concrete social changes.

The fear trap and the call to action

As we have seen, Steel and Newman each provide their audiences with material which widens the scope of social negotiation, encouraging them to take a new set of ideas in to consideration. This achieves Steel's stated goals: Newman, however, aims to go a step further, spurring his audience into action.

Discussion of stand-up comedy is littered with small examples of behavioural change that are credited to the intervention of an individual comedian. Mark Watson states that he once spent a large part of a performance ranting about L'Oreal, and was proud when he received an email from an audience member saying that they had ceased purchasing L'Oreal skin creams as a result.[71] In an interview for the DVD extras released with her show *The Good Life*, Lucy Porter is asked whether her show has 'worked'. Porter responds in upbeat tones: 'yeah, I've had a bit of feedback from people saying that they have, er, embraced environmentalism, vegetarianism and, er, clean living...which is quite ironic, 'cause I haven't.'[72] Evidence of such behavioural changes, reflective as it is of private habits among a disparate group of people, is necessarily anecdotal. Yet it is evidence that stand-up can cause audience members to change their behaviour. This final section analyses some of the mechanisms by which Robert Newman seeks to achieve this end.

Much of the unpleasant content of Newman's message consists of the fear induced by his pessimistic predictions for the future that will be brought about should mankind continue to abuse the planet and its resources. Gross states that fear can lead to a decrease in attention to the message, especially if the level of fear induced is so high that the individual feels that the situation is hopeless.[73] In their chapter on Confirmation Bias, Oswald and Grosjean suggest that we are sometimes

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[71] M. Watson, *Crap at the Environment: A Year in the Life of One Man Trying to Save the Planet* (London, Hodder, 2008), pp.4-5.
[72] Lucy Porter, *The Good Life.*
[73] Gross, *Psychology*, pp.444-445.

motivated to give erroneously high credibility to certain hypotheses because the cost of failing to heed them would be disproportionately high, if it were to turn out that we were wrong.[74] Positive motivations may also lead to erroneous judgements, for example:

> To retain a more positive self-image than is realistic, or to believe that friends are more altruistic and honest than they actually are, involves a lower cost than to become dismayed because of an unrealistic negative self-image, or to lose friends because of chronic distrust.[75]

In this sense, Newman's strategy of ending his show with a call for his audience to act is a sensible one:

> **And of course catch-catch-catch 22 is...the very worst fate that could befall humanity (.) and all the other little species (.) is the discovery of huge new reserves of oil beneath the tundra (.) or the burning in to the sky of what's already known about (.) 'Cause the climate chaos that would unleash would make the mere collapse of industrial society a sideshow bagatelle.** *(Winces)* **...Therefore... since we've got to make the switch from oil anyway (.) why not do it now? While we've got an electricity grid that works twenty-four hours a day to work by. While we have cash from the energy windfall of the seventies to invest in renewables and in changing the whole shape of everything. Or we can spend this money (.) sending battleships out to capture (.) the dwindling deposits (.) of the last hours of ancient sunlight...But to make the switch from oil now...would take a World-War-Two collective effort on behalf of the citizenry...Would mean, for once in our lives, getting off our arses and doing something. Us. Not politicians. Us.**[76]

Newman explains that when he 'first started getting involved with radical, direct-action, non-hierarchical, eco-autonomous, grass-roots organisations' he struggled with the concept of all members, including himself, sharing equal responsibility for making things happen. He would identify an 'alpha male' or 'alpha female' and bounce up to them suggesting ideas for action, always receiving a look in return that he did not understand. He explains:

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[74] Oswald and Grosjean, 'Confirmation Bias', pp.90-93.
[75] *Ibid*, p.92.
[76] Robert Newman, *History of Oil.*

> **And after about a year the penny dropped and I finally realised what that look meant, 'cause they won't tell ya 'cause that'd be hierarchical, right?** [small laugh] **so, but I finally realised that what this look meant, what the look meant was 'Yes (.) Good idea, why don't you do it yourself? You print the leaflets, I'll distribute them. You call a meeting, I'll attend. You organise an action, we'll come along.'...And from the moment (.) I realised that (.) my whole philosophical outlook changed (.) And from then on, instead of suggesting things that other people could do, I stopped suggesting things altogether in case I'd be expected to do them!** [big laugh and applause]**...So, just before we all split up into small groups** [laugh]**...Our revels now are ended. So thank you very much for listening, thank you very much** [cheering and applause]

In some respects this is an odd way for Newman to end his show. After all, Newman seems to throw away his argument by saying that he himself has given up on suggesting helpful measures for fear that he would have to undertake them. Yet Newman's confession of his own anxieties and laziness is also rather comforting. Newman presents himself as someone who was just as confused and troubled by the concept and mechanisms of direct action as his audience members are likely to be, emphasising that you do not need to be an especially knowledgeable or energetic person to take action. Newman limits the relevance of this comment to his audience's future decision regarding their own incentives to act by greeting the laughter and applause that follows with a fixed, moronic grin. He smiles with his mouth and eyes open wide, enjoying the sharing of the common experience of laziness but also highlighting the stupidity of that attitude and reducing his own status. The grinning Newman is no longer the wise and informative leader who can tell us how to save ourselves, but rather a reflection of those self-destructive tendencies of laziness and ignorance of our own responsibility which must be quashed.

This closing summary acknowledges the horror of the situation that the world has found itself in but, crucially, Newman ends by emphasising the positive factors that are still in our favour. There is still hope of making the switch to renewable energy and the world is still in a state to manage the change; we still have a working electricity grid and the finances to do it. Newman concludes that it is not too late. By ending his show thus Newman is able to give his audience enough fear to be

stimulated to act to resolve the problem and enough hope to feel that action is worthwhile.

In Oswald and Grosjean's terms, Newman has presented the consequences of not acting as entailing a far higher cost than 'doing something'. His mockery of his own mistakes when he first became involved with activism does much to neutralise the risk of appearing foolish or not knowing how to behave in that world. Newman did that, and can now laugh at his own errors. His initial failure to understand the social structure of the non-hierarchical groups had no long-term cost: the people who once gave him odd looks still offered him their willing and friendly help and support. There may be a cost in the effort needed to 'get off our arses and do something', but this is nothing in comparison to the cost of failure to do so. Indeed, the phrases 'for once in our lives' and 'getting off our arses' attach a cost to the failure to exert the effort: failure to act would mean adopting the lazy, languid self-image which such wording implies. In fact, Newman's show is offering the audience a choice between rotting into total destruction or involving themselves in noble and dynamic activity to save mankind. There should be little contest.

One criticism we could make of Newman is that he fails to give his audience a concrete set of instructions for action. To some extent, Newman combats this deficiency by explaining his own, initial nervousness about leading his own activities. This approach makes it easier for the audience to agree that something should be done than to translate it into action.[77] There are, however, comedians who address this need. By asking audiences of her *Trying is Good* show to send in pictures of odd people, Josie Long gives them the means by which to keep celebrating eccentricity and continue the show's positive message beyond the gig. We know that audience members did respond, as there is a gallery of contributions included on the *Trying is Good* DVD.[78]

Mark Thomas often suggests specific actions that his audience can take to support the work he talks about. Many of his gigs host campaign stands in the foyer. For example, at his Maidstone performance of *It's the Stupid Economy*, audience members could purchase merchandise,

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[77] Gross, *Psychology*, p.444.
[78] Josie Long, *Trying is Good*.

sign petitions, pick up a card which will help them to make life difficult for any police officer who chooses to use their 'Stop and Search' powers and, of course, think about and submit their own policy ideas.[79] In his *The Night War Broke Out*, Thomas encourages his audience to use civil disobedience and protest to make the Iraq war politically expensive for the government, proposing several specific measures that audience members can take. He insists that the audience note down the telephone number for RAF Fairford so that they can prank call the base, saying, 'get your mobiles out, get your pencils and papers out. Go on, I fucking mean it.'[80] It may be that few of the audience will act upon Thomas' suggestion to call the base, but he has at least insisted that they take away the means to do so.

Asked whether the fact that he works in the medium of stand-up makes his work more likely to have an effect, Mark Thomas answers:

> Do you know, it's my way of doing it. The point about it is that I didn't set out going 'I will do something which will bring people into it and it's intrinsic fun, and it's play'[...]you know, I didn't actually sit there and work it out like that. It's far more organic, it's about actually what we can do, it's about creating events and it's about creating a reality and a way that people can lay down challenges[...]And yes,[...]maybe when you do stuff like this it makes it more accessible for people. I'd hope it does. I've seen some of the fucking political literature that's being put around. It's about as accessible as, fucking, you know, Fort Knox. It's, 'why are you giving people this? They're falling asleep as you hand it to them!' Do you know what I mean? If you can't engage people with stuff then it's pointless, you won't win an argument.[81]

For Thomas, comedy is a means by which to engage people in the processes by which public opinions and social norms evolve. For him, however, efficacy is not only about persuading audiences to agree; he also seeks to empower them to make their own contribution.

> Having an impact is an important thing. Telling people that *they can do it*, actually, and you can do it with fun, is really important. And actually, I hope that that sense does go on.[82]

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[79] Mark Thomas, *It's the Stupid Economy*.
[80] Mark Thomas, *The Night War Broke Out*.
[81] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[82] *Ibid.* [Thomas' emphasis].

Conclusion

Can Stand-up Change the World?

Joking's Influence

Many comedians are cautious about the idea that their material has an ongoing effect. Joe Wilkinson states that stand-up is no more likely to lead to the adoption of a new idea than is participation in any conversation where the individual is exposed to new information.[1] Dan Atkinson emphasises that stand-up is intended as entertainment, stating that, although stand-up may produce other valuable effects, 'you're there to entertain people, and that's the job.'[2] In Chapter One, we saw Isy Suttie, Mark Simmons and Kurt Driver acknowledge that some comedians do produce material that has real political relevance, while dismissing their own contribution to this field: Jonathan Elston summed up the attitude with the phrase, 'my material isn't[...]change-the-world kind of material.'[3] Even Mark Thomas, the master of efficacious stand-up, agrees that many comedians fail in this area:

> There is this thing that people say 'oh comedy can't change anything'. And I just think, well[...]the thing is, it sounds terribly egotistical but I just think, 'well your comedy can't.'[4]

However, stand-up can contribute to real, concrete change. Thomas is able to pinpoint several examples effected by himself and his associates:

> You know, the stuff that we've done on[...]you know, that you can look at conditionally exempt works of art which I did, like, three programmes on and they changed the law on, you can look at Nestlé product stuff that they changed the packaging stuff on, you can look at the Illisu Dam which we collapsed the British end of the deal, you can look at the stuff we're getting through at the moment which is on the back of the arms trade stuff where they're looking at changing laws [in response to] stuff that we mooted[...][5]

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[1] Joe Wilkinson, Interview.
[2] Dan Atkinson, Interview.
[3] Isy Suttie, Interview.
Mark Simmons, Interview.
Kurt Driver, Interview.
[4] Mark Thomas, Interview.
[5] *Ibid.*

Thomas' achievements are impressive, and are evidence of comedy's potential to produce real and significant change. It is important to note, however, that it is not only stand-up but the whole body of Thomas' work that has had this influence. The protests and the pranks, and the links with official campaign groups, are vital to his efficacy: although his activism tends to take the form of comedy, he does not operate solely through stand-up.

Thomas is, furthermore, a special case. The contribution that most comedians make to social change is more ethereal. In the last chapter, I argued that pieces of political stand-up, such as Robert Newman's *History of Oil* and Mark Steel's radio lecture 'The French Revolution', make an influential contribution to the renegotiation of opinions, and thus of societal norms. The remaining difficulty for this thesis is that such effects are not unique to stand-up. Many of the manipulative techniques which have been identified in these case studies, and indeed throughout this thesis, are available to other types of communication. Some of the fragments from both Steel and Newman that I have quoted as important components of their respective arguments include no jokes and get no laughs. This begs the question of whether stand-up really has any unique powers of manipulation or influence. Christie Davies makes the case against the efficacy of joking as influence:

> Jokes are both very important and very unimportant[...]Jokes are important because they are one of the few independent items of popular culture that exist. They are created by the people for the people and they are of the people[...][T]he modern technology of the Internet and email and ever-cheapening international phone calls has multiplied the volume of jokes and increased the speed of their circulation[...]Jokes are intensely pleasurable which is why people invest so much time and ingenuity in giving, sharing and receiving them[...]Yet jokes are also unimportant. They have no significant material consequences. Vigorous political rhetoric, a stirring sermon, a persuasive advertisement, a well-placed lie, a piece of malicious gossip are all uses of words that are infinitely more powerful than jokes. When jokes are used in the pursuit of particular ends they are merely ancillary. They are added to the main message to make it more interesting, appealing and entertaining; they do not achieve anything that could not be attained in other non-humorous ways. Wit is not a weapon; it is merely the artistic decoration on the scabbard. Jokes are neither

> tiny revolutions nor an important safety valve for keeping the discontented passive. Jokes are not important.[6]

Davies claims that professional comedians and scriptwriters are part of this process, for they are 'dependent on collecting and massaging jokes that are already in circulation'.[7] According to Davies, therefore, comedians may serve an important function by utilising a tool which grants us freedom (although he implies that it is in the hands of the lay joker that jokes truly perform their most liberating function as 'independent items of popular culture'), but joking is an inappropriate medium for influence. Davies gives two main reasons for this: firstly, joking is less effective at persuasion than other mediums of communication and, secondly, jokes are merely the 'decoration' upon a proper argument and do not, themselves, carry influential messages.

On the DVD recording of his show *41st Best Stand-up Ever*, Stewart Lee delivers the following routine in defence of political correctness:

> **Now one hesitates, in the current climate, to make a joke on stage about the Muslims, right. Not for fear of religious reprisals, right – when's that ever hurt anyone?** [laugh, one person claps] - **but...but because of a slightly more slippery anxiety, which is, like, basically, when you do like, stand-up in a small room it's like er, we're all friends – hooray – and we can make a joke but you don't really know - you don't really know how a joke's received and it could be that it's laughed at enthusiastically in a way that you don't understand and particularly** *(Lee turns to face one of the cameras at his side and points towards it)* **out there – you don't know who's watching in television. I mean, if it's** *(Lee turns to face the live audience)* **on telly on Paramount, probably someone horrible, an idiot** [big laugh]**...erm...***(turns to camera)* **The kind of person who's awake at (.) five in the morning.** *(turns to live audience)* **Who** [laugh] **knows what**[...]**The problem is, eighty-four percent of people, apparently, of the public, think that political correctness has gone mad. Now,** [some giggles] **erm, I don't know if it has, people still get killed, don't they, for being the wrong colour or the wrong sexuality or whatever. And what is political correctness? It's a – it's an often clumsy negotiation towards a kind of formally-inclusive language, and there's, there's all sorts of problems with it, but it's better than what we had before...But eighty-four percent of people think political correctness has gone mad, and you don't want one**

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[6] Davies, C., 'The Right to Joke', *The Social Affairs Unit*, Research Report 7 (2004), <http://socialaffairsunit.org.uk/digipub/content/view/11/> [accessed 23 July 2010], (p.3).
[7] *Ibid*, p.3.

> **of those people coming up to you after the gig and going, 'Well done mate' (.) er, 'Well done, actually, for having a go at the fucking Muslims'** [laugh]**...'Well done, mate. You know, you can't do anything in this country anymore, mate. It's political correctness gone mad. D'y'know, you can't even write racial abuse in excrement on someone's car'** [big laugh]**...'without the politically correct brigade'** [laugh]**...'jumping down your throat'.**[8]

Lee demonstrates that he is aware of the potential for his jokes to be interpreted in a way that he did not intend, and that this matters to him. He states that he is anxious about the possibility that such jokes could be misinterpreted as attacks; that is to say that he is worried that the jokes' content could do damage. Lee does not explain why this result should be considered damaging: he assumes that his audience, unlike Davies, will understand that this danger exists and that the performer has a legitimate reason to be concerned by it.

The climax of this routine is the gag in which Lee impersonates a hypothetical, racist audience member saying, 'D'y'know, you can't even write racial abuse in excrement on someone's car[...]'. This joke is used 'in the pursuit of particular ends'. Lee aims to provide a counter-argument to the claim that 'political correctness has gone mad' and to demonstrate that, for all its clumsiness, political correctness is 'better than what we had before.' Of course, these points could be communicated through means other than joking. Indeed, in the section transcribed above, Lee builds up to the final set of jokes by putting forward his argument as a statement of opinion without jest or irony, creating a comparatively long section which has no gags at all but in which the point is conveyed. Davies is clearly correct in saying that other 'uses of words' could serve the purpose.

He is, however, wrong in claiming that such alternative methods would be 'infinitely more powerful'. When Lee ironically bemoans the fact that 'you can't even write in excrement on someone's car' he provides a vivid and concise summary of the problems with anti-PC attitudes. The laughter of the audience confirms the validity of Lee's point for the assembled group. This makes the point for the audience who witness Lee's delivery of the gag, and also provides them with a way of spreading the idea further afield. As Davies himself notes, people

[8] Stewart Lee, *41st Best Stand-up Ever.*

enjoy jokes and they like to pass them on. Lee's joke provides each audience member with a handy package that they can use to argue this point in future.

The joke is not 'merely ancillary' to the argument. The build-up explains Lee's point, but it is within the joke itself that his point is expertly crystallised into a deft statement with all the advantages for persuasion mentioned above. Contained within the joking statement is a complex set of points that support Lee's argument. In that one, concise phrase, Lee connects anti-PC attitudes to vicious racist action, questions the practical motivations of people who deny the importance of being inclusive and kind with their language, and shows how spuriously the accusation of 'political correctness gone mad' has been applied. If comic licence was not in force to protect Lee's statement from accusations of inaccuracy, the link between racist acts and the rejection of political correctness would be too tenuous for the statement to be taken on board; obviously, they are not the same thing, and it is only the unacceptability of attacking jokes on the grounds of inaccuracy that prevents this from becoming a salient issue. Similarly, comic licence allows the audience to focus on the point itself, rather than practical concern for the potential victim of the racist act, or anger towards its perpetrator.[9] It would be difficult to make such a statement appear acceptable outside of a joking context.

Lee's joke does not 'decorate' the message: it is the message. The joke form does not make the message less powerful, but rather brings advantages in terms of influence. Joking makes the point vividly and forcefully, while also providing the opportunity both for the audience as reference group to approve the message, and for individual influencees to package it up and pass it on.

The importance of ethereal changes

This thesis has argued that all comedians participate in a process which challenges and renegotiates societal norms, whether or not they, themselves, intend or acknowledge it. Stand-up plays its part in

[9] Morreall, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics', p.70.

determining attitudes towards subjects drawn from all levels of human experience - we have seen examples of material on climate change, revolution, terrorism, homosexuality, abortion, body image, frogs and the inefficiency of the home shower. Through live performance, television, commercial recording and the internet, stand-up participates in the process of renegotiating these norms for millions of people every day. These negotiations are not merely meaningless theoretical exercises, but have a genuine effect on the concrete world. As Walter Lippmann notes, our thoughts, feelings and actions 'operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behaviour is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates':[10] although such a process may appear ethereal, the conclusions offered by these negotiations guide our actions. In this important sense, stand-up does indeed play its part in 'changing the world'. As Mark Thomas has stated, 'change occurs all the time. It's about whether you can shape or change or influence its direction.'[11]

Even if we take as true Davies' assertion that 'jokes are not important' as a means of influence, this would not be an argument against the efficacy of stand-up. One thread running through this thesis is the recognition that the exchange which takes place in stand-up is, inevitably, about more than just laughter. Certainly, stand-up has to be funny, but it also presents a series of arguments against the norm. By laughing at the comedian's jibes the audience validates the world-view presented, and permits the suggested alternative to the current norm to enter the wider social debate. In this sense, successful stand-up is never solely about being funny.

However, this thesis has also shown that funniness is the source of stand-up's special powers of manipulation and influence. As Part One of this thesis has shown, stand-up combines genuine challenge with a lack of concern for truth and a relaxation of everyday standards of decency. This delightfully irresponsible combination both allows the opportunity for 'nasty' ideas to slip past our usual constraints, to be released and enjoyed, and broadens the scope for debate beyond the confines of 'normal' attitudes. As discussed in Part Two, stand-up has developed

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[10] Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, p.10.
[11] Mark Thomas, Interview.

mechanisms which enhance this freedom by ensuring that all elements of the event, including the venue, the delivery of the material and the persona through which it is presented, are skilfully arranged to manipulate the audience into laughing. Stand-up creates a 'play-ground', both physically and ideologically, which operates in accordance with joking's rules of challenge and negotiation.

In the final part of this thesis, I have demonstrated that stand-up is well-placed to have a long-term effect on attitudes and opinions. I have shown that stand-up performs an important function in representing marginal views, and is an ideal medium in which to conduct debate and negotiation. I have also demonstrated that joking is not incompatible with 'serious' opinion change, but is rather an example of the very type of interaction most likely to have a lasting influence. Christie Davies states that joking cannot function as anything more than the decoration on a solid argument: I argue that the joke itself has the power to make the argument forcefully, memorably and downright sneakily. Mark Thomas knows from experience how important stand-up comedy is as a platform for negotiation and influence:

> The point is actually jokes do create change. Comedy clubs and toilet walls (often they are perilously close in proximity) are two of the few places where freedom of speech [exists]. Prime Ministers can control MPs, enquiries, appointments and patronage of power - just as the press can control the agenda for news. BUT the one area they can not control is a stand up gig. In this respect, during the first invasion of Iraq stand up became the one arena that the anti war ideas could be expressed.
>
> So actually we have a huge amount of power if [we] choose to use it[...]
>
> We can be cheerleaders for change and we can confront taboos, comedy naturally lends itself to that. Culturally we can inflict (and I use the word carefully) huge change.[12]

[12] Thomas, Mark, Personal Communication, by email, 5 October 2008. [Thomas' emphasis].

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