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‘See What I’m Doing’: Metacomedy in Contemporary UK Stand-up

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by Research in Drama

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of metacomedy in present-day UK stand-up. It draws on theories of, and existing scholarship on metacomedy and stand-up comedy more generally, to expand understanding of why, in a medium that is characterised by high levels of metareference, salient metacomedy may nonetheless appear to proliferate at specific moments in time.

This thesis argues that present-day 'fringe' comedy is highly metareferential in character, and suggests a number of explanations for this. By analysing the work, methods and metacomic themes of performers such as Jordan Brookes, Stewart Lee and Josie Long, it expands understanding of the uses of metacomedy in stand-up, describing in detail metareferential elements of stand-up performances, their potential effects and their contribution to discourse on stand-up comedy.

The analysis demonstrates that metacomedy is a responsive and complex element of stand-up comedy performance. It is a transhistorical feature of the form, and one that develops alongside it – it reflects changes in content and format, and participates in shaping those changes. It derives its power from its performative character, but its performative character may also produce contradictory effects. It articulates challenges to stand-up, while affirming its importance as a subject for consideration. As with its use in early alternative comedy, metacomedy is shown to be an important vehicle for present-day comedians to performatively and autonomously engage in public conversation about stand-up comedy, and, potentially, to influence 'real world' issues.

Contents

Abstract	p.2
Acknowledgments	p.3
 <u>SECTION ONE</u>	
<u>Chapter One</u>	p.6
Introduction	
<u>Chapter Two</u>	p.33
Metareference, metacomedy and measuring metareferential activity	
<u>Chapter Three</u>	p.49
‘Let’s have a good one, team’: working (with) the audience	
 <u>SECTION TWO</u>	
<u>Chapter Four</u>	p.68
Early alternative comedy and metacomedy	
<u>Chapter Five</u>	p.89
The development of stand-up comedy in the UK from 1979 onwards	
<u>Chapter Six</u>	p.113
A ‘comedy boom’ and a boom in metacomedy	
 <u>SECTION THREE</u>	
<u>Chapter Seven</u>	p.137
‘What a magical night of stars’: metacomedy and an alternative identity	
<u>Chapter Eight</u>	p.160
‘This will get me that fourth or fifth star’: quality stand-up comedy	
<u>Chapter Nine</u>	p.180
‘I’m not like this. This isn’t who I am’: authenticity, truth and self-expression	
<u>Chapter Ten</u>	p.208
‘TV ready!’: metacomedy and gender	

SECTION FOUR

Chapter Eleven

p.234

Conclusion

Bibliography

p.248

Chapter One

Introduction

Focusing primarily on the UK, this thesis examines the significance of metacomedry in present-day stand-up comedy, and particularly its use by comedians to participate in an ongoing discourse on issues relating to stand-up comedy itself. While self-reference and metareference are a transhistorical feature of stand-up comedy performance, the use of metareference within the form has been observed to intensify, and assume particular characters, during specific periods of time. I follow the lead of scholars who have identified a proliferation of metacomedry during early alternative comedy, placing this within a context of metareferential activity within comedy and popular culture more broadly, and suggest some functions and explanations for this. Using this as a backdrop, I examine the use of metacomedry within the context of the 'comedy boom' in the UK, and the emergence of a new alternative comedy scene from the early 2000s onwards. I consider present-day uses of metacomic practices, both as performance strategies and contributions to public discourse concerning issues that are fundamental to academic and vernacular discussion and understanding of the form. These include the use of stand-up comedy as a consumer product, the artistic content of stand-up comedy performance, the centrality of concepts such as authenticity and truth to its identity and the significance of gender in its production and reception.

Metareference, comedy and stand-up comedy

There is a well-established link between metareference and forms that produce laughter. Wolf provides a very brief overview of this connection (2009, pp.71-72; 2011, p.17), at least within Western literary and performance culture, running from the stage comedies of Ancient Greece through some of the earliest iterations of the novel, such as *Don Quixote*. Indeed, Wolf extends this connection between the meta- and the comic beyond verbal texts, arguing that non-verbal, non-narrative texts,

such as instrumental music, demonstrate 'a tendency to combine metareference with a comic or light "tone" ... [for example] in the ironic or meta-elements in Haydn's symphonies' (2009, p.72). Michael Dunne has explored the prominence of self-referentiality and metareference in U.S. sketch and variety shows such as *Saturday Night Live* during the 1970s and 1980s (1992, pp.20-36), while David Cardiff (1988, p.58) has noted a self-referential tendency in BBC comedies of the 20th century, including latterly *Not the Nine O'Clock News* and *The Young Ones*, which, borrowing from Graham Murdock (1980 in Cardiff, 1988, p.58), he designates as examples of 'everyday modernism'. Popular Hollywood comedies such as *Wayne's World*, *Hot Shots!* and *Naked Gun* (Matthews, 2000) feature high levels of metareference, as do animated TV sitcoms such *The Simpsons* (Keazor, 2011), and *Family Guy* (see above), in which 'aesthetic deconstruction' (Crawford in Rustad and Schwind, 2017, p.135) is the comedy.

Within the field of comedy studies, Oliver Double has identified self- and metareference as a prominent feature of stand-up comedy across its history in both the United Kingdom and the United States – from its roots in the UK music hall, to mid- 20th century American comedians such as Phyllis Diller, through to present-day performers such as Daniel Kitson (2014, pp.326-329). Although Double's survey of the history and uses of metareference in stand-up is inexhaustive, it foregrounds the role of meta- and self-reference as an important feature of the stand-up comedian's toolbox, emphasising its utility in securing a successful reception for a stand-up performance through the creation and intensification of comic effect, and the spontaneous use of self- and metareference for recovering from failed material and other 'errors' or slips in performance (2014, pp.326-329).

While Double's survey foregrounds the practical functions of metareference, Philip Auslander has used the metacomic incursions of Steve Martin and Andy Kaufman as a lens through which to explore the possibility of 'resistance' through performance within a postmodern setting. Concentrating on the stand-up persona that Martin developed during the late 1970s and early 1980s – the period during

which he achieved widespread success¹ – Auslander characterises his act as a form of metacomedy which ‘takes the failure of comedy, the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world, as its subject’ (2004, p.107), construing his performances as expressions of a Postmodern attitude. Timothy Wuster has interpreted Martin’s use of metacomedy similarly, arguing that his performances construct an audience ‘that is not laughing with the comic, or at the jokes, or even at themselves; they are laughing at comedy itself’ (2006, p.27). For Wuster, this ‘points not to a deeper social meaning [following the idea of the comedian as social critic] but to the possibility of meaninglessness’ and marks Martin out as ‘the first major postmodern comedian’ (2006, p.27). The significance that Wuster and Auslander identify within Martin’s metacomedy reflects Wolf’s view of the importance of ‘historical and generic perspective’ (2011, p.23) in providing convincing accounts of the discursive function of these practices. For example, the effect and significance of Phyllis Diller’s use of self-reflexivity (2014, p.326) cited by Double may be seen as belonging to a very different order to that of Martin, not simply in the details of the metareferential element that activates metareferential awareness, and what it contributes to the performance, but in what they say about the changing conditions of stand-up comedy across the 20th and 21st centuries. Similarly, just as Martin’s metacomedy is different to Diller’s, present-day examples will not necessarily follow Martin’s approach, in which the notion of comedy itself is treated as ridiculous (see below).

For Auslander, metacomedy provides an opportunity to question or critique aspects of stand-up comedy itself. He describes Martin’s metacomedy as ‘certainly rais[ing] questions about the contract that underlies performance and our investment in the entertainer as a cultural icon’ (1994, p.138), and interprets Kaufman’s work as a form of critique, in which he ‘directs the spectator’s critical

¹ Martin’s emergence as a pre-eminent performer of stand-up comedy foregrounding metacomedy overlaps with the emergence of the alternative comedy scene in the UK (see below).

attention towards the larger processes of social representation of which he is a part' (1994, p.155). Readings of metareferential activity in UK performance comedy also identify these questioning, critical and subversive functions. David Cardiff interprets the broadcast comedy produced by alternative comedians in the 1980s, such as *The Young Ones* – and in particular its 'self-referential' elements – as 'debunking humour' (1988, p.58), a trait that he also views as characteristic of *Not the Nine O'Clock News*, another BBC Two comedy show produced around the same time (1988, p.58). Both programmes are characterised as fulfilling a function of transformation and progress, 'sifting the entire broadcast output, debunking the pretentious and self-important, exposing artifice, jettisoning the hackneyed formula' (1988, p.57).

Also focusing on the inception of early alternative comedy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Double draws attention to the use of metacomedy as a widespread means of critiquing the conventions, performance approaches, ethos, personae and politics of the club comedians who dominated the form at the time, in order to transform them (1997, pp.164-173; 2020, p.101-07). Similarly, Krista Bonello Rutter Giappone has made a case for the critical and productive use of metacomedy within early alternative comedy, examining the function of parody, which this thesis situates within a broad definition of metacomedy, as 'a means of critical [dis]engagement and transformation' (2017, p.407), and has examined metacomedy as part of a wider study of early alternative comedy and its intersection with punk (2018, *passim*). Through this 'comic-critical' method, she argues, early alternative comedians tackled 'political and social questions, as well as rejected dominant trends in comedy and acknowledged influences' (2017, p.407).

The notion of the 'comic-critical' within Bonello Rutter Giappone's work can be understood as both a method and an attitude – an 'antagonist[ic]' one that 'challenges the stability and *seemingly-sacro-sanct* nature of the province of the "serious" – whether this is political debate, a traditional cultural assumption or a question of art' (2017, p.399). The transformative effect that is attributed to early

alternative comedy's use of metacomedy is a frequently cited function in scholarship of metareference across genres and forms. Bonello Rutter Giappone's description of early alternative comedy's use of parody as a 'comic-critical' practice echoes Patricia Waugh's view of metafiction as a project to 'to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction' (2004, p.6), and Linda Hutcheon's view of parody as a 'creatively critical form' (2000, p.xv) – a formulation that appears to be self-consciously echoed by Bonello Rutter Giappone. Both of these scholars make a similar case for the transformative potential of metaization in fiction. For example, Hutcheon and Waugh's influential studies of metafiction argue for its utility as a tool for the development of the novel. In *Metafiction*, Waugh argues for the 'positive aspects of fictional self-consciousness' (1984, p.9) as 'a lever of positive change' (1984, p.64) – one that has the potential to "'defamiliarize" fictional conventions that have become both automatized and inauthentic, and to release new and more authentic forms' (1984, p.65). In *Narcissistic Narratives*, Hutcheon positions parodic metafiction similarly, arguing that 'If a new parodic form does not develop when an old one becomes insufficiently motivated, the old form tends to degenerate into pure convention; witness the popular traditional novel, the best seller' (1980, p.24). As Werner Wolf indicates, this notion of metareference as a tool for achieving artistic progress is a commonly held view of its positive potential across a range of media:

The critical reflection on the medial tools at the disposal of a culture is not merely a detraction from pragmatic activities and functions but can contribute to the development of culture. This can be achieved by the practical improvement of these tools so that they will be of a better use in the future and also by contributing to the theoretical discussion of fundamental cultural, and in particular epistemological issues. (Wolf, 2011, pp.69-70)

Noting the metareferential qualities of readymade art, for example, with its inherent questioning of the relationship between art and authorship and originality, Katharine Bantleon cites Thomas Deecke's assessment of the legacy of the

readymade as a testament to the power of metaization to instigate artistic change within a form, and to shape fundamental perceptions of it:

Ever since [...] Marcel Duchamp declared that the existence of an artwork is determined exclusively by the Artist's claim and by the work's location within an art context, artistic considerations of aesthetic character have come to replace craftsmanship, stylistic connections or even social consensus as the key criteria for the creation and influence of works of art. (Deecke, 1999: 10, in Bantleon, 2010, p.314)

Focusing on performance comedy, Jerry Palmer has sought to impose a limit on the critical potential of parody in popular comedy, and the Bakhtinian 'privileg[ing of] the elements in it [parody] which produce a destabilisation of meaning' (2008, p.86). Approaching the issue from an ethical perspective, Palmer argues that there is a 'visible limit around permissible parody, which excludes parody that really does threaten to destabilise important public meaning' (2008, p.95). However, citing what he identifies as 'the wide permission for aesthetic parody', he makes the case for an understanding of parody that does allow it a potentially transformative function within 'the aesthetic realm' as 'part of the generalised licence accorded to the arts in the post-Romantic world' (2008, p.95). This reflects both Double (2020, p.11 & pp.100-05) and Bonello Rutter Giappone's (2017, *passim*) view of the transformative potential of metacomedy within alternative comedy. Given that the majority of metacomic interventions operate, at least at the first level, within the realm of the aesthetic, this analysis is congruent with the view that metacomedy has the potential to effect artistic change. However, Hutcheon argues that the metafictional novel has the potential to expand its transformative effects into the 'real world' *through* its artistic disruptions:

That some texts pander to the reader – and indeed satisfy him – while others – especially modern ones – disturb him, has been pointed out already. The unsettled reader is forced to scrutinize his concepts of art as well as his life value. In doing so might be freed from enslavement not only to the empirical, but also to his own set patterns of thought and imagination. (1980, p.139)

In the field of Ancient Greek Comedy, Slater (2002, *passim*) and Ruffell (2011, *passim*) have similarly argued that the potentially destabilizing effects of metareference might encourage reflections on contingencies in the world of art and, through that, into the domain of 'important public meaning' (Palmer 2008, p.95). Furthermore, as Olson notes, the double-voicedness of these texts, and the critical attitude they cultivate, may result in an expansive critical attitude that also encompasses the parodic text itself:

... parody always has a tendency to slip into metaparody, in which what is being made fun of is not simply the "target" text, author, or literary context but the current text (the parody), author, or reader. In this way parody encourages the reader to look critically at the world created in any text, not only in the parodied text but even in the parody itself. (2000, p.163)

These developmental and critical functions in present-day uses of metacomedy overlap with the 'didactic value' that Hutcheon identifies in parody's 'teaching or co-opting the art of the past by textual incorporation and ironic commentary' (2000, p.27). This 'inherent [potential].... to educate the recipients aesthetically' (2009, p.67) is viewed by Wolf as a transmedial feature of metareference, and its didactic or educative function has been associated with some of the earliest instances of metatextual activity in European literary and performance culture. For example, Niall W. Slater has characterised Aristophanes as having 'a talent to make his audience think' (2002, p.235) and that through his works he 'teach[es]... performance criticism' (2002, p.237). This didactic value, realised through consciousness-raising and the potential for reaching large audiences, has resulted in Baeva, as part of a rehabilitative study of the functions of metareference in narrative media, describing metareference as a 'public service' (2019, *passim*).

There is a risk, however, that focusing on this didactic function, particularly within the conceptual framework of a 'public service', with its connotations of universalism and utility, elides its complexity as a communicative tool. As Wolf points out, the location of critical or questioning elements within an artistic object means they are

not ‘merely offered as (elements of) a theoretical metadiscourse to the recipients’ reflection such as argumentative articles on literature, music or the arts’ (Wolf, 2009, p.33), but are combined with the ‘non-pragmatic, playful and aesthetic functions’ of the performance as well (Wolf, 2009, p.33). The critical and didactic functions, with potentially transformative effects, must be considered as operating through the ‘creative’ approach that is adopted. Olson, for example, constructs parody as a form of criticism that does not ‘purport... to remain scientific or objective’ (2000, p.162). This is echoed in the view of comedy’s role as a tool for teaching in Declerq’s proposal for a ‘careful cognitivism’ of satire: a critique that issues from within a work of art, he argues, does not ‘adhere to current best practice in domains like history and philosophy’, the classification of which ‘as non-fiction introduces stringent stipulation in the service of safeguarding the truth’ (2018, p.49). It makes manoeuvres that are ‘cognitively risky’ (2018, p.49), but which contribute to its ‘aesthetic seduction’ (Declerq *per* Gombrich, 2018, p.53). For example, Bonello Rutter Giappone’s depiction of the first wave of alternative comedy’s approach to this aesthetic seduction emphasises its directness, its substitution of irony for ‘the comic’ and overstatement (2017, p.396), and its rejection of ambiguity and insistence on ‘rude[ness]’ (2017, p.400) in order to further its transformative agenda. Consistent with this, the character of the parodies that Bonello Rutter Giappone explores are aggressive and ridiculing (see Chapter Four)².

This ‘riskiness’ is congruent with Quirk’s interpretation of stand-up comedy as a form that, through its manipulative performance tactics and rhetorical manoeuvres, ‘is well placed to have a long-term effect on attitudes and opinions’ (2015, p.208): its combination of ‘genuine challenge with a relaxed approach to the concern for truth and a relaxation of everyday standards of decency’ is a ‘delightfully irresponsible’ (2015, p.208) form of discourse that make it potentially dangerous – lending

² However, as Hutcheon argues, parodies can express a range of pragmatic ethos (2000, pp.50-68), requiring a case-by-case reading.

threatening or incorrect ideas a rhetorical potency – and potentially transformative. As Felski indicates, speaking of interactions with works of art more generally, these functions of ‘aesthetic response’ co-exist with ‘moral-political responses’, and feed into each other in the recipient:

It is not just that I cannot unstick myself from my own attributes while having an aesthetic response. It is also that the “separate but equal” position conceives of reactions to artworks—like the fridge-freezer combos available for purchase at Lowe’s and Best Buy—as existing *side by side*: I have an aesthetic *or* a moral-political response *or* an emotional response. And yet these are often blended in ways that make it impossible to pry them apart. It is not just that political or affective response is mediated by aesthetic properties, but that aesthetic properties can augment or intensify the force of such response. (Felski, 2020, p.27)

In stand-up comedy, metareference can make a contribution to shaping this aesthetic response, creating a sense of immediacy (Double, 2014, pp.326-39), or potentially contradictory effects of liberation, control, intimacy and distancing (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2012, p160-61, p.205 & p.302 & 2018, p.143) (see Chapter Three).

The contradictory potential of metareference is reflected by the spectrum of attitudes represented in responses to it. Following Wolf, Baeva, surveying scholarly and popular responses to metareferential works in narrative media, identifies recurring accusations of it ‘being sterile, disconnected from reality and aesthetically irrelevant’ (2019, p.26). The inappropriate detachment from the proper concerns of art is a recurring feature of criticism of metareference across a range of forms (e.g. Hutcheon, 1980, Waugh, 1984, Wolf, 2009, p.69). In the domain of the novel, for example, Hutcheon alludes to condemnatory accusations that metafiction involves an unacceptable ‘sever[ing]’ of the ‘life-art connection’ (1980, p.3), which results in a ‘sterile’ experience (1980, p.5) for the recipient. Stonehill sees criticisms of ‘the self-reflexive novel’ as stemming from the view that ‘Since antiquity it has been agreed that the task of literature, and of art in general, “was and is”, as Hamlet put it, “to hold, as ‘twere, the mirror up to nature”’ (1988, p.1), rather than to hold a mirror up to itself, with meta-works violating or erroneously inverting these priorities. In early

alternative comedy, this charge may be addressed by pointing to the cultivation of a more active recipient, and the incorporation of parodic satire, which points beyond the text to address the world (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2012, p.70). However, despite the prevalence of metaization in culture in general, and in popular culture (see above), the association of metareference with insularity and navel gazing can be identified in popular responses to present-day metacomedy. The comedian and podcaster Stuart Goldsmith provides an example of this criticism related to narcissism and insularity, saying 'It grinds my teeth to powder whenever someone kind of goes, "Ooh, that was a callback." Because that's an industry bit of terminology which you wouldn't even necessarily understand what it meant [*sic*], and seeing somebody point it out is very frustrating' (Goldsmith, 2012). An article on the popular comedy website *Chortle*, while praising the metacomedy of Stewart Lee, also described it as 'a dead end' and 'a cul-de-sac' with no 'future', doomed to 'deconstruct' itself into oblivion (Daniels, 2011), while a review of a 2017 Edinburgh Festival Fringe performance by Jordan Brookes described it as 'messing about with the conventions of mime, character and confessional comedy, seemingly with no great intent beyond seeing if he can get away with it' (Richardson, 2017). More general criticism of the highlighting of artifice, a basic function of metareference, is implied in Josh Widdicombe's view that 'flaunt[ing]... writing' (Goldsmith, 2012a) is an undesirable quality in stand-up.

Related to this is the frequent association of elitism with metaization. In the self-conscious novel, Stonehill identifies 'the strong tinge of elitism... a sense that those who do not share a certain body of knowledge are excluded from the implied audience...', a view shared by the novelist and academic David Cauter (in Hutcheon, 1980, p.141). Werner Wolf has identified the function of metareference as 'a stabilization of a more or less elitist group of connoisseurs of media "consumers", who have become such experts in the respective medial or aesthetic conventions that laying them bare or experimenting with them can become the source of a particular in-group pleasure' (2009, p.68). Borrowing from the language of business

scholarship, Pamela Scorzin has described this group of recipients as 'prosumers' (2011, p.269). This issue is of particular relevance to the present-day stand-up comedy in the UK, and iterations of a new alternative comedy scene, which have been subjected to accusations of elitism, and the tension between cultivating an environment for artistic experimentation and one that is exclusionary on the grounds of class and taste (Friedman, 2014, p.307 & Quirk, 2018, pp.89-100) (see Chapter Seven). Friedman, for example, identifies class-based forms of consumption in fans of Stewart Lee, whose work is highly metareferential (2014, p.217).

Postmodernism and beyond

As Wolf notes, despite the frequent occurrence of metareference prior to the historical period that is referred to as Postmodernity, the link between metareference and postmodernism is well-established (2009, p.68), and postmodernism is central to several of the accounts of metacomedy outlined above. Setting aside their varying emphases, Auslander and Wurst's readings of Steve Martin, and Bonello Rutter Giappone's interpretation of early alternative comedy's use of parody, all employ postmodernism as an analytical framework. For example, Auslander positions Martin's comedy in the context of the disintegration of:

stable referents, norms against which behaviours may be deemed humorous. In the absence of such norms, it is impossible to define comedy. Some comics responded by becoming metacomedians whose performances took the impossibility of being a comedian in the postmodern world as their subject... Martin's pastiche of stand-up comedy was void of content: his performance persona was blank and cynical, clearly only going through the motions and treating the conventions of stand-up comedy as a dead language. (2004, pp.107-08)

Bonello Rutter Giappone has positioned early alternative comedy, with its frequently metareferential aesthetic, in relation to postmodernism through the lens of punk, which she describes as 'both a "postmodern" phenomenon, and as mounting a challenge to postmodernism' (2012, p.i), following Hutcheon's view of postmodernism as characterised by an attitude of ambivalence that is both 'critical' and 'complicit' (1998, p.19).

However, it has become something of a cliché to observe that even Linda Hutcheon, one of the theorists most synonymous with postmodernism, declared the passing of postmodernism in 2002 (Gibbons, 2019). Gibbons has summarised the view that, while there is a dispute over the exact nature of what has replaced postmodernism, there has been a tendency towards identifying a turn away from it in the cultural output of Western capitalist societies during the post-2000s, and towards, in literature at least, work that ‘engages earnestly with real-world problems’ (2019). Therefore, it may be wondered whether, in this context, a study of metareference within present-day stand-up comedy is relevant. Werner Wolf has argued that ‘metareference appears to play a particularly important role’ in ‘(post-)postmodern culture’ (2009, p.7).

One of the primary theoretical paradigms that has been proposed as a replacement for postmodernism as ‘the dominant cultural logic of Western capitalist societies’ (van den Akker and Vermeulen, 2017, p. 4) is ‘metamodernism’, formulated by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (e.g. 2017, *passim*). While attributing metamodernism with many of the characteristics outlined by Gibbons (see above), theorists of metamodernism echo Wolf in retaining a view of the centrality of metareference as a textual device within artistic expressions of this paradigm. In comedy, this is exemplified by Rustad and Schwind’s comparative analysis of *Community*, taken as an example of the metamodern sitcom, and *Family Guy*, read as an example of the quintessential (albeit animated) postmodern sitcom. They argue that both programmes are rooted in their shared use of metareferential techniques, such as parody and pastiche, demonstrating an overlap in textual strategy so pronounced that, purely based on the proliferation of metareferential elements, ‘*Community* can, at first glance, be conceived to be a postmodern sitcom’ (2017, p.134). However, they argue that the uses those textual strategies are put to – their ‘aesthetic function’ (2017, p.135) – are radically different to *Family Guy*, which is viewed as using a metareferential aesthetic in a way that is consistent with John Barth’s diagnosis of metafiction as a response to literary exhaustion (1984), in which

the 'sophisticated intertextuality [displayed] is due to the anxieties that the postmodern writer experiences. The postmodern writer feels there is nothing left to say' (Crawford, 2009, p.63 in Rustad and Schwind, 2017, p.135). For Rustad and Schwind, the combination of *Family Guy*'s metareferential strategies results in 'an aesthetic that is often criticised for being blank and empty' and, *per* Crawford, generates pleasure through its acts of 'aesthetic deconstruction' (2017, p.135). On the other hand, they argue that 'the aesthetic function of *Community*'s intertextual play and use of parody and pastiche... does not appear to be deconstruction', instead 'function[ing] as an aestheticization of the characters' quest for friendship and community' (2017, p.135), resulting in a text that uses metareferential techniques for the purpose of 'articulation of emotion and affect' (2017, p.135) in opposition to the 'cold' aesthetic identified in *Family Guy*. Therefore, they conclude that *Community* must be considered part of the 'metamodern comic sensibility [which] is not so much a question of distinct style, but is rather defined by the tone of the humour and the meaning the stylistic tropes are imbued with' (2017, pp.136-137). As Rustad and Schwind's analysis suggests, the relationship of metamodernism to postmodernism cannot be conceived of as 'a breakage' from postmodernism, and certainly not at the level of textual devices, but an 'emotive and ideological reconfiguration... from within the greater co-ordinates of postmodernism itself' (DeToy, 2015, p.8).

A thumbnail sketch of recent metacomic activity supplies an answer to the continued relevance of metareference in stand-up comedy as a subject for consideration rooted in the realities of performance practice, which aligns with theoretical accounts of its status in the current moment. Frequent examples of metacomedie can be identified in present-day stand-up comedy, some of which have attracted significant attention. Hannah Gadsby's show, *Nanette*, which addresses the limitations of stand-up as social critique resulting from the necessity for 'comics to generate humorous resolutions to any tension created' (Krefting, 2019, p.166), won the Main Prize at the 2017 Edinburgh Festival and, partly aided by its availability on Netflix, generated considerable discussion about stand-up comedy itself (e.g.

'Seriously, We Really Need to Talk about Nanette', 2018). Sarah Balkin regards Gadsby's deconstruction of persona and joking as a critique of stand-up comedy's capacity to communicate marginalization and trauma as 'a test of what audiences will go with' (2020, p.82), demonstrating the potential to 'reconstitute her audience' (2020, p.83) in the process. Two years later, in 2019, the Main Prize for comedy at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe was won by Jordan Brookes, a performer with a highly metacomic oeuvre (Bantleon, 2011, p.309). Other performers operating, at least in part, within the UK comedy scene, such as Tony Law and Zoe Coombs-Marr, have consistently foregrounded metaization in their work, achieving critical acclaim in the process.

Concentrating on the UK, which is the primary focus of this study, Daniel Smith has identified the use of 'metacomedic asides' in present-day stand-up, in which comedians ironically refer to their 'status as "professionals"' (2018, p.45) within their sets, as a means of humorously negotiating their reliance on the confirmation of their work as comedy by the audience's laughter (pp.45-46). He also interprets Stewart Lee's 'comedy about the state of comedy' (2018, p.152) as asserting difference from, and critiquing the apparent deficiency of, the commercial milieu of present-day stand-up. Smith reads his comedy about other comedians as a critique of the social position of comedy in a 'reconfigured... landscape' in which it proliferates as an 'industry buoyed by commercial demands for comedy and the professionalisation of a marginal artform' (2018, p.153). For example, he interprets Lee's routine from his 2009 show as 'a critique on the state of stand-up comedy masquerading as a critique of advertising' (2018, p.154). More broadly, he regards it as 'a routine about the transformation of popular culture from a 'subversive terrain of "resistance through rituals" to a landscape of flat, depthless commodification' (2018, p.155), and suggests an additional interpretation of it as 'a story about the abjection of adulthood and the mediocre status Lee is resigned to' (2018, p.155). For Smith, these routines constitute part of a project to 'maintain stand-up comedy as a fringe art, an inheritance of the

Alternative Comedy movement of the 1980s and the social position of the stand-up comedian as a fringe, low-status (stranger) figure' (2018, p.152).

Lee's ethos and approach can be interpreted as a contribution to the renewal of attitudes and practices consonant with elements of the attitudes and practices of the first-wave of alternative comedy, documented by Quirk (2018, *passim*) and Double (2020, pp.198-201). Bonello Rutter Giappone has also identified Stewart Lee as representing a point of continuity with the attitudes and performance tactics of early alternative comedy (2017, p.408) and, with a degree of self-mockery, this is an identity that Lee himself has embraced (see Chapter Seven). Early alternative comedy performers themselves have echoed this interpretation. At a 2019 conference on alternative comedy at the University of Kent, Tony Allen conducted a workshop which referenced Stewart Lee (Allen & Welsh 2019). In 2014, Alexei Sayle cited Lee, among others, as a performer with whom he felt 'a sense of allegiance.... [one of several] comedians who have made a conscious decision to shun the mainstream... doing more interesting and innovative work to intelligent audiences with open minds' (Chortle, 2014). However, as reflected by Smith's reading of Lee, despite the apparent connection of a shared use of nomenclature and an ethos that overlaps with the values of early alternative comedy, new occurrences of metacomedy take place within a significantly altered context to those explored by Double and Bonello Rutter Giappone. In the UK at least, comedy, and stand-up comedy in particular, have come to occupy an increasingly central position in cultural life, with a widely diagnosed 'comedy boom' (e.g. Logan, 2010b; Double, 2014, pp.49-57; Lockyer, 2015, pp.587-590; and Quirk, 2018, p.82) transforming stand-up comedy's position in the entertainment industry. For example, between 2004 and 2010, the ticket sales for stand-up gigs in the UK taking place in arenas rose from 100,000 to 1 million (Logan, 2010). Furthermore, alongside this commercial growth, new scenes and circuits have developed and, since early alternative comedy, the solo 'conceptual show' (Double, 2014, p.87) has emerged as one of the dominant stand-up formats, 'offer[ing] greater artistic possibilities' (2014, p.87).

Therefore, this thesis uses a theoretical framework of transmedial metareference developed, among others, by Werner Wolf (2009, *passim*; 2011, *passim*), to attempt to chart the ongoing importance, or otherwise, of metareference as a textual strategy within the (post-) postmodern context, and within stand-up comedy in the UK specifically, as part of a wider cultural landscape. It uses Double and Bonello Rutter Giappone's work on early alternative comedy as both a backdrop and a signpost and, as a result, shares some of their concerns and approaches, and attempts to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the special character of metacomedy as a feature of stand-up comedy in that period. However, its primary focus is the proliferation of metacomic activity in the work of performers operating within what Smith has described as 'the circuit-fringe axis' (2018, p.44) in the UK, which it interprets as similarly 'special' in both frequency and character. The continued foregrounding of metareferential elements among these comedians – the use of metacomedy as a means for comedians themselves to talk about and work on comedy through comedy, using the medium itself to subject it to scrutiny and potentially influence its development – and the significantly altered context in which this activity occurs, requires continued consideration. This thesis uses a theoretical framework of metareference as a transmedial phenomenon to contribute to an expanded understanding of the potential of stand-up for activating metareferential awareness, the elements of a stand-up performance that may contribute to this, their possible functions and effects, and explanations of their occurrence and proliferation. By focusing on 'fringe' performers, it makes a contribution to further understanding the use of metareference in scenes that are viewed 'alternative', 'sub-cultural' or oppositional.

It has been noted that, across a range of media, the effects of apparently similar metareferential elements may vary greatly as a result of a combination of factors, including but not restricted to the expectations and attitude of the recipient, the contexts in which they receive the work and the nature of the metareferential element, or elements, themselves (Limoges, 2009, pp.391-407). Therefore, in order to

capture the character of metareference in present-day stand-up, and to explore some of its potential functions, effects and explanations, this thesis engages with the textual details of this metareferential activity through consideration of the character of metareference as a phenomenon that is activated through an interaction between the text and its recipient (Wolf, 2009, *passim*). This emphasis on the work of the receiver follows Wolf's emphasis on the importance of the activation of metareferential awareness (2009, p.4) within the actualisation of metareference. By using a theoretical framework of metareference, the close analysis undertaken here contributes to constructing an account of metareference in present-day stand-up comedy that reflects the 'manifold individual functions which metareference can serve' (Wolf, 2011, p.65). In doing so, it highlights some of the key concerns of metareferential discourse within present-day stand-up in the UK, arising from the much-changed context described above, which function as examples of engagement with these changes and as an index of them. Through close reading of a wide range of examples, it explores how metareferential elements might function in practice as part of a stand-up comedy performance, highlighting the issues with which they engage and suggesting some potential effects of this. This thesis is primarily concerned with metareference as a form of engagement with medial and artistic issues and, as such, readings will focus in particular on generic, medial and artistic contexts.

While the cultivation of an active and critically aware recipient has been posited as an outcome of metacomedy, it has been noted by Wolf that there is a tendency to 'overstress' the critical function of metareference to the exclusion of other functions (2009, p.43). Within early alternative comedy, the aggression that Double identifies as one of its 'special qualities' (2020, p.11), has perhaps resulted in an emphasis on the ridiculing or destructive tone and functions of its metacomedy. Double's characterisation of some alternative comedians' attitude to packaged gags as 'Death to the Joke' (1997, p.168) reflects this. However, metacomedy is also capable of demonstrating the full range of ethos that Hutcheon identifies on the spectrum of

parody, from aggression to celebration (2000, pp.50-68). While Smith has identified hostility, or at the very least the performance of hostility, as a feature of present-day uses of metacomedry (2018, pp.150-155), a fuller understanding of metacomedry within stand-up must take into account Wolf and Hutcheon's more expansive vision of the potential range of the tone and function of metareference. Similarly, by analysing a range of examples from present-metacomedry, this thesis will explore the accuracy of these characterisations of metacomedry, and metaization more generally, as self-indulgent, insular and sterile (see above). Just as not all acts of metareference should be viewed as critical, or all acts of parody as either destabilizing, 'We cannot assume that elitism is necessarily a negative term' or that it is by default 'undemocratic' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.99), and instead must accept that 'Parody's sharing of codes can be used to many different ends; in each case, the inferred intent must be determined individually' (2000, p.99).

Contradicting Wolf's view of the well-established link between metareference and comedy, Wolfgang Funk has argued that, at least within representational works, there is a seriousness that unifies artistic and medial acts of metareference³ which articulates 'the conviction that the objective of such art should not primarily be to entertain and divert but to analyse and interrogate' (2015, p.80). By focusing on the use of metareference in stand-up comedy, a form that, despite recent knowingly exaggerated claims to the contrary (e.g. Ranganathan, 2018), remains associated with

³ Wolf's assertion that 'serious literature and tragedy in particular, seems to be comparatively resistant to metaization', (Wolf, 2009, p.71) and that 'It is not until the artist-novel of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, and beyond this genre, even until modernism and the 1940s (in particular Borges' stories) that we find non-comic metatexts on a major scale' (2009, p.72) is open to challenge. One example of the peculiarity of this position is the sketching out of an early modern metareferential corpus that includes the comedies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1595) and Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1607/1608), but excludes *Hamlet*, the rhetorical focus on acting and performance of which, both within and without performance contexts, results in it being an important object of study in Lionel Abel's *Metatheatre* (1963). The root of this position appears to be located within the different receptive attitudes and effects that Wolf attributes to comedy and 'serious' literature and tragedy: in particular, the attitude of rationality and emotion (Wolf, 2009, p.71) (see Chapter Two).

amusement and entertainment, this thesis contributes to the discussion regarding the relationship between metareference and entertainment, diversion, analysis and interrogation. It will explore whether the analytical, interrogatory and critical functions are antithetical to entertainment or, as Martin Butler has argued with reference to punk, whether a 'metareferential aesthetics... allows for critical reflections on the part of the recipients, while at the same time providing the basis for their entertainment' (2011, p.521).

Methodology

As indicated above, the majority of this research engages with the character, functions and effects of present-day uses of metacomedy as a form of medium-comment through close readings of performance texts informed by theories of metareference and comedy studies. The importance of context in metareferential readings of this kind is emphasised by Wolf (2009, p.35). Therefore, in order to better ascertain the specific character of metareference among stand-up comedy performers on the present-day 'circuit-fringe axis' (Smith, 2018, p.44), I have used the first-wave of early alternative comedy – an earlier period during which there featured a high degree of metacomedy as a means through which to pass medium-comment (Double, 2020, pp.100-05) and Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, *passim*) – as a comparative backdrop against which to explore the metacomic activity of today. Given the relationship between many of the performers frequently foregrounding metacomedy in their work, and a new alternative comedy scene (Quirk, 2018, *passim*), this backdrop is particularly relevant. Furthermore, in addition to contributing to a clearer understanding of metacomedy specifically, this will function as a more general index of the changes that have occurred in the UK comedy scene between the late 1970s and early 1980s and the present day.

In addition to analysis and interpretation of performance content, I have included the reflections of performers whose work incorporates metacomedy. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, the positioning of metacomedy as a 'comic-

critical' or 'creative-critical' accepts the value of the creative work as a source of critical comment, and posits a hybrid identity for the creator as both creator and critic. Therefore, the inclusion of comedians' reflections on their own processes and work is an extension of this identity into more conventionally critical territory – one which Ian Brodie argues is frequently occupied by stand-up comedians, who 'In interviews and elsewhere... have a lot to say about the figure of the stand-up comedian in society, his or her function, and the nature of stand-up comedy' (2014, p.65). This constitutes a form of what McGlaughlin describes as '*insider theory*' (1996, p.102) in which theory of a non-academic character is produced by participants in the field to which the theory pertains. In this '*insider theory*', the theorist 'tries to articulate the premises that guide their own practice and to reflect in their own terms on the results of that practice' (1996, p.102). Reflections of this type yield useful information on how elements of a work were received across a number of performances. They provide insight into effects, as well as detailing the practical motivations for including metareferential elements, such as their deployment as tools of explanation or control, and the causes that prompted their inclusion.

When considering the functions and effects of these practices, therefore, I have taken into account the performer's views on the communicative, artistic and practical intentions of the work (Farrell, 2017, pp.6-7). However, I have maintained that 'The stability of meaning, grounded upon authorial intention in context, does not imperil the variety of practices that go under the name of interpretation' (Farrell, 2017, p.163), acknowledging the receptive act as central to the construction of the metareference. Inevitably, research of this type cannot hope to encompass the spectrum of possible receptive activities and interpretative responses to the works cited here. Therefore, in addition to close readings regarding possible effects and functions (see Chapter Two) guided by a metareferential framework, I have included the responses of a range of critics, often in the form of reviews. However, their responses are not presented as authoritative or typical, but instead serve as

exemplary readings that participate in, and may help to shape, public discourse about comedy (*per* Matthews, 2000).

This thesis engages in analysis of stand-up comedy performance, including the verbal content of the work, as well as other elements of the performance, including voice – intonation, emphasis, tempo etc – and facial expression and movement, the receptive activity of the audience, and its performance context. Stand-up performances of varying lengths have traditionally been noted for their ‘bittiness’ – ‘smaller units... [which] can easily be re-edited and put together in a different order’ (Double, 2014, p.87). However, as Double notes, this has been complicated by the development of ‘longer shows in which a theme, a concept, or a narrative is explored in a much more sustained fashion’ (Double, 2014, p.87). In the case of the ‘concept show’, to borrow Double’s terminology, analysis of the functions or effects of elements of the performance must consider not simply the ‘bit’ itself, but the performance as a whole, as well as the context in which it is situated.

In a form that is often celebrated for its potential for spontaneity, an approach rooted in textual analysis will raise questions. For example, can a specific element of a performance be considered significant, and therefore the legitimate subject of analysis, if one cannot be certain that it was present in every performance of a show, or even a majority of them, rather than simply occurring on one night? Many of the metareferential elements from performances analysed in this thesis are taken from shows that might be regarded as self-contained, standalone performances, of the type seen on the fringe/arts centre circuit, with structures and content that tend to be determined by theme, and therefore are less characterised by spontaneity and improvisation (see above). As a consequence, it is reasonable to conclude that any given element of a show is likely to recur in the majority of performances, if not all of them, unless obviously prompted by another explanatory factor, such as an event in the room, perhaps involving a member of the audience, that cannot be assumed to be part of the recurring elements of the performance. Furthermore, many of the performance elements cited here can be seen to demonstrate a thematic connection

to other elements of the performance in which they were located, and can therefore be assumed to be a recurring element of a unified whole. Given the emphasis on textual analysis in this thesis, recorded materials have been used where possible, for accuracy of reference. On the occasions where I saw a live performance, and a recorded version of the performance was also available, I have typically used a similar recorded version of the routines for ease of reference and consistency, unless a notable event occurred at the live performance that is relevant to the topic under discussion. On these occasions, I have made it clear that I am discussing the live performance.

It is clear from the examples above that refer to Phyllis Diller, Steve Martin and Andy Kauffman in the US, and the recent critical acclaim and commercial success of Hannah Gadsby's metacomic shows *Nanette* and *Douglas* (2020), that the continued use of metacomedy as a means of participating in discourse about comedy is by no means restricted to the UK. The use of recorded material means that this wider pool of performances could have been referred to. However, this thesis does not draw on a wide range of examples from stand-up comedy cultures around the world, but instead focuses primarily on performers regularly appearing on the 'circuit-fringe axis' (Smith, 2018, p.44) in the UK, with the majority of examples taken from performances by UK-based comedians⁴. In recent years, there has been considerable overlap between the UK and Australian comedy scenes, centred around significant festivals such as Edinburgh and Melbourne. The UK comedy website, *Chortle*, for example, runs regular features and reviews from the Melbourne Comedy Festival, and performers from Australia and New Zealand have won or been shortlisted for UK comedy awards. However, Alice Fraser, a comedian who has performed in the UK, has observed some differences between the performing in Australia and the UK, such as a greater 'openness' among UK audiences:

⁴ The specific focus on this pool is not intended to imply that metacomedy is the sole preserve of what Laura Lexx describes as 'arts-centrey, Edinburgh comedians' (Interview, 2020).

I don't know where that slightly more open feeling comes from. I like to think perhaps it's because of the power of the BBC to broaden people's art, independent from government politics, funded by television licences, with a mandate to commission good stuff as a mainstream but non-commercial channel. Without having to play to advertising dollars, the BBC could beam surreal, absurd and extremely silly comedy straight into the homes of the nation. (2019, p.68)

Although she does suggest the possibility of decreasing artistic and receptive differences across the countries' comedy cultures, resulting from a combination of factors, perhaps suggesting an increased applicability or transferability of phenomena and insight from one to the other, she nonetheless argues that a national 'flavour' is retained:

Maybe both performers and audiences will homogenise around the world, or maybe with wildly unrestricted access to so much interesting and good art, every audience will be more welcoming to weird foreign acts when they trot onto the stage. Perhaps this is an outdated idea for the up-and-coming-generations, with the internet opening up channels of access to everything to everyone. Maybe my generation of comedians will be the last ones to really feel vast differences in national audience flavour, as more people sort themselves into team affiliations that span national identity. (2019, pp.68-69)

As a result, I have only included examples of comedians who frequently appear in the UK, even if they are not exclusively resident in the UK.

Furthermore, what follows is not a comprehensive catalogue of metareferential techniques at work within present-day stand-up in the UK, or of the themes that recur within this metareferential activity. The examples subjected to extended analysis in this thesis are drawn from relatively experienced performers, representing varying degrees of commercial success (with one exception). It will also be clear that the themed chapters of this thesis – based around recurring areas of metacomic engagement – are organised around ideas that justify extended examination in their own right, such as the notion of authenticity or aesthetic quality in stand-up comedy. However, this thesis is principally interested in what these performances have to say about these themes, *how* they say it through the

metareferential elements employed, and the possible functions, effects and explanations of this discourse, rather than grappling with the validity or legitimacy (or otherwise) of these concepts more generally.

Chapter Structure

The chapter that follows this, Chapter 2, expands on the theory and terminology of metareference and metareferential turns, and its application to stand-up comedy. It outlines some of the ambiguities that result from use of the word 'metacomedy', and clarifies what is meant by 'metacomedy' in this thesis. By engaging with a formal theoretical framework for metareference, it explores how the frequency and salience of metareferential activity is measured, the factors that shape the discernibility and effects of metareference, and sets out the analytical language that will be used in close readings of metareferential elements in performance.

Chapter 3 builds on previous analysis of the role of metareference in contributing to the experience of a stand-up performance, in combination with theories of the effects of metareference, to explore the contributions that metareference makes to experiential aspects of stand-up comedy, particularly regarding the relationship that is constructed between the performer and their audience. It highlights effects that are democratic and collaborative, laying bare artefactuality in order to equalise the relationship between producer and recipient, or controlling and divisive, asserting the primacy of the creator and contributing to spectator hierarchies.

Chapters 4 turns to the uses of metacomedy in the first wave of alternative comedy in the late 1970s and 1980s. It examines the claims that have been made for the special character and proliferation of metacomedy within early alternative stand-up comedy within the framework for measuring 'metareferential turns' (Wolf, 2011, *passim*). The common themes and functions of metareferential activity in this period are surveyed, and interpretations of their significance by scholars of stand-up comedy are outlined. In addition to acknowledging the significant role of metareference as a means through which destructive attacks on dominant artistic practices, and dominant social and political attitudes, could be made in order to

transform the existing character of stand-up, it also explores the function of metacomedry, in conjunction with contextual factors, in establishing and advertising early alternative comedy as a new practice, and its contribution to the coalescence of the performers and audiences that shaped the scene.

The remainder of the thesis explores present-day uses of metacomedry. In order to do this, Chapter 5 presents the artistic context for this activity through a historical account of the development of stand-up comedy in the UK from the inception of alternative comedy in 1979 to the present. It attempts to survey important changes in stand-up comedy during that period, not only with regard to the shifting character of its performance content in the wake of the first-wave of alternative comedy, but also its significant commercial growth within the context of the entertainment industry and its popularisation.

Chapter 6 identifies a foregrounding of metacomic activity in stand-up comedy concurrent with the 'comedy boom' that occurred in the UK during the 2000s and 2010s, at all levels of the comedy circuit, from professionals exhibiting metacomic oeuvres to performers on the open mic circuit. It identifies positive explanations for this, such as the growth of a 'comedy savvy' audience created by a saturation of stand-up comedy production and its dissemination on high-profile broadcast platforms. However, it also identifies negative causes of recourse to metareferentiality, such as a perceived narrowing of stylistic approaches as a result of homogenous tendencies in TV commissioning.

Chapter 7 explores the use of metacomedry as a response to a burgeoning commercial identity for stand-up comedy. It analyses the relationship between explicit and implicit metacomedry and the (re)assertion of an alternative, or sub-cultural, identity for stand-up comedy within a context of commercialization and professionalization (Smith, 2018, pp.150-155). It explores the potential interaction between metacomedry as a form of self-definition and self-advertisement, and the relationship of this to patterns of comedy consumption. It also identifies

metacomedy as a means through which issues that arise from metacomedy can themselves be addressed.

Chapter 8 examines issues of quality at the level of aesthetic judgment in stand-up comedy, and the role of a set of aesthetic criteria, influenced by the first wave of alternative comedy, that is used to determine this. It considers the expression of these aesthetic criteria by performers through the Edinburgh show. Despite being regarded as a format that presents greater artistic freedom than a comedy club appearance, and therefore providing an opportunity to express an aesthetics of originality (Wolf, 2011, p.30) and complexity, the Edinburgh show has developed a set of generic conventions which, paradoxically, are seen as indicators of qualities such as creativity and complexity, and perceived as obligatory by some performers and critics. The chapter examines how this tension is negotiated and critiqued through performance. It highlights a range of responses, from conventions incorporated with a light touch of knowing ridicule, to destructive parody.

Chapter 9 takes as its subject the perception of stand-up comedy's prioritisation of authenticity, truthfulness and unmediated self-expression as central to its present-day identity. While metareference may have played an important part in establishing these qualities as defining features of stand-up, it often used by present-day performers to challenge, play with or negotiate the difficulties of achieving authenticity. It draws on recent paradigms of metareference and authenticity in literature and the performing arts to explore how, rather than exclusively employing metareference for the purpose of deconstruction, some performers use the artefactuality of metareference as a paradoxical means through which to provide their audience with an authentic experience.

Chapter 10 explores the use of metacomedy as a means through which performative critiques of issues related to gender inequality can be advanced. Metacomedy is shown as a way in which the gendered conventions of some of stand-up comedy's most popular approaches and conventions are exposed, and the gendered receptive attitudes of audiences laid bare. Furthermore, metacomedy is

interpreted as a vehicle through which less visible practices that contribute to gender inequality within the comedy industry can be described and critiqued. The threat of ambiguity and 'misreadings' in the context of works that have explicitly political and transformative aims is considered within the broader practices of feminist parody. Metacomedy itself is presented as a potential solution to some of the challenges created by this ambiguity.

Chapter 11 concludes the thesis by drawing together its threads, suggesting some conclusions regarding the uses of present-day metacomedy based on comparison with the uses of this aesthetic by performers in the first-wave of early alternative comedy. It uses these comparisons as an index of change and continuity, not only regarding stand-up comedy's use metacomedy specifically, but the culture of stand-up comedy in the UK more generally. Furthermore, it offers reflections on the character of metacomedy as a form of discourse about stand-up comedy.

Chapter Two

Metareference, metacomedy and measuring metareferential activity

Although metareference has been identified as a frequent and prominent feature of both avant-garde and popular works (see Chapter One), the 20th and 21st century marked a growth in popular understanding of metareference as a concept (Wolf, 2011, *passim*). In addition to the connection between metareference and popular comedy described above, a proliferation of metaization has also been observed in other areas of popular culture production, including ‘quality’ TV programmes such as *The Sopranos* (Starre, 2011, pp.195-216), horror films such as *Scream* (de Villiers, 2011, pp.355-377) and pop music (Butler, 2011, pp.507-524). Audiences’ increased familiarity with metareferential strategies across art forms and media is reflected in the extent to which the prefix ‘meta-’, to describe cultural artefacts, or even everyday experience, is a feature not just of scholarship, but also of popular journalism and everyday conversation¹, suggesting a widespread understanding of what it denotes. However, the functions this thesis attempts to perform – identifying and explaining moments during which metareference appears to become a more prominent feature in stand-up comedy practice, and exploring the character, functions and effects of metareferential elements – require a more precise explanation of what is meant by metareference and ‘metacomedy’, in relation to stand-up comedy in particular. This will help to avoid potential misunderstandings arising from ambiguous terminology and to assist in the identification and analysis of examples.

In popular writing and scholarship on stand-up comedy, a range of approaches is taken to indicate what is meant by ‘metacomedy’. Some uses imply their

¹ An article by Boston Globe language correspondent Ben Zimmer claiming that metaization had penetrated everyday culture was titled ‘Dude, this headline is so meta’ (2012). A 2016 article in Marie Claire entitled ‘Meta Pop Culture Moments – Biggest Meta Moments in 2016’ asked its readers ‘Do you love yourself a meta moment?’ before answering ‘Cool. So does 2016’. (Bonner, 2016).

understanding of metacomedy through example. Double's analysis of the role of metacomedy in early alternative comedy, for instance, incorporates parody of the conventions of stand-up comedy and showbusiness more generally, and the reconfiguration and deconstruction of established joke structures (2020, pp.99-106). Daniel Smith has described the 'ironic self-referrals that contemporary comedians make to their own status as professionals' (2018, p.45) as 'meta-comedic asides' (2018, p.45). Examining stand-up comedy as an interaction that involves an audience, a performer, jokes and a venue, Jason Rutter has defined 'metacomedy' in stand-up comedy by likening it to a self-reflexive remark, in that it involves the performer making 'a comment on their own performance' (1997, p.181), but one that is distinct in that it 'highlight[s] a *falseness* in the progress of the stand-up performance' (1997, p.181). Taken as a reference to what Monica Fludernik describes as 'artefactuality' (see, for example, 2003, p.4), intended to denote the 'constructedness' of an object by human activity, this definition is useful in describing the activation of awareness of the distinctness of a stand-up comedy performance from discourse that is subject to less obvious mediation. This is the 'basic ontological classification (artefact vs. natural object)' that Werner Wolf regards as 'fundamental to all other statements and functions at issue in metareference' (2009, p.64). However, the use of the word 'falseness' in relation to a form that is so concerned with notions of truth and authenticity (see Chapter Nine), the fascination and appeal of which partly derives from the assumption that the opinions, outlook and events described during the performance at least resemble the off-stage experience and views of the performer (Double, 2014, p.133), runs the risk of confusion.

Bonello Rutter Giappone has defined metacomedy in bald terms as 'comedy about comedy' (2018, p.143). The apparent capaciousness and simplicity of this definition is appealing, and it is adopted in this thesis. However, the vernacular use of 'comedy' to indicate both a mode or genre of text or performance, and also to refer to its humorous properties, is potentially confusing without clarification. For

example, this definition may be interpreted as referring only to a piece of formal humour that generates humour through humour itself. In fiction, for example, a similar ambiguity pertains around the use of the term 'metafiction'. In its broader sense, it refers to a work of fiction that contains reflections on a meta-level about any medial property of the work in question, and/or works of its kind, including narration, the act of their consumption, their situation in the world etc (Wolf, 2009, p.31-34). In its narrower sense, it refers to a work of fiction that engages on a metalevel with 'the fictionality of narratives' (Wolf, 2009, pp.31-34), where fictionality refers to their 'truth-value' (Wolf, 2009, p.34). Within stand-up, a narrow definition of metacomedy might exclude meta-elements that did not produce laughter, or meta-elements that did not take the humorous properties of stand-up as the subject for reflection.

'Metacomedy' in this thesis, therefore, does not denote only metaization referring to, or giving rise to, the humorous content of a performance, but also refers to other metareferential elements whose function does not primarily appear to be the creation of laughter, but nonetheless have metareferential potential. Accommodating metareferential elements that comment on the non-humorous aspects of stand-up comedy is appropriate at a point in time in which a definition of stand-up comedy that conceives of it only in humorous terms is too constraining, and is subject to constant testing by the qualities of performances that identify themselves as stand-up but nonetheless aspire to the production of more than laughter (e.g. Friedman, 2014, p.257, Quirk, 2017, p.231 & Ranganathan, 2018). It follows the template for a medium-led formula for nomenclature described by Werner Wolf, in which the combination of the 'meta-' prefix followed by a type of media, form or genre, denotes metaization occurring in, and referring to, that medium, form or genre. This thesis is particularly concerned with the use of metacomedy to participate in discussion about stand-up comedy, rather than comedy performance more generally. A more precise nomenclature, therefore, might be meta-stand-up-comedy. However, this is unwieldy. Therefore, 'metacomedy' in this thesis is taken to mean

‘metaization occurring within the medium of, and referring to, stand-up comedy’, rather than comedy more generally, unless otherwise indicated. The term is used to denote a range of medium-related issues connected to comedy referred to from a meta-level: for example, its conventions, its various and (sometimes) competing aesthetic values or its status as a medium. It is metaization, which may be humorous or non-humorous in its effect, occurring within the context of a performance that largely defines itself as humorous discourse.

This expansive approach is derived from, and is used as a synonym for, Werner Wolf’s neologistic term ‘metareference’ which, while drawing heavily from the scholarship of metafictional and self-reflexive literature in which contemporary theories of metareference have their origin (e.g. Hutcheon, 1980; Waugh, 1984), is sufficiently general to stand application to other artefacts:

[Metareference is] a special, transmedial form of usually non-accidental self-reference produced by signs or sign configurations which (are felt to be) located on a logically higher level, a ‘meta-level’, within an artefact or performance; this self-reference, which can extend from this artefact to the entire system of the media, forms or implies a statement about an object-level, namely on (aspects of) the medium/system referred to. (2009, p.31)

Wolf uses the term ‘metareference as ‘a hypernym’ that subsumes ‘many medial and generic variants, such as metapoetry, metadrama, metafilm, or metapainting’ (Wolf, 2010, p.13). This hypernym reflects an ambition to expand the study of metaization within artistic and medial artefacts across media, in accordance with the widespread ‘metareferential turn’, which Wolf identifies in the ‘considerabl[e] increase... [in]... the *relative* proportion of meta-elements within given works, elements of which ultimately form “meta-works”’ (2010, p.7), across the 20th and 21st century.

Although Wolf’s definition of metareference describes its formal properties within a text, it is, nonetheless, a phenomenon that is identified as the result of an effect. It rests on the activity of the recipient to determine whether or not a work, or element of a work, ‘implies a statement about... the medium/system referred to’ (Wolf, 2009, p.31). As Bantleon says, ‘... artefacts themselves merely have the *potential* to unfold a

metareferential dimension, the actualization of which can only be effectuated in the recipient' (2011, p.306). Activation of the recipient's meta-awareness will depend on multiple factors. In the context of a comedy performance, some elements, such as subversions of traditional and well-known joke formulas, may strike the majority of their recipients as obviously 'meta'. For example, the packaged joke 'A Rabbi, a Priest and a Minister walk into a bar. The bartender says, "What is this, some kind of joke?"' (*Mordechai Schmutter*, 2015) is an obvious fit for any definition of metacomedy. It signals its genre through quotation of widely recognised verbal joke set-ups, and its punchline even makes explicit reference to the genre of jokes. It also makes formal humour through the incongruous subversion of another, pre-existing instance of formal humour.

Some elements of a performance with the potential to activate meta-awareness may be more subtle, however. Wolf's typology of metareference acknowledges this through the incorporation of the category of 'explicit' and 'implicit', which he describes as referring to 'the semantic discernibility of the metareference in certain signs or sign configurations' (2009, p.39). The degree of discernibility can be conceived of as a continuum. The joke cited above, for example, which makes obvious use of recognisable joke formulas in order to activate the recipient's medium awareness, is classifiable as an explicit form of metareference. At the other end of this continuum is implicit metareference, which Wolf acknowledges as more problematic, because 'it consists in certain ways of employing the medium in question so that a second-order statement centred on medial or related issues can be inferred' (Wolf, 2009, p.47). He cites the device of 'salient deviation' as an example of this, in which deviation from conventional use of the medium encourages reflection on the medium itself (2009, p.47). For example, Keith Allen's deliberate refusal to be funny during his stand-up performances – 'Sometimes I would get really serious, not funny... sometimes just not be funny at all' (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.34) – may activate reflection on the performance's identity as stand-up comedy and, as a result, on the obligation of the stand-up comedy performance to humour. Alternatively, it

may activate reflection on the extent to which a performance invites the audience to identify it as comedy, and find humour within it, simply by virtue of its setting within a comedy club, in the same way that a urinal invites the audience to question what constitutes art by virtue of its setting within the exhibition space of a gallery. This is a transmedial variation of Hutcheon's fictional category of overt and covert. Overt self-reflexive texts are those in which the process of production and reception is made 'a self-conscious one, integrating the reader in the text' (1980, p.139), 'thematizing within the story its storytelling concerns – parody, narrative conventions, creative process – with an eye to teaching him [the reader] his new, more active role' (1980, p.53). Located at the other end of this spectrum are instances of 'covertly narcissistic texts' in which the 'teaching is done by disruption and discontinuity, by disturbing the comfortable habits of the actual act of reading' (Hutcheon, 1980, p.139). In these texts, Hutcheon argues, reading 'is actually made so disruptive and challenging as to force the reader, if he is to read at all, to do that ordering, interpreting, and imagining for himself (1980, p.144)'¹.

Implicit metacomedy is a phenomenon that rests heavily on the perception of the recipient and one that, as a result, foregrounds the agency of the researcher of metareferential activity. While this does not negate attempts at defining 'metacomedy' as 'comedy about comedy' (see above), it does illuminate the process for identifying metacomedy that is perhaps elided by them. The degree to which there is agreement over what constitutes comedy about comedy will vary across recipients, depending on a range of factors – for example, the predispositions and knowledge of the recipient, the content of the work as a whole, its context and the horizon of expectation determined by its genre (Limoges, 2009, *passim*). For the researcher engaged in study of the potential functions of metareference, therefore, analysis of these effects must necessarily be 'speculative' (Wolf, 2011, p.24) readings based on the work and its context. While this thesis largely follows the definitions of metacomedy that have been used by scholarly writing in the field of UK stand-up, it

does it with the researcher's agency in identifying examples explicitly acknowledged and foregrounded.

In addition to identifying metareferential elements, a range of factors must also be considered in gauging their potential effects. Jean-Marc Limoges', writing about the 'gradable effects' (2009) of anti-illusionist devices in cinema, has proposed a set of criteria which allows researchers to 'nuance the effect that self-reflexive² devices could have' (2009, p.397). Some of these criteria are more relevant to dramatic mediums in which forms of naturalistic diegesis are a default expectation. Others, however, are more transmedially applicable. Firstly, in order to judge an effect, Limoges argues that the researcher must consider the issue of 'perceptibility' (2009, p.397), which overlaps with Wolf's classification of implicit and explicit. Furthermore, Limoges considers the context of reception as a factor both in influencing discernibility of a metareferential element (2009, p.398), and in assessing its effect once it is discerned. In the case of a stand-up comedy performance, for example, the humorous properties of a metacomic element are perhaps more likely to be seized on by an audience watching the performance in a club, and may be experienced differently by somebody watching a solo show in a theatre.

Limoges also highlights the significance of genre in the way in which these effects are experienced – for example, the expectation of laughter from a stand-up comedy performance may shape how a metareferential element is perceived. He also considers 'modalities of occurrence' (2009, pp.401-02) (where in the work the metareferential element is situated) as an important factor in determining the effect of a metareferential element. As Baeva rightly notes, no definition of metareference, or framework for interpretation, can completely remove the ambiguity, uncertainty or variation that characterises receptive activity, and each element and meta-work must be considered on a case-by-case basis, bearing these factors in mind (2019,

² Limoges uses a definition of self-reflexivity in his work which incorporates metareference (2009, *passim*).

pp.15-16). While this may introduce a degree of uncertainty around possible readings, it does highlight the potential for metareference to resonate strongly with some recipients, prompting engaged or intense responses, while simultaneously antagonising others, or passing them by unaffected. These utterances may also be double-coded, with the potential to be read and assimilated by the audience without being recognised as metareferential (Scorzin, 2011, p.269).

In addition to the explicit-implicit continuum of discernibility referred to above, Werner Wolf organises his typology of metareference around three other categories of 'important forms of metareference' (2010, p.10):

- Intracompositional/direct vs. extracompositional/indirect metareference
- Generally mediality centred vs. truth-/fiction-centred metareference
- Critical vs. non-critical metareference (Wolf, 2010, pp.10-13).

These typological pairs refer to: a) whether the metareference refers to the work from which it issues or some other work or media; b) whether it is orientated towards commenting on general medial properties, or whether it is particularly concerned with the fictional or illusionistic elements; and c) whether it points critically towards problems, gaps or challenges within a medium or work, or whether it serves a non-critical function, such as an explanatory or celebratory one (2010, pp.10-13). The issue of truth- or fiction-centred metareference may appear to be a legacy of the strong influence of metafiction in formulating a more general theory of metareference, and specifically applicable to forms in which a (more or less) immersive form of diegesis is a prominent feature, and therefore have little relevance to less diegetic forms. However, notions of 'truth' are central to the vernacular theory of the power of stand-up comedy (see Double, 2014, p.160), and metareferential acts can work to reinforce or rupture the perceived 'truth' value of the performance – for example, the illusion of spontaneity (Double, 2014, p.331) (see Chapter 9).

Despite the organisation of the typology as opposing binaries, the framing of these as 'typological pairs' (Wolf, 2010 towards metareference that, p.10) suggests that the

presence of one does not necessarily preclude the presence of the other. The binary distinction between the 'critical' and the 'non-critical', for example, is described as a 'crude' one (Wolf, 2010, p.27). As Wolf makes clear in his explanation of the typology with reference to 'metamusic', an intracompositional or extracompositional metareferential event may trigger reflections in the recipient that relate to the other half of their binary pair (2010b). An intracompositional metareferential element, for example – i.e. a metareferential element that refers to the work from which it is issued – may be regarded by its recipient as relating to other works of its kind, even when it is specifically pointed towards one work in particular. The same is true of extracompositional elements, which may in their turn be experienced by the recipient as activating intracompositional awareness. As Wolf says:

Even when the metacomment is... only an indirect one it ultimately always affects the work from which the metaization issues forth. It may, for instance, imply a classificatory self-referential statement of the kind 'I am a better work than the one in focus' or 'I belong to the same class of artefacts as the work referred to'. (2010, p.64)³

According to Wolf, therefore, all metareferential elements will activate awareness of the work from which they issue, even if their primary orientation appears extracompositional.

Wolf identifies 'manifold individual functions' arising from this 'separating [of] the work in question from the realm of natural objects and also by marking its status as art' (2010, p.64). He breaks these down into four broad categories of function, based on who or what the classificatory act is orientated towards: work-centred, author-

³ This phenomenon makes a reasonable case for Funk's transformation of Wolf's pairs into 'four basic dimensions' (2015, p.87) which, nonetheless, attempts to retain the broad transmedial application of this typology: these four dimensions are display, location/direction, focus and effect (2015, p.88). Although there is significant overlap with Wolf's typological pairs, some of these sub-categories develop the dimensions outlined, drawing on Genette to incorporate a paratextual level, and an 'interactional' sub-category, which results from 'a direct interpellation of the reader's participation, where... the metareferential moment can be said to occur in the act of participation as such' (Funk, 2015, p.89).

centred, recipient centred and context-centred (2011, pp.65-68). His acknowledgment that 'individual cases may be adduced under several headings since they may serve several functions at the same time' (2011, p.65) is well illustrated by the example of Bonello Rutter Giappone's view of the transformative function of metacomedy in early alternative comedy (2017, *passim*). While its transformation of approaches and attitudes towards comedy emphasises its context-related developmental function, it may also be seen to serve its authors, by conferring status on them, for example, while supplying its recipients with pleasure through the creation of laughter and a potential form of education through its didactic effects (see Chapter Three).

By adopting a theoretical framework based on metareference, this thesis in part constitutes an attempt to clarify and formalise some of the vocabulary used to describe metareference in stand-up comedy by applying the concepts and the transmedial lexicon developed by Werner Wolf. In doing so, I hope to contribute to a more methodical approach to identifying and analysing what has commonly been understood as constituting the metareferential content of a stand-up show which will hopefully open up the possibility of identifying examples that are less intuitive, but still possessed of metareferential potential. However, given that I have drawn so heavily on Wolf's theory and typology of metareference in laying out the parameters for understanding metacomedy within this research, it is necessary to address areas of his typology which might prove an awkward fit for the analysis of stand-up comedy. For example, Wolf (2009, p.50) and others regard metalepsis, which has been defined transmedially as a 'transgression of the boundaries of the fictional world' (Kukkonen, 2011, p.4), as possessed of metareferential potential through its anti-illusionistic properties (Kukkonen, 2011, p.10). As the definition implies, it may be regarded as more relevant to artefacts that tends towards narrative forms that are more illusionistic than stand-up comedy. Recent work, however, has expanded understanding of the potential for metalepsis, and its functions and effects, across a range of popular culture artefacts, including forms of live performance in which illusionistic narrative is not typically emphasised (e.g. Hofer, 2011, pp.232-251). Antti

Lindfors has argued that stand-up comedians can construct a ‘narrated storyworld’ within their performances, and that the ‘interactional space’ of the performance situation can be invaded by elements of the ‘storyworld’ (2017, p.51). He cites the example of Josie Long miming a scene involving Marie Antoinette setting two drinks down on an imaginary table, before hitting the glasses off the table and into the audience, prompting some audience members to ‘flinch as if the glasses were actually spilled or crashed’ (Lindfors, 2017, p.51). Stand-up comedy, therefore, is capable of achieving metaleptic effects with metareferential implications, and its function as a means of participating in medium-comment is explored here.

Wolf describes metareference as ‘usually non-accidental’ (2009, p.31), although he acknowledges that this ‘involves the hotly disputed issue of intentionality’ (2010, p.9). Nonetheless, he argues that while ‘metareference [and all reception phenomena] can be conceived of as ultimately taking place within the recipient’s mind... the artefact or text eliciting media in the recipient should at least be said to give non-accidental “signals” that invite a “meta-reading”’ (2010, p.9). A lacuna in his overview is what these ‘non-accidental’ signals constitute across different metareferential artefacts and types. The definition of the ‘non-accidental’ in stand-up comedy, with its frequently improvisational character, requires clarification (see Chapter One). Even those performers who produce shows that are self-contained, with unified content that is relatively consistent, describe performance processes in which the content of their performance varies from one performance to the next⁴. Many spontaneous instances of metareference in stand-up comedy, for example, will arise in response to the activity of the audience: a particular example of this might be self-reflexive commentary on the progress of the performance, and the audience’s reception of it as it unfolds. Commentary of this type might focus on a perceived enthusiasm (or lack of it) for specific material, the circumstances of the gig,

⁴ Describing his show *Menage a Un*, Richard Herring refers to sections where ‘over the course of a tour, you’d stretch it [a routine], stretch it, and then you’d break it, and you couldn’t ever quite get back to what it was. I was changing it so much...’ (2020, Interview).

unplanned occurrences in the room, noises from outside the venue etc. While this could strictly be regarded as ‘non-accidental’ – it is an intentional communicative act on the part of the performer – it may be agreed that its spontaneous character means that it cannot be said to be a non-accidental metareferential element in the way it is meant by Wolf, in that it is not a planned part of the work as a whole. Given that the primary focus of this thesis is the type of metareference that appears to trigger medial reflection in the recipient, there has been an attempt to distinguish between the spontaneous and the planned.

Despite the development of the ‘conceptual show’ in stand-up in recent years (see Chapter One), the tendency ‘towards bittiness’ still exists. The notion of the metareferential element, a unit within a ‘bit’ that is not necessarily part of an explicit greater whole, is of use. For example, Sarah Lauzen’s use of the term ‘metafictional device/element’, which she uses to describe a textual feature that ‘foregrounds some aspect of the writing, reading, or structure of a work that the applicable canons of standard (realistic) practice would expect to be backgrounded’ (Lauzen, 1986, p.84, in Funk, 2015,) has been helpfully adopted and broadened by Funk into the more general ‘metareferential elements’, which draws a distinction between a ‘specific [metareferential] event, or set of events, in a text’ (2015, p.87) and the use of ‘metareference’ to describe the concept more broadly. The transmedial application of this concept redeems from exclusion works that do not meet the criteria of a full ‘meta-work’, but nonetheless may activate awareness of the work itself and/or the medium to which it belongs.

‘Measuring’ metareferential activity

One of the aims of this thesis is to explain why stand-up comedy appears to sometimes take on an especially metareferential character, as both Double and Bonello Rutter Giappone have argued in relation to early alternative comedy in the UK (see above). Any approach to this must acknowledge some caveats and limitations. Firstly, attempts at charting changes in both the quantity and character of metareferential activity must be understood within the context of the definition of

metacomedy laid out above, in which the role of the recipient (or researcher) is active not merely as a collator of examples of metacomedy, but as a creator of them (see above). Secondly, given the volume of activity in live stand-up comedy, and the absence of databases cataloguing performance content, the identification of an increase or decrease in metareferential activity must necessarily rely to an extent on the knowledge and intuition of the researcher, and qualitative impressions of others involved in the field (Wolf, 2011, p.8). This is also the case in other research of this type across media and forms. For example, it is this non-statistical identification of a general trend Hutcheon identifies in *Narcissistic Narratives* (1980, p.18), the ‘tend[ency]’ (1984, p.2) upon which Waugh builds her discourse on metafiction, and a similarly non-statistical diagnosis of an increase in the occurrence of metaization that is the premise of Stonehill’s work on the ‘self-conscious novel’ (1988, ix). This can be combined with observation of significant qualitative changes – for example, the emergence of large audiences for meta- or partial meta-works where they had previously only demonstrated niche appeal, or the existence of ‘evidently metareferential oeuvres’ where they had previously not existed, or had been considered exceptional (Bantleon, 2011, p.309). In 2011, using these criteria, Werner Wolf argued for a ‘disproportionate and therefore significant’ (2011, p.7) increase in the quantity of metaization in diagnosing what he describes as the ‘metareferential turn’ across the arts and media. Given that the majority of works are likely not to contain metareferential elements, he emphasizes the significance of a relative increase in this evaluation – neither ‘the majority, let alone all, of the works/performances of a given medium’ (Wolf, 2011, p.7) need to have become ‘meta’, or demonstrate metareferential elements, for a pattern to be notable. Instead, it is only necessary for the number to be ‘increased in comparison to the average of previous times’ (Wolf, 2011, p.7).

Metareference and/as humour

In addition to identifying the long-standing relationship between comic works and metareference, Wolf argues that metareference itself may contribute to the humour

of an artefact, 'rendering the work... generally amusing' (Wolf, 2009, p.66) and giving rise to the impression of the creator as a 'one capable of surprising, witty or amusing devices' (Wolf, 2009, p.66). In part, he attributes this to a similarity in the cognitive manoeuvres activated by both joking and a metareferential aesthetic:

... The reason for this special affinity of metaization is arguably the parallel between the aesthetic or intellectual distance involved in metareflections and the emotional or even moral distance which, according to Henri Bergson's theory, is a presupposition of laughter. Bergson aptly speaks of an "anesthésie momentanée du cœur" (1899/1975: 49), 'a momentary anesthesia of the heart', which is obviously opposed to *eleos* and *phobos*, pity and fear, the Aristotelian emotions elicited by tragedy. (2009, p.71)

In addition to this similarity of receptive attitude, however, he implies that metareference itself can be the source of humour. For example, the violation of the illusionistic conventions of many art forms through metareference may result in 'a conflict between some mental input and the framework into which that input is received' (Martin, 1987, p.190) and produce humour as a result of incongruity. Wolf's reference to the self-reflexive disruption of the illusionistic world of a Moliere play, when a character within the world of the narrative is advised to pass the time by going to the theatre to watch a comedy by Moliere, resulting in a metaleptic effect, may be regarded as an example of this (2009, p.29).

The use of a framework of incongruity to interpret the humour of stand-up comedy is a common practice (e.g. Quirk, 2015, *passim*), and John Morreall has identified incongruity theory as an explanation of humour that is more universally applicable than other prominent theories of humour, such as superiority theory and relief theory (2020). However, in individual instances of humour, the presence of incongruity does not preclude the contribution of these explanations in rendering something amusing. Theories of humour provide only a partial explanation of the cause of amusement, and each situation of joking requires consideration of other contextual factors: 'cultural and social conditioning and even genetic inheritance would presumably have to go into a complete causal explanation of amusement'

(Martin, 1987, p.174). Just as contextual factors must be taken into account when considering the discernibility and effect of metareference, so other factors in joking behaviour, such as the competence of the joke teller, and the circumstances in which the joke is told, will also influence whether the subject is amused by the incongruity (Morreall, 1987, p.130). Furthermore, in stand-up comedy, in which the boundary between the performance and the 'real world' is less visible, violations of illusion of the type described Wolf may be regarded as less salient, and therefore less frequent as a recurring source of humour, though by no means entirely absent. Therefore, although incongruity theory is drawn upon as a framework to explore humour in this thesis, for the reasons laid set above, the humour arising from the examples of metacomedy in this thesis are considered within the context of the performance as a whole.

Performance practices that do not conform to conventional approaches to produce laughter within stand-up may provoke different reactions in the same audience: Morreall suggests responses to incongruity apart from amusement, including 'negative emotion and reality assimilation' (1987, p.196). This thesis, therefore, will remain sensitive to the heterogeneity of responses that performance practices may provoke in an audience. It does this by incorporating the audience's response within its close readings and, at least where the humorous elements of the performances are concerned, using these responses to advance 'probabilistic theses' (Wolf, 2009, p.23) regarding the contribution of metaization to this. In his examination of the relationship between laughter and aesthetic experience, Martin suggests that, to some extent, both humour and aesthetic taste 'involve... discrimination and perceptiveness' and that this 'perceptiveness can be cultivated by practice and formal training in humour and formal art' (1987, p.181): understanding of incongruity leading to amusement, it is implied, can be developed. Although Martin asserts that this process may occur through 'formal training', the decoding and appreciation of the types of incongruity regularly found in stand-up comedy are typically acquired through experience of these performances: 'When an utterance is

assimilated to a given genre, the process by which it is... interpreted is mediated through its intertextual relationship with prior texts' (Bauman, 2004, p.4). Given the educative function that has been proposed for it (e.g. Wolf, 2009, p.67, Baeva, 2019), metareference may be viewed as having a role to play in contributing to the development of a humorous sensibility.

Chapter Three

'Let's have a good one, team': working (with) the audience

Chapter One identified the activation of 'critical distance' through metareference, particularly parody, as an effect that has been emphasised as contributing to achieving artistic, social and political change through stand-up comedy (e.g. Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, *passim*). Wolf has argued that metareference across forms and media is well-suited to the cultivation of critical distance, because 'the activation of the secondary frame always involves a rational distance and presupposes that a recipient is aware of the nature, forms and conventions of the signifying systems and media in question' (2009, p.38). The rationality implied by the classificatory act that is fundamental to metareference is often positioned as antithetical to other aesthetic responses (Wolf, 2009, p.28), including emotional ones. As set out in Chapter One, a consequence of this, Linda Hutcheon has argued, is that meta-works are often (wrongly) characterised as providing a 'sterile' experience (1980, p.5) for the recipient. In contemporary stand-up comedy, for example, a review of an Edinburgh Fringe performance of Jordan Brookes' 2016 show, *The Making Of*, described it as 'pretty meta, with layers of detachment to be dealt with, which occasionally slips into being a bit too smarty pants' (Bennett, 2016).

However, as the historic relationship between comedy as a mode of entertainment and metareferentiality attests, this is only a partial account of the potential effect of meta-works, or meta-elements, on their recipients. In his work on Athenian Old Comedy, Ruffell argues that Brecht's 'elaboration of the Russian Formalist concept of *ostranenie* – estrangement or making strange – in terms of the central Marxist concept of alienation... makes a potentially flexible concept extremely rigid' (2011, p.220), emphasizing metaization's potential for 're-energizing stale material and grabbing the audience's attention, making it both lively and relevant' (2011, p.220). Indeed, the characterisation of metareference as resulting in a sterile effect is antithetical to

Ruffell's visceral description of the effect of metaization in Athenian Old Comedy, in which 'the metatheatricality draws them [the audience] in, the comic narrative slaps them around' (2011, p.312). Double's emphasis on the humorousness of the metacomedy in early alternative comedy, rather than as something purely 'cerebral' (Double, 2020, p.105), and its contribution to the audience's visceral enjoyment of the performance, is consistent with this. Bonello Rutter Giappone has analogised the more active audience posited in early alternative comedy with the more active reader of metafiction theorised by Hutcheon (2018, p.143), and Double has sketched out how some metareferential (or self-reflexive) techniques contribute to 'one of stand-up's defining features... that it is firmly and conspicuously rooted in the present tense' (2014, p.325). He argues that this creates an effect of 'intense immediacy' by providing an opportunity for comedians to attract 'attention to their own processes, making the audience exactly aware of what they're doing' (2014, p.326) and contributing to the success of the performance in the process. This chapter explores more fully the use of metacomedy as a performance tactic that has the potential to foster intense engagement between an audience and a performance not in spite of the declaration of its 'artefactuality' (Fludernik, 2003) but through this declaration of artefactuality, resulting in a viewing experience that is far from sterile. It analyses examples of performances to demonstrate their potential to cultivate a level of intimacy between performer and audience – implying a more equal relationship between them than some paradigms of stand-up may suggest. However, consistent with the potential for both liberation and control that Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies in the metacomedy of early alternative comedy (2018, p.143), in addition to a more democratic relationship between the performance and audience, it also explores the use of metacomedy by comedians to assert their status and exert increased control over the audience's response to their performance.

'There are jokes in the show!'

The desirability of an intimate relationship between performer and audience is taken as axiomatic in much theoretical writing on popular performance and stand-up

comedy especially (e.g. Quirk, 2015, *passim* and Double, 2017, *passim*). Double argues that, in opposition to the techniques of theatrical realism, 'For popular performers, the trick is to break down any barrier between them and the audience, rather than develop techniques to establish an artificial one' (2017, p.11). Stand-up comedy, through the absence of a fourth wall, and the normative view of the conflation of performer and performance persona (Rappaport and Quilty-Dunn, 2020, *passim*), is often regarded as exemplifying this intimate audience-performer relationship. For Brodie, stand-up comedy is, by definition, 'very much the same form of intimate talk that occurs in face-to-face encounters' (2014, p.5), and the performance is an attempt to 'reconcile' this intimacy with the distance that is created by the 'requirements of... professionalization' (2014, p.5). He primarily locates this distance in physical and sociological factors: the set-up and size of the venue; the distinction between the stage and the seats; the amplification of the performer and not the audience; and differences in 'social category' between the audience and the performer (2014, p.5). The archetypal stand-up comedy performance theorized by Brodie attempts to construct an identity that is perceived as closer to 'natural object' than to 'artefact' (Wolf, 2009, p.64) (see Chapter Nine).

Tom Parry's use of metareference as a classificatory act demonstrates the utility of metareference in forging a bond with the audience posited by Bonello Rutter Giappone in relation to early alternative comedy (2018, p.143). For example, in *Yellow T-Shirt*, Parry begins the show by proleptically outlining its content, drawing attention to its artefactuality in the process:

There are jokes in the show! Give me a cheer if you like jokes? **(Cheers)** That's a relief, isn't it? Who likes jokes the most? **(The audience are silent, then laugh,)** Madam, what's your name? Nicky, you can be in charge of jokes! Nicky, how many jokes are there in the list of jokes? Five jokes! Talk about value for money! **(Laughter)** And helpful chapter points on a DVD! "Skip to joke three!" **(Laughter)** There are also thoughts in the show!... Thoughts are basically jokes but without a punchline. **(Laughter)** They didn't quite make it into the joke folder... Damien, you're in charge of thoughts. How many thoughts are there? **(Audience member says, 'Five'.)** Upsettingly, as many as there are jokes. **(Laughter).** (2017)

At subsequent intervals during the show, Parry calls on these audience members to read out a one-word prompt for the joke or thought, which he then elaborates on. The incongruity created by Parry's bombastic and celebratory declaration regarding the presence of jokes in the show, in a form in which the presence of jokes is a minimum expectation of the performance's attempt to meet its obligations, contributes to the humorousness of this metareferential element, creating laughter. It is also a classificatory act that reduces the performance to its bare components. There is a superficial similarity between this classificatory act, and the assertion of artefactuality that Double identifies in Phyllis Diller's cuing up of punchlines with the phrase 'Are you ready?' (2014, p.326). However, the use of this device within the context of the normative conventions of a present-day stand-up show, in which artefactuality is typically downplayed in favour of a more conversational approach (Lee, 2013), may be experienced as more discernible, and therefore regarded as more salient by the audience. Furthermore, rather than merely activating the audience's awareness of the unfolding of the performance in 'the here and now' (Double, 2014, p.326), and supplying humour, for Parry, this approach to proleptically laying bare the content of the show is an expression of an artistic ethos of openness and co-operation, and is part of an attempt to equalise the potential imbalance in status between the audience and the performer:

Part of that is the presentation of someone who doesn't quite know what they're doing, or who hasn't quite worked it out, and is going, "Ok, I'm going to need your help for this", and you kind of buy the audience's trust, their cooperation into the show. I've never been very good at being a high-status performer who is the guy in control in a room... I feel a lot more comfortable earning the good favour of the audience... I think that's why I felt very comfortable starting a dialogue with the audience, saying, 'Look, I'm going to need your help. These are my jokes. When I need a joke, I'm going to you.' Then we're in it together almost. Even for the Edinburgh shows, for necessity I had to start at the back of the room, I'd sit in with everyone, and they'd all come in, and then I'd get on the mic, and I'd say, "Right, are we up for this?" And they'd all say, "Yeah!" And I'd say, "Let's have a good one, team"... That's important to me.

(Interview, 2018)

The use of metareference here provides a clear example of its potential to 'permit the recipients, as it were, glimpses behind the scenes' (Wolf, 2011, p.32) of the artefact. It cultivates a complicit in-group constructed within the performance, revealing its artefactuality through the laying bare of its components and, in doing so, creates the impression of a more equal footing between comedian and audience. Although Parry attributes a practical motivation to these decisions, he also implies an 'insider theory' (McGlaughlin, 1996, p.102) about stand-up that prioritises a democratic dynamic between audience and performer, activating the audience's awareness of stand-up comedy as a collaborative enterprise as part of a combination of strategies that challenges the distance imposed by the performance situation – including the literal closing of space between audience and performer. Although by no means unique to the present moment, Wolf has identified a proliferation of activity of this type in the contemporary arts and media as both a consequence and reflection of a more 'democratic attitude' (2011, p.32), that is the result of, and helps to create, increased audience awareness of the 'nature... [and] conventions of the signifying systems and media in question' (Wolf, 2009, p.28)¹.

Furthermore, it gestures towards collapsing the conventional hierarchy that exists between producer and recipient and, in doing so, substitutes a co-operative amity for the model of rivalry that is one of the archetypal constructions of the audience performer-relationship in stand-up comedy. This typically hostile relationship is exemplified by Catriona Craig's description of interactions between performer and audience on the early alternative comedy circuit, in which there was:

little sense of harmonious togetherness with the audience, as equality gave way to an atmosphere of contest and antagonism, a mood that was especially strong at The Comedy Store in the early days of the circuit... To maintain his [*sic*] place behind the microphone the speaker had to prove himself. (2001, p.264)

¹ See Chapter Seven.

Parry's activation of the audience's awareness of their role in the construction of the performance, on the other hand, demonstrates a desire to overturn 'the implicit power of the "one who speaks to many"' (Peterson, 1993, p.4 in Craig, 2001, p.264) that Craig sees pertaining in early alternative comedy clubs, dispensing with the 'threat of challenge' (2001, p.264) by incorporating a refusal of that power on the part of the performer, and instead replacing it with a thematization of the dependence of the one on the many. Parry's work constitutes an example of intentional use, within the framework of the 'conceptual show', of the democratic potential of metareference that Bonello Rutter Giappone has identified in Hutcheon's theories of the metafictional reader (2018, p.143), cultivating a stand-up comedy audience that is aware of its role in constructing the performance.

In addition to cultivating a recipient that is aware of their role as a co-creator, rather than necessarily imposing distance between the performance and the audience as a result of the foregrounding of artefactuality, laying bare the components of the show, as demonstrated by Parry, may contribute to an intensified intimacy and proximity between the performer, the performance and the recipient. Discussing the desirability of an intimate bond between performer and audience in stand-up comedy, Nathaniel Metcalf posits the appeal of the form as rooted in 'a communal experience, and I think people enjoy laughing with other people. I also think [stand-up] has a confessional quality and I think people enjoy the gossipy nature of hearing other people talking about their own lives in great detail' (Quirk, 2017, pp.235-36). Metacomic elements that lay bare process contribute to the intensification of this intimacy by providing a point of connection through revelation not just at the level of heteroreferential content, through the disclosure of personal information, but at the level of metareferential content, through the disclosure of artistic practice².

² In addition to establishing a positive relationship between the audience and the performance, activating the audience's awareness of their role in the construction of the

This process echoes Hutcheon's theorization of the relocation of the point of connection between the text and the recipient that occurs in some forms of metafiction:

In self-conscious parodic literature, the reader-character identification circuit is often broken. It is sacrificed in order to engage the reader in an active dialogue with the generic models of his [*sic*] time, an exercise that is usually only the writer's. (1980, p.139)

This result of this engagement at the level of generic model results in a 'composite identity' (1980, p.139) – that of author and reader. Discussing the parodic Hollywood comedies of the 1980s and the 1990s, Nicole Matthews identifies a similar pattern of identification, arguing that the audience is encouraged to identify with an author-director figure, often 'inscribed' (2000, p.43) as a character within the film. For Matthews, alignment with the identity of the 'joking author-director [can allow] spectators to situate themselves as powerful by aligning themselves with that authority' (2000, p.45). The power of this identification with an authority figure results in the spectator feeling empowered in their turn³. The sharing of a creative identity may contribute to cultivating a response that is not simply one of critical detachment, but which strongly identifies with the performing subject. The identification that is forged between the performer and the spectator may, in its turn, lend force to other content in the performance, including metareferential elements.

performance can also activate more wide-ranging reflections on the part of the audience about the dynamic of audiences and crowds themselves. For example, Alfie Brown's 2019 Edinburgh Festival Fringe show, *Imagination*, developed a thematization of the relationship between the stand-up comedian and their audience into a wider exploration about 'how an individual relates to a crowd' (Angus, 2019).

³ Limits are imposed on the factors that facilitate this identification, with Matthews arguing that the dynamics that enable this identification are correlated to gender, with male audience members feeling more kinship with the autonomy and authority historically represented by the author, which may result in the exclusion of recipients whose identity prevents them from making this act of identification (2000, pp.44-50). However, Cooper has argued that women are 'culturally primed' to consider male comedians as universally identifiable (Cooper, 2019) (see Chapter Ten). Both Friedman (2014, *passim*) and Matthews also correlate this identification or engagement with factors of social class (2000, pp.44-50) (see Chapter Seven).

In the case of stand-up comedy, the 'composite identity' that emerges is more multi-faceted than that of 'author and reader', because the stand-up comedy performance, in its live iteration, at least, is not received in isolation. The stand-up audience member, unlike the reader of a metafictional novel, receives the performance in the company of other recipients – or in the case of viewings of recordings, is at least aware of other responses at the moment of reception – and, as a consequence of the audibility of the laughter of others, is exposed to other 'readings' of the performance alongside their own. Therefore, the composite identity of comedian and audience that is constructed through this identification acquires an additional collaborative dimension. The consensus indicated by the coalescence of laughter may contribute to the pleasure of identifying as a 'unity' (Quirk, 2015, p.56), both with the performer and other members of audience. Felski has argued that this process of connection as part of a network, with the work itself and with its other recipients, is non-trivial, and determines the extent to which a recipient will view a cultural artefact as significant to them:

It is via the forging of ties—the acquisition of know-how, the honing of attention, exposure to examples, input from friends or teachers or reviewers—that novels or pictures or films come to matter: that they become more present, more vivid, more real. (2020, p.18)

'I just wanted to get it out there'

Implicit, or covert, metaization, with its potential reduction in discernibility, may contribute to the intensity of experience that Double regards as a desirable feature of stand-up through the construction of a more active recipient (2014, p.326), who is required to make sense of the 'disrupt[ion]' (Hutcheon, 1980, p.144) of the normal process of reception of the genre in question, demonstrating greater levels of engagement with the performance as a result. For example, Edward Aczel is a comedian who 'shuns any sense of presentation, let alone showmanship' (Bennett, 2011), and 'eschew[s] not only punchlines, but just about any overt attempts at humour' (Bennett, 2007). At the beginning of a 2017 Edinburgh Festival performance

of his show, *Is Edward Aczel Infinite?*, Aczel ambles onto the stage, inexpertly adjusts the microphone stand and then stares at the floor:

Hello. I think it.. (*adjusts glasses*) Yep... I think it... Yeah... I think it was 1933 when Kurt Godel published his famous theorem on recursive axiomatic systems.**(Laughter)** Um... I think you'll all remember Johan Conrad Dipple, the famous inventor of Dipple Oil, once used as an insect repellent, he... um... was famously the inspiration for Dr Frankenstein... **(Muted laughter)** Yeah... I believe it was 1944 that Jack Parsons was sacked from NASA's jet propulsion laboratory for claiming to be the anti-Christ. None of this has anything to do with the show. I just wanted to get it out there. (2018)

The deadpan nature of Aczel's performance, and the apparent absence of material, has the potential to cultivate intense engagement. Quirk has identified the "'unfinished joke'" (Lee in Quirk, 2015, p.106) as a 'mechanism for engaging an audience more deeply' (2015, p.106), and anti-comedy of the type presented by Aczel is paradigmatic of this process: it makes greater demands on its audience for the completion the comic text, requiring them to undertake elements of the performance that are normally the job of the performer themselves. As Aczel himself notes, the requirement for the audience to establish and re-establish moments of incongruity results in disruptive effects:

You try and play with the tension in the room in a way that... [has] people laughing at unexpected moments. That, I think, is the distinction. The audience feels in some ways that they're being messed with... You know, you're pulling the rug from under them all the time. (Goldsmith, 2019)

In identifying punchlines where there appear to be none, audiences acknowledge their investment in the outcome of the comedy experience: laughter is the goal, and they are engaged in the process of finding its location for themselves. In this respect, Aczel's performances echo the comic strategies of Steve Martin. Martin alludes to relief theory in explaining how his comedy works, with tension released at unpredictable moments in order to cultivate an audience that is more actively involved in the creation of the performance:

What if there were no punchlines? What if there were no indicators? What if I created tension and never released it? What if I headed for a climax, but all I delivered was an anti-climax? What would the audience do with all that tension? Theoretically, it would have to come out sometime. But if I kept denying them the formality of a punchline, the audience would eventually pick their own place to laugh, essentially out of desperation. This type of laugh seemed stronger to me, as they would be laughing at something *they chose*, rather than being told exactly when to laugh. (2008, p.112)

However, while comedy that locates its humour in salient deviation from generic models may cultivate a recipient that is more active, its implicit nature has the potential to alienate some spectators. Humour of this type is typically more divisive among audiences, drawing sharp distinctions between in- and out- groups within the moment of the performance – a phenomenon reflected by responses to Aczel's shows. Paul MacInnes, for example, in his review of a performance by Aczel in 2009, highlights the 'very wide-ranging responses' (2009) that it elicited, describing an audience divided between those who were highly entertained and those who were confused or affronted, split between a knowing in-group and an excluded out-group – 'Aczel seems to be the sort of comedian you either get or you don't' (2009). MacInnes emphasises the active involvement of those who enjoyed the performance, describing them as 'ready to back Aczel all the way; to interpret a stumble as a deft comic gesture and a limp punchline as deliberately weak' (2009).

The stratifying effect that is created by implicit uses of metareference may be intensified depending on the metareferential elements that activate (or do not activate) meta-awareness. For example, in an interview with Liam Williams, Stuart Goldsmith mentions the presence of an unacknowledged Larkin quotation from the poem *Toads* in one of Williams' performances (2016). In the context of the performance, this reference can be read as heteroreferential in character, with the quotation contributing to the topic that Williams is discussing. However, it is double-coded. Its metareferential potential is also activated by the full context of Williams' performances, which feature 'running criticism of his own routine' and

'lambast stand-up itself' (Penczu, 2014). The metareference, which activates awareness of the performance as an artefact, may be read as a declaration of influence, a statement regarding the intermedial relationship between stand-up comedy and other medial forms or a problematization of the 'aesthetics of originality' (Wolf, 2011, p.30) that pertain in stand-up. It may also be read as contributing a challenge to the classifications that traditionally apply to stand-up, elevating a traditionally 'low' art form (Double, 2017, p.7) by incorporating elements of 'high' culture, or denying the significance of any such categorisation by setting them side-by-side.

However, implicit metareference of this type, with no explicit verbal signifier of metareferentiality, which draws on a different medial source, leans heavily on the recipient to identify the metareferential content. As a result, it has the potential to fragment the audience based on the knowledge that they bring to the performance and the strategies they use to receive it. The audience member who possesses the knowledge to identify the allusion, and explore its implications, may experience it as a source of pleasure (Irwin, 2002, p.524), and a spur to involvement⁴, resulting in a performance that is 'cultivating intimacy and forging a community, actively involving the audience in a way that straightforward statement does not' (Irwin, 2002, p.522). Other members of the audience who do not recognise the source quotation may experience this moment in different ways. Scorzin argues that:

even if one remains unaware of a work's metareferential dimension, one will still be able to enjoy it on a different level of meaning and understanding, as metareferentiality always emerges from essentially multiple, or at least, double-coded works. Providing multiple modes of being read, a metareferential work will thus frequently appeal to different people on various levels of meaning and experience. (2011, p.269)

⁴ Describing his use of surreal subversions of stand-up conventions, Tony Law has identified their potential for forging more intense connections with the recipient: 'I've learnt so much more from the world from someone doing a thing that I've had to work out what it is they meant... You see someone doing something surreal, and a feeling inside you goes, 'Oh, I think he's in pain,' but if it's harder to get at, that makes you think about the nature of whatever that pain was more. I guess I had high hopes for it'. (Interview, 2017)

In the case of Williams' performance, the recipient who does not know the source text of the quotation may notice the poetic quality of the language as a deviation from Williams' idiolect in the rest of the show, and appreciate that a quotation has been included, without being able to identify its exact source. Others may not recognise the deviation from the rest of the performance, but still enjoy the source quotation for its intellectual and emotional content and verbal expression. For example, Stuart Goldsmith describes his response to seeing the performance while not being familiar with Larkin's poem, saying 'I saw that show once, and that sentence was like, "What an incredible sentence"' (2016).

The metareference cited here is not a joke, and therefore the exclusionary potential of non-identification, in which 'the author and the [knowing] audience become, in effect, members of a club who know the secret handshake' (Irwin, 2002, p.523), may not be experienced in the moment of performance itself. However, this exclusionary potential of the reference may have an afterlife beyond the performance. For example, Goldsmith implies that discovering the identity of the quotation caused him to reflect on his competency as an audience member, and the factors that contribute to that:

I remember at the time going, "How much of the other stuff of yours that I love is actually an uncredited quote from someone?" Or is it my fault that I didn't recognise the quote... if I was better educated, would I be in the audience going "Larkin, very good?" (2016)

The method employed in this example shares characteristics with what Stonehill describes as the 'frequently obscure allusiveness' (1988, p.7) that he identifies in 'self-conscious' (1988, *passim*) texts such as *Ulysses*, echoing historic elisions of metareferential activity with a form of elitist intellectual grandstanding that has the potential to be exclusionary in nature:

Readers who don't get the jokes nonetheless sense that they've missed something; they are thus excluded from the implied audience of the novel. Given certain preconceptions, then, it is possible to find fault with the self-conscious novel on the basis of its elitist cast. (1988, p.8)

This is particularly pertinent in relation to present-day comedy consumption, and Friedman's diagnosis 'that comedy taste not only plays a central role in the expression of middle-class identities, but more significantly it also acts as a tool for the culturally privileged to identify and pathologise those with low cultural capital' (2014, p.4). The foregoing example demonstrates how implicit metareferential elements in particular may contribute to this dynamic, without intending to do so. In particular, Friedman emphasises the tendency of 'high-cultural capital' respondents to think of their appreciation in intellectual terms, in comparison to iterations of the form which they disparage on the grounds that they perceive them as intellectually empty (2014, p.116). The distinct form of cultural knowledge required by the allusion to a poem provides an opportunity for this. However, in considering the extent to which metareference might be regarded as of utility to those seeking to activate cultural capital as a means of distinction, it must be remembered that not all metareferential elements are alike, with some presenting more democratic opportunities for activation and engagement.

'I think it's important for the comedian to have the upper hand'

It has been demonstrated that metacomedy has the potential to activate the recipient through its classificatory acts, making them aware of their role in the construction of the performance and, through these active requirements, implying a more democratic and collaborative relationship between the performance and the recipient, heightening the identification between producer and recipient in the process. However, applying Hutcheon's theories of postmodernism to punk, Bonello Rutter Giappone argues that meta-elements highlighted the role of the author as a producer of text (2012, p.352), with the classification of 'artefact' rather than 'natural object' (Wolf, 2009, p.64) asserting the existence of at least one creator of that artefact, resulting in potential author- and work-centric functions. In stand-up comedy, the majority of uses of metareference of this kind – as a form of controlling intervention – may be expected to occur spontaneously, at moments when the audience's

response, in the form of heckling or the absence of laughter, indicates that it is required (see previous chapter). Comedians' use of metacomedy as a means of 'pre-empt[ing]' interruption from the audience has also been identified as a feature of the sometimes-hostile context of the early alternative circuit (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, p.144).

Formal and planned interventions that serve an explanatory function, in which the metareferential frame functions 'as a means of educating the recipients, or of providing interpretational clues and cognitive frames' (Wolf, 2009, p.67), anticipating potential misreadings and attempting to 'foreclose' (Brand, 2006, p.182) them, can be identified in the practice of present-day comedians. The character of these metareferential practices reflects the more expansive character of present-day stand-up. Lou Sanders, for example has employed recorded meta-comments, and lighting devices, to establish a meta-level and supply an explanatory function. While Sanders could not accurately be identified as a character comedian – the presence of a heightened persona identified as 'Lou Sanders' is the dominant persona in her performances – she does include a range of characters in her act, some of which are 'instant characters' (Double, 2014, p.393), while others are 'more formal character piece[s] signalled by a change of costume' (Double, 2014, p.393). 'Genderless Michael' is a character of the latter type, and is portrayed through a bowler hat with an upturned brim, a pastel pink and white striped scarf and a north-western accent rendered with deliberate carelessness to heighten the impression of caricature, rather than character. In a recorded performance of *What's That Lady Doing?* at the Soho Theatre, having changed into the costume while a recording of Genderless Michael's 'theme tune' plays – a faux-naïf song which outlines the premise of the character (a performative refusal to conform to gender stereotypes) – Sanders strides across the stage, accompanying the character's speech with expansive hand gestures towards the audience:

My name's Michael, and I'm genderless. 'Oh no, what is he? What is he?
We're scared. Oh, no. He's got long hair, but he's got long bollocks. (**Muted**

laughter) We like everything in a neat little package. We can't bear it. What is he? Oooh, I hope he's not going to turn me into a willy woofier. **(Muted laughter)** Ooh, don't touch me. Don't touch me.' I wouldn't touch you in case I got normalitis. **(Muted laughter)** (2016)

Having concluded the character piece with a refrain of the character's theme tune, Sanders comments, 'Yes, there is a message there if you know where to look' (2016), earning laughter from the audience through the incongruous attribution of significance to such a brief, and apparently nonsensical, element of the performance. This laugh is followed by a change in lighting state, from a white wash to a deep blue wash, signalling a transition to a meta-level, while a recording of Sanders' voice plays the following message:

I wonder if people confuse that bit for a thing about transgender people. I hope not, but I saw that lady's face. I mean, you know it wasn't about transgender people. You know that it's based on your mate Michael. **(Laughter)**... Right, I mean, it is time to get on with the show now. (2016)

This is a pre-emptive attempt to 'foreclose' on potential misreadings of the performance, providing the audience with an indication of how its author intends it to be interpreted. The reflexive commentary articulates a concern about the possible reception of the content, specifically the fear that it might be perceived as transphobic. Again, the metareferential element contributes to the humour of the performance – the confessional commentary itself earns laughter – while also providing an explanatory function that anticipates misunderstanding. However, while it contributes to shaping the audience's response, it simultaneously has the potential to activate awareness of the ultimate power of the audience as recipients of the message, responsible for constructing the final interpretation of the performance.

Daniel Smith has interpreted ironic metacomic comments on the professional status of the comedian as uneasy attempts at maintaining jurisdiction over the domain of comedy and humour (2018, p.46) within a context of professionalization, which imply a superior understanding of humour while acknowledging the

audience's role as ultimate arbiter of the 'funniness' of the material. Laura Lexx describes an author-centric use of metacomedy, in which metacomic interventions provide a means of asserting control over a difficult performance situation, arguing that 'I think it's important for the comedian to have the upper hand' (Interview, 2020). For Lexx, drawing attention to the artefactuality of the performance is a strategy that is used to establish the audience's confidence in her intentions and her competence as the creator of the work: 'I suppose [I use it to] remind the audience of my intelligence and my structure in that "We look like we've done this, but I know what we're doing. Trust me. Everything I'm doing is on purpose"...' (Interview, 2020). In particular, she regards this as a useful tool when performing in front of audiences who appear to be sceptical of her abilities, saying that when 'I don't think they trust me, I will throw that [metacomic] bit in nice and early to just go "Come on. I know what I'm doing"' (Interview, 2020). Lexx's identification of the pragmatic function of metaization as a means of 'remind[ing] the audience of my intelligence' is consistent with Wolf's view of metareference's status-related author-centric function of 'reveal[ing] him or herself as a particularly self-conscious and hence intellectual person or as one capable of surprising, witty and amusing devices' (2009, p.66).

In addition to conferring prestige on the creator, metareference may also function to confer prestige on the work itself and, by extension, on the form. Stewart Lee has said that Al Murray uses implicit metareference to activate awareness of his performance's artefactuality in order to draw attention to the identity of the performance as a planned artefact⁵:

⁵ In addition to his metacomic performances, Lee has contributed to understanding the process involved in stand-up comedy through his books. *How I Escaped My Certain Fate* (2010), *The 'If You Prefer a Milder Comedian Please Ask For One' EP* (2012a) and *March of the Lemmings: Brexit in Print and Performance 2016-19* (2019) contain transcripts of his shows, and detail the processes in the performances' creations. They add an additional layer of metacommentary to the performances, declaring a further interest in performances that already declare an interest in themselves. It might be argued that commercially available

[He was] so fed up with people assuming that he made the whole thing up [his shows as 'The Pub Landlord'] as he went along, he worked a bit into the character where it was necessary for him to recite the whole of the 'To be or not to be' speech from *Hamlet*. And he said he did that because he wanted to let the audience know that he was capable of learning things, which would then, he hoped, make them realise that there was a process at work. (Lee, 2013)

This is an act of implicit metareference that operates through salient deviation: the incongruity of the insertion of a long speech from Shakespeare into an otherwise apparently improvised performance calls attention to the performance's artefactuality, and identifies the work in question as a skilful construct. The cultural capital associated with the intermedial component of the extracompositional referent – extensive quotation of Shakespeare, with its connotations of difficulty and erudition – may also function in the way that Stonehill identifies in some iterations of the metareferential novel: '*How* do you ensure that your novel will be read and preserved as a work of art? You remind the reader, on every page and with convincing, self-conscious skill, that the author is an artist' (1988, p.72). This accords with the recurring function of metareference as a reaction 'to a still felt disregard of popular media' that may contribute to 'a conferring of prestige and intellectual status' (Wolf, 2011, p.34).

However, the author- or work-centric uses of metareference prompted by 'failed' or challenging material, or challenging contexts, does not negate its use for recipient-orientated functions, often within the same performance. Bridget Christie implies that it can be an opportunity to engage with the audience's response to a prepared artefact in the moment, saying 'Why something does or doesn't work is endlessly fascinating to me, and live stand-up gives you an opportunity to examine that in real time, with real people' (Interview, 2020).

recordings of stand-up performances, with commentary, provide the same function; however, the books confer literary respectability on the act of comedy production, aligning it with the high culture connotations of its publisher, Faber & Faber.

Conclusion

The above analysis illustrates some of the contributions that metareference makes to the effects and experience of present-day stand stand-up comedy performance, and the relationship that is constructed between the performance and its recipients. It follows previous scholarship to look beyond the frequently emphasised effects of distance and detachment, exploring the effects of intimacy, emancipation and control that it has the potential to activate, showing the potential for metareferential elements to serve author-, work- and audience-centric functions in the construction of how the performance is experienced and interpreted. Metareference can be conceived as one of many strategies – some structural and some textual – that close the gap between audience and performer by fostering intimacy and connection, not only at the level of personal revelation, but also at the level of process. These strategies represent some continuity with those highlighted in the work of early alternative comedy comedians (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2012, p.352), and earlier performers (Double, 2014, p.325), although they reflect the changed character of stand-up comedy performance in the detail of the metareferential elements, as exemplified by the more theatrical devices employed by Lou Sanders to signal transition to a meta-level.

Within the present-day context of a stand-up comedy scene which some regard as having sacrificed intimate connection for commercial exchange, and in which there tends to be an unequal dynamic between the person who creates the laughter and the audience, these strategies may resonate with performers seeking to fashion more collaborative and non-hierarchical approaches to stand-up, and to substitute activeness for passiveness. Although not limited to performances with a critical agenda, the cultivation of identification and intimacy that is achieved at the level of aesthetic response may help to shape responses to the political-moral content, in line with Felski's depiction of the mixing together of different elements of response that is characteristic of engagement with a work of art (2020, p.27 – see Chapter One).

Therefore, in addition to expanding understanding of how metareference contributes to the stand-up comedy experience at the level of aesthetic response, this analysis will help to illuminate the contribution of the 'experiential' component to the more expansive discursive metacomedy that is analysed in later chapters.

However, there are potential limitations to the democratic effects of these strategies, which may cultivate their effects of intimacy and connection through the creation of an out-group. The hierarchical implications of this potentially resonate in uses of the text beyond the immediate performance situation in the activation of cultural and social capital, in line with Friedman's view of comedy as an object of taste that is 'now being mobilised by the culturally privileged as an instrument of distinction' and functions as a 'partial status marker in contemporary British society' (2014, p.306).

Chapter Four

Early alternative comedy and metacomedy

This chapter attempts to perform three main functions. Firstly, it explores the factors that have contributed to the identification of metacomedy as a salient feature of early alternative comedy's performance style. It does this by exploring both the frequency of its occurrence and its qualitative character within the framework set out by Werner Wolf for determining the presence of a 'metareferential turn' (2011, *passim*) – in other words, the perception of a salient increase in the prominence of metareference as a feature of a genre, medium or form (see Chapter Two). Secondly, it seeks to expand understanding of the uses of, and explanations for, metacomedy in early alternative comedy. Previous emphasis has been placed on the transformative function of metacomedy in early alternative comedy facilitated by its destructive character. However, in addition to destruction and transformation, the establishment of early alternative comedy as a significant movement and tradition – what 'brought alternative comedy into being' (Double, 2020, p.60) – was the coalescence of 'a community of like-minded people' (Double, 2020, p.60). Therefore, this chapter foregrounds the role of metacomedy in contributing to the construction of this community as an in-group with a shared identity. In doing so, it does not reject early alternative comedy's much-emphasised use of metareference as a means of achieving critique through 'an act of distancing' (McLaughlin, 1996, p.163), but also considers it as 'a mode of affiliation' (McLaughlin, 1996, p.163) which helped to intensify the relationship between performers and recipients. Thirdly, this overview of the functions, effects and character of metacomedy in early alternative comedy will provide a comparative backdrop against which the character of present-day instances of metacomedy are explored in subsequent chapters.

Metacomedy as a characteristic of early alternative comedy performance

The character of alternative comedy as a 'style' of performance is difficult to pin down. Surveying the contacts book of Comedy Store co-founder Don Ward, Oliver Double observes that 'the range of acts represented suggests that the cabaret circuit was not just healthy but also artistically diverse' (2020, p.64). Bonello Rutter Giappone stresses the 'internal variety' (2017, p.395) of early alternative comedy and the 'diversity' (2017, p.408) of styles that were represented, not only in terms of acts working in different forms, including stand-up, sketch and novelty acts, but also regarding the variety of approaches represented within those styles. Quirk implies the diversity of performance practices and content at work in early alternative comedy through reference to its proximity to, and influence by, the experimentation of the broader alternative cabaret circuit:

... alternative comedy was energized by the alternative cabaret scene in which it was formed. Growing up among the likes of tortoise impersonation acts and puzzling performance art, alternative comedy stand-ups prized experimentation and novelty with their own form. (2017, p.227)

Nonetheless, both Double and Bonello Rutter Giappone identify metacomedy as a significant feature of early alternative comedy's performance identity. The latter describes it as 'a favourite device of alternative comedians' (2012, p.205), and builds her approach to defining alternative comedy as an oppositional genre, best understood 'in relation to what it sought to define itself against' (2017 p.395), on the basis of its frequent incorporation of artistic and political metacomical critique, often in the form of ridiculing parody. Double identifies metacomedy as one of 'alternative comedy's special qualities' (2020, p.11), identifying it as both a 'stylistic innovation' (2020, p.11) in its own right, and a means through which further stylistic innovation was achieved, in line with the common function of metareference as a tool for artistic development. Even within the context of a form that has historically demonstrated widespread and recurring uses of self- and metareference, it is implied that early alternative comedy is exceptional in its metacomical character, and represents a

notable “thickening” ... of the... meta-strand’ (Wolf, 2011, p.19) within performance comedy, and stand-up comedy more specifically.

Metacomedy in early alternative comedy addresses a wide a range of themes, encompasses both intracompositional and extracompositional focuses, demonstrates critical and non-critical functions, is situated across the spectrum of discernibility and was a feature of the acts of some of the most high-profile performers of the first wave. Alexei Sayle, Ben Elton, Rik Mayall and Adrian Edmondson’s double act *The Dangerous Brothers*, Jim Barclay and Tony Allen (Double, 1997, pp.168-173), all of whom played a pivotal role in establishing early alternative comedy in its emergent form, featured different types of metacomedy in their acts. Sayle, Allen and Elton, at least two of whom might be regarded as significant figures in shaping the image of alternative comedy beyond the tight network of clubs in which it began, incorporated critical parodies of club-style comedians or club-style comedy in their sets. Tony Allen’s parodic satires, such as ‘Waiter, waiter, there’s a racial stereotype in my soup’ (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.29), critiqued the formulas and attitudes of club comedy (Double, 2020, p.107), while Sayle and Elton both performed parodies in the style of northern club comedians (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.91; Double, 2020, p.1). Jim Barclay and *The Dangerous Brothers* subverted conventional joke structures, with Barclay creating incongruity by offering factual and literal responses in lieu of punchlines to the questions asked in his set-ups (Double, 2020, 100-107).

Nigel Planer and Peter Richardson’s double act *The Outer Limits* (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.62) and Ronnie Golden (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.88) also performed metacomedy. *The Outer Limits* metacomic subject matter was drawn from outside the sphere of UK live performance comedy: the act itself was named after the American 1960s science fiction anthology show, and their ‘lively and frequently violent’ sets at *The Comedy Store* parodied the conventions of American comedy (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.62). Ronnie Golden played with decontextualization of traditional club comic joke formats in an act that was ‘based

largely on musical parody: for example, the “Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup” joke done as a blues holler’ (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.88). Implicit metacomic elements also contributed to the formation of early alternative comedy’s metareferential aesthetic. Keith Allen’s experiments with being ‘deliberately unfunny’, or playing the opening of his act through a tape recorder located in front of a microphone on an otherwise empty stage (Double, 2014, p.82) (see also Chapter One) are a form of implicit metacomedy that functions through salient deviation, relying in part for their potential humour on the audience’s completion of the incongruities created by the deviation from performance conventions. The comedy is created by activating the audience’s awareness of their expectations of a stand-up comedy performance, and then deviating from them.

Much of the metacomedy cited above demonstrates a critical attitude to its generic forebears that can be seen as part of a wider attitude of hostility (Double, 1997, pp.164-187 & Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2012, pp.168-180) within the ‘civil war’ (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.29) that Tony Allen has described as taking place between early alternative comedians and club performers. However, a range of ‘aggressivity’ (Hutcheon, 2000, p.60) in the ethos demonstrated towards existing conventions is discernible, even within the comparatively small selection of examples cited above. Although Golden’s recontextualization of traditional joke formats within a musical setting results in defamiliarization, and constitutes a form of repetition ‘with distance’ (Hutcheon, 2000, p.35), the humorous incongruity that results is largely benign, and may even be regarded as breathing fresh life into the formulaic jokes it subverts, in line with Barth’s view that metareference enables ‘artistic conventions... to be transformed, or even deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work’ (1984, p.205). Furthermore, in addition to using parody to critique that which had gone before, metacomedy was also used as a means of celebration and alignment. For example, Lenny Bruce was a feature of both the metacomic assays of both Tony Allen and Alexei Sayle. As Stewart Lee (2013) has pointed out, Bruce served as a shorthand for the type of comedy culture that

performers such as Sayle and Allen wanted to inculcate in the UK. Allen, for example, incorporated into his sets the following joke: 'Lenny Bruce finished his career, out of his head on drugs, hassled by the police and dying in a toilet... that's how I'm starting off' (2002, p.115). Allen himself interprets this joke as 'a public show of irreverence' and 'a gentle pop' at Bruce (2002, p.115), but positions this within the context of the profound influence that he describes Bruce as having over his work¹.

The identification of metacomedy as an exceptional feature of early alternative comedy must be considered in terms of frequency and character. As the above sketch suggests, the impression of alternative comedy as especially metareferential in character can, in part, be attributed to a qualitative factor: namely, that several of its participants viewed as most prominent, both at the time and in retrospect, featured metacomedy in their acts. Merely observing the frequency with which metaization occurs does not adequately capture the metareferential flavour of a medial form at any given time, because it implies that all contributions to that form carry the same weight. A form or genre will, to an extent, both at the time and in retrospect, come to be recognised in part by the practices of its most significant exponents, and not merely those which are used most frequently among the full range of its participants (Wolf, 2011, p.5). As indicated above, examples of alternative comedians performing metacomedy, such as Alexei Sayle, Ben Elton and Nigel Planer, include those who went on to become household names, and came to represent alternative comedy outside the small circuit of clubs in which it originated. Alexei Sayle, for example, included metacomedy, in the form of a critical parody of a working-men's club comedians, in a commercial video release (Double, 2020, p.15), and Ben Elton thematized the conventions and sexual politics of comedy in his TV performances, such as on *The Oxford Road Show* (sotcaadotnet, 2010). The presence of

¹ Allen describes his early performances 'com[ing] alive when I play the hip dissolute dude which had less to do with me, and more to do with the Lenny Bruce baggage I'd inadvertently brought on stage with me' (2002, p.88).

these prominent performers on the list of stand-ups performing metacomedy, therefore, strengthen the case for considering early alternative comedy to be notably metareferential in character. Performers who remained on the alternative circuit, such as Tony Allen, were also significant in their own right, and the presence of metacomedy in their acts further contributes to a perception of alternative comedy as highly metareferential.

The judgment that metacomedy is especially characteristic of early alternative comedy, however, can only be confirmed through the extent to which its proliferation is regarded as significantly different in 'comparison to the average of previous times' (Wolf, 2011, p.7). As Double has pointed out, metaization has been a frequent feature of stand-up comedy across its history in both the UK and the US (2014, pp.326-29) – indeed, it may be argued that stand-up has consistently demonstrated a high frequency of metaization compared to other forms and genres. However, most immediately relevant to explaining the perception of metacomedy as a notably salient feature of early alternative comedy, particularly with reference to stand-up, is its comparative prominence in relation to the dominant iteration of comedy that immediately preceded it, and against which much of its opposition was directed: the nightclub and working men's club comedy of the 1960s and 70s. The identification of metacomedy as a notable feature of the first-wave of early alternative comedy, and the use of that metacomedy to critique the work of nightclub and working men's club comedians, may be interpreted as implying that the latter's acts did not feature elements with metareferential potential. This is not the case. The performances of comedians on these circuits, as indicated by performances recorded for *The Comedians*, a long-running Granada TV show from the 1970s, and later reprised in the 1980s and early 1990s, do possess metareferential potential. Acts featured on a compilation of highlights from episodes broadcast in 1975 include some of the most prominent performers from this milieu, including Bernard Manning, Frank Carson and Tom O' Connor (grahamwhyte, 2012). They frequently demonstrate metareferential potential: indeed, many of them are

fundamentally and consistently metareferential in a way that subsequent acts, including those of early alternative comedians, rarely are. Jokes with the verbal formulation ‘This fella...’ are a recurring feature of different performers’ acts: for example, ‘This fella went to the doctor’, ‘This fella went to the dentist...’, ‘This fella was walking through the jungle...’ (grahamwhyte, 2012) among others. These set-ups are both heteroreferential, in that they refer to the worlds described in the jokes, but are also metareferential, in that they have the potential to activate awareness in the recipient, through the self-conscious repetition of convention, that what they are listening to is a joke, and therefore an artefact rather than a natural object. Other elements of these performers’ acts may also be regarded as possessing ‘at the very least [metareferential] potential’ (Baeva, 2019), in that they draw attention to the character of the performances as a collection of packaged jokes: Frank Carson’s famous catchphrase, ‘It’s the way I tell ‘em’ and ‘It’s a cracker’ (Man From Belfast, 2020), for example, acknowledge the artefactuality of the performance from a level located above the jokes themselves, even gesturing towards the shared ownership of the material.

However, this artificial language of joking, and the metareferential framing of the jokes *as* jokes, occurs within performances in which acknowledgement and understanding of the artefactuality of these jokes is the normative receptive attitude. Therefore, the act of classification of the joke’s status as an unnatural object in these situations may register with audiences weakly, or not at all. This is an example of the significance of genre expectation as a factor in limiting the extent to which a meta-layer is noticed, activated or intensely felt (Limoges, 2009, pp.399-400). Joking of this type is so steeped in acknowledgment of its artefactuality that its ‘meta’ properties may no longer be noticed or, if they are noticed, are not regarded as significant. By contrast, the metacomic elements of early alternative comedy may be viewed as more discernible and their effects more intense. Firstly, the foregrounding of metaization in acts which strive to achieve a quality closer to natural and ‘unmediated’ discourse are likely to be experienced as more striking as a result of

this contrast, and are therefore more likely to activate meta ‘reflections... in the recipient’ (Wolf, 2009, p.30). Furthermore, the critical quality of much of the meta-activity in early alternative comedy, which encourages more extensive discursive reflection on the part of the recipient, contributes to its salience. The special metacomic character of early alternative comedy, therefore, is based on the identification of a significant amount of metareferential activity among high-profile performers, in combination with a qualitative difference to the metareference in the dominant style of stand-up that preceded it. In the comedy of nightclub and working men’s comedians, metareferential potential is present, but typically exists as a backdrop that is assumed and taken for granted, rather than foregrounded.

‘Creat[ing] a whole new art form’: transformation

Although a proliferation of salient meta-activity resists ‘monocausal explanations’ (Wolf, 2011, p.24), the formation of a new comedy scene is an important factor in understanding this phenomenon in early alternative comedy. Providing an alternative to the artistic practices, and the political and social attitudes, of the performers that dominated contemporary iterations of stand-up comedy was a conscious intention for many of the key performers involved with the first wave of alternative comedy. Although the radical character of early alternative comedy has been challenged by some performers and scholars², the newness of early alternative

² Contemporaneous accounts to that effect include those of Keith Allen (Wilmot and Rosengard, 1989, p.36) and, to an extent, Tony Allen, who has argued that the Comedy Store in particular provided a platform for many acts there were neither formally or politically progressive (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.30). Schaffer has argued that alternative comedy led to the ‘perpetuation of an elitist approach to comedy, which only resonated with a small minority of people’ (2016, p.396), contextualising this within the claim that “alternative comedians emerged almost exclusively from university-educated, middle-class communities’ (2016, p.393). While Schaffer’s approach makes it difficult to assess the merits of the latter claim, it is true that some of the most ardent advocates of the ‘elitist approach’ that he identifies, and some of the most high-profile performers on the alternative comedy circuit, such as Alexei Sayle (2016, *passim*), were not from conventionally ‘middle-class communities’. Furthermore, while it might be accurate to say that early alternative comedy only reached small audiences at its inception, its influence on shaping comedy culture is widely acknowledged (see Double, 2020, *passim*).

comedy, or at the very least, its difference to that which had come immediately before it (see above), is a unifying element of many contemporary and retrospective accounts of its character – even those like Schaffer's (2016) which argue that, over the longer term, it did not fulfil its radical intentions. Early alternative comedians have articulated an understanding that, if they were to fulfil their political and artistic aims, they would have to repurpose and reinvent stand-up comedy in the UK and, in the process, construct a new audience for it. Alexei Sayle has explained his own activities, and those of his contemporaries, within this framework of innovation and novelty:

Though I never consciously thought about it in these terms, what we were attempting at the Comedy Store was to create a whole new art form. Britain had never had a tradition of smart, anecdotal stand-up comedy so we were trying to build that tradition from scratch while at the same time overlaying it with a left-wing political consciousness. (2016, pp.175-76)

Although Sayle retrospectively denies being conscious of the 'newness' of alternative comedy at the time of its inception, in 1989 he described his act as 'avant-garde' (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.49), suggesting a degree of near-contemporaneous self-consciousness about the lack of precedent in the UK for acts of his type, and the sense that he was breaking new ground. Sayle's reference to the absence of a political and intellectual 'tradition' of stand-up in the UK makes it clear that, while not denying the presence of comedians who demonstrated at least some of the characteristics they describe (2016, p.129), acts that deviated from this template were conceived of as outliers, rather than reflecting a dominant and established approach. Tony Allen's description of his perception of the comic context from which alternative comedy emerged also emphasises the lack of precedent in the UK for the ambitions of early alternative comedians:

I started going down these clubs in the East End, these pubs really, on the Old Kent Road... Of course, it was appalling stuff. It was racist, you'd want to throw something... It was really bad.... If a joke wasn't about black people or Irish people it was about mother-in-laws and women... It was just perpetuating stereotypes endlessly... I'd already worked out

what I wanted to do because I'd been listening to Lenny Bruce, and listening to some of the American comedians like Richard Pryor, and even Woody Allen and Robin Williams, so there were some precedents for that... And there was Billy Conolly and Jasper Carrott and Mike Harding, but they were folk musicians and they did long chats before they did a song and that was the act... But they weren't political, and they didn't have any aspirations to change anything. (Allen, 2018).

The 'newness' that Sayle and Allen sought was, in part, expressed and facilitated through the establishment of a network of clubs with different organisational and artistic principles to those on the nightclub and working-men's circuits, such as Alternative Cabaret and The Earth Exchange, which shaped what was possible within this new art form (Double, 2020, p.142). However, the novel character of early alternative comedy also found its expression in its performance style. The assertion of difference at the level of humour and performance aesthetics more generally was identified in a *Sunday Times* article from 1984 as the element that united the work of many 'alternative cabaret' performers:

They all have a style in common, which means challenging what they see as the dead hand of entertainment's old guard – the idea that audiences know only what they like and like only what they know. (Williams, 1984, p.39)

An unsigned article in an issue of *Cabaret News* from 1986 emphasises the artistic and political imperative of creating a new approach to the form in opposition to the derivativeness of approach that characterised dominant artistic practices: 'I feel that the dreadful "Comedians" TV show gave an almost unavoidable challenge to alternative comedians to devise and practise a comic format that did not involve the relation of the "There was this Irish feller" type of joke' (1986). The 'challenging... [of] the dead hand of entertainment's old guard' accords with the transformative intention and effect that is identified in early alternative comedy's use of 'comic-critical parody' (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.399). This is also the function identified by Cardiff in his characterisation of *The Young Ones* – and in particular the self-referential elements – as 'debunking humour' (1988, p.58). Indeed, the

importance of this transformative function in alternative comedy is implicit in Tony Allen's critique of his nightclub and working-men's club antecedents, and his view of the role of the stand-up comedian as artist:

In stand-up comedy, a lot of jokes are based on clichés, and they're just reworking clichés... What happened to the previous generation... they were reinforcing clichés, they were reinforcing the stereotypes... You've got to challenge, question and confront cliché, especially the clichés of the art form that went before. Art is always moving on by changing all this sort of stuff... (Allen, 2018).

Cardiff positions the 'debunking humour' of self- and metareference in 'BBC middlebrow comedy' as demonstrating a commitment to transformation that presented no positive vision for the replacement of that which it debunked:

It is broadcasting's quality control mechanism, designed to accelerate the process of stylistic change; except that it lacks a concept of quality. No moral precept guides its indiscriminate attacks. It is only "knowing", and because its raw material is the very stuff of broadcasting, available to all, it can share its "knowingness" with the audience. This is what makes it cultish. (1988, p.58)

As Bonello Rutter Giappone indicates, this view of the void at the heart of 'BBC middlebrow comedy' does not provide a full and satisfactory account of the political, moral or social character of early alternative comedy expressed through its metacomic gestures. She argues that the transformative function of this metacomedy was motivated by the performers' desire 'to restore a sense of political responsibility as urgent as Thatcher's policies were felt to be ruthless' (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.407), reflected by their 'apparent eschewal of approaches which rely on irony and ambiguity' (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.407). The directness of these critical interventions may also be interpreted not simply as the result of their political context, but the combative contexts within which some of these performances unfolded. Craig has described the alternative comedy audience's willingness to challenge the performer's claim to authority (2001, p.265), and the willingness of the performers to challenge the audience in return. Contested control

of the space between audience and performer was certainly a feature of the Comedy Store, which Wilmut describes as 'noted for its heckling' (1989, p.23). In addition, the performance of stand-up in unconventional spaces with different codes of reception may have demanded direct tactics for successful communication of the content.

Tony Allen recalls supporting the anarcho-punk band Poison Girls (Wilmut & Rosengard 1989, p.47), saying 'I would go down in the audience with the follow-spot and a microphone and just argue with all these young anarchists, and have great big political arguments with them and take the piss out of them' (Allen in Wilmut & Rosengard, 1989, p.47). Roger Wilmut likens these gigs to 'something out of *Mad Max 2*, with the band in a cage with punk kids climbing up it, and Tony Allen covered in saliva because the audience were spitting at him' (1989, p.47). Therefore, the performance contexts and circumstances in which these performances took place must also be considered a factor for explaining the directness of the metareferential aesthetic.

Nonetheless, the necessity for 'urgent' transformation closely aligns with the explanations of intentions and motivations provided by some early alternative comedians themselves, who regard their refashioning of stand-up comedy through metareferential means as, at least partly, fuelled by moral and artistic objections to the content of more traditional comedy, and a desire for broader political and social change. Sayle saw himself as engaged in an attempt to effect a transformation of the moral and political character of showbusiness in the UK, arguing that 'Whatever else was wrong with the left in Britain, nobody else seemed to have noticed that racism and sexism were rife in the entertainment business and needed to be challenged' (Double, 2020, p.175). As a consequence, the characterisation of early alternative comedy, and especially its use of metaization as a tool for critique, as mere 'debunking' humour is limited, and cannot account for the frequent presence of parodies that were not merely ridiculing, but employed both satiric parody and parodic satire (Hutcheon, 2000, p.62) not only to critique the jokes themselves, but

the political and social attitudes expressed by those jokes. Double, for example, highlights Alexei Sayle's critique of 'traditional comedy' catchphrases:

In one gag he fingered the right-wing bigotry that underlies a lot of traditional comedy by following up two genuine catchphrases, from Jim Davidson and Larry Grayson respectively, with a very different kind of phrase: "You gotta have a catchphrase as well, you know like "Nick nick" or "Shut that door" or "*Sieg Heil*". (1997, p.169)

As Hutcheon explains, 'Satire is certainly one of the ways of bringing the "world" into art', providing a 'pragmatic as well as formalist' function' (2000, p.104). This demonstrates that moral and political commitment were not a feature of early alternative comedy *in spite* of its metareferential character, as Cardiff implies, but were often communicated *through* its metareferential character.

Affiliation and community building

The self-conscious novelty of the project in which early alternative comedy performers were involved, and the high levels of salient metareference featured in their performances, corresponds with Wolf's mapping of the patterning of metareferential activity in relation to the lifespan of forms and genres:

With an eye to the amount of metareferentiality in a newly emerging genre or medium... one may also argue that there is a tendency towards a relatively high degree of metareference in the early stages of a genre or medium (explicable by the need to establish and advertise itself as something new. (2011, p.38)

Bonello Rutter Giappone's foregrounding of the use of ridiculing parody as a means of transformation emphasises the hostile aspect of the relationship between novelty and metareference, expressed through what Waugh describes as the often 'double-edged' (1984, p.64) nature of parody, which achieves transformation and development of a form by destroying existing conventions through ridicule, and rendering them unusable, except in an altered state. The language Waugh uses to describe the operation of parody as a 'destructive' strategy that engages in 'self-conscious... undermining' in order to 'break norms that have become conventionalized' (2003, p.65) reflects this. This language of transformation through

destruction is consistent with the 'debunking' character that Cardiff refers to (1988, p.58). However, acknowledging early alternative comedy's use of the transformative moral, social and political functions of metacomedy does not necessitate ignoring the role of metacomedy in 'establish[ing] and advertis[ing]... [early alternative comedy] as something new (2011, p.38)' and, in doing so, creating a new community of production and reception for comedy. Nor should the latter functions be considered trivial in comparison to those which appear more directly and immediately 'urgent' in their political and social intent (Felski, 2020, p.27). Metacomedy presented an opportunity to articulate, sometimes through negation, a political, social and artistic agenda, and also provided an aesthetic route through which the 'community of like-minded people' (Double, 2020, p.60) that were necessary to create the conditions for alternative comedy's existence could coalesce.

For example, Hutcheon argues that 'parodic codes... have to be shared for *parody* – as parody – to be comprehended' (2000, p.93). The shared 'knowingness' signalled by the uses of parody and other metacomical strategies in early alternative comedy serves as 'a built-in "sign of differentiation... of a specific class or group.... [creating] an exclusive work offering a special bonus that addresses and targets particular ingroups [*sic*], the "cognoscenti"' (Scorzin, 2011, p.68). Metacomedy both assumes and contributes to a dynamic of complicity and understanding between producer and audience through the creation of a situation similar to that described by Norris in which 'Failure to get this joke... signals nonmembership in cultural groups' (Norrick, 1989, p.121 in Keazor, 2011, p.484). The importance of this shared knowledge between producer and recipient for successful reception of the work contributes to explaining why metareference is sometimes accused of elitism (Stonehill, 1988, p.8) – it is regarded as speaking only to those who know. This characterisation is consistent with the 'knowingness' that Cardiff pejoratively ascribes to the 'debunking humour' of programmes such as *The Young Ones* (1988). Although Cardiff characterises the 'raw material' upon which this debunking is predicated as 'available to all' (1988, p.58), with a 'cultish' (1988, p.58) effect that is

therefore available to everybody, nonetheless the 'shared codes' (2000, pp.84-99) by which it is interpreted are not shared by everyone. While the communicative dynamic that results from this may be regarded as exclusive, its exclusivity functions as a means of cultivating intimacy and establishing and reinforcing the bond of common understanding between members of the community who do share these codes. The affiliation resulting from an aesthetic that draws heavily on metareference, and particularly on parody, may be regarded, therefore, as making an important contribution to a nascent genre or form with a 'need to establish and advertise itself as something new' (Wolf, 2011, p.38), and to achieve coalescence in part through exclusion.

In alternative comedy, the 'sharing of codes in an act of communication between encoder and decoder' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.108) that Hutcheon sees as central to parody, and that Scorzin identifies as an important feature of metareferential practices more generally, expressed at the formal level of the work the new attitudes that were fundamental to establishing this community of comedy production and reception through exclusion. This is reflected in accounts of contemporary responses to early alternative comedy performances. Peter Rosengard, for example, describes Kim Kinnie, who eventually became the booker for The Comedy Store, initially reacting with bafflement to the innovations of the first comedians to appear at the club: 'He thought it was rubbish...He thought all these people were terrible. He couldn't understand why we were doing this' (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.26). Although Rosengard himself admits that not all of the acts who appeared in the early days of The Comedy Store were skilled performers, Kinnie's hostility to their innovations is also explained by his background in more established forms of popular entertainment (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.26). The performance tactics that sought to ridicule and exclude performers with more conventional approaches, and recipients with different attitudes, contributed to establishing a core group of enthusiasts, reflected in Tony Allen's description of discriminating 'in-group' responses to Alexei Sayle's early performances, consisting of a 'cognoscenti [who]

liked it, and if you didn't mind swearing you could see that there was something happening' (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.47). Allen's remarks on Sayle's cognoscenti audience echo Scorzin's diagnosis of the efficacy of metaization in communicating with, and contributing to, the cultivation of a shared complicity between audience and performer through the creation of an out-group (2011, p.68).

Context must be considered a factor in contributing to the salience and intensity of the affiliative function of metacomedy within early alternative comedy. As Limoges notes, the effect of a metareferential rupturing of illusion in an otherwise immersive form of narrative media will depend on the context in which it is received (see Chapter Two): it is less likely to be felt intensely in contexts that negate the initial immersive effects of the artefact (2009, p.398). Similarly, the distinction asserted by uses of metacomedy in early alternative comedy, and the sense of in-group belonging arising from it, must be considered in conjunction with the atmosphere of complicity and collusion created by the discrete network of clubs in which many early alternative comedy nights took place, which fostered a sense of creative freedom and difference. This is contrasted with the need to 'exercise... caution' (Double, 1997, p.180) when performing in more conventional venues:

We didn't have the freedom [in more conventional settings] to do what we wanted. I wanted to talk about anarchy and sexual politics... And so we started our own club in Ladbroke Grove, which had an anarchist audience, a squat audience, so we were playing to the troops... The audience were rowdy but supportive 'cos they couldn't believe that we were standing up talking about their stuff. We were talking about drugs, we were talking about squatting, we were talking about left-wing politics... (Allen, 2018)

The sense of separation from mainstream entertainment, and the sub-cultural identity of much of their audience (Allen, 2002, p.107), may be regarded as contributing to a context in which awareness of the shared codes (Hutcheon, 2000, pp.84) of parodic ridicule – in which producer and recipient come together to mock and exclude a third party – was intensified, feeding back into the separateness of the club from other entertainment scenes and, in doing so, helping to foster group

consent with the political-moral content, resulting in the dynamic blending of response identified by Felski (2020, p.27 – see Chapter One). The same dynamic can also be identified in Double's description of 'just how potent it [the metacomedy in early comedy] was in terms of getting laughs' (2020, p.105). The humour of these meta-elements should be interpreted not as a surprising effect that occurs *in spite* of the metareference, but as the result of its exclusive character – the metareference interacts with other contextual factors in order to intensify the pleasure that arises from the 'audience... identifying what they share' (Quirk, 2015, p.56). In this case, the audience identifies a common understanding of the ridiculous, hackneyed or reactionary elements of nightclub and working-men's club comedy, with 'each new person who laughs validat[ing] the sentiment expressed' (Quirk, 2015, p.58).

The 'community of distinction' created by metacomedy was also significant in 'advertising' early alternative comedy as something new through its reinforcement of generational dividing lines within the domain of aesthetics. Double has argued that, through alternative comedy, for the 'First time stand-up comedy became a young person's thing, as close to rock 'n' roll as it was to family entertainment' (Double, 1997, p.167). Bonello Rutter Giappone has likened its significance as a youth-culture phenomenon, and its performance strategies, to punk (2018, *passim*), and Craig has collected testimony from performers articulating a perception that audiences got younger as the 1980s progressed, with the dominant demographic group shifting from people in their mid-twenties-to-thirties to students in their late-teens and early twenties (2001, p.410).

First-wave alternative comedians exploited metareference to heighten this sense of generational rift, metacomically participating in an act of self-definition through opposition to established older performers. The subversion of packaged jokes, and the ridiculing parodies of nightclub and working-men's club comedians, enacted this difference at the level of performance. It allowed performers to construct in- and out-groups based on a shared code of 'knowing' and not 'knowing' in a way that was correlated to generational difference. Alternative comedy's use of metareference was

consistent with a wider turn towards 'knowingness' expressed through metaization in popular culture (e.g. Dunne, 1992, *passim*) at the time resulting from, and contributing to, an increase in 'media-savvy' recipients (Wolf, 2011, p.31). As Dunne's US-centric description of the 'metapop' phenomenon indicates, this increase in self-reference and medial awareness was an emerging feature of popular comedy aimed at younger audiences at the time, particularly in televised forms (1992, pp.20-106). The parodic presence of American sitcom conventions in the early performances of *The Outer Limits* suggests that the presence of self- and metareferential content in early alternative comedy is explained, at least in part, by a general increase in awareness of the possibility of using the conventions of comedy as a source of comedy itself within youth culture.³

Despite the potency of the laughter (2020, p.105) created by the incorporation of metacomedy in first-wave alternative comedy performances, and the description of it as direct, impassioned and rejecting irony and ambiguity (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.407), the association of metaization with more cerebral forms of receptive activity – the way in which 'the classificatory gesture at its core always implies something rational, intellectual' (Wolf, 2009, p.65) – and the attitude of 'knowingness' and discrimination implied by the critical elements of metacomedy, can also be seen as contributing to an aesthetic of distinction for stand-up comedy and forging a receptive community for this. This is consistent with the self-conscious attempt to cultivate an audience that appreciated 'intelligent comedy' – a culture that Peter Rosengard (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.2) and Alexei Sayle (see above)⁴

³ Parodies of other performance and medial artifacts, some with metareferential significance, were a feature of alternative comedy performance: the Dangerous Brothers performed Beckett parodies; as a solo performer Rik Mayall parodied performance poetry; and performers such as Randolph the Remarkable, sitting at the intersection of cabaret and comedy, parodied circus and variety acts. Nigel Planer has described the content of *The Outer Limits*' act as 'We did space invaders... "Sarky and Bitch"... it was all very media and very fast' (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.63).

⁴ Alexi Sayle has said that his references to philosophy and high culture are a 'trick' and that his 'knowledge' of these subjects is 'minimal' (Double, 2014, p.232).

sought to create within the alternative comedy milieu. The parodic activities of Allen, Sayle and Elton denigrated the approaches they parodied, while implying a superior understanding of the form in comparison, 'conferring a certain prestige and intellectual status... [on] producers as well as products' (Wolf, 2011, p.34) and, by extension, on the discriminating audiences who appreciated their material.

Furthermore, contrary to Cardiff's positioning of these strategies as expressions of mere 'knowingness', this metacomedy positively articulated a set of artistic values and aspirations, including contributing to the formation of a culture that venerated 'writerly' values, such as self-expression and originality. Stewart Lee sees this as a consequence of the introduction of new performers to stand-up, bringing with them the working practices they had developed through their activities in alternative theatre, with 'a generation of people who were used to writing new work call[ing] themselves stand-up comedians and... plying their trade, out of economic necessity really, in a country that had no real tradition of the comedian as writer' (Lee, 2013). While Lee identifies an explicit advertisement of a new culture of the stand-up comedian as writer in Tony Allen's metacomic joke about Lenny Bruce, the parodies and subversions of traditional material also contributed to 'advertising' a new writerly culture in early alternative comedy. In addition to mocking their derivativeness, parodic subversions or deconstructions of package joke formats implicitly declare the originality of their creator through juxtaposition with the repetitious content they subvert, serving author- and context-centric functions. This use of metacomedy contributed to the construction of a comedy scene with what Chow describes as 'performer-motivated characteristics' (2008, p.123), and it is clear that this emphasis on the centrality of the performer was a major element of alternative comedy's transformation of existing live comedy practices (see Chapter Five).

Conclusion

In line with Wolf's mapping of the ebb and flow of metareferential activity across the life of a genre or form (2011, p.38), the inception of early alternative comedy was

accompanied by a significant amount of metacomedy. The perception of a special relationship between alternative comedy and metacomedy as a characteristic of its performance style is the result of a combination of factors, including identification of an increased discursive quality in the metacomedy of early alternative comedy in comparison to the weak forms of metareference that had been a feature of nightclub and working men's club comedians. The 'richness in metareferential practices' (Keazor, 2011, p.481) described here encompasses aggressive and direct metacomedy, as well as the playful and the celebratory. Despite this emphasis on the 'directness' of these strategies, the metacomic character of early alternative comedy also occupies a range of positions on the spectrum of discernibility, from the explicit to the implicit.

In addition to the function of critical parody as form of transformation and destruction, the function of metacomedy as a means of affiliation and self-definition within the context of its attempts to establish itself as something new is also significant. It allowed early alternative comedians to engage in self-definition through the lineage they identified with – including the 'sick comedians' who had themselves contributed to a transformation of stand-up in the United States. Furthermore, it struck a note of aesthetic alignment with youth culture and counter-cultural attitudes and practices more generally. Its 'knowingness' contributed to an aesthetics of 'intelligence' that was fundamental to the reinvention of stand-up that early alternative comedians effected – even if that 'intelligence' and bookishness has subsequently been characterised as more superficial than substantial by some of its exponents. For audiences, its metareferential content constituted a point of identification with the performers – bonding over shared dislikes and enthusiasms – but also contributed to an expanded understanding of the possibilities of stand-up comedy.

This chapter has argued that, through its exploitation of its affiliative function, metacomedy in early alternative comedy played a similar role to that Keazor identifies for metareference in *The Simpsons*, in which the recipient is 'Urged to form

a kind of community with the producers as well as with other viewers' (2011, p.486), contributing to the creation of an exclusive or elite in-group. If, as Double has argued, it was the coalescence of a community 'that brought alternative comedy into being' (2020, p.60), then metareference may be seen as helping to form a community that not only challenged the dominance of the artistic practices of the nightclub comedians and, by extension, the reactionary attitudes expressed in their material, but succeeded in that challenge. Although this audience began as a small in-group – 'a cognoscenti' constructed in part through the conspiracy of metacomedy – the performance practices they cultivated quickly acquired wider cultural cache and commercial acceptance, overturning the practices of club comedians and becoming established as one of the dominant modes of performance comedy in the UK (see Chapter Five). The result of this was a new culture of comedy production and reception against which present-day uses of metacomedy must be understood.

Chapter Five

The development of stand-up comedy in the UK from 1979 onwards

The remainder of this thesis focuses on recent uses of metacomedy within stand-up comedy performance. As indicated in previous chapters, the explanations, functions and effects of metareferential activity cannot be separated from the contexts in which they occur, both within the work and outside it. The previous chapter pointed towards the identification of a significant transformation of the artistic content of stand-up comedy in the UK instigated by early alternative comedy. This transformation occurred at the formal level, with new conventions emerging to replace the 'stale' conventions of club stand-up that early alternative comedy had challenged. It also contributed to a change in the perception and popularity of live performance comedy as a branch of the entertainment industry. In order to advance probabilistic thesis for the functions, effects and explanations of present-day metacomedy, this revised context must be elaborated upon. Given that this thesis explores stand-up comedy's contribution to discussion of stand-up comedy itself, this chapter synthesises material from a range of primary and secondary sources in order to provide an overview on the development of stand-up comedy in the wake of the first-wave of the alternative. This will function as the context for the analysis of metareferential activity that occurs in subsequent chapters. This contextual overview emphasises changes to the artistic context of stand-up comedy, rather than wider changes to the social and political context.

Commercialization and depoliticization

During its early years, the alternative comedy scene existed as a self-contained network of clubs with little or no overlap with other aspects of the entertainment industry (see Chapter Three), often reflecting and fulfilling the political or artistic ethos of the performers – for example, Tony Allen describes his motivation for

setting up Alternative Cabaret as wanting to 'play to a home crowd' (2002, p.107) who shared his interests and experiences. Although Allen has identified the potential for financial self-sufficiency as one of the attractions of stand-up comedy, compared to the need for Arts Council funding in alternative theatre (Double, 2020, p.49), the initial returns on the live alternative comedy circuit were often not substantial, with many promoters and performers not making enough money from their involvement with the circuit to live on (Craig, 2001, p.91). However, as Double (1991, p.255) and Craig (2001, p.88) have argued, the 'reinvention' (Double, 2020) of live performance comedy through the alternative comedy circuit instigated a change in circumstances during the 1980s, with more money being made by promoters and performers involved with popular clubs, such as the Comedy Store and Jongleurs. For example, having moved from its initial *ad hoc* premises at The Gargoyle in Soho to a basement venue off Leicester Square in 1983, of which it assumed sole occupancy in 1985, the Comedy Store finally moved to a 400-seat purpose-built performance space on Oxendon Street, near Piccadilly Circus, in 1993 (Cook, 2001, p.8). In the eyes of stage manager Stan Nelson, the design of the Oxendon Street venue reflected a respect for the form, making the comedian, rather than the sale of food or drink, 'the most important thing in the room at that moment in time' (Cook, 2001, p.112). However, the investment of £750,000 in the premises by the promoter Don Ward also suggests an expectation of continued financial stability, reflecting the 'gradual gentrification' (2001, p.8) that William Cook identifies in his history of the Store, and the movement of alternative comedy from a marginal, or 'emergent' (Chow, 2008, *passim*) pursuit in its nascent form, to a commercially established, and exploitable, branch of the entertainment industry, with performers and producers regularly moving from the live circuit into television and then back again.

Having achieved a consistent audience of around 300 people every night at its original Battersea venue, the comedy club Jongleurs also expanded, opening a second venue in Camden Town in 1992 (Cooper, 1992), reflecting a growth in popularity of live comedy during the 1990s. In 1992, the live comedy circuit in

London (not including working men's club venues) was numbered at over 50 clubs, and William Burdett-Coutts, who ran one of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival's primary comedy venues, the Assembly Rooms, argued that comedians who had come from the alternative comedy circuit had 'virtually taken over television' (*The Guardian*, 1992, p.5), at a point when a national recession made more expensive forms of live and recorded entertainment less popular. A 1994 article on the launch of *Deadpan* (see below), a consumer magazine aimed at fans of comedy, estimated the weekly UK-wide audience for live comedy at 100,000 people (Tredre, 1994, p.10)¹. The expansion of Jongleurs also signalled the diffusion of stand-up comedy as a cultural phenomenon into areas that it had not previously occupied, such as supplying comedians from the circuit into corporate contexts, and a relationship with Thomson Holidays to provide entertainment to holiday makers (Double, 1991, p.256).

The increased appeal of stand-up comedy at this time was in part explained by the perceived ease with which it could be consumed within the context of a club format. In analysing the appeal of stand-up in comparison to theatre, Paul Blackman, who produced comedy and theatre while artistic director of the Battersea Arts Centre from 1990-1995, emphasised the accessibility of comedy, saying 'You can come in on Friday, have a beer and a chat and take in a bit of comedy. It's much more interactive' (1992, p.5). Blackman's emphasis on the ease with which comedy could be appreciated - it can be 'take[n] in', rather than requiring any effort of comprehension - was echoed by the comedian Jeremy Hardy, who also attributed part of stand-up's popularity to it being 'less demanding than theatre' (1992, p.5). Indeed, Blackman's comments suggest the subordination of the comedy performance itself to the social aspect of the event, with comedy as a backdrop. This transformation of the character of the comedy consumption experience could be regarded as another example of the narratives of decline (Craig, 2001) that are often used to account for the development of early alternative comedy into more

¹ This figure is not supported.

commercial avenues, moving away from Allen's view of stand-up as a coterie or 'cognoscenti' (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.45) pursuit that required more active participation on the part of its audiences, and towards the social activities associated with it.

The perceived ease of consumption of stand-up comedy in the wake of the first wave of alternative comedy might in part be explained by the dilution of overt radical political content. It has been suggested that this was the result of a fear that political content might prove unhelpfully contentious with the broader audience that live comedy had started to attract, where audience support for the progressive causes espoused by some early alternative comedians could no longer be assumed (Double, 1997, p.232). The comedy magician Paul Zenon described the make-up of the audience at the Comedy Store in 2000 as politically mixed, with the Leicester Square audience 'a hell of a lot more PC than now' (Cook, 2001, p.203), heckling on the basis that some content was politically unacceptable. Furthermore, Double has argued that the prospect of appearing on television, following performers such as Jack Dee and Jo Brand, also imposed a limit on the willingness of the live performer to experiment (1997, p.225), either with unusual approaches to the form or radical content, although the presence on television of performers such as Alexei Sayle and Ben Elton, both of whose performances frequently included political content, complicates this narrative.

Phill Jupitus, who began his performance career as a poet and contributed to Red Wedge in the mid-1980s, has suggested that, irrespective of audiences, even comedians sympathetic to progressive causes were suspicious of the intention behind the inclusion of political content of this type, no longer regarding it as an expression of genuine political commitment, but also as a method for manipulating the crowd into receiving the performance positively: 'As long as you started and finished with something deeply political and militant they all loved you' (Cook, 2001, p.102). This suggests that, while the inclusion of progressive political content at early alternative clubs such as Alternative Cabaret was indicative of a performer-

centric comedy culture in which performers with 'more political acts... could perform longer sets to a more sympathetic audience' (Sayle, 2016, p.178), it was latterly perceived by some performers as a concession made to providing the audience with what they wanted to see. Other performers who followed the first wave of alternative comedy have articulated a sense that the depoliticization of content during the early 1990s was not simply a rejection of a dominant orthodoxy, or a consequence of shifting audiences and careerism, but instead a reflection of the exhaustion resulting from the 'repeated setbacks endured by the liberal left during that decade [the 1980s] [which] has alienated many from the political process altogether, producing a sense simply of weariness' (Turner, 2014, p.124). David Baddiel has claimed that this depoliticization was a phenomenon that affected 'the intellectual classes' and 'right-on people' in general (Turner, 2014, p.124) suggesting that the shifting orthodoxies in the content of stand-up comedy performances were not divorced from a wider cultural, political and social milieu. Indeed, Baddiel argues that the 1990s were in part characterized by a decline in 'seriousness... seriousness as in that adolescent, or post-adolescent, concern about everything' (Turner, 2014, p.46), a seriousness that Alwyn Turner has contrastingly and contentiously identified as 'the keynote of the 1980s counterculture' (Turner, 2014, p.46). In the second issue of *Comedy Review* (1996), for example, an interview with Felix Dexter results in Dexter setting out a theory of the function of comedy, and the comedian within society, as being 'to share joy with people – however pretentious that sounds – and for the comedy to be almost like a celebration, rather than a torturesome [*sic*], horrible experience' (Wallace, 1996, p.32).

The proliferation of comedy consumer magazines themselves in the 1990s, and their content, function as an index of the increased popularity of stand-up comedy, and its changed identity. Through the early to mid-1990s, major publishers launched comedy titles aimed at the consumer market, such as IPL's *Comedy* (1994) and Future Publishing's *Comedy Review* (1996). The tone of the magazines was generally irreverent, with thoughts on the craft, aesthetics and function of stand-up occurring

as an incidental consequence of personality led interviews with performers, rather than systematically positioned as a central concern. A *Comedy Review* editorial, for example, disavows serious consideration of aesthetics and function in relation to stand-up comedy: an unattributed guide to performing stand-up, written in the 'house style' of the magazine, describes itself as 'woefully superficial' (1996, pp.22-23). *Deadpan* magazine was published monthly from 1994-95, with a focus on comedy, and live comedy in particular, but was relaunched in 1996 with more general coverage of television and popular culture. Like *Comedy Review*, it mixed appraisals of emerging acts with an interest in kitsch comedy of the past. This abandonment of cultural hierarchies, fuelled by an intermingling of ironic enthusiasm and ironic detachment, was characteristic of a larger current of ironic nostalgia that characterised popular culture in the UK more broadly during the mid-to-late 90s. The pop music journalist Sylvia Patterson has described 'a nationwide spirit' (2017, p.142) in the UK in 1995 of 'permanent exuberance', which was accompanied in the arts, particularly in popular culture, by a 'kitsch-pop mentality' opposed to the 'gloomy grunge' that had preceded it (2017, p.143). She describes some of the most successful bands of the period as indulging 'retro-kitsch obsessions' (2017, p.143) and a general aesthetic, among dominant youth cultures, of 'high-kitsch abandon' (2017, p.143). Atton has argued that, during the late 1970s and 1980s, the *NME* in particular (2009, p.54) contributed to 'a general account of rock's means of signification' (Frith, 1983, p.162 in Atton, 2009, p.54) that challenged the dominant critical ideologies that had pertained to rock music prior to that, which was replaced by a more homogenous 'consumer-guide' approach to music journalism during the 1990s (Atton, 2009, pp.54-55). A similar phenomenon can be observed in the shift from the fanzines produced in response to early alternative comedy, such as *Cabaret News* (n.d.), and the glossy production values and the rejection of serious engagement with comedy expressed in *Deadpan* and *Comedy Review*.

Concurrent with their rejection of seriousness regarding both the form, and culture more generally, *Deadpan*, *Comedy* and *Comedy Review* constitute an expression of the commercial growth of stand-up comedy, which accelerated through the 1990s as a result of the success of alternative comedy (Double, 1997, p.220). For example, alongside its comedy content, *Comedy* featured a 'lifestyle' section covering 'Fashion, Music, Travel, Eats' (1994). Cook has described advertising in the mid-90s as 'a comedic safari park, with Jack Dee, Paul Merton, Mel Smith and Harry Enfield all fronting recent ad campaigns' (1994, p.1). The incorporation of advertising for high-profile consumer brands, including car companies and drinks brands, within these magazines reflects the growth of UK stand-up comedy as an 'entertainment product' (Chow, 2008, p.131) and as a vehicle through which other commodities are sold.

Artistic innovation and new conventions

The trend towards the depoliticization of stand-up comedy performances on the post-alternative circuit has led to a revision of the legacy of early alternative comedy regarding its core characteristics, with Cook suggesting that 'The establishment of the comic as sole author and rightful owner of his own material is Alternative Comedy's most important achievement – and a far more profound conceptual leap than the rank rejection of sexist and racist humour' (1994, p.6). According to Cook, the rejection of the packaged shared jokes that were a prominent feature of stand-up comedy on the working-men's club circuit resulted in a stand-up comedy culture in which 'the best comics are forced constantly to comb their new material for any gag that's remotely derivative' (1994, p.6). However, his characterisation of the results of the expectation of originality and authorship, and the rejection of the packaged joke, suggest a corresponding set of expectations regarding the subject matter of a stand-up comedy performance: post-alternative comedians were 'writing and performing their own jokes... particular to their own personalities and experiences' (1994, p.15)', with the rejection of the cartoonish stereotypes and situations of packaged jokes resulting in a type of stand-up performance that 'reveals... something of the real life of the comedian' (1994, p.16). It can be inferred from these comments that, in the

early post-alternative context of the early-to-mid 1990s, the artistic radicalism of alternative comedy's emphasis on originality and authenticity had resulted in the dominance of comic content that could be identified, at least in its inception, as rooted in 'real life'. Natalie Haynes has identified a continuation of this emphasis within present-day stand-up, describing the most successful and high-profile contemporary stand-up comedians as 'selling a personality... [they] are offering up a version of themselves' (2013). By implication, approaches that did not include this type of real-life content – such as the absurd and surreal – become marginal within the form, despite conforming to the basic demand for originality and authorship. The consequence of the association of originality and authorship with material that is rooted in autobiography and everyday experience was the formation of a new dominant orthodoxy. Speaking in 1995, the comedian Stewart Lee suggested – perhaps with a degree of irony – that the current incarnation of alternative comedy had 'become the orthodoxy against which it once rebelled' (Taylor, 1995, p.C7). If, as the primary function of early alternative comedy's parodic tactics was to instigate artistic and political change (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.407), then the degree to which the areas it had sought to change, such as the 'establishment of the comic as sole author and rightful owner of his own material', had become fixed features of the form, may be interpreted as testimony of the effectiveness of alternative comedy's transformation of perceptions of stand-up in the UK.

A short case study: Cluub Zarathustra

A relevant case study to illustrate the manner in which the emergent artistic innovations of the alternative came to be perceived as dominant orthodoxies during this time, and an incipient form of engagement with what Chow terms a 'post-alternative alternative' (2008, p.123), is that of Cluub Zarathustra, a London-based comedy club that operated between 1994 and 1997. Cluub Zarathustra can be conceived of as a continuation of early alternative comedy's vernacular understanding of comedy as art (Allen, 2018), manifested through an emphasis on formal innovation, and demonstrates sub-cultural characteristics as well, in its

position at a 'distance from mainstream culture' (Moore, 2005, p.232). Wringham describes 'the club's stance [being] that comedy need not be light entertainment – the anaesthetizing nothingness of contemporary sitcoms, the white-collar tedium of a Friday night at a Jongleur's comedy club' (2012, p.13).

Although not strictly a stand-up comedy club, Cluub Zarathustra began as a weekly club night at the Market Tavern in Islington in 1994 and appeared at the Edinburgh Fringe festival in 1995 and 1997. It featured Simon Munnery performing as The League Against Tedium, a character with 'quite a few duties... to insult the audience, to deliver his beautifully honed and character-driven joke and aphorisms... and to introduce the next act' (Wringham, 2012, p.46). The bills for each night were mixed, featuring solo performances, double acts and ensemble work, which rarely conformed to the expectations surrounding live comedy at the time. The metareferential character of many of the acts presented at the club, and the intentions of the club as a whole, is of particular interest to this study. Wringham describes Kevin Eldon's routine 'taking measurements of the room, and reporting the results straightforwardly to the audience' as 'journalism in its purest form. It's also perfectly Dadaist: a hundred urbanites laughing at numbers in a cellar' (p.63). Wringham's interpretation of Eldon's activity as 'journalism in its purest form' indicates the metareferential character of the routine's humour, which resides in the audience's transformation of Eldon's activity from 'journalism in its purest form' into comedy through their recognition of the incongruity of carrying out such a mundane, and apparently humour-free activity, within a performance context.

In his 2012 monograph on Cluub Zarathustra, *You Are Nothing*, Robert Wringham describes the club as having been 'founded to showcase non-stand-up-forms of comedy... eventually tak[ing] the myriad forms of sketches, opera, monologues, poetry, pyrotechnics, dance, stunts, and high- and low-tech gadgetry' (2012, p.12). However, although the content of the performances was not typical of stand-up, the post-alternative stand-up comedy milieu was significant in the performers' intentions for the night. In an interview with *The Times* in 2000, Stewart Lee claimed

that the group of performers associated with Cluub Zarathustra were dissatisfied with the limitations of the dominant orthodoxy of stand-up comedy at the time: 'In 1993, we were the first people in our generation to think that we had things we wanted to do that wouldn't work on the comedy circuit' (Judah, 2000). In particular, Simon Munnery described the club in 1997 as 'a reaction against the constraints of the stand-up form. If you go around the circuit, everything has to be a microphone and someone speaking into it for twenty minutes... Rushing towards thirty punchlines a minute is the law of diminishing returns. To me, it doesn't matter if Cluub Z isn't funny. I'm sick of funny things' (Wringham, 2012, p.37). Munnery's critique concerns both the formal constraints operating on the circuit, as well as the high 'laughs-per-minute ratio' (2008, p.125) that Chow has identified as a determiner of success in clubs such as Jongleurs and the Comedy Store.

Furthermore, in a 1995 interview with *The Independent*, Munnery claimed that the character he performed to compere the club, The League Against Tedium, was a response to the confines imposed by the new orthodoxy of 'real life' material in stand-up comedy: 'The League comes from someone who has done stand-up for quite a long time and got bored with it. People are fed up with comedians pretending to like them... You don't want to seem dull and normal. What's funny about that?' (Wringham, 2012, p.46). This echoes comments made in the same year by Lee, who expressed concern that the prevailing orthodoxy of stand-up in the mid-1990s had enshrined observational material as an essential component of the form, and that this had resulted in the audience regarding themselves as not simply observers and critics, but also as the only appropriate subject of the performance, reducing the performer to a mirror in which the audience sees a portrait of itself: 'The trouble is... that people go to comedy gigs to have their own perception of the world reflected back at them, so they can nudge each other and say, 'That's what you said, isn't it?' (Taylor, 1995, p.C7). Indeed, an *Observer* review of stand-up shows at the Edinburgh Festival in 1995 suggests that the Cluub Zarathustra frustrations

with the limitations of post-alternative stand-up comedy were not merely a motivation in opening the club, but also an explicit element of its content:

“Think of a thing, right? Now think of that thing on drugs. It’s different, innit?” So runs Cluub Zarathustra’s parody of The Alternative Comedian. The parody itself is a cliché now, but the subject of the satire – the oppressive small-mindedness and aching lack of imagination among many young British comics – is still all too relevant. There are few fates worse than being locked for an hour in a sweltering basement room with a comedian whose range of material does not extend beyond the effects of cannabis and the plot deficiencies of *Neighbours*. (Taylor, 1995, p.49)

The quotation above makes it clear that the post-political post-alternative stand-up comedy circuit was perceived by some as characterised by a lack of invention and a focus on mundane subjects, and that Cluub Zarathustra’s response to this echoed early alternative comedy’s critical creative practices through the presence of a metareferential layer that defined and commented on the performance itself and other performances like it. Wringham’s account of the Cluub Z aesthetic implicitly emphasises this metareferential element, arguing that its hostile attitude towards its audiences – Kevin Eldon recalls significant numbers of walk-outs, especially during the first year of the club’s existence (2012, p.48) – was ‘borrowed from Dada... to adjust the aesthetic distance expected of a comedy show and to question the usually passive audience experience’ (2012, p.49). As outlined above, the repositioning of the audience in a more active role has been identified as a defining characteristic of early alternative comedy. It must, therefore, be inferred that the passive audience experience Wringham describes refers to the culture prevalent in the most commercially successful post-alternative clubs, such as Jongleurs and the Comedy Store, a culture that Jo Brand described in 2001 in terms of ease of consumption: ‘They [the audience] don’t want anything slightly off the wall that you have to think about too much’ (Cook, 2001, p.329). In opposition to this, Munnery aphoristically described the ethos of Cluub Zarathustra to his fellow performers as actively hoping for intense engagement on the part of the audience: ‘We aim to fascinate, not entertain’ (Wringham, 2012, p.13).

The significance of Cluub Zarathustra must be considered within the context of stand-up comedy in the UK at the time as a whole. Roger Mann, one of the co-founders of the club alongside Simon Munnery and Stewart Lee, suggests that Munnery initially found it difficult to find a sufficient number of 'weird and wonderful acts' to make up a weekly comedy night (Wringham, 2012, p.37) different in tone and content to the existing comedy clubs at the time. However, while acknowledging its marginal position, Wringham has claimed that Cluub Zarathustra, and the performers associated with it, made a significant contribution to shaping the aesthetic and values of the post-alternative alternative (2012, p.21). This influence has been confirmed by John-Luke Roberts, one of the founder members of the Alternative Comedy Memorial Society (see below) (Quirk, 2018, p.81). Cluub Zarathustra, therefore, provides an example of a continuation of metareferential practices through the period that is often described as post-alternative and evidence of the continued alignment of critical meta-activity with an 'alternative' ethos and aesthetic: the critic Dominic Cavendish felt that Cluub Zarathustra was 'invigoratingly like a return to the early spirit of alternative comedy' (in Wringham, 2012, p.39). However, it also represents a recurrence of critical metareferential practices within a marginal positional relative to more mainstream iterations of stand-up comedy at the time, such as the comedy club chains, with contemporary responses to Cluub Zarathustra emphasising its coterie appeal. Cayte Williams argued that it would be 'understandable that light humour from the super-educated Munnery is not for the majority' (1997, p.2), and this was an impression cultivated by the performers, either through their work on stage – with its recourse to literary and artistic allusion and confrontational attitude – and their off-stage remarks. Speaking retrospectively, and with typically elusive intent, Stewart Lee, for example, emphasised these coterie and self-consciously intellectually elitist aspects of the club's performances:

"Most of the apparently intellectual things still had the structure of jokes," explains Lee, "but it was dressed up in the rhetoric of high philosophy

rather than the kebab culture of Jongleurs. Most of the people in it were the school nerds who would have been disliked by their classmates for reading books. This was a kind of revenge." (Judah, 2000)

Circuits and venues

In addition to an expanding club circuit which functioned as a space for social interactions, Ben Thompson has identified the early 1990s as a period of expansion for a theatre and arts-centre touring circuit fuelled by television exposure, with 'an unprecedentedly large phalanx of big-name, alternative-gone mainstream comedians' touring 'around the Civics and Regals' (2004, pp.66-67) of the UK. Newman and Baddiel's two performances at the 12,000-seat Wembley Arena represented the apogee of this phenomenon, synonymous with the popular culture trope of comedy as the new rock 'n' roll. Caitlin Moran began a 1993 article on the popularity of post-alternative comedy claiming to have heard the phrase 'six times in the past two weeks' (1993, p.18), arguing that it signified an expansion of the youth demographic for post-alternative comedy into an early-teenage market cultivated by television appearances but excluded from the majority of comedy clubs as a consequence of age. The solo theatre performance constitutes an extension of the performer-centric ideology initiated by early alternative comedy, with an audience invested solely in the performer, primed to favourably receive the performance as a consequence of approval from the broadcast media and removed from the sociable atmosphere of the comedy club environment described above. However, Ben Thompson has argued that the television exposure necessary for these conditions created an excessively reverential atmosphere in which 'a large section of the crowd have come to pay tribute to an established TV persona rather than to watch someone push back the outer envelope of their art' (2004, p.67), and actually preferred to see the repetition of material made popular on television rather than content they had never seen before.

In early alternative comedy, control of the space was often contested between audience and performer - Wilmut describes The Comedy Store as 'noted for its

heckling' (1989, p.23). However, it is a stark contrast to the professional ethos behind The Comedy Store's design of its current performance space, involving separating the bar and the auditorium, and installing a bank of theatre-style seating with well-designed sightlines, rather than the more socially focused tables (Cook, 2001, p.109), resulting in an 'audience [that] is there for one thing, and one thing only... Just the comedy' (Cook, 2001, pp.109-110). The growth of this commercial comedy club circuit during the 1990s and 2000s was reflected by the continued expansion of two of its longest-standing clubs, Jongleurs and the Comedy Store. In 2000, Jongleurs' eight comedy venues (four in London and the others in Nottingham, Leicester, Southampton and Oxford) were acquired by the pub chain Regents Inns at an initial cost of £7m, during a five-year period between 1997-2002 in which the chain opened 11 new clubs throughout the UK, including a 2,400-seat venue in Birmingham. Also in 2000, the Comedy Store opened a purpose-built 500-seat venue in Manchester at a cost of £1.8m. For the *Guardian*, comedy critic William Cook likened the growing commercial appetite for stand-up comedy in the UK to a 'boom' in America (2004). In addition to the expansion of comedy club chains, stand-up comedy also expanded into arenas during the 2000s and early 2010s. Brian Logan, in an article for the *Guardian* entitled 'Standup comics hit the boom time' (2010b), documented a situation in which arena ticket sales increased tenfold between 2004 and 2010, from 100,000 per to 1 million a year, and stand-up comedy performances constituted 10% of the O2 Arena's revenues. In addition to the emergence of stand-up as a feature of primetime television schedules (see below), this was 'One of the most prevalent ways in which this "explosion" [in stand-up comedy's popularity] is evident' (Lockyer, 2015, p.587), and contributed to the diagnosis of a 'comedy boom' in the UK (Logan, 2010b).

As part of this 'comedy boom', alongside the growth of commercial comedy clubs, other networks of venues and gigs also evolved and expanded. Laura Lexx regards the organisation of professional stand-up in U.K. comedy as orientated around three networks: 'From the inside of the industry, we probably refer to TV comedians,

circuit comedians and arts centre-y, Edinburgh comedians' (Interview, 2020). In addition, performers, critics and academics have identified a resurgence in clubs and performers that appear to embody an alternative ethos. Stewart Lee has described the following situation:

I stopped in about 1999-2000, and then, when I started again in about 2003-04, and actually saw people like you, or the venues and clubs that Robin was running, I think something happened in that period, where I think what had been alternative comedy reached sort of saturation point, where there were lots of people going out for stag nights and hen nights at their big local club... And what seemed to have happened in the period I had off, and the period you were in further education, was that every town that had got a Jongleurs or a Comedy Store suddenly also had the other gig that was doing well, like the Comedy Box in Bristol – there always seemed to be another one... Lots of people like yourself and Robin seemed to have set up these other kinds of gigs and there really is an alternative circuit now, and basically if you're on that alternative circuit you probably go to Edinburgh, and your dream is to try and get a tour of 100- to 200-seater arts centres. (Lee, 2012)

Josie Long has pinpointed the emergence of a new 'alternative' scene to a similar period, saying that:

In 1998-99 when I started gigging I remember sort of doing a lot of gigs in like pubs and restaurants etc. and them all being with guys in suits talking about stuff... I came out of university in 2003 and started again, and that for me felt completely different scene wise in those 4 years. (2012, Ince & Long)

Long was one of the key figures cited in 2007 a *Guardian* article outlining a new 'DIY comedy scene' (Jonze, 2007), encompassing club nights such as Robin Ince's Book Club and Terry Saunders' Laughter in Odd Places. The scene was positioned as oppositional in intent, taking a 'hands-on approach to combating the rise of bland Friday night TV, stale one-liner routines and pissed hen parties doing conga dances through Jongleurs' (Jonze, 2007). In 2013, Stewart Lee executive produced a 12-part Comedy Central show entitled *The Alternative Comedy Experience*, which comedy critic Bruce Dessau described as reflective of Lee's 'oppositional attitude' (Dessau,

2013). The Alternative Comedy Memorial Society, begun in 2011 by Thom Tuck and John Luke Roberts, is described as a 'leftfield comedy night' that places an emphasis on the inventiveness of the content (2013, noblefailure.org), in opposition to the caution identified as problematic for conventional club nights².

The organisation of this circuit is partly orientated towards the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Smith, 2018, p.54). Brian Logan has described the growth in the number of stand-up comedians who debut a show at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August, then tour that show in arts centres and theatres around the country, or perform extended runs of that show at a single specialist venue, such as the Soho Theatre in London (Logan, 2017b). The significance of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in generating sufficient attention to validate a solo tour has contributed to the creation of other fringe-style comedy festivals in the months leading up to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, such as The Great Yorkshire Fringe in York and the Cambridge Comedy Festival; these events take place during July, and provide venues and audiences for comedians previewing shows.

The experience of performing or watching comedy in an arts centre or at a performance is different to the comedy club experience. Rutter has described the typical comedy club as possessing both artistic and social functions: 'the layout, like that of the pub, is one that encourages group interaction as going to stand-up comedy, like going to the pub, is almost invariably a group process' (1997, p.74). The

² None of the consumer comedy magazines that demonstrated the development of a more commercial identity for stand-up comedy in the 1990s are still in production. However, attempts at producing comedy magazines with more niche appeal have occurred in the 2000s and 2010s, reflecting and contributing to a culture in which comedy is treated as art. One issue of *Stand and Deliver* (2014) was published, a magazine that positioned itself as combining 'alternative comedy, beautiful design and sharp writing' (Stand & Deliver Mag, n.d.). *Indie Comedy Mag* (2018-19) also combined an emphasis on design with a focus on those performers who associate with a present-day alternative. Like the comedy magazines of the 1990s, the glossy presentation of these magazines, with their emphasis on stylish design, participates in the exchange of comedy as a consumer good, the desire for which is in part fuelled by a refined and rarefied sensibility that self-consciously rejects the 'shiny-floor' (Widdicombe in Goldsmith, 2012a) aesthetic of more obviously commercial presentations of comedy.

comedy club experience encompasses activities more typical to a social framework rather than as aesthetic one – ‘discussion, laughter, buying of drinks in rounds’ (Rutter, 1997, p.77) – and consequently involves a ‘negotiation... between the frames of practice applied to going to a pub and those relevant to going to stand-up comedy’ (1997, p.77), with the comedy sometimes subordinate to the social experience. The growth of the arts centre and theatre circuit in recent years might be read as contributing a challenge to this perception of comedy as a disposable form of live performance that functions as the backdrop for a night of socialising. As Rutter outlines, in a ‘traditional theatre production... the performance is... necessarily the primary focus of the evening’s entertainment’ (1997, p.77), and stand-up comedy performances that occur within theatres and arts centres tend to conform to this dynamic, with the audience occupying seats that are positioned to direct the audience’s gaze towards the stage. In a comedy club, with the audience seated in groups around tables, the natural gaze of some spectators might be towards other spectators, rather than the stage, thus emphasising the primarily social nature of the situation, rather than establishing the primacy of the aesthetic component of the experience (Rutter, 1997, p.77). Furthermore, the comedy club echoes the pub experience in the opportunity it presents for drinking alcohol, with opportunities provided to buy drinks during the interval between each performance (and sometimes during Rutter, 1997, p.77). The theatrical experience of stand-up limits these opportunities, often allowing only one interval in which to buy drinks, or omitting the interval entirely. In this respect, the ‘frame of practice’ (Rutter, 1997, p.77) activated by watching stand-up comedy in a theatre or arts centre may be considered closer to that of the theatre experience than the pub experience.

The development of circuits and gigs in different spaces is reflected in the emergence of new formats for stand-up. For example, Stewart Lee has argued that, rather than simply contributing to the network of existing comedy venues in the UK, the arts centre circuit has provided the material conditions that have resulted in establishment of the ‘conceptual show’ or ‘think-show’ as a standard format for

stand-up comedy. Rather than 'tend[ing] towards [the] bittiness' (2014, p.87) that Oliver Double identifies as characterising the majority of stand-up performances, these shows are instead possessed of thematic unity: in Stewart Lee's words, the performers involved with these performances 'try to write a show that's about something' (Double, 2012). Although stand-up comedians working in clubs have an established set, the performance presented each night is contingent, and the 'gags and routines [that make up the set] can easily be re-edited and put together in a different order' (Double, 2014, p.87), removed from the performance altogether and substituted for another piece of prepared material, or cut as a consequence of time pressure if other elements of the performance overrun. While the conceptual show may also feature unplanned digressions, it generally functions as a whole: Lee has suggested that units of these performances are dependent on the context of the whole for their meaning and comic success (Ince & Long, 2012). The comedian Tony Law thinks of these thematically unified shows as 'albums' (Interview, 2018), containing sections of material that function in the same way as individual songs but are ultimately self-contained and sequenced to achieve coherence.

Gavin Schaffer has argued that the broad rejection of racist values by early alternative comedians must be considered in the context of the lack of diversity among performers on the circuit itself (2016, p.391). A review from 1992 of the 291 Club, a music and comedy show at the Hackney Empire featuring black performers, for example, describes the night as 'a welcome breath of smokey-blue air' within the context of an alternative comedy scene that 'despite its devout anti-racist and anti-sexist constitution... has always remained obstinately white, male and middle class' (Cook, 1992, p.A6), suggesting that, rather than arising from an increasingly diverse alternative comedy circuit, the 291 Club in fact constituted an emergent response to a lack of diversity. In 1993, Cook recorded that 'the majority of post-Alternative comedians [were] white', along with their audiences; Curtis Walker, MC at the 291 Club described many of the alternative comedy clubs he played as 'in-bred' (Cook, 1993, A4), interested only in a dominant white perspective, and Cook suggests that

this resulted in 'the slow but steady development of a distinctive black comedy circuit – which enjoys tentative links with the Alt Com scene, while retaining its own separate identity' (Cook, 1993, A4), including clubs such as East End Cabarave and The Cave in Birmingham. A television version of the 291 Club was broadcast between 1991-93 on ITV, and between 1991-96 the BBC produced *The Real McCoy*, a programme that starred black and Asian comedians, performing in sketch rather than stand-up formats.

However, although performers from the black comedy circuit found success within the context of performances and programmes produced for primarily black audiences, a 1997 article in *The Guardian* by Brian Logan documented a continuingly 'predominantly white mainstream' ('mainstream' now signifying comedians appearing in post-alternative comedy clubs with mixed audiences and taking shows to the Edinburgh Festival), with the comic Junior Simpson observing that 'if you walk into any comedy club in London, you'll see very few black comics, and you'll never see two on the same bill' (1997, p.B10) and articulating a perception that 'quite a few black comedians feel that their stuff will not translate to a wider audience' (1997, p.10). It might be argued, as a consequence, that a default dominant perspective developed which excluded black voices and resulted in 'black comedians remain[ing] in the margins of the mainstream' (Logan, 1997, p.B11).

In the same article, Simpson noted that 'historically.... There have been very few comedians there [the Edinburgh Festival]', with Logan recording that, in the year the article was written, three black stand-up comedians performed. Although that number has increased as the Edinburgh Festival Fringe has grown, marginalisation is still identified as a problem by black and Asian performers. Simpson's comments in 1997 about never seeing two black comedians performing on the same bill were echoed by Miles Crawford in 2010, who said, 'If we see two or three [black performers] on the same bill... it goes into the set. We'll make a joke about the gig being charity funded' (Logan, 2010). Tez Ilyas has suggested that this unconscious bias regarding people of colour is not restricted to bookings of comedy nights, but is

also evident outside the club circuit, in the arts events and organisations connected to comedy. Speaking in 2018, Ilyas argued that the unrepresentative nature of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival awards judging panel might result in unconscious bias, leading to fewer nominations for BAME performers (Richardson, 2018). Arguing that the unrepresentative nature of the judging panel reflected the media in general, Ilyas' comments echoed those of the comedian Gina Yashere, who has suggested that there is limited exposure of black performers on television as a consequence of the UK media's domination by 'white middle-class people.... [who] want TV shows made by people like them' (Logan, 2010), and consequently deny BAME performers the opportunity to attract larger crowds and expand the perspectives conventionally associated with stand-up comedy performances. Writing in 2020, Mo Gilligan described a situation in which Black performers were still largely restricted to the Black comedy circuit, with little access to television, and limited intersection with the Fringe component of the 'circuit-fringe' axis (2020).

All-female comedy nights have also developed as a consequence of limited representation on mixed bills. Laura Shavin opened Hersterics, a London comedy club featuring only female performers, in 1995, as a consequence of a lack of exposure in post-alternative comedy clubs: 'I got fed up with bookers telling me, "I can't put you on this week, because I already have a girl on the bill"' (Rampton, 1997). Shavin identified a hegemony of male perspective within the form, limiting the voices to which audiences are exposed: 'You have Irish, Jewish and gay comedy nights - this is just another perspective' (Rampton, 1997). Fifteen years later, the stand-up comedian and improviser Lara A. King echoed Shavin's characterisation of the comedy scene, suggesting that, 'Women are less encouraged and less supported. People who book comedy nights do tend to think that one woman on the bill is really quite enough' (Benedictus, 2012). In 2017, the US comedian Amy Schumer suggested that the act of women performing comedy was an assertion that 'a woman's comedic voice is as valuable as a man's' (Moore, 2017). Describing the reception of female comedians within contemporary stand-up comedy, the academic

Lisa Moore has argued that the female comic voice within the patriarchy is 'constrained', resulting in a performer who is 'inhibited and unable to express herself authentically' (Moore, 2017). It might also be argued that the under-representation of women in stand-up comedy – in 2012, one comedian in four listed on the Chortle database of comedians was female (Benedictus, 2012) – has resulted in the enshrining of a male perspective as the dominant point of view within the form. New clubs such as FOC It Up! (Femmes of Colour) Comedy Club, founded in 2018 by Kemah Bob, tackle the related exclusionary practices they identify across the various networks of UK comedy by seeking to increase representation as a club that provides a platform that 'celebrates and centres the perspectives of comedians of colour that identify as women, trans or non-binary' (The Femmes of Colour Comedy Club, n.d.).

Stand-up on television

As referenced earlier, early alternative comedians, including several of the performers associated with the Comic Strip, transmuted live performance into sustained careers in television. However, the broadcast content during the 1990s of many of the performers who made this transition, such as Rik Mayall and Ade Edmonson and French and Saunders, primarily consisted of sketches performed as a double-act, and sitcoms such as *Bottom* (British Comedy Guide, n.d.) and *Absolutely Fabulous* (IMDB, 1990-2021). Television programmes featuring members of the alternative and post-alternative era that did include stand-up, such as *Saturday Live* in its original Channel 4 incarnation (1985-88), also featured double-act performances, live music and pre-recorded sketches (Double, 2020, p.80). Television programmes organised around early alternative comedians who had started their careers in stand-up comedy, such as *Alexei Sayle's Stuff* (e.g. citizen2, 2020) and *Ben Elton: The Man from Auntie* (agirlnamedmoe, 2011), also interspersed stand-up comedy with sketches. During the 1990s, straight stand-up shows were broadcast, including *The Jack Dee Show* (1992-94), *Viva Cabaret* in 1993 (e.g. CHnerdarmy, 2009), *Gas* from 1997 to 1998 (e.g. Cosygmack, 2013) and *Comedy Network* (e.g. RichWriter,

2012). All of these programmes imitated the live mixed-bill comedy club experience to a greater or lesser extent, with the exception of *The Jack Dee Show*, which consisted of a solo 30-minute performance with a musical interlude (Channel 4, 2021).

However, the first three programmes were broadcast on Channel 4, with its remit of alternative arts and culture programming, while *Comedy Network* was broadcast on the Paramount Comedy Channel and was only available to viewers with a pay-television subscription, suggesting that, despite its popularity as a live form of entertainment, straight stand-up comedy was not considered sufficiently popular, or suited to television, to appear on the most-watched channels.

However, the prominence of stand-up comedy on broadcast television, and consequently within the entertainment industry, altered significantly over the course of the 2000s. In 2004, *Live at the Apollo* was broadcast for the first time on BBC One, airing at 10.35pm on Monday nights in a six-episode series between September and October (British Comedy Guide, 2021). The first series featured a mix of nationally and internationally recognisable performers, such as Joan Rivers and Jo Brand, along with acts that were billed as new, such as Omid Djalili (British Comedy Guide, 2021). In fact, Djalili was a well-established live comedian, who had received national press coverage from the mid-1990s onwards (e.g. Logan, 2001) and can only be regarded as a new performer in the context of television appearances. The increasing popularity of the programme, reflecting and driving the popularity of stand-up as a whole, is reflected in its changing position in the schedules over its history, moving to 10.35pm on Friday nights for its fourth series in 2008, before occupying a primetime position at 9.45pm on BBC One on Saturdays in 2012, and switching to the same slot on BBC Two in 2015. In 2009, as a result of the popularity of *Live at the Apollo* (BBC, 2009), the BBC also produced *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow*, a series of 6 x 45-minute episodes which appeared on Saturday evenings on BBC One, and provided another prominent broadcast outlet for stand-up comedy.

Nonetheless, while promoters and managers with performers appearing on television have observed a corresponding growth in ticket sales, a 2012 meeting of 70

people working in live comedy, including performers and promoters, reported a decline in audience numbers for comedy club attendance of between 10 and 20% (*Chortle*, 2012). A variety of factors were cited for this decline, with television implicated in more than one of them: firstly, in the continuation of the narrative of creative decline in the face of the growth of televised stand-up, resulting in performances that don't excite or engage audiences enough in the live context; and secondly, in the difficulty of attracting audiences to medium-sized paying clubs featuring performers who have not appeared on television.

This chapter provides an overview of some of the major changes that stand-up comedy, and comedy more generally, underwent in the wake of the first-wave of alternative comedy. It demonstrates a remarkable growth in the popularity of stand-up comedy between the early 1980s and the present day, and its transformation into a widely enjoyed consumer product. It details the diffusion of stand-up into a variety of circuits and networks, including the growth of comedy within mainstream live and broadcast entertainment settings, and the response to this in the form of new networks and circuits filling the demand not catered for within these mainstream settings. These include structural responses to limited representation of identities that are often marginalised, and responses to perceived artistic and political deficiencies. Furthermore, it highlights one of the major changes in format since early alternative comedy: the development of the longer solo show as a common stand-up comedy format, both within the festival circuit and on the arts-centre, theatre and stadium touring circuits. The following chapters use the developments outlined in this chapter as the contextual backdrop against which the metacomedy they explore occurs.

Chapter Six

A 'comedy boom' and a boom in metacomedy

This chapter identifies an increase in salient metacomedy in stand-up comedy performance in the UK during the 2000s and continuing into the 2010s – a proliferation of metacomedic practices coinciding with the significant commercial growth and increased exposure for stand-up in the UK entertainment industry documented in the previous chapter. It draws on scholarship of metareference to explore this increase in salient metareferential activity within different spheres and at different levels of the comedy industry, taking account of the significant shifts in the artistic and cultural context of UK comedy that occurred during this period in order to suggest some speculative explanations for this. The chapter concludes with a brief account of my own experience performing stand-up with a metacomedic act during this time. Given the agency of the researcher in identifying instances of metaization (see Chapter Two), as well as speculating about their effects, this section in part constitutes a declaration of interest, providing some insight into the lens through which I viewed stand-up comedy at this moment, and my own relationship to it as a practitioner, rather than as an audience member and/or researcher. It also functions as another example of metacomedic practices, and one for which I have (at least partial) access to the intentions of the creator.

As set out in Chapter Two, identifying a relative thickening of metacomedy during a specific period of time is an activity that must, by necessity, be intuitive, uncertain and generalised. However, even accepting these caveats, indicators of an increase in metacomedic activity at all levels of the comedy circuit can be observed during the 2000s and into the 2010s. As discussed in the previous chapter, in the context of the UK comedy scene in the late 1990s, the 'knowing comedy' (2012, p.21) that Robert Wringham identifies as a feature of Cluub Zarathustra, involving the use of metacomedy as a means of creating laughter, communicating difference from a

commercial mainstream and critiquing dominant practices that were perceived to be stale (see Chapter Five), was viewed as ‘experimental and inaccessible fringe comedy’ (2012, p.31). However, by 2012, Stuart Goldsmith was suggesting that metareference, particularly in the form of metacomic deconstruction, was a common a feature of the stand-up comedy circuit in the UK, describing a situation in which there was ‘a vogue for showing, “This is the structure”’, with comedians ‘sort of exposing the workings out’ (2012a). Goldsmith hyperbolically describes this as something that ‘everyone’s doing’ and, responding to him, Josh Widdicombe says ‘You certainly get that a lot on the open mic circuit’ (2012a). Also in 2012, Goldsmith remarked on ‘the cardinal sin of open spots... to point out the structure of what they’re doing, but they’re really only scraping the surface of a structural thing’ (2012).

The growth in popularity and profile of performers with acts that did not merely feature metareferential elements, or ‘bits’, but systematically foregrounded metareference and made it fundamental to the content and humour of their acts functions as a qualitative indicator of a change in metareferential activity during this period. For example, in 2005, Edward Aczel (see Chapter Three), who describes himself as an ‘anti-comedian’ (Goldsmith, 2019), was one of two runners-up¹ in the BBC New Comedy competition, a prestigious award for new stand-up comedians that had previously been won by performers such as Rhod Gilbert and Alan Carr (BBC, 2021). Aczel performed a metacomic set that relied on salient deviation, with ‘no jokes... [and] all the delivery skills of the chief accountant awkwardly making a staff announcement’ (Bennett, 2006). Despite this, he was described as having ‘reduced the room to hysterics’ (Bennett, 2006), with the creation of humour resting almost entirely on the subversion of stand-up conventions and the audience’s expectations. In spite of the potentially niche or ‘cognoscenti’ appeal of this act – and

¹ The award was won that year by Tom Allen, and Sarah Millican was the other runner-up alongside Aczel (BBC, 2021).

the sometimes-divisive responses it provoked (see Chapter Three) – Aczel was selected to perform a set as an extra feature for a Jimmy Carr stand-up DVD after having performed just four professional gigs (Goldsmith, 2019), with Carr describing the act as creating an effect in which he ‘wasn’t quite sure what I was laughing at, but I was laughing’ (tdiddy101, 2007). Aczel describes his attitude to his career during this period as a resolution to ‘ride the wave... and what was bizarre was that the wave seemed to be somewhere [*sic*] going in my direction’ (Goldsmith, 2019).

While Aczel represents metacomic activity during this period at the grassroots level of the circuit, more established acts also presented meta-works at this time, in the form of extended shows that foregrounded metareference, and have latterly developed ‘metareferential oeuvres’ (Bantleon, 2011, p.309). In 2004, for example, Stewart Lee returned to regular stand-up comedy performance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe with a show entitled *Stand-Up Comedian*. Reviews of the show in the broadsheet media and specialist comedy publications drew attention to its metacomic properties, foregrounding these in their descriptions of the performance. For example, the comedy critic Steve Bennett, Editor of the comedy website *Chortle*, emphasised the recurrence of deconstruction in the work:

Lee is nothing if not a superlative technician, yet original enough to follow his own comic blueprint rather than reaching for the universal ploys found in the pages of teach-yourself stand-up manuals. In fact, when he does feel the need to employ, say, the rule of three (that being the optimum number of items in any list for most impact e.g., “an Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman”, or “ein volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer”), he knowingly deconstructs and subverts the idea, keeping the audience in on the joke. (2004c)

This instigated a sequence of metacomic performances by Lee whose titles often foreground their status as works of stand-up comedy, including *90’s Comedian* (Stewart Lee, 2021d), debuted at the Festival Fringe in 2005, *41st Best Stand-Up Ever* (Stewart Lee, 2021b) in 2007 and *If You Prefer a Milder Comedian, Please Ask for One* (Stewart Lee, 2021c) in 2009. He has also produced a BBC2 stand-up and sketch show, *Stewart Lee’s Comedy Vehicle* (2013-16) (Chortle, 2016), which has frequently

featured metacomedy. Lee's work is critically acclaimed, and he has a regular column in *The Observer* (*The Guardian*, 2021). In this regard, Lee constitutes an example of an instance where 'a qualitative leap' (Wolf, 2011, p.13) contributes to determining a notable change in metareferential activity. As Wolf notes, it must be considered significant in the assessment of a metareferential turn when works or oeuvres that extensively foreground metareference are no longer restricted to the domain of 'high art' or, in the case of stand-up comedy, of marginal concern, and instead are 'produced with the expectation that they are both understood and appreciated by a wide audience' (2011, p.15). Although some have located Lee's performances towards the self-consciously 'high art' end of a spectrum of comedy performance (Friedman, 2014, p.114), they are nonetheless commercially popular, selling out large theatres around the UK, such as the 2,700-seat Royal Festival Hall (Stewart Lee, 2021a). His television programme, which featured three episodes specifically organised around the topics of comedy, stand-up comedy and satire, as well as regularly featuring metareferential elements, ran for four series and attracted around one million viewers per broadcast episode (Chortle, 2016).

Similarly, Tony Law also began performing extended shows that prominently featured metacomedy in the mid-2000s – for example, in 2004, his Edinburgh Festival Fringe show 'highlight[ed] the inconsistencies of his own thoughts, creating the image of a self-reflexive comic, acting as both comedian and critic' (Bennett, 2004). Law has continued to foreground these metareferential elements in his act throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s (e.g. Benedictus, 2013), and in 2012 was nominated for the main prize in the Edinburgh Fringe Festival comedy awards for *Maximum Nonsense*, a show in which metaization was prominent:

Law alternates between peculiar imagery and bizarre flights of fancy and the self referential as he deconstructs his own routine whilst performing it. He frequently breaks from the chaotic narrative of *Maximum Nonsense* to indulge in meta-comedy, pointing out uncomfortable non-sequiturs and his lack of one liners, before bringing the whole show to a close with an extended joke about his apparent inability to finish a joke. (Strauss, 2013)

Explanations

Both Lee and Law are often associated with a resurgence in an alternative comedy identity concurrent with the popularisation and commercialisation of stand-up comedy (see Chapter Five) in the 2000s and 2010s (see Chapter Seven). Stuart Goldsmith connects the proliferation of metareferential activity at this time to the emergence of this 'new' alternative scene. Indeed, he points to a situation in which the use of metacomedy among performers associated with the 'alternative' label was so widespread that he regarded it as synonymous with a 'new alternative' (2012a), arguing that 'Alternative has now become mainstream and now new alternative is seizing on things like [deconstruction]' (2012a). Many of the comedians incorporating metareference into their sets during this period, such as Simon Munnery (*Hello*, 2007), Robin Ince (Bennett, 2004b) and Isy Suttie (The Comedy Club, 2021) were associated with this alternative resurgence, including through their involvement with scenes that have been assigned other names but are regarded as sharing some of the important characteristics of early alternative comedy, or have cited it as an influence or inspiration, such as the DIY scene (see Chapter Five). The connection between these performers suggests that the renaissance of an alternative comedy identity within the context of significant commercial growth across stand-up as a whole may be regarded as one explanation for the proliferation of metacomedy at this time among certain performers (e.g. Smith, 2018, pp.152-53). The functions and effects of this use of metacomedy are explored in greater detail in Chapter Seven.

While metacomedy may have been used as a means of engaging with the cultural (and subcultural) identity of stand-up comedy within the context of the comedy boom, its popularity can also be explained as a response to the emergence of a perceived stylistic homogeneity during this period (Quirk, 2015, pp.155-56 & Lockyer, 2015, p.592), with metareference providing a means of ridiculing the over-representation of certain styles, and the contribution of this to nullifying creativity and experimentation among producers of comedy. For example, the frequent

exposure on mainstream broadcast platforms for stand-up comedy in the UK, while making it available to larger audiences, may have incentivised repetition of dominant stylistic approaches among performers (Quirk, 2015, pp.155-56). In an article on the comedy boom, *The Guardian* comedy critic Brian Logan drew connections between the proliferation of stand-up on television and the homogenisation of its form and content, citing BBC entertainment commissioner Mark Linsey, and the comedy critic Steve Bennett:

... Linsey says: "Comedians are seeing the value of wanting to do more mainstream material." Chortle's Bennett highlights the notion of careerism: "Now you get professional comedians like you get professional politicians, who've never engaged with the real world." Some even enrol on academic comedy courses. "And Jack Whitehall is suddenly everywhere," says Bennett. "You think, 'You could be good, but at the moment you're speaking in that received, this-is- the-point-of-view-I-should- have voice.'" (2010b)

Metacomedy from this period mocking observational approaches to stand-up in particular may be regarded as a response to this situation, challenging the dominance of a style rooted in the sharing of everyday experience that the comedian, broadcaster and author Robin Ince has reduced to the formula, 'I'm like you, here are things that you do' (Ince & Long, 2012). Stewart Lee and Simon Munnery, among others, parodied observational comedy in their acts, choosing 'to seize on [it] and exaggerate it to ludicrous effect' (Dentith, 2000, p.32). For example, in *Hello*, recorded in 2007, Munnery reduces the observational approach to: 'Anybody from anywhere? **(Laughter)** Anyone ever noticed anything ever? **(Laughter)** Life, don't it drag on? **(Laughter)** Don't you wish you were dead? **(Laughter)**' (2007). This metareferential content serves a humorous purpose: the incongruous substitution of morbid subject matter subverts the expectation of the typically light-hearted or trivial content that William Cook has argued is the normative condition of the observational style (2003, p.38). However, the ridicule of the metareference – which belongs to the category Hutcheon describes as satiric parody (2000, pp.50-68) – is also orientated towards the homogeneity of observational joke formulas: the distillation of the style to its basic

elements, stripping away individual variation, constitutes a critical comment on the listlessness and derivativeness involved in its creation. The economy with which Munnery is able to successfully construct this parody of observational comedy is not merely a comment on the efficiency of the writing, but also an indicator of the prevalence of the observational approach at the time of his performance in 2007. The more familiar the audience with the background text, or texts, being parodied, the fewer parodic indicators are required to construct the parody.

The frequent inclusion of these critical parodies of observational comedy among performers at this time suggests the proliferation of metacomedy can be partly explained as an ‘active response’ to a development that was viewed as negative: namely, criticising a crisis of creativity in a form in which ‘many consider the best work to be signified by... creative ambition and emphasis on novelty’ (Quirk, 2017, p.228). Richard Herring describes this perception of creative stagnation in the dominant approaches to stand-up in the late 90s as motivating some of the metacomic deconstruction in his early television programmes:

I think 90s comedy wasn’t very good, on the whole... I found it boring. There was [sic] a lot of men standing up and doing pull-back and reveal jokes a lot, or just obvious political satire, and laddie stuff... We were very sure of ourselves, we’d thought about comedy a lot, and I think we were very arrogant in a lot of ways, but you sort of need to be to get going. But I found stand-up – and partly because I didn’t get on very well with stand-up – but I just found that so basic. (Interview, 2020)

Howard Read attributes a similar artistic dissatisfaction with the homogeneity and dominance of certain approaches and conventions in comedy clubs to his incorporation of metacomedy in his performances in the early 2000s:

I always did comedy about comedy... I would do jokes about jokes and comedy tropes. I used to do, when I first started, I used to MC a club in Canterbury actually... All the comics would come along and say “What’s a town around here that everyone hates?” and they’d then go and do a joke about Margate or Thanet or whatever... Even as a sort of new comic, I would go [*bored*] ‘Oh, really?’... It is a bit snobby – but [metacomedy came from] that sort of disdain for lazy comedy, and trying to do things that are surprising and that are the opposite of the sort of the hack you’re on instead

of. And it always worked... I think that's the best bit about metacomedy – at its worst, it's a smug in-joke. At its best, it's making comedy that no one else is making, and thus making the best comedy, I think. (Interview, 2020)

The metacomic critique of stylistic homogeneity is related to another explanation for frequent recourse to metareferentiality during this period: the impact of the dissemination of a limited stylistic palette through major broadcast platforms on the tastes of comedy audiences, resulting in a more limited view of what is regarded as an acceptable approach (Quirk, pp.155-56). Paul Foot, a comedian who regards himself as unorthodox in style (Simmons, 2019), has described the way in which dominant modes of production establish receptive expectations that are challenged by deviation, and the difficulty this represents for both audience and performer: 'If I was in a very mainstream situation, like *Live at the Apollo* ... it does involve people suddenly thinking "This is different." The structure of the thoughts is different' (Goldsmith, 2018c). Stewart Lee has argued that the 'comedy boom', and particularly the homogeneity of stand-up styles broadcast on the largest television platforms, intensified this problem, resulting in audiences that 'have an expectation of getting what they've seen... The problem with those programmes is that they close people's minds down a bit' (Ince & Long, 2012). Howard Read makes a similar observation about high-profile exposure establishing a set of expectations that do not reflect the breadth of practices on the circuit:

I think as comedy has got more popular, and less 'fringey', in the last 20 years, and as a consequence lots of comedy that the general public consume is television comedy, and so isn't as experimental, isn't as edgy, isn't as swearsy, and so when those people go out to see alternative comics, they often don't like what people actually do. (Interview, 2020)

Within the context of the comedy boom, for example, the combination of a profusion of observational comedy in comedy clubs, along with validation of that approach through repetition by prominent performers, and on mainstream media platforms, is perceived by some comedians as contributing to a situation in which it was deemed more legitimate than other approaches, resulting in a form of canonical authority.

This is viewed as having potentially negative consequences for performers whose work does not conform to the most frequently represented approaches, with even moderate deviations from that approach provoking scepticism or hostility from audiences.

In this context, the author-centric and work-centric functions of metareference outlined in Chapter Three, in which a performer is able to explain their intentions to the audience, can be considered a factor in contributing to a proliferation of metacomedy during the comedy boom, providing an opportunity for ‘an attempt at self-explanation which is felt to be requisite in order to avoid disorientation on the part of the recipients not yet familiar enough with avantgarde experimentation’ (Wolf, 2011, p.31)². Tony Law charts the evolution of his highly metareferential aesthetic as stemming from challenges arising in some commercial clubs:

It started from doing gigs and people not really getting what I was trying to do, and so like literally explaining the joke to people... It’s from doing the really hard comedy clubs, where... they were making too many judgments about Canadian, he looks like this, and I just wanted to get past that, but I had to do those gigs to pay the bills. It was a really hard time for me, so it just sort of naturally came out of that. (Interview, 2017)

For Law, metareferentiality allowed him to explain his act, and to assert his competence in front of audiences who concluded that “‘He’s not very good”, or “He doesn’t know how to do it”” (Interview, 2017) as a result of his unorthodox style. These work- and author-centric functions suggest an explanation for a proliferation of metareference that is contradictory: the turn towards metareferential content is the result of some of the challenges that are perceived as arising from the commercial success that, in many parts of the industry, is regarded as a positive occurrence.

Stewart Lee demonstrates the use of anticipatory metareference as a means of dealing with potential misunderstanding in the form of ‘metamusic’ (Wolf, 2010, *passim*) at the beginning of his *Stand-Up Comedian* show. He attributes his use of

² Avantgarde’ here must be understood as that which is unusual or avantgarde *within stand-up*.

“‘The Breath of Coldness’... a ten-minute saxophone solo, using the circular breathing technique, from the album *America 2003* by the British free-jazz saxophonist Evan Parker’ (2010, p.41) as his pre-performance music in order to both activate and resist popular expectations of stand-up comedy at the time:

It was a very deliberate and self-conscious decision to use the Evan Parker solo, on a loop, as the pre-show music for *Stand-Up Comedian*. The normal pre-show procedure for stand-up is to play something upbeat and jaunty, slightly too loudly, through the PA... But in the small and stifling space of The Underbelly’s soggy dungeon, The White Belly, in August 2004, the Evan Parker solo was a warning, before the show began, that this was not intended to be like other stand-up shows. (2010)

This is an example of implicit metareference, in the form of salient deviation, serving an explanatory function. The music subtly invites the audience to engage in metareferential reflection of a classificatory nature – a strategy that is available to the performer as a result of the development in popularity of the solo show as a form, with its corresponding artistic freedom (see Chapter Eight) – and to reflect on the genre of performance they are about to watch, inferring this particular performance’s relationship to that genre and adjusting their expectations accordingly.

Beyond the inclusion of individual instances of metareferentiality to influence the reception of a specific performance, a thickening of metareference may also be explained as part of an attempt to effect a wider-reaching transformation of receptive attitudes, using the explanatory and educational functions of metareference to cultivate ‘prosumer’ (Scorzin, 2011, *passim*) styles of reception. In doing so, a variety of effects may be achieved that expand the approaches to stand-up that are considered acceptable. For example, the contingency of certain artistic choices that are widely regarded as immutable may be revealed through the defamiliarization that is a frequent effect of metareferentiality (e.g. Waugh, 1984, *passim*), encouraging the audience to imagine alternative artistic possibilities. Reviews of Stewart Lee’s use of metacomic deconstruction imply this educative function of metareference. The

lead comedy reviewer for *The Scotsman*, Kate Copstick, has described his work as being ‘something of a masterclass in comedy technique’ (Copstick in Friedman, 2014, 257), while Julian Hall, reviewing a tour performance of *Stand-up Comedian* for *The Independent*, described ‘Lee’s asides and deconstructions [as] illuminating’ (2005), demonstrating ‘the potential... in metareference to educate the recipients aesthetically’ (Wolf, 2009, p.67). This function accords with Keazor’s view of ‘one of the most important functions’ (2011, p.486) of metareference in *The Simpsons* – ‘to create an audience fit to appreciate *The Simpsons* as well as the genre and medium used’ (2011, p.486) – and is an echo of the use of metacomedy in the first wave of alternative comedy. However, while this activation of ‘prosumership’ through metareference may foster more positive responses to performances that deviate from entrenched conventions, its effects on the uses of these performances by their recipients may not be regarded as uniformly positive (see Chapter Seven).

In addition to these explanatory functions, the growth in participation in stand-up comedy during the ‘comedy boom’ may have contributed to comedians making use of the performer-centric function of metareference, which allows them to ‘reveal him- or herself as a particularly self-conscious and hence intellectual person or as one capable of surprising, witty and amusing devices... (Wolf, 2009, p.66)’ (see Chapter Three). This explanation for an increase in metareferential activity may appear less like ‘shallow psychologising’ (Butler, 2011, p.515) in the context of the burgeoning number of amateur comedians performing either at open mic nights or occupying the ‘open spot’ at an otherwise professional gig (see below). An anecdotal article by an open mic comedian in 2012 details this situation:

Go on any thread in the Chortle forums and, sooner or later, you’ll read some complaints along the line of: ‘Half-hearted open-mic nights, populated by a wearisome number of would-be and workshoping comedians – playing to an audience almost entirely composed of other comics...

While one's initial response to this sort of thing may well be 'suck it up – that's comedy', it's a fly in the ointment of the London scene that has been compounded by the sudden boom in new comics. (Dunincan, 2012)

Like open mic nights, in which the performer's amateur status is itself a condition of participation, the open spot at a gig otherwise populated by professionals tends to reinforce the relatively lowly status of its occupant. The open spot tends to be positioned at the bottom of the bill, and their inexperience and low status may be reinforced by their anonymity in comparison to other performers appearing. In this context, metareferential deconstructions of the form of the type that Goldsmith regarded as prevalent on the open mic circuit at the time the article cited above was written (2012a) may signal to both the audience and other performers that the comedian belongs to an 'in group' of comedy aficionados and professionals, advertising their knowledge despite their comparatively low status. In 2012, Dan Antapolski identified discourse on the technical components of stand-up comedy as an expression of the aspirational attitudes of the profusion of amateur performers entering stand-up comedy at the time:

That is a sort of glaring sociological fact of people in that position, which is that they aspire to technical mastery, because they don't have it, but that's why they say so many technical things, and talk about whether the audience "Got that" or not... (Goldsmith, 2012)

Creative opportunity

The functions and explanations presented so far for an increase in metareference concurrent with the comedy boom focus on the challenges that the commercialization and popularization of stand-up gave rise to, the negotiation of which prompted recourse to metacomedy. However, as Wolf has argued, proliferation of metaization often serves as an 'index of an unprecedented level of media savvy on the part of the recipients' (Wolf, 2011, p.31), and this 'unprecedented level of media savvy' presents a creative opportunity for producers and recipients to playfully engage with a form or genre's conventions, and derive pleasure from this.

Within this more positive narrative, the comedy boom can be interpreted not simply as contributing to the necessity of metareferential activity by creating difficulties that have to be negotiated, but also as contributing to the conditions in which metareferential activity within stand-up could thrive, cultivating an audience that was sufficiently cognisant with the form and its conventions to appreciate metareferential elements and meta-works. Discussing the importance of broad shared frames of reference for communicating with large audiences, Susan Calman has said that 'really if it's that many people [tens of thousands] you have to choose the most generic stuff you can that hopefully will get the most laughs' (Lockyer, 2015, p.591). Within the context of a popular cultural milieu saturated with stand-up comedy, and a single style of stand-up comedy in particular, comedy itself becomes a 'generic' frame of reference through which performers can communicate. Michael Dunne has made the case for the significance of increased exposure to, and understanding of, popular culture in America, as an explanation for the increased presence of 'self-reference' in popular culture artefacts themselves:

The self-referential art forms... demonstrate the presence of a contemporary rhetorical community based on a mutual recognition of mediated experience on the parts of senders and receivers of cultural messages. It is evident that film-makers such as Mel Brooks and Jim Henson presupposed that their viewers were nearly as familiar with the subjects and techniques of popular American films as they were themselves. (1992, p.182)

Margaret Rose argues that 'If [readers] do not already know the target text of the parodist, they may come to know it through its evocation in the parody itself, and to understand the discrepancy between it and the parody text through the latter' (1993, p. 36). Nonetheless, the presence of a thriving and successful parodic culture in stand-up comedy, particularly of the type of economical parody described above, suggests a general level of familiarity with the specific works, or general styles, that are parodied. Similarly, while the deconstruction of comedy through the metareferential labelling of its components may be regarded as an attempt to

advertise technical mastery (see above), it also bespeaks the existence of an audience that is familiar with that technical vocabulary, and is interested in its uses as a source of humour. For example, in a performance of *Go Mr. Tony, Go*, recorded at the Soho Theatre in London in April, 2012, Tony Law uses subversion of formal conventions, including the technical vocabulary of stand-up, as the subject of his performance's humour:

Yeah, I gotta get back home, gotta new mattress delivered. It's got one of those tags on it that says do not remove. Ha ha ha! Your days are numbered, fucker! **(Laughter)** Not on my watch, you're coming off. Especially since I'll probably have two pairs of scissors on me at the time. **(Laughter)** Tiny little call back there, tiny little call back. **(Laughter)** "Tony, that was too tight in, too tight in, you've gotta give those more room to breathe." **(Laughter)** No, not me, I'm a maverick, I'm a maverick. I did it straight away. I would've forgotten if I didn't do it straight away. **(Laughter)** I had to get it in. Get that fucker done. (2016)

This routine constructs a dialogue between the first-person voice that expresses Law's own thoughts – or at least the thoughts of the persona of Tony Law presented within the performance – about the quality of the performance content and his skill (or otherwise) as a performer, and a second voice, addressing Law as 'Tony', which Law attributes to that of 'somebody in the audience making a judgment' (Interview, 2017)³. The audience member that Law voices possesses a familiarity with the terminology of stand-up, most obviously indicated by the use of the word 'callback' which, although its meaning might be intuited within the context of this performance by somebody with little knowledge of the form, has been cited as an example of one of the techniques that comics learn as they develop their act (Double, 2014, p.2), suggesting it is a specialist form of knowledge (see also Goldsmith, 2012a). It also demonstrates an understanding that the manner in which Law has used the callback is a deviation from conventional practice. This 'tiny little callback', which leaves just one minute between first and second reference, truncates the

³ Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies a similar 'voicing' strategy at work in early alternative comedy as a means of closing off heckles (2018, p.144).

conventionally much larger gap that has led to Chauvin identifying it as a device that creates a sense of cohesion at a macro level of a stand-up comedy performance (2017, p.165). This is recognised by the audience member that Law voices as a failure to adhere to the conventions of the form. Law also constructs an even more comedy-savvy audience located at a level above the recipient voiced in the routine – the actual audience of his performance, who understand the intention behind the distortion of the convention, and enjoy it as a source of comedy.

The presence and popularity of implicit metacomedy, in particular that which relies on salient deviation for its success, provides further evidence of the existence of a ‘prosumer’ or savvy audience during this period, and contributes to a positive narrative about a proliferation of metareference as representing a creative opportunity. In addition to the heightened engagement that Edward Aczel’s anti-comedy encourages (see Chapter Three), Aczel’s comedy also demands an audience that is sufficiently aware of the conventions of comedy to appreciate his deviations from them. During his performances, the audience are required to participate alongside the performer through ‘engage[ment]... with the generic models of his [*sic*] time’ (Hutcheon, 1980, p.139) in order to create the humour, invoking the expectations created by archetypal stand-up comedy – what John-Luke Roberts describes as ‘*stand-up* stand-up’ (Quirk, 2018, p.81) – and identifying the incongruity in his contrived failure to live up to them. For example, in a 2010 performance on a recorded mixed bill at the Edinburgh Festival, Aczel demonstrates an approach to crowd work that substitutes punchlines with banal conversation:

Adam, how did you get here today? You walked. Sir, how did you get here today? You walked. It’s a nice comparison, isn’t it? **(Laughter)** What exactly do you do for a living? You’re a teacher. How are you? **(Laughter)** Good, good. How long have been in this room?... Sir, sir, I like your shoes. See what I’m doing, everyone, now. (BBC, 2019)

Aczel’s performance text – relating unremarkable facts in a low energy style – supplies the punchline for the incongruity, while the set-up is supplied by the situation, namely a comedy performance in which such behaviour is abnormal.

Stuart Goldsmith describes Aczel's process as, 'set[ting] up the circumstances under which we might expect there to be a joke any minute, and then kind of blithely ignor[ing] those circumstances...' (Goldsmith, 2019). As the transcript above indicates, Aczel does very little, verbally or physically, to 'set up' these circumstances: instead, he creates a gap which the audience fill with their expectation of what should occur, setting up the incongruity that occurs when no joke is forthcoming. For Limon, the 'audiences turn their [comedians'] jokes into jokes...' (2000, p.13) with their laughter. Here, the requirement of the audience is greater, demanding that they assume the role of co-creator to complete jokes not simply by anointing them with laughter, but by articulating the unspoken set-up. The success of this type of implicit metacomedy relies on the existence of a dominant homogenous style, and an audience sufficiently well-schooled in that style to actualize the comedy. Aczel himself has positioned the significant increase in media exposure for stand-up comedy as coinciding with opportunities for him:

I started in 2005, and it was really conventional, and straightforward stand-up... It was all big suits and tours. The oddballs were kind of nowhere. They weren't on television. They weren't anywhere really... It was a very commercial period. And as soon as Michael McIntyre's Roadshow kicked off, that side of the game exploded, I thought. (Goldsmith, 2019)

Speaking more broadly about the knock-on effects of a commercially successful dominant stand-up culture, Stewart Lee has said that:

I think the fact that there is a kind of homogenousness about the sorts of people that you see on the big stand-up shows on telly... I think that does help to create a sort of alternative culture and market (Ince & Long, 2012).

Chris Coltrane has echoed this sentiment, saying 'I think when... the mainstream is more obvious then you have a more interesting alternative' (Quirk, 2018, p.82).

While the more 'comedy savvy' receptive attitudes that facilitate the success of performance tactics such as this may not be held by a majority of comedy consumers, they have grown alongside the commercial expansion of stand-up

comedy, and participate in and legitimise the view that stand-up comedy is a suitable domain within which to cultivate connoisseurship (Friedman, 2014, *passim*). As Friedman notes, the proliferation of this attitude may be connected to the emergence of alternative comedy in 1979, and the values and ideals for stand-up comedy that it inculcated within culture more broadly (2014, p.60). However, while Friedman argues that this attitude may result in the use of comedy consumption as a form of personal distinction by recipients (see Chapter Three), for performers this receptive attitude appears to present an opportunity for exploring the possibilities of the form (Quirk, 2015, p.72). The coalescence of this comedy savvy audience around a festival and arts-centre circuit that is sufficiently popular to be self-sustaining has been cited as an explanatory factor in creating conditions that were conducive to a surge in metacomedy. Gary Delaney, for example, argues that a thriving Fringe festival circuit, which attracts audiences that demonstrate high levels of familiarity with the conventions of comedy as a form, contributes to a situation in which metacomedy represents a creative opportunity for the performer:

[At festivals] where audiences have seen so much comedy...if you make a joke about comedy itself, that will get a really big response in... In Edinburgh, actually doing *terribly clever*, post-modern jokes [about the form] will go really well. (Stewart, 2015)

The relationship between ‘cognoscenti’ audiences of the type referred to by Delaney, and conditions that are congenial to the proliferation of metareference, is perhaps reflected by the relationship between works that foreground metaization and those that have received awards at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In addition to Howard Read, who was nominated for the main prize at the Edinburgh Festival in 2003 with the metacomic *Big Howard and Little Howard Show*, performances centring metareference during the period concurrent with the comedy boom that won awards at the Festival have included Brendon Burns in 2007 (Comedy Awards, 2021), Doctor Brown in 2012 (Chortle, 2021) – the conclusion of Brown’s show was described as

‘meta-comedy at its best’ (Lee, 2012b) – and more recently, Hannah Gadsby and Jordan Brookes (see Chapter One).

The proliferation of metareference in stand-up comedy at a high-point of enthusiasm for the form may also be partly explained by the celebratory functions it can serve, providing an outlet for expressions of that enthusiasm. Price and Robinson, for example, see the sharing of information as quintessential to the fan experience:

Fans have always been inherently social, enjoying the discursive interactions that come with discussing and debating their areas of interest... Fans also acted as gatekeepers and knowledge experts to their peers. Fandom is, and always has been, rooted in information practices. (2016, p.3)

Metareference provides a space within performance for fans to engage in discourse with, and share their understanding and enthusiasm for the form, with others who share the object of their fandom. It is an opportunity to find release for ‘the passionate enthusiast who avidly follows something or someone’ (Price & Robinson, 2016, p.2). This may take the form of knowledge-sharing encapsulated by the deconstruction, subversion or ironising of conventions, or showcasing of knowledge in the form of value judgments (positive and negative) about comedy styles and specific performers that are a frequent feature of fan discourse (e.g. Friedman, 2014, *passim*). Although this is described as ‘fan’ behaviour, it should not be considered as limited to amateur performers. Josie Long, for example, has worn a T-shirt with the logo of the Chicago improv venue, Upright Citizens Brigade, one of the centres of the American alternative comedy scene of the 1990s, while on stage (Double, 2014, p.63). This exploits the classificatory function of metareference, aligning Long with the ethos and approaches of another network of performance. However, it is also an act of celebration. The presence of these types of fan-type behaviours in the act of professional comedians may be seen in part as a preservation of the sub-cultural roots of early alternative comedy, and a resistance to the accelerated commercialisation and professionalisation of the form that has taken place over the

last 20-30 years, through identification with the amateur enthusiasm of fan cultures (see Chapter Seven).

'I'll give you an example of a joke' - Matt Clacker, golfer and comedian

Subversive or transformative intent are frequently attributed to the use of metaization, and I have contributed to that project in this thesis. Here I will return to more obvious uses of what Wolf describes as work- and author-centred functions (Wolf, 2009, pp.1-84), using a brief account of my own experience performing stand-up comedy to explore aspects of these categories. By including this reflection, it is not my intention to elevate the significance of my personal performance practice, either as work in its own right or as a lens for my analysis in this project as whole. Instead, it is simply offered as a clarification of my own relationship to the metacomic practices and performance tactics examined in this thesis, and the milieu in which some of them occurred. It is also intended to introduce a concentration of pragmatism alongside some of the more general, and generally abstract, frameworks that have been used to explore the potential critical effects and explanations of these practices.

Between 2008-2012, I occasionally performed stand-up comedy, both as 'myself', and as a character. My involvement with stand-up coincided with the period that is often referred to as 'the comedy boom' described above and in the previous chapter. My most intensive period of involvement with stand-up comedy as a performer was during 2010, when I undertook a weekly, three-month long comedy course in central London, which incorporated workshops, along with opportunities to perform in front of other students and the general public in the basement room of a pub in Covent Garden. At the same time, and after, I performed 5-10 minute spots at gigs around London. Some of these were dedicated open mic nights run by professional promoters, some were gigs run by friends I had met in the course of performing and one was a charity benefit in the café of the crypt at St-Martin-in-the-Fields Church in Covent Garden. (Appropriately, I died.)

My overwhelming memory of this time is the abundance of activity in live comedy, in London at least, with shows of all sizes and levels happening across the city every night of the week. In a smaller place, like York, where I lived from 2008-09, there were frequently three or four stand-up comedy gigs a week, of varying levels of popularity and professionalism. It often felt that, despite this abundance, there were not enough gigs to accommodate everybody who wanted to perform stand-up comedy. I can personally attest to experiencing the sensation of the 'glutted economy' (2018, p.152) of comedians to which Daniel Smith has referred when signing up to open mic nights that featured a bill of fifteen performers or so.

In this context, I initially laboured at what I instinctively considered to be 'real' or 'proper' stand-up: autobiographical, observational or political material, performed in a persona that had a clear relationship to my everyday self. However, I didn't find this perspective fruitful for generating comic material or performing it. Although I had no formal framework for thinking about this at the time, I had internalised what Brodie describes as 'the vernacular theory of comedy [that] sees the stand-up comedian-as-type as marginalised... and as seeing the world from a different perspective' (2014, p.104). In all good conscience, I felt unable to claim this position for my own identity – that of a middle-class, white, heterosexual, university-educated man. There seemed very little in this perspective, superficially at least, that might be regarded as 'different', and even less that was 'marginal'. This judgment seemed to be borne out by the proliferation of comedians performing from a similar perspective. In fact, I was conscious, within the 'aesthetics of originality' (Wolf, 2011, p.30) that operates within present-day stand-up, of there being little I could say that hadn't been said before.

Pressure of time was another factor that influenced my attitude to the content of my act in the gigs I did during this period: a standard slot was five minutes, although sometimes I was able to perform for 10-15 minutes if I knew the promoter, or had done reasonably well at the gig before. The most successful acts in this context found a way to be funny within the first few seconds – from scratch, without

the existing relationship that an audience may bring to more established acts. I felt that a strong frame of reference – a key that would allow the audience to quickly understand how to interpret the act – was critical to success in this context, but I could not provide it with a biographical performance of self. In short, I wanted to perform stand-up comedy, but had few ideas for content for my act.

My solution to this was to make my lack of comic inspiration the subject of my act. The content of the performance was the stand-up equivalent of beginning a piece of writing by stating that you have nothing to write about. I described the components of an ideal stand-up comedy performance, which I manifestly failed to deliver. I declared the importance of having jokes in a routine, supplied an example of a joke, and then explained why the example I had given was ‘probably not the best’, itemising its comic failings. This relied on salient deviation for the creation of humour, and was an enactment of Mahler’s model of ‘the topos of the writer’s block as a productive absence producing a textual presence... [as] a real absence, covering up a real lack of inspiration (on level 1) by converting an imminent failure (the threat of having no level 2, i. e. no text) into some superficial, and doubtful, success (a level 2 with no level 4, i. e. a text about nothing)’ (2011, p.54). However, if nothing else, I felt assured that a performance that took itself as its subject would be a point of reference I had in common with an audience at a stand-up gig, unconsciously echoing Auslander’s interpretation of Steve Martin’s act as a reaction to a collapse in referents that could form a stable basis for stand-up comedy (Auslander, 2004, pp.107-08). As with Barth’s use of metafiction within a ‘literature of exhaustion’, metacomedy provided the opportunity for me to continue to produce work through subversion of established conventions within a context in which I doubted the possibility of producing something that audiences hadn’t seen before (Barth, 1984, p.205).

Although this process produced an act, I felt the ‘doubtfulness’ of the success that Mahler identifies. However, the raw material, of failed attempts at humour, provided the beginnings of a new act. I transferred much of this verbal content into a

character, a former professional golfer called Matt Clacker attempting to forge a career as an entertainer and comedian. The character was based on a golfer who was described in a Sunday newspaper as being more concerned about his legacy as a humourist than as a sportsman. Despite retaining much of the anti-joke content - feeble or absent punchlines and catchphrases - in keeping with the source material of the character, I changed the presentational attitude, incorporating maladroit attempts at a more showbusiness style of presentation, and delusional self-praise for the quality of the act. For example, after a string of set-ups followed by non-punchlines, I would say: 'A bit of a misconception about golfers is that because we're single-minded, we're boring. We're not. Take me for example. I do a lot of 'gigs' like this. People say to me 'Matt, you're not only one of the best British golfers of your generation, you're also one of its best new comedians. How did you become such a consummate entertainer?'² Unlike many character acts, in which the character doesn't consciously try to be funny, the character continually made reference to the fact that they were performing stand-up - they were trying (very hard) to be amusing and entertaining. Much of the humour was located in the gap between the professed effort to be funny and the outcome, along with the miscategorisation of the structures and attitudes of performance comedy as constituting comedy itself.

The act was generally successful, with the exception of the charity gig at St-Martin's-in-the-Field, where my deliberately bad jokes about golf - parodies of a type of bantering humour I perceived as typical of sportspeople trying to cross over into entertainment - were received by at least one audience member as simply bad jokes about golf. He sought to improve them by heckling me with actual jokes about golf that he thought were funny. What I regarded as poor attempts at comedy that were funny only because of their failure as comedy, some of the audience simply regarded as bad comedy. Like much anti-comedy, there was nothing funny about the act unless the frame of reference was identified and accepted by the audience. Without the 'mocking complicity' (Prest, 2016, p.2) between the audience and performer, there was no criticism in my act - simply an inexplicable attempt at

imitation - and no comedy either. However, while the anti-comedy continued to be a feature of the act, the transformation of perspective, placing the material in the context of a character which approximated a recognisable figure – or composite of figures – in the public realm, gave the performance more of a heteroreferential dimension. It could be enjoyed by audiences as a species of weak satire, mocking a facet of celebrity culture, rather than purely as a joke about the absence of jokes.

My personal experience intersects with several of the motivations and explanations for the presence of metacomedy proffered by theorizing on metareferentiality. It illustrates the potential of the work- and author/performer-centric utility of metareference in establishing a shared frame of reference through which an act can be interpreted. However, it also highlights the importance of context, both specific and general. At comedy nights, often performing to and alongside other people enthusiastic about comedy, the ‘mocking complicity’ the act relied on could generally be taken for granted. For an audience whose primary motive for attending a show was support for a charity, however, the humorous potential of the act was more obscure. This perhaps says something about the limitations of the type of metacomedy I was practising to communicate beyond a coterie audience. The general genesis of the act, however, was a product of a time and circuit in which there was a saturation of comedy in culture, and comedy therefore suggested itself as a subject matter that could be expected to resonate with a significant number of any given audience.

This reflection on my own process points to an author-centric function of metareference that is not a feature of the work in which the metareference is located. By presenting a method for producing a textual presence, even one that is constituted by the acknowledgment of absence, it provides a means of generating something out of nothing, with the possibility that what is produced might be transformed into something else. The author-centric function is activated not in the work that is the expression of an absence, but in subsequent works that might arise from it. Importantly, I hope this reflection also reasserts the priority that is given to

the creation of humour in the majority - though perhaps not all? - stand-up performances. This point has the potential to get lost in a study like this, which may occasionally fall into a trap of taking the 'comic' element of a comedy performance for granted. The motivation that led me towards metacomedy was ultimately a desire to be funny – a function it is well-placed to fulfil. The presence of a meta-activity in any stand-up comedy performance, whatever its other functions – including the 'intellectual' activity of the creative-criticism that is foregrounded here – can't and shouldn't be fully disentangled from the attempt to answer the central question faced by a stand-up comedian: how can I make a room of strangers laugh?

Conclusion

The evidence cited above suggests that there was a significant increase in metareferential activity congruent with the years that also saw significant increases in the exposure, popularity and commercial growth of stand-up comedy in the UK. Consistent with Wolf's view that proliferations of metareference within genres are complex phenomena that resist 'monocausal' (2011, p.24) explanation, positive and negative potential explanations for this can be discerned. In keeping with the historic use of metareference as a tool for development, parody was used to ridicule and resist the dominance of observational comedy as an approach to stand-up, in a context in which its heavy representation in clubs and on the mainstream television platforms for stand-up was perceived as reinforcing its dominance and incentivising more performers to adopt it as a style. The explanatory function of metareference was used to negotiate the perceived closing down of receptive attitudes to other approaches that resulted from the dominance of this style, providing performers with an opportunity to humorously explain unorthodox approaches, and reassure audiences of their intentions. The growth of new comedians performing at open mic nights, or in unpaid spots at the comedy clubs and nights that sprang up around the country, may also have contributed to the proliferation of metareference through

their use of its author-centric functions, asserting their knowledge and competence with the form in contexts that reinforced their aspirational and amateur status.

These explorations of the functions of metareference situate them within the negative explanatory narratives that significant increases in metareference have tended to attract, as 'a by-product and a symptom of a currently problematic state of affairs' (Wolf, 2011, p.31) – perhaps paradoxically, in the case of the comedy boom which, at least viewed from the point of view of popularization and commercialization, was a positive period for stand-up comedy in the UK. However, this survey also bears out Wolf's assertion of positive and negative dimensions to an increase in metareference. The boom in popularity of stand-up comedy, which resulted in challenges that these metareferential functions attempt to negotiate, also contributed to an increased appetite for comedy, and an 'audience with an unprecedented level' (Wolf, 2011, p.31) of knowledge of stand-up comedy, creating an environment highly receptive to performers interested in playing with the form, with the complicity and appreciation of their audience.

The following chapters explore a range of examples of discursive metacomedy, from metareferential elements to fully fledged 'meta-works', organised around themes of present-day metacomic engagement, in greater detail. Close readings of these, considered in their performance and artistic context, reveal the character of metareferences used, their effects, and what they say about artistic, social and political issues relating to stand-up.

Chapter Seven

'What a magical night of stars': metacomedy

and an alternative identity

Martin Butler has identified a tendency for artistic traditions that construct their identity through opposition to, or positioning outside of, a perceived mainstream (Butler, 2011, p.3130) to view commercialization, professionalization and institutionalization as a threat. As Newman has argued with reference to indie film, 'Real popularity threatens indie artists' credibility, the status of their work as outsider art, and most of all the consumer's sense of being apart from the dominant culture' (2009, p.20). Within popular music, Butler has identified the collapse of 'generic as well as ideological boundaries' associated with postmodernism, and the resulting encroachment of a perceived mainstream onto sub-cultural terrain, as contributing to this challenge, and provoking defensive responses:

... under the postmodern condition of "anything goes", there seems to be the dire need to redraw generic as well as ideological boundaries between different musical styles and cultures, both in order to claim authenticity as well as to stake out a specific space in an otherwise chaotic and seemingly limitless realm of cultural production. (2011, pp.514-15)

Drawing on Kassabian's definition of subcultural activities as those where 'value derives directly from the degree of [...] opposition to (mainstream) culture' (Kassabian 1999: 119 in Butler, 2011, p.515), Butler argues that 'as one turns to more subcultural territories [such as punk]... this need to redraw lines of demarcation becomes most visible' (2011, p.515).

In early alternative comedy, hostility towards commercial branches of the entertainment industry, concomitant with the more general hostility towards capitalism that was a feature of the politics of many performers and their audiences

(Double, 2020, pp.170-80), was an attitude espoused by some, though not all, those involved in its development (Schaffer, pp.13-14). Mapping the trajectory of alternative comedy in 2012, Robin Ince identified a widespread view that 'The point in the '90s when things seemed to become so embraced by the media' (Ince & Long, 2012) (see Chapter Five) had resulted in a situation in the late 1990s and 2000s in which 'Some people just think all comedy is just comedy again' (Ince & Long, 2012), before speculatively suggesting that the current situation demonstrated a clearer distinction between alternative and mainstream scenes. Broderick Chow has positioned the emergence of a DIY comedy scene in the UK in the mid-2000s as a response to this perceived erosion of boundaries in an 'otherwise chaotic and seemingly limitless realm of cultural production' (Butler, 2011, p.515). For Chow, interpreting comedy within the framework of relational art, the DIY scene constitutes a self-conscious attempt at restoring boundaries to the field of stand-up comedy production and reception:

I believe DIY comedy is a legitimate response to a current cultural climate in which there is almost limitless choice in leisure or entertainment products yet a growing dissatisfaction with them. Like other movements aimed at reclaiming cultural capital both past (punk music, fanzines) and present, DIY comedy is available for incorporation into the mainstream—yet being a form whose existence relies so heavily on networks or scenes of like-minded individuals, small audiences, and a desire to form relationships through performance, it is difficult to conceive of a mainstream version of DIY comedy. (2008, p.131)

Although Chow identifies the performance content of DIY comedians as tending towards expressions of 'irony' (2008, p.128), he also locates DIY comedy's response to this 'growing dissatisfaction' (2018, p.131) with 'leisure or entertainment products' in its difference to the structural and organisational characteristics of commercial comedy clubs. He characterises DIY gigs, and the attitude that motivates them, by their relegation of the profit motive and their non-careerist intentions (2008, pp.126-27), 'emphasiz[ing] the event as a whole...' (2008, p.129), and 'remak[ing] [the comedy club experience] into an active, participatory event' (2008, p.129).

It is this challenge to the alternative identity of stand-up comedy – and the possibility of its restoration – that Daniel Smith positions as an important contextual factor in interpreting Stewart Lee’s comedy about other comedians (2018, pp.150-155). Smith’s reading of Lee’s use of metacomedy to resist the encroachment of commercialisation is consistent with other political readings of Lee’s work (e.g. Brassett, 2016). However, Lee is not alone in using a wide range of metacomic techniques to engage with this issue. For example, Josie Long, one of the principal organisers and performers in the DIY scene, has used a variety of metacomic techniques to construct an identity that is situated outside the sphere of commercial or mainstream practices. Double cites her metacomically describing her own act as ‘unreliable at best’ (2014, p.57), engaging in the ‘amateur’ styling that Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies as a feature of early alternative comedy (2018, p.107). However, her performances also demonstrate more subtle forms of metareference, working in combination with explicit metareferential elements and cues located outside the performance itself, to contribute to the construction of an alternative aesthetic.

Throughout her career, Long has used stand-up as a vehicle for self-expression, and as a tool for participating in political and social action. Identification with an ‘alternative’ label has played a part in this. Her ‘Alternative Reality Tour’, for example, staged a series of free performances in areas of the country identified as most affected by government spending cuts, through which Long sought to challenge austerity, and particularly its impact on the arts:

I’m so anti austerity because I think that it’s wonderful and civilizing to be a society that funds public arts and public education and offers things for free to its citizens to make their lives more beautiful, challenging and fun. If the government doesn’t agree with us then the small acts of free, DIY arts we can do can at least make the point that a lot of things are better than money. (Long, 2011)

The content of the tour – including ‘powerful anti-cuts’ material (Long, 2011) – articulated Long’s belief in the importance of accessible culture, while the tour itself enacted that position by staging free performances in public spaces. During the

period of the 'comedy boom', Long was active in promoting comedy nights that resisted the conventions and obligations of commercial comedy clubs (Quirk, 2017, pp.229-230). Furthermore, she describes herself and her peers engaging in criticism of commercial comedy through creative activity outside performance, such as the production of fanzines:

We had this real, visceral hatred to what we thought was hack, and what we thought was mainstream. And, actually... I don't know how much those clubs, and my club, and other clubs at the time, in a massive, meaningful sense differentiated from other ones... But, like, writing tracts and pamphlets about how much we hated the mainstream. (Ince & Long, 2012)

Double has noted that Long also collected an award at the Chortle Comedy Awards with 'Fuck Jongleurs' written on her arm (Double, 2020, p.200).

These are forms of epitextual activity, which shape audiences' responses to performance activity, reflecting Brodie's observation that the stand-up comedian's 'presentation of self offstage contributes to their interpretation' (2014, pp.65-66). This epitextual activity may heighten the extent to which Long's performances are perceived as incorporating elements of salient deviation, resulting in the activation of metareferential awareness. For example, Long's use of homemade and analogue props – 'complete with hand-drawn programmes and pie charts inexpertly rendered on her flip-chart' (Bennett, 2008) – constitutes a form of boundary-restoration through metareference. In webcomics, 'scanty craftsmanship' (Thoss, 2011, p.558) is often used to activate the viewer's awareness of the form through salient deviation from the conventional technical skill demonstrated in more typical approaches to comics and cartooning. Similarly, in the context of a sustained critique of the commercialization of stand-up comedy as an 'entertainment product' (Chow, 2008, p.131), Long's incorporation of deliberately unpolished props in her act may activate medial awareness, resulting in recipients classifying her work as distinct from other works of a similar kind. Tim Jonze's description of the content and style of her performances as constituting a 'refreshing antidote to a slick, male-dominated

mainstream' (2007) suggests that, rather than simply contributing to the internal aesthetic of the work, these elements have metareferential potential, distancing Long from a commercial identity and, potentially, articulating a critique of its 'slickness'.

Although Bonello Rutter Giappone's diagnosis of the metareferential potential of this 'amateur' styling in early alternative comedy is tentative (2018, p.107), Long's use of these strategies may be regarded as possessing increased salience within a present-day comedy context of heightened commercialization and professionalization in stand-up, and her self-conscious engagement with these issues through her participation in acts of 'insider theory' offstage (McGlaghlin, 1996, p.102). As with much implicit metaization, its recognition, and the audience's awareness that they are 'completing' the work through their mental participation (Scorzin, 2011) may contribute to more active engagement with the performance. The community that these strategies cultivate, by establishing complicity between the performer and the audience, and 'mobiliz[ing] them in the completion and the fulfilment' (Scorzin, 2011, p.268) of the performance, enacts at the level of the performance text the 'active, participatory event' (2008, p.129) that Chow sees in the refashioning of the comedy club through organisational and structural means.

Metacomic rudeness

Metacomic rudeness about other comedians and comedy output demonstrates a point of continuity between the tactics used by early alternative comedians to erect a boundary between themselves and their nightclub and working-men's club forebears, and the tactics of present-day comedians. Bonello Rutter Giappone illustrates this phenomenon in early alternative comedy through a *Not the Nine O'Clock News* parody of the Two Ronnies, in which innuendo is juxtaposed with 'insistent filth, over-exposed and overstated, [which] seemed calculated to render innuendo unnecessary, and thereafter impossible without a critical stance' (2017, 401). This process, she argues, resulted in a situation in which there was 'a diminishing of the impact of the previously unsaid, and the debunking of its power as "mysterious", "rude" or "unacceptable"' (2017, p.403). Ronnie Corbett indicates

the power of this critique as a form of artistic censure, saying ‘Ronnie [Barker] was even more upset than I was, but we both felt that it was very unfair’ (Corbett in Corbett & Nobbs, 2006, p. 215, in Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.401). While early alternative comedy may have contributed to the normalisation of bodily rudeness as a feature of popular comedy, the taboo nature of a comedian appearing to criticise another performer, either from within a performance or outside it, has been retained. Richard Herring has said that, when making radio and television programmes in the late 1990s, he ‘felt that the last taboo [in comedy] was that you’re not allowed to slag off other comedians’ (Interview, 2020).

The continuing power of this taboo is demonstrated both by audience and performer responses to the incorporation of metacomic rudeness in present-day stand-up performances. As documented in Chapters Four and Five, as a result of the activity of early alternative comedians, the stand-up comedian’s authorship of their own material is fundamental to the present-day identity of stand-up comedy as an art, and the identity of the stand-comedian as a creative artist who writes the material they perform. However, the use of writers by performers who are assumed to be the authors of their own material has emerged as a feature of present-day stand-up comedy practice (Haynes, 2013). Paul Sinha has used metacomedie to critique the influence of commercialization on the identity of stand-up as a performer- and author-centric art form, jokingly satirising the role that television has played (see Chapter 5) in eroding the identity of the stand-up comedian as an auteur-style producer.

General knowledge, quiz, that’s all I’ve got over the regular ‘Appearing-on-TV’ comedian. I know I’ll never be on *Mock the Week*, I realise my face doesn’t fit for *Live at the Apollo*. It’s fine. I’m cheerfully accepting of that and I’m kind of relieved about the *Mock the Week* thing. I’m glad they’ve never asked. I wouldn’t want to overcomplicate my tax affairs by paying a team of writers to write all of my jokes. **(Laughter and some ‘Ooohs’.)** I’m glad you liked that one. That one cost me £750. **(Laughter).** (Sinha, 2018)

Sinha's routine satirises the influence of mainstream television programming on stand-up comedy, the co-option of stand-up comedy into the entertainment industry and its reduction to the level of a product made by a committee rather than an individual's expression of self. While the comments about the role of television in the erosion of the identity of the comedian as writer-artist are located within an unambiguously humorous framework, and their light-hearted intent is clear, this material is nonetheless met with an 'Ooh' from some members of the audience, suggesting an ongoing perception that this is a sensitive topic for joking, even while taboos around bodily rudeness and coarseness have been eroded¹.

The power of the taboo attached to metacomic criticism of other comedians and their work invests it with disruptive power. For example, in addition to critiquing the commercial activity of other comedians (Smith, 2018, p.152), Stewart Lee has also performed ridiculing parodies of their acts, distilling their performance styles into a set of crudely rendered gestures. In *Carpet Remnant World*, for example, he parodies Michael McIntyre by running around the stage for 15 seconds, surveying the audience appraisingly for around 35 seconds, and then running around the stage again for another 30 seconds, all without speaking (2012). In *Content Provider*, he mimics Russell Howard by adopting an exaggerated walk, splaying his legs and extending them out in front of him, gurning and occasionally thrusting his groin out (2019). Again, the parody is sustained, lasting for 45 seconds without speech. Prompted by Lee's 'routines about other comics' (2015), John Robins performed a routine about 'millionaire underdog' Stewart Lee, which itself parodied recognizable features of Lee's approach to stand-up, including repetition, seemingly unpolished notes read from scraps of paper and elaborate analogies (Robins, 2015), and questioned Lee's presentation of himself as a struggling or alternative performer while enjoying relatively high levels of commercial success and critical acclaim in the industry:

¹ See also Quirk, 2015, p.82

The basic premise is how it possible to claim that you don't earn much money in front of 500 people... And it's infuriating... when you're fighting... to get a foothold in that industry, and you're hearing one of the most successful people in that industry saying that it's hard for them. (Herring, 2015)

To an extent, the efficacy of Lee's metacomic rudeness as a tactic for rejuvenating stand-up comedy as a site of contestation, in which boundaries, categories and difference are disputed, is demonstrated by Robins' response to it within performance:

I just thought "If I have a point to make, it would be nice to set myself the challenge of making it through stand-up, and not online... or on Twitter or anything like that... So, I thought I'd write a stand-up routine... and postulated the idea that the more successful comedians become, the more miserable they have to pretend to be, which fitted nicely into a brief routine about Stewart Lee... and set myself to challenge to apply his logic to him, which I think is absolutely valid, and never once gave an opinion about him outside of that routine. (Herring, 2015)

In addition to intracompositionally constructing an alternative identity through metaization, performative interventions such as metacomic rudeness may challenge the sense of corporate institutionalization and professionalization within stand-up comedy by having a tangible effect on the performances and practices of other comedians, giving rise to more metacomedy that demonstrates an aggressive or hostile ethos, and echoing the attitudes of early alternative comedy's oppositional approach. However, this apparent disruption of the institutionalization of stand-up is itself open to criticism (see below).

Ambiguity and elitism

Within present-day punk music, Butler sees metareferential assertions of difference as participating in acts of judgment about quality and merit, 'establish[ing] a canon of aesthetic.... forms and values at a time when forms and values seem to erode all too quickly and when canonization itself is under attack' (2011, p.515). The implications of elitism that arise from this have been wielded against early alternative comedy (see Chapter Four) and, in present-day UK stand-up, attempts at

distancing from a commercially successful and popular mainstream, both performatively and organisationally, have been correlated with class-based methods of consumption (Friedman, 2014, p.304; Quirk, 2018, p.89-99). However, while present-day metacomic elements may invoke mainstream practices or performers in order to explicitly or implicitly assert their difference from them, the discernible attitude expressed in these metareferential acts is not uniformly and unambiguously hostile or elitist. Attention to the details of these performative acts suggests that, rather than simply contributing to elitist forms of distinction, or unambiguously reinstating boundaries, they demonstrate a range of attitudes, and confuse and problematize the extent to which these boundaries can be maintained. For example, Tony Law's thematization of the relationship between comedy as fringe art and as an entertainment product alludes to these differences without reproducing judgments of value. In a filmed performance of his Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2012 show, *Maximum Nonsense*, at the Seligman Theatre at the Chapter Arts Centre in Cardiff, a venue with a capacity of 120 people, Law appears on stage peering out at the audience, as if unable to count their number, as part of an introduction parodying the behaviours of stand-up comedians performing on mainstream television stand-up shows, such as *Live at the Apollo* or *Michael McIntyre's Comedy Roadshow*:

What a magical night of stars we've got, what a magical night of stars. It's just like *the Apollo* in here, isn't it? **(Laughter)** Yeah, that's right...
(Gesturing towards the back of the venue, as if it is a much larger space) Ok, keep it down at the back, I have no way of controlling you ... Who's in?
(Addressing an audience member) What's your name, fella? Pol Pot!
(Laughter) It's Pol Pot, ladies and gentleman. One of the greatest mass murderers of recent history! Good to have you in... Who else have we got in? The Archduke Franz Ferdinand! **(Laughter)** All the characters of history are in!... What a night of stars, what a night of stars. (2016)

Law's parodic invocation of the conventions of broadcast stand-up comedy creates distance between his performance and more mainstream iterations of the form. For example, the surreal subversion of practices that are typically seen on mainstream

television platforms establishes Law's idiosyncrasy as a performer, cultivates intimacy between himself and his audience and cues them to expect unorthodox content from his performance (see Chapters Five and Six).

Allusion to the arena-sized stadiums and large theatres in which televised stand-up typically occurs, and its juxtaposition with the size of the venue in which Law's performance takes place – a social and artistic space for a small community – invokes another point of distinction between stand-up comedy as mass entertainment, and stand-up comedy performance at the margins, again echoing the amateur styling of early alternative comedy (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, p.107) and intensifying the salience of the metareferential construction of an in-group. However, this reference is double-coded through irony. It also functions self-deprecatingly, classifying Law's performance as of marginal interest and significance in comparison to the type of acts who perform at venues such as the Apollo. Elements of implied hostility or elitism are negated or diluted by their surreal framing, resulting in an assertion of difference that reflects a desire to serve 'different tastes and wants' (Quirk, 2018, p.97), without implying that those different tastes and wants are superior. Indeed, the routine may be read as a performative expression of Quirk's view that many comedians involved in constructing an alternative identity see themselves as 'underdogs, pluckily opposing the forces of commercialism' (2018, p.99).

Smith notes that, in addition to 'attempt[ing] to maintain stand-up comedy as a fringe art' (2018, p.152), Stewart Lee's comedy about other comedians is often read as 'condescending, patronising or polemical' (2018, p.152). However, the blurred line that stand-up comedy draws between persona and person, and the specific character of metareferential elements, may challenge definitive interpretations of these gestures. For example, Russell Howard has referred to the experience of being the subject of Lee's metacomic critique as 'weird', saying 'That was the weirdest thing. We had a chat about it and he said "It wasn't me. It was the character"' (Herring, 2012). Richard Herring, Lee's former comedy partner, jokingly concurs with the analysis, saying 'I genuinely don't think he meant you any harm', but goes on to

destabilize this further by saying 'But the character of Stewart Lee does think exactly the same things as the real Stewart Lee does...' (Herring, 2012). Lee's epitextual activity has contributed to this ambiguity, influencing interpretations of these metareferential acts. For example, although Smith quotes Lee affirming the closeness of the character to his conception of himself (2018, p.152), Lee has also described his stage persona in the following way:

It's similar in lots of ways... but the politics and morality is exaggerated, he's more like the absolutist I was as a teenager. He's different enough that I'm aware of getting fed up of him when I'm doing the same show for a long time or going through a phase of writing. I'm sick of what he thinks, how he talks, how pleased with himself he is. (Saner, 2011)

For Bonello Rutter Giappone, 'overstatement' (2017, p.396) was key to early alternative comedy's dispensing with ambiguity. However, in the case of Lee's reductive parodies, their obvious overstatement and distortion, and the persona that Lee creates, work together to challenge stable interpretations. They do this in combination with the genre, with its built-in tendency to encourage its recipient to 'trivialize' (Brodie, 2014, p.33) the content, demonstrating Olson's view of parody's 'tendency to slip into metaparody, in which what is being made fun of is not simply the "target" text, author, or literary context but the current text (the parody), author, or reader' (2000, p.163). In this light, Lee's parodies are just as easily interpreted as self-mockery – the product of professional jealousy, or dogmatic self-righteousness. Far from repudiating irony (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.407), this contemporary iteration of the tactics used by early alternative comedians derives much of its fascination and power from its ambiguity of intention, and the speculation that arises from it.

As advertising

Despite the distancing from mainstream identities that is implied in the examples above – with varying degrees of sincerity and aggression – and the corresponding implications of resistance to commercialization, metareferences such as these have

also been interpreted as participating in their own commercial processes. As Moore notes, 'subcultural capital can be marketed to large numbers of consumers who want to seem versed in the latest thing, or at least don't want to be caught dead behind the times' (2006, p.235). Within this context, metareference is interpreted as functioning as both a critique of the commercialization of stand-up comedy and a means of establishing value for the performer and the performance within the comedy marketplace. For example, in addition to regarding Lee's comedy about comedy as 'a critique on the state of stand-up comedy masquerading as a critique of advertising' (2018, p.154), Smith sees it paradoxically as constituting a type of advert itself, a means for Lee to forge an identity for himself in the 'glutted economy' of present-day stand-up comedy (2018, p.152). Frankie Boyle has echoed Smith by arguing that Lee uses this function of distancing as a form self-advertisement within a comedy economy: 'People internalise marketing. You sell yourself and people sell stuff to you. He ends up going, "Michael McIntyre, Russell Howard, not like me." What the fuck is that? "Sick of that *old* washing powder?"' (Aitch, 2011).

The scepticism that greets the use of these practices in stand-up comedy coincides with a wider scepticism about the possibility of 'resistance through rituals'², and a view of youth or sub-cultures as participants in a consumer economy 'characterized by competition, insecurity and pressure, and not a sense of mutuality and collective identity' (Winlow & Hall, 2007, p.396). Janz has identified a resulting indeterminacy in the function of critical metareference in popular culture, in which 'the limits and conditions of media and art forms are explored and played with, often producing games whose potentially critical impulse at times blends with, and becomes indistinct from, functions of entertainment, social distinction, or commercial marketing' (2011, Janz, p.527). The changed commercial position of stand-up comedy

² In recent years, scholarship of stand-up comedy has identified a challenge to this scepticism. See, for example, Quirk, 2018, pp.45-71.

in the UK that was facilitated by early alternative comedy makes it harder for these resistant tactics to be received innocently.

In addition to leveraging sub-cultural cache as a means of advertising, Newham has argued that 'indie credibility can be maintained in the eyes of the indie community even as an alternative artist achieves success through the channels of the corporate mass media' (2009, p.20). Metareference may contribute to this. For example, Lee has incorporated negative responses to his work into his performances, activating the classificatory function that metareference provides to invite perceptions of himself as marginal (Smith, 2018, p.152), despite his critical acclaim and relative commercial success³. His *Carpet Remnant World* show toured between November, 2011 and December, 2012 (Lee, 2012), regularly appearing in venues with approximately 1000 seats. Although this is 'fringe' or marginal in comparison to an arena performance, in combination with Lee's long-running television programme, this represents a significant level of commercial success when compared to the roots of the alternative comedy tradition, and the current club comedy and arts-centre touring circuits. However, within his performances on the tour, Lee incorporated a range of metareferential devices that thematized his 'niche' appeal. In a recording of the show from 2012, he constructs a running conceit about the indifference, or hostility, to his performance from members of the audience who have never seen him before.

Up there, there's a lot people, they don't really know what they've come to.... Friends have brought them... They've come and they don't know who I am, and they've been whispering all through it up there, in the top bit there. Like, "Is this who you wanted to see?" (**Laughter**) "It seems like an aggressive lecture." (**Laughter**)... That whispering doubt, that will spread all around to the balcony up there. And there will be no one laughing up there by the end because of people bringing their friends. (**Laughter**). (Lee, 2012)

³ The disparity between Lee's construction of his identity on stage and his success in the world of comedy is the premise of Robins' routine (2015).

As the transcript indicates, this material is met with enthusiasm by the audience, and there is no indication within the context of the show as a whole that significant sections of the audience are not enjoying it. However, the playful division of the audience makes comedy out of Lee's apparent insecurity, while reaffirming the idea that he is not a universally popular act.

While Lee builds an intracompositional assertion of his alternative credentials into this relatively conventional example of crowd work, it is undercut with irony: the humour of the routine is predicated on the ironic understanding that the performance, and the performer, *is* successful, and that the perception of dissatisfaction with the performance on the part of a significant minority of the audience is a fictional construct, possibly the fantasy of the embittered, thin-skinned persona Lee presents on stage. External hostile responses to the performance may serve a similar 'protective' function when, against a backdrop of jazz music, Lee presents a range of quotations from people who have not enjoyed his performances in the past:

Rowing Rob on *The Guardian's* 'Comment is Free' site calls me "a sneering tosser." **(Laughter)**. Tokyo Fist on YouTube writes, "Smug elitist liberalism. Who is this cunt?" **(Laughter)**. Warto15 on Twitter writes, "I hate Stewart Lee with a passion. He's like Ian Huntley to me." **(Laughter)** Huey on YouTube says, "Stewart Lee, I will shove my thick cock in your throat, *(pause)* you gaylord." Z-Factor on Twitter writes, "Stewart Lee addresses an insular cadre of socially challenged, prematurely middle-aged, pseudo-intellectual men." **(Laughter)**. I know. Yeah. Look. **(Laughter.)** Not as exclusively as I'd like, to be honest. It'll just be us again soon. It won't last. (2012)

This section of the performance functions effectively as comedy, with the routine presenting a series of local incongruities – the homophobic insult juxtaposed with the threat of homosexual sexual assault, the criticism fuelled by a dislike of criticism ('sneering tosser') – framed within an overarching incongruity that unites the routine: the incorporation of criticism into a performance by the performer to whom the criticism pertains. Beyond its comic function, the inclusion of this criticism

constructs an 'out' group who are excluded from the complicity between the performer and the audience through their failure to appreciate the performer and, by implication, the performance that the audience in the theatre are currently enjoying. Through the construction of this third group, unknowable in size, but accepted as real within the performance, Lee is able to retain an 'amateur' aesthetic (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, p.107) by challenging the perception of commercial success and popular acceptance suggested by the performance venue, the positive reception of the performance and his critical acclaim, and maintain the appearance of a fringe artists who is underappreciated, or simply unappreciated, by a wider audience.

Lee's reflections on his own work suggest that, rather than being commercially motivated, the reconfiguration of the 'amateur' styling that Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies in early alternative comedy (2018, p.107) is central to maintaining the humour of his act:

I wouldn't want that [high] level of recognition [of more famous comedians]. It's quite difficult as a comic if you're that famous to know whether people are laughing at you or whether they're just excited about seeing someone famous in a football stadium. It's hard to go badly under those circumstances, and going badly is a big part of what I do. (Saner, 2011)

Furthermore, metacomedy provides Lee with a performative opportunity to signal awareness of the potential contradictions and negative effects of this activity. His 2019 tour show, *Content Provider*, provides a clear example of this strategy. The set for the show consisted of a 'stage... strewn with thousands of other comedians' live stand-up comedy DVDs, arranged in piles and at random around a small central staircase made of junk' (2019, p.292). During the show, Lee walked across the DVDs while he spoke, trampling them under foot and, on the occasion that I saw it, at the Southbank Centre in May, 2019, the cases audibly cracked as he moved around them, establishing a metaphor for the competitiveness engaged in by those participating in selling stand-up to audiences in its present-day context. The gesture complicates his relationship with this activity, presenting him as both a critic of, and

a participant in, this 'glutted economy' (Smith, 2018, p.152). This set was echoed by a lengthy routine that closed the first-half of the show, in which Lee described the financial challenges resulting from the cancellation of his television show and, as a result, the necessity for him to obsessively monitor the cost of his second hand DVDS on the internet, buying those he finds cheaply and selling them on at 'an extra ten or fifteen pence profit' (2019).

Friedman has argued that, while Lee may not intend his aesthetic boundary-drawing to imply wider social prejudice, 'this does not mean that his audiences do not read such snobbery into his work' (2014, p.217). However, the metareference described above provides an opportunity for Lee to address this potential (mis)reading. While the title of the show positions him as a *Content Provider*, by implication it constructs an identity for his audience, watching him trample across the work of other performers, as content consumers. In doing so, it provides them with an opportunity to reflect on their own role within this comedy economy, and the complicity of producers and consumers in the marketisation of culture. As the routine makes clear, through their consumer behaviour, they are implicated in the reduction of the value of these cultural commodities, leading to the aggressive competition that Lee exaggeratedly presents. This implicit metareference presents this dynamic as an object of reflection for the audience, who are invited to consider their own relationship to comedy as a consumer choice. The negotiation of this complicated situation, in which the performer cannot innocently locate themselves outside the commercial practices they criticise, results in a more complex form of metareference than that employed by early alternative comedians for similar ends, in which the moral clarity of their parodic satires, unconstrained by 'ambiguity', derives from a sense of clear political urgency.

Generic metacomic titles: transforming the past from the present

For Smith, Stewart Lee's determination to maintain the identity for stand-up comedy established in UK by early alternative comedy is an act of alignment with tradition. His performances look to the past, 'to the inheritance of the Alternative Comedy

movement of the 1980s' (2018, p.152), in order to define their relationship to the 'current epoch of stand-up comedians' (2018, p.153). A similar phenomenon can be identified in the metacomic strategies of The Alternative Comedy Memorial Society. ACMS is a comedy club night that is typically held in venues around London, including The Soho Theatre, The Bill Murray, The Albany and The Phoenix. Occasionally, the club is run in Brighton, and ACMS nights are held at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Although ACMS follows comedy club convention in booking a variety of guest performers, regular performers at the club, such as Bridget Christie, Isy Sutie, Sophie Duker and Alexis Dubus, are referred to as members of 'The Board', which is overseen by the club's primary curators, the stand-up comedian John-Luke Roberts and the stand-up and sketch performer Thom Tuck, who are also the regular joint-comperes of ACMS shows (ACMS, 2018).

ACMS has a specific vision and remit, which is to provide an environment that is receptive to experimental comedy: 'unusual but semi-established performers trying things they could never do elsewhere – the very antithesis of the anodyne end of TV stand-up or the clubs which try to recreate that' (Bennett, 2012). Performances that have taken place at ACMS include 'a woman with a pumpkin on her head bashing herself with a hammer... [and] a reading from an earnest academic paper about the effects of alien species on British freshwater life' (Bennett, 2012). Although its website is laced with irony, the description of the club as a 'leftfield comedy night stuffed to the gills with hilarious invention' (ACMS, 2018) accurately represents its commitment to deviation from the dominant orthodoxy in stand-up, and its emphasis on originality and innovation. In fact, the encouragement of experimentation and innovation extends to the prescription of the audience's reaction to new work: rather than expressing hostility or mockery, 'permitted heckles' within ACMS – audience interjections approved by the convenors of the club – articulate support for attempts at innovation or experimentation, regardless of outcome. Smith has argued that the ACMS heckles embody an attitude 'which acknowledges failure as a virtue, a failed attempt at originality is better than old

rope' (2018, p.65). Furthermore, he views clubs that focus on new and experimental material, such as ACMS and Old Rope, as 'the ritual celebration of the very notion of new material and the working out of jokes' (Smith, 2018, p.63) and an assertion of the centrality of originality to the professional identity of the contemporary stand-up.

The metareferential properties of the name of the club deserve special consideration within the context of the standard practice of comedy club nomenclature. The names of comedy clubs often contain a reference to their genre as comedy. *Time Out's* list of 10 of the best comedy clubs open in October 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic, featured four clubs that include reference to 'comedy' as a performance genre in their names: Banana Cabaret Comedy Club, Backyard Comedy Club, Camden Comedy Club, Country Mile Comedy Club and Top Secret Comedy Club (Lukowski, 2020). Another club, Headliners, refers to stand-up comedy metonymically. However, while these names do refer to genre, their dominant function is to establish the individual identity of the club. Alternative Comedy Memorial Society also serves this function. John-Luke Roberts, one of the founders of ACMS, has argued that the name contributes to the identity of the club partly by using 'alternative comedy' to signify a style or approach to comedy, and also as a joke: 'The idea of it is obviously alternative comedy doesn't exist anymore, so this society is mourning that but also trying to do it at the same time which is sort of inherently ridiculous' (Quirk, 2018, p.81).

However, unlike the club names cited above, 'ACMS' has the potential to activate a more thoroughgoing awareness of, and discursive reflection on, the nature of the genre to which it refers, and its relationship to that genre, making it an example of paratextual metareference. This cue – particularly in the whimsical context of a memorial society – may serve multiple functions. In part, it is classificatory. It follows Wolf's identification of a recurring use of metareference as a way to 'insert it [the work in which the metareference is located] into a specific (aesthetic, generic) tradition' (2009, p.66). The result of this is to suggest differentiation between the

performances presented at the Alternative Comedy Memorial Society and other stand-up comedy performances. This differentiation performs work- and context-centred functions. It appears paradoxical that a club that identifies itself as a home for originality styles itself as the Alternative Comedy Memorial Society and, in the club-collective structure, echoes the club-collectives that characterised early alternative comedy, such as The Comic Strip and Alternative Cabaret. Tony Allen argues epigrammatically that ‘Those who copy the innovator do exactly the opposite of what the innovator did’ (2002, p.32). However, while present-day performers using comedy as a space in which to engage in formal experimentation are not faced with the challenge that Alexei Sayle described as facing early altcom performers, to ‘create a whole new art form’ (2016, p.175), the club nonetheless opened in the context of a culture dominated by the styles most frequently represented on television (see Chapters Five and Six). The invocation of early alternative comedy provides a tradition that can be called upon to support an ethos of stand-up comedy that encourages experimentation and innovation (Quirk, 2018, p.79). While antagonism is still an attitude through which distance is established (see above), and conditions for an ethos of experimentation and innovation may be cultivated (see Chapter Six), this use of the early alternative comedy tradition represents a more celebratory and positive example of boundary-drawing. By aligning themselves with early alternative comedy, the founders of ACMS exploit the associations of the tradition to cultivate an audience receptive to a new wave of experimentation and originality.

While the work-centred function of this paratextual metareference is clear, it also has context-oriented effects. The Alternative Comedy Memorial Society presents several different acts on any given night: the promotional listing for a 2017 Edinburgh Fringe run of the club described it as ‘containing too many guest acts, i.e. “dozens of the bastards” (Chortle.co.uk)’ (broadwaybaby.co.uk, 2017). Citing it as an example of metareference does not imply that every act that features during an ACMS gig would be considered metareferential in character if it were presented

outside of that specific context. However, as a review by *Chortle's* Steve Bennett illustrates, the identity of the club, and its existence, can in part be read as a critical comment on the contemporary UK comedy milieu, appearing to suggest that elements of the alternative comedy tradition – in particular the emphasis on innovation and originality that the Alternative Comedy Memorial Society represents – have been replaced by derivativeness, and therefore require memorialisation: a performance by Joanna Neary at a night in 2012, for example, is described by Steve Bennett as mocking the 'rituals of stand-up' (2012) employed by Russell Kane and Michael McIntyre. In general, however, the emphasis of ACMS is on the encouragement of innovation and different through celebration and support – 'A noble failure!' – rather than the antagonistic critical parodies of early alternative comedy (Quirk, 2018, pp.75-100).

This metareferential act of distancing from the present context through explicit affiliation with tradition, however, is not neutral in its relationship to the tradition with which it aligns itself. Simon Munnery has argued that there is an assertion of continuity in the invocation of alternative comedy as a time-bound movement. 'Even as they claim to memorialise it [the alternative comedy tradition] they keep it alive' (2016). In 'keep[ing] it alive', however, the tradition that is invoked is not preserved with historical fidelity. Instead, the reference constructs a 'dialogue with the past, but a dialogue that recirculates rather than immortalizes' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.28). The process of memorialisation, to the extent that it can be described as such, is also a process of transformation, in part achieved through inclusion, omission and emphasis, that works as and on cultural memory. For example, performers at the Alternative Comedy Memorial Society do not perform material that is overtly sexist or racist, and may refer to liberal or leftist politics; the night itself may also serve a political function through its provision of a space in which participants are liberated from constraints they would otherwise be subjected to (Quirk, 2018, pp.75-100). However, the overtly political dimension that is regarded as central to vernacular definitions of early alternative comedy is not foregrounded, with ACMS instead

emphasising the formal innovation and experimentation of the early alternative tradition:

I think in fact our idea, at the time certainly, of Alternative Comedy was different than what a lot of other people's would be. I think ... we wanted people to play with form ... Our idea of Alternative Comedy, I think, was more form-based, was more not doing stand-up -stand-up. (Quirk, 2018, p.81)

The result of this recirculation is a contribution to cultural memory which participates in a redefinition of what alternative comedy is, and what early alternative comedy as a time-bound phenomenon was. Despite their ethos of embracing change and promoting innovation, early alternative comedy performers do not necessarily accept this retrospective transformation of their legacy. At an alternative comedy conference at the University of Kent in 2019, I was part of a panel presenting research on the practices of performers who tend to be grouped together under a present-day alternative banner (Wilson, 2019). During the discussion at the end of the panel, Tony Allen denied a relationship between the practices that had been described and alternative comedy as a historical genre, despite the apparent overlap in ethos and the adoption of the nomenclature. In that instance, the generic paratextual metareference created an antagonistic response on the part of the recipient, regardless of the producer's intentions, and gave rise to an attempt to control historical understanding of the genre⁴. However, the legacy of alternative comedy is not simply a matter of fixed academic and historical opinion, but instead presents an opportunity and a challenge to be worked with by contemporary performers aligning themselves with the tradition. It is appropriated and rejected, reinforced and reinterpreted – in short, it is actively worked *on*. This may result in what Luca Somigli describes as a 'loss in status of the original' (1998, p.289), which ends up as one of many versions which exist concurrently, rather than the

⁴ Allen has written a negative account of watching an ACMS performance in the company of other early alternative comedy performers (2011).

authoritative version from which other versions are regarded as imitations or deviant.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the use of intracompositional and extracompositional metacomedie in [re]drawing boundaries and asserting difference in the context of a sub-cultural comedy identity threatened by the encroachment of a commercialized and institutionalized mainstream. It reflects a situation in which this practice was so common that Stuart Goldsmith described metacomedie and a renewed alternative comedy as almost interchangeable, arguing that 'Alternative has now become mainstream and now new alternative is seizing on things like [deconstruction]' (2012). The use of metareference within present-day stand-up comedy to reconstruct boundaries between a commercial mainstream and an alternative culture can be seen as an echo of early alternative comedy's performance tactics for establishing an in-group identity that constructed itself as opposed to, or apart from, dominant practices and structures. The cultivation of this in-group may provide a powerful means through which a performer can make a connection with an audience, and foster a community that identifies with a different set of artistic and social values. In doing so, they may be viewed as a textual corollary to the creation of comedy communities such as the DIY scene described by Chow (2008). The use of metareference to this end is similar to practices employed in other self-consciously sub-cultural or alternative enterprises, at different points in history and in the UK and beyond (e.g. Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, *passim*).

These strategies have been interpreted as ways to critique commercialized and institutionalized market while potentially working as products of distinction within that market. However, while these metacomic strategies may contribute to the use of these performances as indicators of distinction, they also provide an opportunity for self-reflection and transformation. Firstly, their critiques are frequently ambivalent, demonstrating consciousness of the contradictory position they occupy in the market and, in doing so, inviting their audience to consider their own role in this process of

selection, identification and positioning, and whether their participation in these practices operates outside the worlds of commercialization and institutionalization, or whether they function as consumer choices within them. Secondly, through the potential responses they trigger among other performers, they may contribute to shaping the character of the circuit by instigating metacomic challenges to their critique, which can be challenged in turn, restoring some of the opposition and aggression to the institutional and commercial spheres which they criticise and operate in. Finally, rather than being viewed as nostalgic repetitions of a now obsolete sub-cultural tradition, even celebratory metareferences are actively involved in shaping the past, working on the legacies they draw on through selection and emphasis and, in doing so, revising and reworking how they are understood in the present.

Chapter Eight

'This will get me that fourth or fifth star':

quality stand-up comedy

The previous chapter explored the metacomic treatment of a dominant identity for stand-up comedy as a 'saleable product' with a mainstream commercial identity that is 'sold alongside chicken in a basket and alcohol' (Chow, 2008, p.125), and emphasised the metacomic thematization of a sub-cultural social identity for stand-up comedy, situated apart from popularization and institutionalization. However, as alluded to in Chapters Four, Five and Six, the identity of comedy as 'a performer-driven art form' (Chow, 2008, p.123) is not purely expressed through its proximity to the entertainment industry, but is also associated with a set of aesthetic criteria for judging the performance quality of stand-up comedy too. Many of the criteria used to determine whether a present-day stand-up comedy performance meets the conditions of art are derived from the ideals of early alternative comedy: for example, Quirk identifies a situation 'wherein many consider the best work to be signified by the creative ambition and emphasis on novelty that characterized the early alternative movement' (Quirk, 2017, p.228). This echoes Tony Allen's emphasis on the importance of 'challen[ging], question[ing] and confront[ing] cliché' (2018) as one of his three personal criteria for defining comedy and art, and comedy *as art*¹. For example, he praises his earliest performances on the grounds of their

¹ The uncertain relationship between comedy and art has been humorously thematized by Simon Munnery. Referring to a review of his comedy that described it as "the closest comedy gets to modern art" (Hello, 2007), Munnery explored the implication of the comment through a Venn diagram:

[It's] meaning...[is] comedy can never be modern art. It's not like "That's comedy and that's art", and they overlap a little bit, which I might have assumed... Even if I made that leap, somehow, magically... Cut out a couple of jokes, bit more painting (**laughter**)... what category of art would it be in? It would be in the category of shit art. (**Laughter**) Art that is perilously near being comedy (**Laughter**)'. (2007)

predominantly original content: 'It's a montage of personal anecdote, opinion and witty political slogans plus a few updated old jokes. Most of it is original; I've hardly nicked a thing' (2002, p.73).

As Quirk argues, the result of this legacy is a situation in which many performers on the 'circuit-fringe axis' (Smith, 2018, p.44) now reject 'a high "hit rate" of laughter as the sole marker' (Quirk, 2017, p.230) of quality in stand-up comedy. Richard Herring, for example, says that he aspires to 'having originality or doing something in a different way' (Interview, 2020). This is evident in his reaction to some of the negative responses to *Someone Like Yoghurt*, including being named *The Daily Telegraph's 'Worst Comedy Experience 2005'*:

It didn't get great reviews, and there were nights where it went badly, which is when I presume *The Daily Telegraph* saw it, and there were days when it went incredibly well. But that was sort of the point of it... I'm still sort of slightly bamboozled by it because I think if you saw that show on a day it didn't work you'd think "Oh, look, he's trying to do something..." It was what the show was about, so I can't really complain about it. (Interview, 2020)

Implicit within this comment is the notion that Herring values 'trying to do something' beyond creating the conditions for laughter in stand-up (see also Smith, 2018, p.44). Tony Law highlights the tension between the comedian's obligation to provide laughter for an audience, and the more expansive aims that characterise the attitude of many present-day performers:

You know I'm all for forcing yourself to try an idea out. But if it's solely about thinking about what the audience are going to laugh at, then... It's a hard one, isn't it? Because that's kind of the idea. (Interview, 2017)

Friedman argues that complexity is one of the criteria for judging stand-up that developed from early alternative comedy and still pertains today (2014, p.256), elevating the status of works that are judged as producing 'more of a three-dimensional experience' (Fleckney, 2018). The application of these criteria are identifiable in a range of receptive communities. Brett Mills has identified this form of discourse around comedy as particularly prevalent in the academy, in which

‘comedy is only of interest – and of worth – if it is doing something else at the same time as being funny... it is seen as a legitimate mode if its purpose is complex and, in the end, serious’ (2005, p.21). This receptive attitude is also common among those involved in making journalistic judgments about the quality of comedy. Although a culture of comedy criticism in the UK media lagged behind the growth in popularity of stand-comedy within the UK entertainment industry (Cook, 1994, p.3), journalistic writing about stand-up comedy is now a feature of traditional media platforms, particularly the Arts and Culture sections of broadsheet newspapers. It is also a feature of websites dedicated to comedy, such as the *British Comedy Guide*, *Chortle* and *Beyond the Joke*, which publish listings and profiles, but also criticism that addresses the craft and vernacular theory of stand-up. Much of the discourse about stand-up comedy across these media takes the form of reviews, particularly of fringe festival shows – often seen as the apogee of stand-up comedy as art (Smith, 2018, p.144). Friedman identifies these aesthetic criteria as the recurring basis for the judgments on which these reviews are predicated, citing two comedy critics’ responses to Simon Amstell as expressions of this reverence for an aesthetic of complexity and seriousness in the form, identified in the performers’ capacity for combining laughter with other emotional affect, including pathos. The first, by Becca Pottinger, writing for *The Skinny*, an independent cultural journal and website with a focus on Scotland, praises Amstell’s ability to ‘produce brilliantly nuanced comedy out of the most tragic of existential quandaries’ (Pottinger in Friedman, 2014, p.256). The second example, taken from a review by Kate Copstick for *The Scotsman*, expresses admiration at the way in which Amstell is able to ‘pull laughter from pain in the turn of a sentence’ (Copstick in Friedman, 2014, p.256).

Like Quirk, Friedman argues that the veneration of these qualities that may be regarded as traditional conditions of art among high-cultural capital recipients is a consequence of the ‘post-1979 aestheticisation’ (2014, p.179) of comedy – a legacy of the first-wave of alternative comedy’s artistic revolution. The idea of using stand-up comedy performance as a vehicle for the cathartic expression of complex and

conflicting emotions was central to the identity of Tony Allen, who sometimes referred to himself as a 'cathartic comedian' rather than an 'alternative comedian' (2002, 116). However, the relationship of early alternative comedy more generally to the presence of complexity and other traditional signifiers of artistic quality is more complicated. In early alternative comedy's 'eschewal' of irony and ambiguity, Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies a directness and overstatement (2017, p.407) that appears to contradict characterisations of early alternative as giving rise to a veneration of complexity in stand-up – although the political aims that this directness served may themselves be interpreted as markers of complexity. In 1991, by which time the artistic values of early alternative comedy were well-established, Oliver Double sought to clarify the properties of stand-up by way of a comparison with storytelling, emphasising the typically singular responsive outcome of stand-up – namely, laughter – in opposition to 'the range of emotional responses' that storytelling may produce (1991, p.3). Similarly, the number of comedians doing material about 'the difference between cats and dogs' (Cook, 2003, p.38) that Cook identified as a feature of the post-alternative circuit in 2003 is not suggestive of a culture in which complexity and seriousness were prioritised. Therefore, while the origins of a turn towards complexity and creativity may be located in early alternative comedy, the consolidation of this turn towards seriousness and complexity must be viewed as a more recent phenomenon. *Guardian* comedy critic Brian Logan, for example, has claimed that 'Standup [*sic*] in the 21st-century has been more emotionally intimate than anything we've seen before' (2019), and Romesh Ranganathan has argued – hyperbolically – that this has culminated in a stand-up culture in which the presence of laughter itself has become suspect:

In comedy, and particularly standup, there is an argument that looking like you're not trying to be funny has now reached its inevitable endpoint: standup that is not funny at all. Many shows are now more about tragedy, or ongoing struggle, and the trend seems to be to present these without any humour, imbuing the set with a greater importance. Some of the best comedy comes from squeezing humour from tragedy and struggle, but the main pursuit of comedy should be laughter... Having watched this kind of

comedy [comedy that places less emphasis on laughter and more on heavier emotional content], however, I have been struck by how much audiences are moved by it, arguably beyond just a show comprising simple jokes. (2018)

Friedman suggests that this aesthetic framework, which positions laughter as one of many traits that good comedy will possess, and sometimes not even the most important one, is common among 'high cultural capital recipients' (2014, p.256) who use comedy as a domain in which they can assert social distinction through the types of comedy performances they consume, the receptive strategies they employ and the language they use to discuss comedy (2014, *passim*). Herring jokingly alludes to the stereotypical pretension, and possible class basis, of this type of reception within

Someone Likes Yoghurt:

About 30% of every audience, they're kind of chuckling along to begin with, they're going "Yeah, I can see what he's doing, this is quite avant-garde. He's experimenting with the form of stand-up by being deliberately tedious. I read *The Guardian*, I understand that we, the audience, become part of the Theatre du Tedium, our reaction fuels it, and it's quite a beautiful thing. I enjoy." (2006)

The Edinburgh Show

Within a present-day context, these understandings of what constitutes 'good' comedy often find their expression in the hour-long Edinburgh show (see Chapter Five) (Smith, 2018, p.56). On a practical level, the 'Edinburgh show' tends to imply both the function of a stand-up comedy performance and its duration, describing a show that is longer than a standard club set, typically lasting between 45 minutes and an hour, and is performed at fringe festivals, both in the UK and sometimes at other international Fringe Festivals, such as Melbourne. However, in recent years, the Edinburgh show has emerged as a genre in its own right, with its own conventions. Typically, these include thematic unity, 'meaningful' content, frequently exploring the 'complex', sometimes painful experience praised by the comedy critics cited above, and structural coherence, building towards a climactic and satisfying resolution. Stewart Lee has described them as being:

the kind of shows that... are a bit like theatre one-man shows, but they're also high-end stand-up shows... The kind of shows I'm thinking about are by people like Daniel Kitson, Ben Moore, Will Adamsdale. Or proper sorts of theatre things like your Ken Campbells or whatever, where there is a kind of rhythm to those sorts of one-man shows, where there's funny bits and then a meaningful bit.... (Double, 2012)

The generic conventions of the Edinburgh show are sufficiently well-established for Alex Edelman to have playfully proposed a template for a 'cynical, "Build-a-Bear" structural hour' (Goldsmith, 2018), consisting of:

25 minutes of bulletproof jokes and three set-pieces... So, right away, you make your show a three-star show. The one that you end on should be big, and if you can end on a bit of a prestige, that's best of all. (Goldsmith, 2018)²

Edelman's structural template, in response to a question about 'a fictional hour' that would produce a show that could 'win' an award at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Goldsmith, 2018) identifies the existence of performances that understand and anticipate the requirements of comedy critics and awards judges (see above), and the relationship between approaches to the production of an Edinburgh show and the bestowal of critical approval or acclaim – for example, in his passing suggestion that the presence of certain performance elements equates to the allocation of 'stars' (Goldsmith, 2018). Lee's comments also indicate that the inclusion of certain features of these performances function as signifiers of quality – the narrative or themed stand-up show is viewed as 'high-end' (Double, 2012). In particular, the presence of a 'cathartic last act' (Logan, 2016) has been highlighted as a typical feature of 'complex' shows that are viewed as demonstrating high-levels of artistic quality, on the grounds that it provides the recipient with 'more of a three-dimensional experience with a broader narrative and/or an emotional core' (Fleckney, 2018). The

² The 'prestige' that Edelman refers to is synonymous with a structural callback that takes the audience by surprise, and he argues that these should be 'united by a common thread... to follow' (Goldsmith, 2018) which ties the show together.

extent to which this has become not merely a convention of the Edinburgh show but something approaching a requirement of one is jokingly confirmed by Tom Parry. While he describes the expectation of a meaningful ending in a stand-up show performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe as a ‘standing joke in the comedy world – “I’m sorry to hear that your dad’s passed away, but at least you’ve got a show for next year”’ (Interview, 2018) – he also acknowledges its dominance as an approach: ‘That’s increasingly become... the stereotype. You can’t just have a funny show. It has to have a point at the end’ (Interview, 2018).

The identification of recurring structures and formulas within the Edinburgh show, and their impact on evaluative judgments, is necessarily a source of tension within a context of production that emphasises its aspirations for ‘creative ambition’ (2017, p.228), originality (Smith, 2018, p.63) and complexity. It is unsurprising, therefore, that present-day stand ups have subjected the genre of the Edinburgh show, and particularly the obligatory climactic structural resolutions and ‘cathartic last acts’, to metareferential scrutiny. From 2010 onwards alone, Stewart Lee (2012), Tom Parry (2015), Fern Brady (2016), Stuart Laws (2016) and Jordan Brookes (2017, see Chapter Nine), among others, incorporated extensive metareferential comment on these facets of the Edinburgh Show into their performances, exploring the recurring use of narrative structures and ‘cathartic last act[s]’ and their relationship to judgments of quality. In 2018, *The Guardian* comedy critic Paul Fleckney suggested that the ‘cathartic last act’ accommodated a wide range of approaches, from the ‘cynical’ to the ‘subtle’ (2018). The following analysis looks at some recent metacomic treatments of the cathartic last act that demonstrate this range, all located within the broad spectrum of parody, and examines their possible functions and effects.

Tom Parry: *Yellow T-Shirt*

Tom Parry’s full-length solo debut at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, entitled *Yellow T-Shirt*, received an Edinburgh Comedy Award nomination for Best Newcomer in 2015. After 25 minutes of a performance of the show recorded at the Bloomsbury Theatre in central London in September 2016, Parry invites a member of the

audience to read a question from a card that was handed to him at the beginning (see Chapter Three). The question written on the card is, 'How does the show end?' This intracompositional metareference, prompting an instance of prolepsis, is given an extracompositional dimension by Parry's reflection on the nature of performances that elicit a standing ovation at their conclusion, and the feelings prompted in the audience by this experience:

Everyone feels it... it's incredible. Honestly, you get goose bumps and everything. Well, you're in luck, guys (**Loud laughter**) because that's how this show ends (**Laughter**)... But just so you don't fuck it up, let's practise it. (**Laughter**) (2017)

This instance of metareference serves a comic function: the performer's stipulation that the show ends with a standing ovation – something typically bestowed by the audience – creates an incongruity that results in laughter. By staging a mock-rehearsal of the performance's ending, stripped from the content of the show and reduced only to a set of formal conventions, the performance also defamiliarizes this structural component, laying bare its constituent parts and their intended effects:

The show is gonna end like this, right. I kind of, I do this thing when I finish my shows, where I go over to the mic stand, and I'll bring it to the middle. It's kind of my thing (**Laughter**). I started doing it a few years ago; man, a lot of people have been ripping me off – Russell Howard! (**Laughter**) – it's ok, you know, people need to get their inspiration where they can (**Laughter**). (2017)

Parry begins the parodic element of the performance with a visual convention that regularly occurs at the end of a stand-up comedy performance: the movement of the microphone stand from the edge of the stage, where it has been positioned for the majority of the show, to the centre of the stage. His explicit allusion to this device – a cue to the audience that the ending is approaching – functions as a metareferential key when it returns, and sets up an instance of incongruity that is completed at the conclusion of the performance: having seen the ending once, Parry's non-verbal cue that the 'real' ending is approaching – he looks at the microphone stand, as promised in the 'rehearsal' – is rewarded with a big laugh from the audience (2017), and

functions as a structural callback. The alteration of the predicted pattern that results in comic incongruity is achieved through repetition of content, rather than variation or surprise. In this defamiliarized context, the convention is no longer experienced as ordinary, or as 'artistic', but as amusing.

Parry develops the parody through the incorporation of more generic conventions that occur at the 'climactic' end of a stand-up comedy performance into his 'rehearsal' of the ending:

(*Solemnly*) Well, I guess that's it. Scientific proof that fancy dress can make you live forever. (*'Shine a Light', by the Rolling Stones as a bed for speech*) Well, guys, I guess what I've told you today is probably the truth of my life. But, do you know what? It's probably the truth of yours. I've been Tom Parry. It's been a pleasure. (*'Shine a Light' increases in volume at the chorus.*) (2017)

The dense combination of signifiers achieves 'a kind of... mimicry' (Kiremidjian in Waugh, 2003, p.68). The concluding homily, containing references to ultimate truths, is ironically awarded unjustified universal significance. The experience of this convention as amusing may be heightened for those members of the audience familiar with Parry's role as the 'in-house loose cannon' (Logan, 2015) in his prior performances with the sketch group Pappy's. The presence of uplifting music that mirrors the conclusion's themes of positivity and optimism suggests a structural and thematic coherence to the performance that is often associated with works of high aesthetic quality, but is comically laid bare here as a device. Through relocation and heightened imitation, the conventions are exposed 'in order to achieve defamiliarization' (Waugh, 2003, p.65). All of these factors contribute to the demarcation of this element of the performance as not truly belonging to the rest of the show – not the 'satisfying ending' towards which the whole performance has been inevitably moving, but instead something that functionally mimics those in order to activate the desired response from the audience.

However, rather than demonstrating a destructive ethos, the ridicule of this parody is diluted, reflecting Parry's view of the emotionally cathartic ending as something that is both a derivative convention *and* something that is capable of producing

genuine affect. The affability and positivity of his persona throughout – in keeping with the performance's thematic celebration of 'the spirit of fun' (Logan, 2015) – acts as a corrective to any inference that the backgrounded texts of the parody are regarded as inferior to the performance he is presenting. Indeed, Parry's ironic assertion that other more commercially successful stand-up comedians, such as Russell Howard, have been 'ripping me off' (2017), is followed by his own laughter, which further neutralises any aggression or criticism within the parody.

In this context, the 'degree of aggressivity' (Hutcheon, 2000) contained in the parodic elements of the performance is reduced: instead, the parody exposes their function – to signify to the audience that the ending is approaching, and to elicit an appropriate response from them – while simultaneously celebrating them, an approach to metareferential reflection that is consistent with the 'thoroughly joyous' (Bennett, 2015) tone of the performance. Furthermore, the parody facilitates the incorporation of a 'cathartic last act' (Logan, 2017), while demonstrating a self-deprecating awareness that the serious didactic content of this conclusion is not fully supported by the content of the performance. Parry attests to the effectiveness of this ending in fulfilling the emotional function of the thing it parodies:

It still had the same effect at the end... there's [*sic*] goosebumps. People would leave going, "Oh, I had goosebumps." And people would leave buzzing... And the anecdote that I tell in the show about the Mach fest gig where one of the comedians was saying, "Fucking hell, have you seen Parry's show?" That's true... I've told you [the audience]... this is what it's gonna be, [and] it still triggers exactly the right effect. (Interview, 2018)

Indeed, it might be argued that if there is a tangible 'degree of aggressivity' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.60) within the performance, it is intracompositionally orientated, critiquing its own incorporation of a 'satisfying ending' through illegitimate means: the 'self-critical dimension' (2010, p.23) that Wolf associates with pastiche. Parry himself identifies this ambivalence in the performance's parody: 'What I love is if you can show people, "Oh, everyone does this," but then you still do it, and it still works, then it's actually even more satisfying, and the audience can feel themselves

being manipulated [and experience the effects of that manipulation], in spite of knowing that they're being manipulated' (2018, Interview).

This is an example of 'the lightest of mockeries of which irony is capable' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.60), consistent with Parry's view of this convention as something that is both a cliché and an obligation: 'it has become a trope, and it has become something that comedians are in search of... That back-in-the-mic-stand moment: "This is what it's really all about"' (Interview, 2018). Consistent with this, Parry views the climactic thematic conclusion as legitimising the existence of the performance, to some extent: 'Once I realised that I had something I could finish with, [it gave it] a sense of, "This hasn't just been a frivolous waste of time" and then it feels like you can do it' (Interview, 2018). The approach that Parry takes skilfully negotiates the contradictory sense that endings of this type are over-used, but that without one the show is not complete. As a result, it lightly acknowledges the obligations of the genre, and fulfils these obligations 'consciously and with pleasure' (Eco, 1985, p.67).

The efficacy of this approach is also evident in Double's account of Stewart Lee's *Carpet Remnant World*, which treated the obligation of this convention in a similarly ambivalent manner. The routines of the show are built around a unifying narrative: the premise that Lee 'can't write material because his life consists of nothing more than childcare and driving to gigs, where he sees outlets like Carpet Remnant World' (Double, 2014, p.72). At the end of the show, this narrative reaches a dramatic climax, in which 'Tiny rows of lights appear in the rolled-up carpets at the back of the stage, transforming them into carpet remnant skyscrapers from the literal carpet remnant world' (Double, 2014, p.72). Lee offers this as evidence of the formulaic shallowness of a process in which 'a ragbag of seemingly disparate and unrelated items... can, if stitched together in the correct order, with a degree of sensitivity, give the impression of being a satisfying whole' (2012), resulting in exactly the vision for the show that he had claimed he struggled to create, albeit a parodic imitation of one. However, despite the framing of the parody earlier in the show as a mockery of the generic and imitative

‘sort of thing you get in those kinds of shows’ (2012), its effect when it is eventually incorporated is more ‘complex’. Lee has articulated the hope that ‘it does still seem meaningful and moving’ (2012); Oliver Double’s response to a performance of the show confirms this, describing the ending ‘as a lovely moment which is as strangely moving as it is funny’ (2014, p.72).

Stuart Laws: *Stuart Laws Stops*

Stuart Laws opens his performance of *Stuart Laws Stops*, first performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2016, with a succession of jokes with short set-ups and punchlines³. After around five minutes of this, he stops and says:

“Is that the end of the jokes section? Yeeeeees! Thank goodness.”

(Laughter) It’s stressful. I am on your side with that. It’s too much, just to listen to jokes, again and again and again. ‘Cos you’re there, and you’re like “Uh oh! He’s started another one. In five to six seconds, we’re gonna have to laugh, or just stare at him in silence.” **(Laughter)** But luckily, that’s not the trend in comedy anymore. When you do a comedy show, you’ve got to have a story. You’ve got to have depth, you’ve got to have emotion, you’ve got to have layers. Like a pastry. **(Laughter)** And so that’s what I’m going to do for you today. I’m going to tell you a story, about the time I met the love of my life. (2017)

Exploiting the explanatory function of the meta-level, Laws frames his performance as an attempt to fulfil the obligations of the Edinburgh show in terms of both content and form, delivering the emotional complexity and ‘depth’ of a love story, and the structural complexity that is associated with the narrative stand-up show. However, while Laws imitates the formal conventions of the narrative, the content of the performance undermines this, supplying an account of how he met the ‘love of his life’ that involves them bonding over misplaced Belgian buns, before she dies after being hit by a car (2017). Recounting the events of her funeral, Laws, like Parry, incorporates the formal signifiers of the cathartic emotional climax, adopting a solemn tone of voice and a serious demeanour and feigning tears, and sets his

³ For example: ‘France. Stop bringing me breakfast. Stop bringing me breakfast. I just want a little lunch.’ (*Stops*, 2017).

account of the events of the funeral against a sweeping soundtrack of epic electronica (2017). However, unlike Parry, whose attitude is ambivalent, Laws undermines the formal conventions of the endings with absurd juxtapositions – for example, relating the supposedly meaningful message of the show through a dialogue with a member of S Club 7.

After the conclusion of the epic electronic music, Laws ridicules the complex and cathartic narrative further by literalising its components. He describes his girlfriend as a ‘plot device’ and earns a big laugh by taking off his gilet to reveal another gilet underneath while shouting ‘Layers! The story has got layers! So many layers!’ (2017). This deconstruction is continued through an extracompositional comment that reduces the ‘complexity’ of the ‘on-trend’ Edinburgh show to a facile formula:

There’s a thing that happens in comedy shows where you have to good structure. Now what good structure means is that you mention something very early on, and you don’t mention it again for another 45 minutes. **(Laughter)** But when you mention it again people are like “Oh, my god, he said that earlier! What a cleverly structured show.” **(Laughter)** So, I wanted to have one of those cleverly structured shows, so I wanted to get a custom T-shirt made with a callback to an earlier bit of material that never goes well. And you’re like “Why has he kept that in? Oh, it was structurally significant.” **(Laughter)** (2017)

Having laid bare the formula, Laws explains that he failed to get a t-shirt made, and instead bought one of the display t-shirts mounted on the wall of the shop, thus failing to supply the show with a successful ‘prestige’ ending (see above). However, he then reverses this subversion, reintegrating an earlier line from the show as the conclusion to the performance, critiquing the convention of the structural callback while gesturing towards its fulfilment at the same time (2017).

While Parry’s employment of these very similar conventions signals knowingness while simultaneously allowing his audience to experience the emotionally cathartic climax that the Edinburgh show demands, Laws’ repeated description of his ending’s components from the meta-level, and their literalisation through visual puns, continually returns the audience to the classificatory act, increasing the

salience of their meta-awareness and refusing to allow them to appreciate the conventions at an emotional or intellectual level at any point. This rational act contributes to the function of the performance as an example of satiric parody that mocks its backgrounded texts, reflecting Laws' view of shallow incorporations of these conventions as a means of simulating 'good' comedy, rather than supplying the audience with 'good comedy' itself. He describes this as part of a trend for performers to seek undeserved acclaim through formal imitation by 'follow[ing] this production pack of how to do a show, and I think this will get me that 5th star or that 4th star or whatever' (Goldsmith, 2021). The satiric parody serves a contextual and developmental function, maintaining an aesthetic of creative ambition by challenging conventional wisdom regarding what constitutes quality. However, although the intention of the parodic text is to ridicule the conventions it appropriates, and to destabilize their authority, the persistence of the 'prestige's' association with quality is nonetheless hinted at in the big laugh and applause that greets Laws' final callback, even as the performance parodically undermines this association (2017).

Fern Brady: *Male Comedienne*

While Parry ironizes the conventions of the genre of the Edinburgh Fringe show in order to continue their use, Laws' appropriation of the conventions fits more firmly within the category of 'satirical parody'. Although it accords with the narrative of ridiculing parody as destructive, it largely restricts itself to the domain of aesthetics, supplying entertainment and education for its recipients through its exposure of artistic cliché and its implicit expression of an 'aesthetics of originality' (Wolf, 2011, p.30). The final example explored here, however, employs metacomedy to launch not only an aesthetic critique, but to critique the worldly implications of the reproduction of these artistic conventions and their uses outside the performance. Fern Brady's 2016 Edinburgh Festival Fringe show, *Male Comedienne*, treated the theme of 'the feeling of being left out' (Goldsmith, 2016) as the result of a combination of factors, including gender and class. One of the routines contained in

a recording of the show explores Brady's observation of the negative treatment she received as a result of having worked as a stripper and her fear that it would lead some people to believe she was not a feminist, saying 'I've read tons of feminist and gender theory books, but I paid for them all dancing for money with my boobs out' (2016). She then comments that feminism 'Can't just be for posh people' (2016). This routine is part of a larger series of connected observations during the performance that foreground class-based exclusion within the world of comedy, humorously centred around Brady's exclusion from the 'female comedians friends' brunch' (2016). The motif is metacomically designated as 'the serious part of the show. The part of the show to make middle-class critics like me' (2016), and leads into a critical parody of the climactic Edinburgh show ending, which Brady frames as cynically motivated and manipulative, connecting it to the inclusion of 'serious' content as a means of appealing to the receptive preferences of Edinburgh Fringe audiences:

Every Edinburgh Fringe show, it's very important that you not only make the audience laugh, you have to make them cry as well, and a lot of comedians will cry at the end of their show to show that they're sincere, even though 100% of comedians are narcissistic sociopaths. **(Laughter)** But I should be able to cry before the end... *(Attempts to force tears)*. I can't. I can't. Can I have some sort of emotional image or some emotional music, please, that's gonna help me somehow? (2016)

Brady exploits the classificatory and explanatory functions of the meta-level to reduce the content of the show – the 'emotional image[s] or... emotional music' – to their function as tools with which to manipulate emotional affect. These conventional and clichéd tools of emotional manipulation are then juxtaposed with disturbing visual images and bathetic self-pity:

(Ethereal music plays and an analogue photograph of Fern Brady as a child with her mother is projected) This was the last chance I had to be a normal woman. But it was also my first... awkward social encounter that I had with a woman. It was my mum. She hated me so much she wore sunglasses indoors and turned me away from her cos she was disgusted by me. That's doing nothing, could I have something else please, cos I just feel dead inside when I look at her? Oh, it's poverty in the third world. Oh, it's a sad dog, I love dogs. I'm not crying, sorry. Can I have something

worse? Worse dogs. I need to cry so I'm taken seriously as a comedian. Oh, thank you, it's a dead dog. It was a montage of dead dogs, but you can't get copyright for this recording. Sorry, this is doing nothing... I'm always eating brunch alone! I'm never going to be in the female comedians friends' brunch club! I'm not really crying! (*Someone runs on and punches her in the arm*) Ow! ... I'm still not really crying. I have to cry to win an award. (*Someone walks on and slaps her in the face.*) Oh, god! I'll never be accepted. **(Laughter)** I should totally act. **(Laughter)** (2016)

By presenting a subversion of a typical climactic structural ending – Brady has spoken about not wanting 'to have a serious conclusion' (2016) – the parody resolves the theme of Brady's show, enacting her failure to fit in at the formal level as well as at the level of content. It calls back to elements that have featured in the show, such as the 'female comedians friends' brunch', in a tokenistic and unsubtle way, allowing the audience to experience this structural device as shallow and undeserving of praise. Furthermore, the co-option of issues such as 'poverty in the third world' reduced to mere levers for the exploitation of emotion contributes to a satirical attack on the backgrounded works of the parody, and the attitudes that lie behind them. Brady's more explicitly moral reading of the recycling of these conventions is reflected in her direct rendering of them through parodic satire, which 'eschews' (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.407) any sense of ambiguity, contributing to an undermining effect that is characterised by a high level of ridicule and aggression, and communicates a sense of urgency as a result.

Whereas Laws' satirical parody largely restricts itself to a critique of repetitions of conventions as a failed simulation of quality within the context of an overarching framework of an 'aesthetics of originality' (Wolf, 2011, p.30), Brady's parody, in addition to satirizing the emotionally manipulative behaviour of stand-up comedians, implicates class-based receptive practices in establishing and perpetuating these production formulas (Friedman, 2014, *passim*). Firstly, she explicitly critiques the contribution of this formulaic application of receptive aesthetic criteria to the cultivation of a formulaic culture of production, through the automatic bestowal of critical acclaim and the potential for career advancement that

positive press coverage and awards bring. Just as disproportionate television exposure for a limited set of artistic approaches is critiqued as incentivising a narrowing of artistic horizons (see Chapter Six), so are the repeating criteria of evaluation used by critics and judges supposedly committed to upholding a culture of originality and creative ambition. Brady's critique exposes this application of an aesthetics of quality in stand-up comedy as producing a set of automated and repeating elements that constitute an impression of quality rather than quality itself – ersatz 'artiness' rather than art. The performance echoes critiques of popular culture that emphasise its standardization – its essentially repeating character as a mass culture commodity, which presents its listener with a 'standardized' product that 'is already listened to for them, or "pre-digested"' (Adorno, 1998, p.203). Although Adorno sees this as characteristic of 'popular' music, where popular is synonymous with low-quality mass culture, Brady's performance implies that this process of standardization, and a resulting standardization of reception, is a phenomenon within the supposedly restricted sphere of high-cultural capital comedy production too. This echoes Mills' research on the TV sitcom, which suggests that there is widespread awareness of the 'signifier[s] of quality' among the makers of television, quoting the sitcom writer Susan Nickson's view that incorporation of these signifiers 'leads to more critical acclaim' (Nickson, 2005 in Mills, 2013, p.105). Brady explicitly implicates the receptive practices of 'middle-class critics' and award judges in the perpetuation of homogenous content.

More broadly, the alignment of the 'serious part of the show' with the receptive tastes of 'middle-class critics' engages with the use of stand-up comedy as a means of activating cultural capital through the prioritisation of traditional aesthetic principles (Friedman, 2014). Contrary to the frequent accusation of 'meta-' strategies serving an elite group, Brady's use of these tactics provides evidence of their ability

to challenge the authority of cultural gatekeepers such as critics and awards judges⁴. Here, they disrupt the 'aestheticisation' of stand-up consumption, and empower the producer in the face of perceived co-option by a self-interested group, allowing Brady to describe a set of hostile power dynamics, in which a working-class performer's work is used by middle-class recipients for the perpetuation of a set class-based receptive practices. In doing so, the rarefied identity of 'artistic' forms of comedy, which construct themselves as opposed to a 'mainstream' form of entertainment that is perceived as primarily a form of consumer commodity, is challenged and exposed as a commodity in its own right, conforming to a template of production. In this respect, critical examination of artistic content and the political and social functions of comedy are intertwined. Ironically, the presence of metareference itself is often associated with an aesthetics of quality across medial forms (e.g. Thompson, 1997, p.83), raising the possibility that the performance tactics Brady employs to perform this critique of elitist receptive practices might result in her work being co-opted by them.

Brady adapts the controlling function of metareference to accommodate the reconstituted and expanded terms on which engagement between a stand-up comedy performance and the receptive activity around it now occurs. Rather than exploiting metacomedy to control an antagonistic audience in the room (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, p.143), she acknowledges the ways in which reception of comedy extends beyond the immediacy of the gig itself, into the formulation and circulation of critical judgments beyond the gig, and the ways in which these judgments feed into dynamics of cultural capital and, in their turn, have an effect on the shapes and conventions of the form.

⁴ In an otherwise positive review of Brady's show, Brian Logan commented that 'her snarky remarks about awards and middle-class audiences are unnecessary' (2016).

Conclusion

The proliferation of parodies of the Edinburgh show, with its emphasis on thematic and structural coherence, and its extended engagement with serious and complex subjects that may be perceived as counterintuitive in a form that is traditionally associated with entertainment, are an index of the proliferation and dominance of this format within UK comedy, particularly within the arts centre and festival circuits that have developed and expanded as a parallel circuit to commercial comedy clubs. They highlight the extent to which perceptions of the function and properties of stand-up comedy have also developed and expanded: comedy that seeks to tackle 'serious' topics and incorporate complexity is no longer mocked as an aberration as it was by nightclub and working-men's club comedians (Wilmot & Rosengard, 1989, p.26) – a ridiculous deviation from the norm – but is mocked for its conformity and derivativeness. The parodies highlight a gap between the ideals of a post-1979 comedy culture, in which stand-up comedy was envisioned as a form that would prize originality, innovation and self-expression, and reject formulas, and the reality of the present-day, in which the supposed expression of these characteristics is subject to automation and repetition. In doing so, these parodies serve a developmental function. They allow performers to comment on their own production practices, and the practices of others, to participate performatively in a public conversation about what constitutes quality comedy and, in doing so, to potentially shape the direction that the form takes. At least implicitly, they suggest that, in order to live up to the ideals of comedy as art and the foundational artistic values of the circuit in which they participate, widely held views about the qualities and properties that make comedy art must themselves be confronted and interrogated. Furthermore, they demonstrate the proactive nature of the developmental function of metareference in stand-up – the shows discussed in this chapter all pre-date a *Guardian* article arguing that stand-up should reinvent the Edinburgh show format (Fleckney, 2018).

As much as these performances constitute a critique of the recycling of performance strategies intended to activate awareness of their 'quality', the more critical of these practices also constitute a challenge to a particular receptive style and its participation in the calcification of performance content. Implicitly or explicitly, they question the legitimacy of receptive processes that lay claim to distinction based on seriousness and complexity, but appear to operate automatically, substituting genuine engagement with the work for a checklist of qualities. They ridicule these practises as failing to draw a distinction between good and bad, art and not art, and imply that this mode of reception is engaged in the same automatization as the mode of production that is also critiqued. In doing so, they encourage audiences to reflect on the processes by which their own tastes are shaped, foregrounding social formation as a factor. They encourage them not to automatically assign a judgment of quality in response to the reiteration of conventions – not to confuse the convention with the affect with which its typically associated. In doing so, they strive to cultivate an audience that draws a distinction between the signs of 'good comedy' and 'good comedy' itself. Furthermore, they implicate the institutional practices of comedy criticism, and the judgments of quality it reproduces, in incentivising 'cynical' practices of production. In doing so, they become metacritical-comic practices. In comparison to the parodic treatments of derivativeness in early alternative comedy, the parodies described here are all extended, reflecting the transformation of the object they are parodying within the arts centre and fringe festival circuits.

Chapter Nine

'I'm not like this. This isn't who I am': authenticity, truth and self-expression

The notion of stand-up comedy as a vehicle for 'authentic', 'truthful', 'honest' or 'real' self-expression is a recurring feature of vernacular and academic discussion of the form. The multitude of meanings attached to the word 'authentic' has been widely discussed, in the context of artistic activity and beyond. Funk, Gross and Huber have described it as a 'fickle' concept, touching on the 'genuine origin of things and true essences (of selves) ... It can serve as a yardstick both for radical self-searching and for the accuracy or veracity of medial representations' (2012, p.11). Given the 'protean' (Funk Gross & Huber, 2012, p.11) identity of the notion, it is unsurprising that discussion of authenticity in stand-up, both vernacular and academic, is varied and imprecise. Auslander, for example, defines 'the nostalgic desire for authenticity' (1994, p.132) as part of stand-up comedy's appeal, in opposition to 'cynical, commodified, popular culture' (1994, p.132) (see Chapter Seven). It is often also used to refer to the perception of a true self being presented within a performance, in which 'what we see on stage appears to be an authentic human being, unaffected by the process of performance' (Double, 2014, p.128)¹.

Pointing towards the complicated relationship that exists between authenticity and artifice in other performance modes, Double acknowledges that, while stand-up may be presented as an unmediated, truthful and spontaneous expression of self, and the audience receive it in a state of wishful naivety, locating part of their enjoyment in the absence of 'process', and the access to relatively unmediated communication, this is in fact an impossibility:

¹ Different types of authenticity will be observed in the same work, and may interact with each other to contribute to an overall experience of authenticity by the recipient.

John Harrop points out that there's a crucial difference between the actor who is 'both present on the stage and yet at the same time absent, replaced by the illusion he or she creates', and musclemen, Miss Universe contestants and stand-up comedians who are 'projecting themselves'. However, he qualifies this point by saying that performers who project themselves 'may be making adaptations to the conventions of the performance'. This is a crucial point – however authentic the person behind the mike may seem, the very fact of being onstage must affect the way they behave. (2014, p.116)

In stand-up, this results in 'an ambiguity of identity' (Double, 2014, p.124), which refers to the central question of who or what we are watching during a performance: rather than a fiction-truth binary, there is instead 'a continuous spectrum of approaches, each example subtly shading into the next' (Double, 2014, p.124). Nonetheless, Miriam Chirico views authenticity in the form of an 'autobiographical aura... [as] a hallmark of the genre' (2016, p.22), and Rappaport and Quilty-Dunn (2020, p.6) regard it as a 'normative condition' which, while not a 'constitutive' element of stand-up, is one from which 'deviations... are seen by the audience *as* [my emphasis] deviations' (2020, p.6). Ian Brodie interprets the 'issue of saying something authentic' as central to the construction of a stand-up comedy hierarchy of quality – a point of 'delineation between "true" stand-up comedians and others' (2014, p.152). In this context, 'true' does not merely distinguish between stand-ups whose material is founded in their lives off-stage, and those whose material is 'made up', but also points towards an ideal version of stand-up, against which other approaches are considered corrupt deviations.

One of the defining features of the development of stand-up comedy in the 20th and 21st centuries has been a shift towards authenticity as representing the 'normative' position on this spectrum. In the stand-up comedy cultures of the US and the UK, the presence of authenticity or truthfulness is often seen as a marker of difference between early iterations of the form, with their roots in vaudeville or musical hall, and more recent instances. In the United States, for example, the 'sick comedians' who first came to prominence in the late 1950s are viewed as an early and significant

expression of this break with the past (Rappaport & Quilty-Dunn, 2020), and the identification of 'authenticity' is often cited as a factor that differentiates them from their predecessors. Describing his admiration for comedians such as Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl and Dick Gregory, Tony Allen says that their acts had 'the ring of authenticity' (2002, p.70). The influence of the sick comedians on early alternative comedy performers contributed to the post-1979 transformation of a normative understanding of stand-up in the UK, reflected in the widely held view of it as a means through which an authentic representation of self could be achieved (Allen, 2018). The essentially contemporaneous association of stand-up with a perception of authenticity is implicit in the way in which acts that are perceived as deviating from this normativity, such as one-liner comedians, who may not, on the surface, appear to reveal very much about the individual point of view from which their jokes issue, are often viewed as nostalgic or retro. An article by William Langley in the conservative *Daily Telegraph* described the one-liner comedian Tim Vine as 'shamelessly old-fashioned' and as an 'antidote to the "tyranny" of alternative humour' (2014). Tim Vine himself has described his act as being influenced by older one-liner comedy that 'wasn't very chatty' and, as an implicit effect of this, 'old-fashioned' and 'quite traditional' (YorkMix, 2018).

Challenges to authenticity

Auslander has pointed to the work of Andy Kaufman as replacing 'a consistent comic persona... with a hall of mirrors in which no persona ever turned out to be a dependable representation' (2006, p.108). Bonello Rutter Giappone has suggested that a destabilization of persona and truthfulness, and the potential of a more 'authentic' effect as a result of this 'honesty' (2012, p.188) was an occasional feature of early alternative comedy. However, in a present-day context at least, the attempt to achieve an 'authentic' performance style, that appears to present an unmediated self and assert its truth value, dominates approaches to stand-up comedy performance. This chapter builds on these insights to identify the issue of authenticity, truthfulness and self-expression as a continuing source of fascination in

present-day stand-up in the UK. It also explores in detail how present-day performers use extended metacomedie to engage with these issues and the potential effects of these metacomie strategies on the audience.

At a recorded performance at the Aces and Eights Bar in Tufnell Park, London, in June 2016, Alfie Brown begins his act by ironically thanking the audience for an excessively effusive welcome to the stage that they have not actually provided:

Sit down! Sit down! **(Laughter)** No, sit down... You see the American ones where everyone stands up at the beginning? They're fucking idiots. **(Laughter)**... Anyway, my set... I much prefer this, like this way of working. Because you're not fucking hating yourself. Like, in there, I closed the door, and I was just staring at the mirror going 'You're shit, you're fucking shit, I hate you. You suck at comedy, dickhead.' And then you have to come out here and go (*Showbusiness attitude*) 'Hi, guys! How's it going?!' And everybody can just tell that you hate yourself. **(Laughter)** So, I think it's much better to distract yourself by talking to everybody first, and then you can forget that you hate yourself, so the job becomes easier. (2016)

In these opening remarks, Brown activates multiple potential metareferential reflections. Firstly, he calls attention to typical receptive practices of stand-up recordings in order to highlight a difference between the attitudes and behaviour of audiences in the US and the UK. He also acknowledges the disparity between the public and private self that stand-up comedy performances require, in which behaviours and attitudes are concealed on the grounds that they are considered inappropriate. This is particularly salient within a dominant context in which stand-up comedy is an 'entertainment product' (Chow, 2008, p.131), and the authentic self of the performer is presumed to be an aspect of that product, consistent with Haynes' view that they are 'selling a personality' (2013). This metareference has intra- and extra-compositional work- and performer-centred functions. It contributes to the construction of Brown's comedic identity as a breaker of rules, and a challenger of taboos, rejecting the performance of a slick, upbeat self on the grounds that it is not 'true' or 'real'. In doing so, it aligns him with the 'outsider stance' (Brodie, 2014, p.104) and 'social identity' (Brodie, 2014, p.104) of the 'true' comedian.

In the incongruous juxtaposition of the private and public selves of the performer, the metareference contributes to the audience's experience of this schism as amusing.

However, Brown follows this assertion of the truthfulness of his approach to stand-up with a complication of that position:

So, I'm not like this. This isn't who I am. Like, no comedian that you see on stage is like this. No stage performer that you see on stage, nobody on a chat show that you see, is the same way. Nobody is the same on-stage, off-stage. It never works like that. I went to like a metal festival recently. All the bands onstage are so angry. All of them just going (*metal growl*) 'Uuuuuuurgh! Kill the man, 'cos he killed my goat!' It's a real song by Mastodon. Then, you meet these guys backstage and they go (*Effusively polite*) 'Oh, my Gooood! So good to see you! Thank you so much for coming! **(Laughter)** Oh, my god! I was so nervous! Could you tell?! Oh, my God! **(Laughter)** Oh, my God! You know the middle eight where I have to 'Uuuuuurgh!' I thought I fucked it up but nobody noticed. Oh, my God!' **(Laughter)**. And then you go to a Katie Perry concert and onstage it's all (*Singing*) 'Baby, you're a firework!' And offstage it's all (*Furious shouting*) 'Where is my mink dildo?' **(Laughter)** Never the same. Onstage. Offstage. Never the same. (2016)

Through this routine, Brown creates a contradictory effect. He asserts his commitment to bringing his authentic self onto the stage, then disavows the idea, implicating himself in his critique by identifying and establishing a rupture between public versions of the self and their presentation in public. The metareference is both intra- and extracompositional, extending from Brown's differing public and private selves to encompass stand-up comedy as a whole. Writing about comic monologists, who she analogises to stand-up comedians, Miriam Chirico highlights the common dynamic in which performers 'play with the disjunction of public and private selves during performance, telling narratives about the public self they inhabit while revealing through performance—or at least seeming to reveal—their private selves' (2016, p.24). Brown's metacomedy critically foregrounds the artifice behind this claim to self-revelation, and its commodification, creating a situation in which the act of revelation itself is revealed as an artificial construct. This metareference functions

not only as a challenge to the authenticity of stand-up comedy's presentation of self, but applies across a spectrum of popular performance practices and genres, from metal to pop music.

The positioning of this destabilization of certainty at the beginning of the performance may contribute to increasing its salience across the rest of Brown's set, framing everything that follows with a question mark². Furthermore, its disruptive potential may be felt more keenly because of the prominent role that autobiographical truthfulness and uncensored self-expression plays in the public persona that Brown constructs. For example, he has cultivated a reputation for being an 'honest' performer³. The public profile of his mother, the actor and comedian Jan Ravens, and his relationship with the actor and comedian Jessie Cave, allows audiences to identify correspondences between the biographical information he offers during performances and the biographical information that is known about his life offstage. He has been described as a 'modern-day Lenny Bruce' as a consequence of the perception that 'he is tackling notions that the mainstream is never going to touch' (Bennett, 2014), while reviews of his performances have commented on his apparent 'scorn for capitalism and commodified culture' and refusal to conform to conventions (Logan, 2017). Furthermore, the intensity of his delivery has often led to the epithet 'passionate' – with its connotations of sincerity and commitment – being attached to his style. As a result of the rupture between these indicators of authenticity, and the confession of the presence of pretence or artifice, the performance provokes discursive reflection throughout about itself and about stand-up more generally: how close to the 'real' version of the performer is the presentation of the self on the stage? How close is this correspondence in any stand-up performance?

² See Limoges' assertion on the importance of 'modalities of occurrence' (2009, p.400) within the work (see Chapter Two).

³ Alongside Jessie Cave, a comedian and the parent of a child with Brown, Brown has participated in a discussion entitled 'Being Honest', in which they discussed the question of 'How important is honesty to art and comedy?' (Soho Theatre, 2018).

The challenges that Brown raises regarding the truthfulness of his own performance, the truth value of stand-up comedy in general, and its importance in the 'product' of stand-up, have implications for the performance as comedy. Persona, and the worldview implied by it, is used a frame through which the joking content of a stand-up performance is interpreted (Quirk, 2015, p.128). Apparent discrepancies or inconsistencies arising from a persona, worldview and performance style that foreground the revelation of personal truth, in combination with metareferential destabilization of the 'realness' of that presentation of self, complicate the recipients' attempts to resolve what is being said as 'funny'. In this respect, the intentional problematization of the authenticity of the performance may conflict with the construction of a persona through which the humorous content of the performance is realised. Moments of Brown's performance in which the audience appear to be caught between laughter and uncertainty reflect this (2016). The ambiguity of the framing, rather than helping audiences to trivialize the content and turn the performance into humour, instead removes a component through which access to one of the components that contributes to the identification of humour in jokes – the intention of the joker – is achieved, thus making it harder to arrive at humorous resolution (Storey, 2001, *passim*). The uncertainty around the humorous content of the performance is fuelled by, and contributes to, the experience of the uncertainty implied by the questions the performance raises about its truthfulness. It is in this contradiction and ambiguity that the power of Brown's metareferential statement lies: the audience experience the doubt and disturbance regarding authenticity that his performance thematizes. The doubt and disturbance disrupt the 'commodification of self' (Smith, 2018, p.35) that is part of present-day stand-up's economy.

'Everyone lost their minds:' illusory spontaneity

Daniel Schulze has described the historic link between the 'written' quality of a text and an impression of 'fakeness' in live performance:

The advent of writing... produced a rift between the live event and the written text, which can theoretically be consumed in the privacy and solitude of one's home. I would argue that in this rift between the written and the performed, a fundamental rift in the perception of this art form appeared, which will resurface a number of times over the centuries. Where the live performance of a memorized text that had never been fixed in writing always had a strong sense of authenticity, with the written text there appears an idea of fakeness. When an actor reads out something that is not his own, the performance can easily be perceived as fake or inauthentic. (2017, p.59)

Reflecting the prioritisation of an effect of authentic, rather than fake, self-expression, the connection between 'writing' and 'fakeness' is a factor that influences the processes used by stand-up comedians to create a performance text that gives the impression of not having been written⁴. Giving a lecture in 2013 at St Edmund Hall, at the University of Oxford, Stewart Lee supplied a description of his writing process that, while ironic, suggested similar fundamental objectives to those that animated Tony Allen in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

Like a lot of stand-ups, I try to write in the rhythms and cadences of someone who has cornered you in a train carriage, continues drinking steadily and determinedly over a two hour period, grows increasingly agitated and unhappy, whilst holding forth on a series of subjects he really knows little about and in so doing inadvertently reveals some great truth and/or the real things that are driving him to despair. (Lee, 2013)

The suggestion that the stand-up's text should reveal 'the real things that are driving him to despair' suggests a continuing belief both in the commitment to, and the possibility of, authentic self-expression through stand-up comedy performance, and acknowledgment that this is generally expressed through an act of artifice: the imitation of spontaneous and unmediated speech.

Josh Widdicombe echoes this judgment when describing his preference in stand-up for 'acts that [make] you go, "This feels so natural and conversational, it doesn't

⁴ See also Quirk, 2015, pp.77-82

feel like there's any artifice'" (Goldsmith, 2012a). He articulates a similar aspiration for his own performances, saying 'I like it to feel like a natural conversation that's really funny... I think it's really bad when someone will flaunt their writing... I want it to feel like, "This is a man talking about a subject"' (Goldsmith, 2012a), and his process for developing material reflects this. He describes himself avoiding the 'fakeness' of writing by mapping topics and jokes out using spider diagrams, finding links between subjects, and imposing a semi-recurring structure for the development of a routine involving a progression from premise to punchline (Goldsmith, 2012a). However, he eschews writing routines out in full, saying 'I will get the phrasing by saying it on stage, because then it feels more natural' (Goldsmith, 2012a). As Widdicombe's own language regarding artifice indicates, this process results in a simulacrum of authenticity judged on these terms: it 'feels *like* [my emphasis], "This is a man talking about a subject"', rather than actually *being* a man simply talking about a subject' (Goldsmith, 2012a).

Quirk has argued that the cultivation of this illusion of spontaneity is a cornerstone of stand-up's rhetorical power, 'one of... [its] most persuasive manipulative tools', that contributes to the audience's perception that the performer's material is 'fresh' and that the performer is quick-witted (2015, p.90), and thus ensures their act is well-received. Although Schulze argues that 'a strong sense of authenticity' (2017, p.59) can be retained in prepared texts through the type of strategies that Lee and Widdicombe describe, the framework outlined here – where the less 'written' a performance appears, the more 'authentic' and therefore 'better' it seems – encourages comedians to provide the audience with demonstrations of the absence of writing, in which the gap between the conception of the content of the performance and its delivery is reduced as much as possible (Quirk, 2015, p.88). In this context, interactions with the audience, either in the form of exchanges initiated by the performer, or responses to heckles, provide an opportunity to demonstrate this spontaneity and 'freshness'. A performer who is able to interact with an audience in a way that is convincingly spontaneous is viewed as having provided

evidence of both the unwritten, and therefore 'authentic', quality of their performance, and of their innate humorousness.

However, metacomedy has been used to critique the heckle response as an exemplar of spontaneity. Howard Read is a stand-up comedian who has been performing comedy professionally since the early 2000s (Interview, 2020). He performs at comedy clubs, as well as at arts centres, theatres and festivals. His act includes conventional stand-up comedy, musical comedy and, idiosyncratically, a quasi-double act, in which he interacts with an animated character: a young boy called Little Howard. This act incorporates a combination of planned and semi-spontaneous action. All Little Howard's movements and dialogue are necessarily written, animated and programmed before the performance (see also Double, 2014, p.326); however, Read uses a handset to control Little Howard, enabling him to select the character's actions from the range of programmed options and trigger them at the time of his choosing. This allows Little Howard to respond meaningfully and pertinently to 'live' and unplanned incidents occurring in the performance space, including interjections from the audience, and variations in the quality of their laughter, among others. In 2003, a show centred on the relationship between Read and Little Howard – *The Big Howard and Little Howard Show* – was nominated for the Best Show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2003 (see Chapter Six), and Read performs the act for audiences of children and adults at arts festivals and theatres. The character of Little Howard was also foregrounded in *Little Howard's Big Question*, a BBC children's television programme that was broadcast between 2009-2011.

Read describes the creation of Little Howard as a continuation of a wider set of critical-comic practices in his performances, and one that responded to a perceived inauthenticity in stand-up comedy as performed in clubs at the time of its creation, at the beginning of the 2000s (see also Double, 2014, p.326). Specifically, the intention behind Little Howard was to lay bare the illusory nature of the spontaneity of many of the interactions that occur in comedy clubs:

If you've never seen live comedy before, and you see someone [the comedian] chat to the front row, they appear to be the wittiest, most intelligent person. And sometimes they are... But very often, they're going off funny things they've seen other people say, funny things they've said in the past that they're regurgitating, which is all stand-up is... But I became interested in the idea, would it be possible to mechanise that process and to show the framework of it. (2020, Interview)

As Read's comments indicate, the primary intention behind the creation of Little Howard was a critical extracompositional metacomment on the spontaneity of these exchanges between performer and audience. The intended demystifying effect relies on the audience's understanding that the mechanisation required for the exchange negates the possibility of spontaneity: for the exchanges to occur at a speed that is mimetic of a typical interaction between a comedian and an audience member, Little Howard's responses must be programmed before the performance, to a greater or lesser degree. This mimics and exposes the lack of spontaneity of conventional human MCs in this situation, drawing from a bank of prepared responses based on common exchanges instead. Read notes that this demystification acquired a dual meta-focus: the repetitive regularity of MCs' prepared responses, and the predictability of the audiences' contributions to these exchanges as well:

I want to do 'An Any Questions' section on the basis that I think audiences will respond in the same way and ask the same questions, and it was devastatingly accurate. I'd never thought of this, and I probably would eventually because people started asking, but before I did any gigs my wife said 'Put in an answer to "Do you have a girlfriend?" ... Because he's a six-year old boy, and that's a thing that blokes who think they're funny say to kids.'... And literally every show, someone would ask 'Do you have a girlfriend?' And when he responded immediately with exactly the answer to the thing, everyone lost their minds. (Interview, 2020)

The approach taken by Read intersects with a form of metalepsis, in which two different worlds – one 'fictional', in the form of the animated character Little Howard, and one 'real', in the form of the audience and Howard Read – appear to interact with each other. Using the example of the live performances of the 'cartoon' band Gorillaz (2011, *passim*), Hofer has sketched the arguments around the

distinction between ‘true metalepsis’ – in which the two different worlds actually come into contact with each other – and what Ryan has described as ‘quasimetaleptic’ or ‘pseudometaleptic’ (Ryan in Hofer, 2011, p.240) events, ‘in which one level (fantastical) *seems* to invade [another] temporarily’ (2011, p.241). As Lindfors notes, something similar to a conventional narratological understanding of metalepsis, based on fiction, can be seen in many stand-up performances: for example, a situation in which a comedian performs an act-out of a fictional event, and the act out of this event is made to interact with the ‘real-world’ situation of the performance (2017, pp.50-51). Little Howard, however, heightens the sense of a more striking boundary violation having occurred because he appears to belong exclusively and solely within a fictional world, and his interactions must therefore be limited to those facilitated by his creator. As a result, when these appear to extend beyond those limits – for example, an apparently spontaneous response to an interjection that is assumed to be unforeseen – the sense of an actual metaleptic boundary violation having occurred is heightened.

The ‘mechanisation’ of a convention may be recognised as such by members of the audience who are already inclined to regard these moments of supposed spontaneity as illusory. However, as with the metaleptic element of Josie Long’s act analysed by Lindfors (see Chapter 2), the reactions of the audience described by Howard Read – ‘everyone lost their minds’ (Interview, 2020) – suggest that the effect of the boundary violation is not necessarily conducive to critical reflection. Read notes that the audience often resolved the contradiction that was essential to Little Howard as an act of critique not by adopting a detached attitude towards the illusory spontaneity, but instead resolved the contradiction by identifying it as a superior example of spontaneity: ‘I think people are more likely to think that I’m magic than to think that they’re predictable’ (Interview, 2020)⁵. In this situation, the prevailing expectation

⁵ For Little Howard’s responses to function as a critique of the ‘automatic’ nature of exchanges between a compere and their audience, the audience must locate the incongruity from which

relating to comperes, and to stand-up comedians in general – that they are capable of skilful spontaneity, and that spontaneity is necessitated by the demands of the performance situation (Double, 2014, p.331) – works against the intention of the text, not merely neutralising its intended effect, but helping to co-opt it as an example of exactly the phenomenon it is intended to critique⁶.

Furthermore, in this case, the context of the genre's expectations, in which comedy is primarily viewed as entertainment, may militate against the interpretation of this content as critical. In particular, the intense sensations of enjoyment identified by Read in recipients of the performance seems to be connected to the perceived 'impossibility' of Little Howard's spontaneous interactions with the audience, which Hofer identifies in responses to Gorillaz (2011, p.245). The sensational effect of Little Howard may be regarded as more heightened than when a live performer incorporates the performance situation into an act-out, for example, because of the belief that the interaction between these two worlds should not be possible, and is therefore genuinely metaleptic, rather than merely quasimetaleptic (see above).

While the implicit metacomedy that Read employs may, for some audience members, work against its critical intention, it produces some of the positive effects that metaleptic activity can facilitate, as outlined by Hofer (2011, pp.244-46). Firstly, and perhaps most importantly in the context of stand-up comedy, Little Howard serves a ludic purpose (Hofer, 2011, p.245). Although, as Read has described, the

the humour derives in the unexpected revelation of a supposedly spontaneous process revealed to be an automatic one. However, recipients who miss this metacomic element may still enjoy the humour of Little Howard's specific responses in these interactions, laughing at the jokes themselves rather than the incongruous meta-joke.

⁶ A similar receptive process may occur in the example of Alfie Brown cited above. The 'joking' situation within which the question is framed may lead some recipients to resolve the contradiction between the authentic self and the self presented on stage through recourse to genre, especially in the context of a performance that Brian Logan argued emphasised 'Provocation [as] the keynote: Brown has an armful of subversive arguments, some of which surely aim more to ruffle than persuade' (Logan, 2017). Within this context, the metareference may function as an act of 'trivialization' that 'encourages the dismissal of what is said by marking it off from the serious' (Brodie, 2014, p.33).

intention of this metareferential element is a critical one, it is criticism delivered through playfulness, with the edge of the criticism softened through the endearing and sympathetic persona of Little Howard. While it may not consistently succeed in dismantling an illusion, its ludic approach nonetheless contributes to a vision of stand-up that either breaks conventions or moves beyond them and, in its playful creativity, contributes to an expanded notion of what is possible within the form (Hofer, 2011, p.245). Little Howard, therefore, may be read as a celebration of stand-up. Despite its apparent limitations – restricted to a solo performer, often with little in the way of augmentation – it points to its capaciousness, and the breadth of approaches that it can accommodate within its fundamental simplicity. Furthermore, the audience’s enthusiasm for Little Howard’s programmed responses, along with the skill that Read acknowledges he discovered was necessary to make it successful, results in the act functioning as a celebration of the type of illusory spontaneity in crowd work that it was originally intended to satirise: ‘It sort of turned into a homage to those people, as well as a mickey-take... It sort of made you appreciate when a human does it’ (Interview, 2020). This is a version of the function of medium-celebration that Hofer identifies in Gorillaz (2011, p.245).

Negotiating and achieving authenticity through metacomed

The demand that a stand-up comedy performance be at once authentic, while also supplying its audience with humour, may result in tension between these two obligations – this tension is central to the metacomed of Hannah Gadsby’s *Nanette*, with Gadsby concluding that, if she is to speak honestly about her experiences, it cannot be within a framework of stand-up comedy (Krefting, 2019, p.166 – see below). Formulaic joke structures, in particular, are often held up as antithetical to the achievement of authentic self-expression within stand-up, as the destructive parodies of packaged jokes by the first wave of alternative comedians indicate (see Chapter Four)⁷. The potential limitation to honesty, truth and authenticity imposed

⁷ See also Tim Vine’s comments above.

by the joke formula may be felt particularly keenly by performers who regard authenticity as a foundational element of their identity and their performance persona and ethos. Josie Long, for example, describes herself as a comedian motivated by a 'desire for authenticity and honesty' (Double, 2014, p.417), and her creative practices are informed by this. For example, describing the content of her performances, she says 'I do try and write it [stand-up] about what I have been genuinely thinking and feeling' (Double, 2014, p.417). Long demonstrates how a performer who prioritises authenticity and honesty can playfully use metacomedry to acknowledge the occasionally conflicting demands of these two obligations, and create more humour from this tension. In her 2008 Edinburgh show, *Trying is Good*, she performs a routine about 'physical weaknesses' that culminates with her lifting her t-shirt up to reveal a sea scene drawn on her stomach. From this, she segues into a section on her enthusiasm for art:

I like drawing in general. I like to make things. I like to think of myself as quite a crafty person. I like to think of myself as Renaissance woman. In so far as I'm a little bit overweight and I like (*emphasising each word that follows*) lying around in the nude! (**Lots of laughter**) That's my favourite joke. That's my best joke. It's about art and I get to go (*mimicking her emphasis on the punchline*) bang, bang, bang! (*Excitedly*) Can we do that with every joke? (*Earnestly*) No. No. It just doesn't seem sincere sometimes. (**Laughter**). (2008)

The transition to a meta-level from which Long comments on the 'joke' in the routine, acknowledging its formulaic construction and artificial delivery, allows her to navigate the tension between the creation of humour through joke formulas, and the inevitable compromise to authentic self-expression that this entails. This is another example of the way in which metacomedry can help performers concerned with authenticity and 'sincerity' to navigate the challenges represented by 'hack' formulas without rejecting them altogether, allowing them to be used and enjoyed 'but with irony, not innocently' (Eco, 1985, p.67). Long also demonstrates the importance of persona in determining the effect of this strategy. While this metacomment does imply a theory of stand-up comedy that incorporates 'sincerity'

as a desirable component, and implicitly criticises acts that are over-reliant on formulas, Long's persona in this section of the performance is friendly and joyful, and the celebratory framing of the artefactuality of the joke contributes to a dilution of the critical or ridiculing ethos directed towards the acts who use these devices and the audiences who appreciate them.

Case Study: Jordan Brookes: The Making Of, Body of Work and Bleed

None of the metacomic thematizations described so far in this chapter suggest that notions of 'authentic', 'truthful' or 'real' self-expression have dwindled in their significance to 'insider theories' (McGlaughlin, 1996, p.102) of stand-up comedy. Even those that position it as something to be questioned or negotiated, elusive and potentially unobtainable, implicitly acknowledge its importance to normative understandings of the form. However, Daniel Schulze has characterised contemporary culture as one which 'seeks authenticity' and in which 'authenticity permeates all areas of cultural production' (2017, p.251), in line with a broader turn towards authenticity within a post-postmodern or metamodern structure of feeling (see Chapter One). He argues that this appetite is reflected in the behaviour of present-day audiences, both in preference and receptive attitudes: 'Audiences are interpreting works differently today than they did in the 1990s and they also go for different kinds of works, which offer possibilities of truth, intimacy, hapticity and so on – in short, authentic experience' (2017, p.252). Schulze identifies metareference as one of the recurring and important 'aesthetic strategies' to create experiences of authenticity in the contemporary performing arts (2017, *passim*). Although this notion is originally drawn from Wolfgang Funk's work on the present-day novel (2015), extended narrative acts have come to the fore in stand-up comedy in recent years, as described in the previous chapter, and have been designated as high quality on the basis that they are equipped to communicate experiences and emotions more powerfully than stand-up shows that consist of more fragmented segments or 'bits'. Unlike typically postmodern uses of metareference, in which

metareference contributes to works that toy with, problematize or deny the possibility of authenticity, Funk and Schulze identify a trend towards achieving authenticity *through* the incorporation of metareference, by drawing attention to the process of a work's construction and, in doing so, paradoxically achieving 'truthful and sincere representation of experience' (Funk, p.201, 2015).

In stand-up comedy, Mary Luckhurst (2019) and Sarah Balkin (2020) have both identified Hannah Gadsby's deconstruction of stand-up as a vehicle for authentic self-expression as part of a process of reformulating the genre in order to arrive at something more authentic (see below). For example, Luckhurst interprets Gadsby's destruction of her persona, and stand-up more generally, as a means of critiquing the limits of comedy as a vehicle for expressing trauma, and of reconstituting it to meet the needs of the individual performer (2019, p.64). This desire is consistent with the paradigm of authenticity outlined above, and its methods are related. In the UK, the work of Jordan Brookes makes an interesting case study in this context. Brookes took his first stand-up show, *Adventures in Limited Space*, to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2015. His performances have regularly won praise from comedy critics (Logan, 2017; Bennett, 2018; Copstick, 2019 etc.), along with recognition in the form of awards: he was nominated for the Edinburgh Comedy Awards main prize in 2017 for *Body of Work* and won the prize in 2019 for *I've Got Nothing*. He performs on the 'circuit-fringe axis' (Smith, 2018, p.44), appearing at self-described alternative comedy clubs, but primarily focuses on the production of a new, standalone show every year, which typically receives its debut at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and is then performed in small theatres and art centres, including extended runs in London. Rather than creating an experience of authenticity through the presentation of a form of illusory unmediated spontaneity, Brookes actively and systematically foregrounds the artefactuality of his performances. However, Brookes himself has stressed the communication of authenticity as fundamental to his work: 'My style is a mix of developing what I think is funny, and I think as long as you're coming from an authentic place then people will see that... No matter how different or unique it

might be, I think people will get on board because they can sense authenticity' (Tsimbis, 2019). Two of Brookes' performances – *Body of Work* and *Bleed* – are considered here, within the framework of authenticity achieved *through* metareference. What follows is not an exhaustive itemisation of all of the metareferential strategies used by Brookes during these performances, which are too numerous to include fully, and qualify the shows as meta-works, but some elements that are illustrative of this.

Body of Work

Body of Work purports to be a show about Brookes' relationship with his grandmother, and explores the function of narrative as a means of achieving authentic self-expression in stand-up, with much of the metareferential activity examining the capacity for narrative structures to capture 'real' life experience. Ten minutes into an hour-long performance recorded at The Pleasance, London, in 2019, Brookes activates an extracompositional metareference regarding film narratives, and their mimetic capabilities:

You know when you go to the cinema... You're getting a proper lob on for the film, aren't you? **(Laughter)** You start jonesing for a narrative, jonesing for a narrative. **(Laughter)** Proper craving a beginning, a middle and an end. Oooh, yes, please. Some relatable characters? Mmmm, gimme, gimme. **(Laughter)** An inciting incident to start the whole thing off? Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, please. **(Laughter)** And then the film starts and you're watching it and you're like... "Uhh." Know what I mean? 'Cos arguably, Christmas Eve is better than Christmas Day, isn't it? Christmas Eve, you look at your presents and you go, *(Excited and optimistic)* "That could be anything." Christmas Day, you open it and you go *(Disappointed)* "It's that specific thing"... **(Laughter)** Ideally, ideal scenario, we'd just stay here forever, never really starting, just enjoying the potential. And then at the end of it, just as you're all leaving, you shake me by the hand and you go "That could have been brilliant, mate. **(Laughter)** That could have been tip top." Never mind. Life ain't like a film is it, guys? **(Laughter)** Is it? Gutting. Absolutely gutting. Did you hear this? Life ain't like a film, buddy. Deal with it. Deal with it. Do you ever find yourself wishing that the credits could roll on a particular feeling or experience? Do you ever find yourself walking down the street like "And that was the last time I thought about her. **(Laughter)** Starting froooooom.... NOW!" Just looking down, waiting for

the credits to roll, just thinking “Who directed this? Who directed this? Oh, it’s my lack of self-esteem again. There it goes.” (2019)

Having established scepticism about the functionality of conventional narrative structures to truthfully capture ‘the singularity of the individual experience and its ultimate unrepresentability’ (Funk, 2011, p.134) – particularly archetypal narrative structures of the type often employed in Hollywood films – Brookes nonetheless announces his intention to recount the story of his relationship with his grandmother through these means:

Nana, she was an incredible storyteller. She was the kind of person that would sit on a chair, start telling a story and from the moment she started speaking to the moment she finished you’d be completely engaged. Proper beginning, middle, end stories, you know? I’m not really like that. I find it very difficult to concentrate. I get easily distracted, but I’m going to try for her, as a tribute to her, I’m going to talk about her, in her style. Because four months before she died, she said to me, “If you ever talk about me on stage, be honest.” And that’s what I’m going to do. (2019)

However, despite this declaration, the difficulty of telling a story that can adequately capture the experience of real life is repeatedly asserted and enacted throughout the performance. For example, Brookes finds himself unable to sit in a chair on the stage, in imitation of his grandmother’s storytelling habit, with the result that he is unable to start telling the story. This leads to an extended act-out, in which he attempts to coax himself into beginning, trying to slide into the chair gradually, by degrees, but failing. He repeats ‘Once a upon a... once upon a... once upon a....’ (2019) but is unable to move beyond this conventional formulation. Eventually, he attempts to wrestle himself into the chair, but fails, and has to ask an audience member to force him into it. When he manages to begin the story, telling the audience when and where his grandmother was born, he quickly digresses. The rest of the performance continues in this fragmented and digressive style, interspersing information about Brookes’ grandmother’s life with long, tangential routines about his failure to give up smoking, an imaginary dog, a TV variety show called the Benny Peters show and

his sexuality, particularly his sexual attraction to his grandmother. The truth-value of the content is repeatedly asserted and then undermined, and very little information about Brookes' grandmother appears to be imparted (2019).

In the last 10 minutes of the show, Brookes appears to open up to the audience, revealing in a confessional tone that the metareferential thematization of the inadequacy of narrative as a means of capturing 'authentic' experience, and the challenges of relating a satisfactory story, have been a formal enactment of his experience of his grandmother's dementia:

So, about six years before she died, my nan turned to me and said "Where's Jordan?" Now, in case you've not been paying much attention, I'm Jordan. The thing about dementia is, it ruins someone's world. It devastates their story. It takes away their beginning, their middle, their end. And they tell you to live in it with them. That's the best thing for them. You don't challenge them. You inhabit that world with them, with all of its inconsistencies, its weird outbursts, you live it with them. So, if they tell you there's a dog in the corner, and there's not, you go along with it. If they start reliving a memory as if they're 14 years of age all over again... you live it with them. If they tell you that their favourite show is the Benny Peters Show and you're pretty sure that never existed, you play it out with them, it's the best thing for you, it's the best thing for them. It's a horrible disease. It takes away all structure, and it turns it into chaos. (2019)

However, having apparently asserted the authenticity of the content of the show, and its expression at the formal level through metareference, Brookes undermines this sincerity again, appearing to 'oscillate' (Vermeulen & Akker, 2017, p.10) back towards deconstruction and emptiness:

Four months before she died, my nan turned to me and said "If you ever talk about me onstage, be honest. Tell them I've got dementia." And I said "But Nana, you don't have dementia." **(Laughter)** And she said "I know but that's the most dramatically interesting disease... **(Laughter)** It'll provide a delightful framework within which you can experiment and get away with a lot of stupid shit"... She said 'If there's anyone who can get away with it, son, it's you. You're smart, you're funny, you're genuinely inventive, you're changing the face of stand-up comedy as we know it. I said "Nana, stop it, you're making me blush. I haven't even won any

awards.” And she said “AND THAT IS A FUCKING TRAVESTY!”
(**Laughter**) (2019)

In a final twist to the performance, Brookes adds a postscript, in the form of a personal confession. He describes his experience of Pure OCD, a condition characterised by repeated, intrusive and uncontrollable thoughts, which led to him being ‘flooded’ by sexual thoughts about his grandmother, and left him ‘petrified of being the same room as her’, a situation which ‘completely ruined’ their relationship. Brookes concludes this personal revelation by saying ‘That’s about as honest as I can get’ (2019). An experience of uncontrollable thoughts that refuse to coalesce into a coherent narrative – and the relationship between narrative and the construction of the self – is finally achieved at the formal level through a systematic foregrounding of the medial aspects of the performance. The ‘cold’ aesthetic that Rustad and Schwind identify in postmodern uses of comic deconstruction is ultimately replaced with an ‘aestheticization’ of authentic experience (2017, p.135).

Similarly, Brookes’ 2016 Edinburgh Festival Fringe show, *The Making Of*, which declares itself an account of a gap year, incorporates an arsenal of narrative tricks, including false beginnings, false endings, re-enactments of events in the show that happened seconds before, and metacommentary on elements of the show as those elements unfold. Brookes concludes the performance by explaining the reality of his ‘gap year’:

Drop out, right, have some sort of identity crisis...pacing the bedroom day in day out, dwelling on your insecurities... the walls’ll start coming in, right, you’ll start feeling increasingly alone and alienated, you’ll start pushing people away... and eventually you’ll feel totally and utterly alone. (2016)

The metareferential elements are again revealed as an enactment of this experience at the formal level: ‘Instead of telling you what I did on my gap year, I thought I would just show you how I felt’ (2016). The ‘democratic’ opportunities presented by metareference (see Chapter 3) are not only an opportunity to create a connection

with the audience at a more intimate level of process, but also to attempt 'to achieve a higher level of truthfulness/authenticity' (Funk, 2015, p.134). Specifically, they constitute a form of mentalization, depicting through metareference 'a more complex self: a self that looks at itself, a self that takes itself as an object of thought and reflection' (Coates 2006: xv in Mader, 2011, p.236), and an attempt to communicate what that self sees to others.

The unusual dynamic that Brookes establishes in these performances, and the challenge they represent for audiences, has been humorously documented by Brookes himself, whose social media posts often include self-deprecating descriptions of unsuccessful gigs in which the audience responded with confusion or hostility (Brookes, 2020). However, it is clear from responses to Brookes' performances that, while they may not achieve mainstream popularity, they leave a lasting impression on the audience which may, in part, be attributable to the perception of authenticity created by the manoeuvres described above. Many reviews of Brookes' performances make reference to their 'disturbing' (Logan, 2018) or 'unsettling' quality (Dessau, 2020).

Bleed

The concern with authentic self-expression, exploring the possibility of finding a means of communicating 'a reality beyond representation' (Funk, 2015, p.14), is also a focus of Brookes' show *Bleed*, which debuted at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2018. Writing in *The Telegraph*, Tristram Fayne Saunders argued that:

The first big one [theme] is the impossibility of ever truly knowing another person. We're all stuck inside our own heads, never really living in the present moment, as Brookes explains in his opening half-hour of bleak observational stand-up and uneasy crowd interaction. It's an entertaining segment that sets the evening's tone, but is mostly there to sow the seeds for later callbacks. (Fane Saunders, 2018).

Within the show, the assertion that it is impossible to ever truly know another person is made during an early interaction with a couple in the audience, as part of a reflection on the difficulty of maintaining a romantic relationship. Although this is a

heteroreferential observation, directed towards the concerns of the 'real' world, within the context of a stand-up comedy performance, and particularly a stand-up comedy performance by a performer whose own work self-reflexively comments on its interrogation of the form (see above), it is double-coded, activating discursive reflection on the performance itself and stand-up as a system of artistic communication. If the normative identity of present-day stand-up comedy partly consists of its suitability as a vehicle for self-expression, then a general statement about the impossibility of understanding another person must constitute a direct challenge to one of its fundamental claims.

After this discursive preamble, which establishes the 'big' themes of the show, Brookes stages a disruption to the aural mediation of the show that requires him to distribute binaural headphones to the audience. At the Edinburgh Festival, the necessity for distributing the headphones was attributed to noise 'bleeding' in from outside the venue. However, in a performance at the Soho Theatre, the pretext was altered to suit the different production circumstances, and the use of headphones was justified by a faulty microphone (2018). The aural component of the rest of the performance is experienced through these headphones. The content the audience hear through the headphones is a combination of pre-recorded sound effects and noises, along with the verbal interjections that Brookes' produces live through a radio mic, providing an insight into his internal monologue, as well as simulating events occurring in the room, including the responses of other audience members. This has been experienced as a 'clos[ing] of the gap' between experience and the mediated expression of that experience: 'Suddenly, there is nowhere to run. He's breathing down your neck at one moment, plugging you directly into his frenzied inner monologue the next' (Fane Saunders, 2018). Throughout the show, the efficacy of this approach in achieving an authentic representation of self was questioned and challenged by Brookes: Fane Saunders describes this as 'pre-empting criticism. Every time Brookes sets up a theme, he dismantles it and mocks the audience for ever going along with it in the first place, then jeers at himself for his clever-clever self-

indulgence' (2018). However, as with *Body of Work*, the apparently deconstructing qualifications, reservations, insecurities and evasions contribute to a whole in which the audience are let in on the processes by which the performance attempts to communicate, locating authenticity in that struggle for communication.

Mediation through technology is often held in opposition to communicative acts that are experienced as authentic or real, an extension of the 'fakeness' that Schulze identifies in the act of writing (2017, p.59) – the authenticity of stand-up as a form is often located in its 'liveness' and the intimacy that exists between the participants resulting from the relative absence of obvious mediation. Therefore, a performance that foregrounds its mediality might instinctively be regarded as producing a more distant experience between the attempt to communicate the authentic self and the recipients of that attempt. Brookes, however, utilizes the schisms and fragmentation that result from the use of this technology to attempt to close the gap between authentic experience and its communication.

In part, this is achieved by supplying the audience with different soundtracks, resulting in a situation in which sections of the crowd, dispersed around the venue, are hearing different audio content, and therefore laughing at different things, and at different moments during the show. The comedian Rich Wilson describes his experience of watching the performance during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe run of the show:

We all get given headphones, and... that's when the universe got tipped on its fucking head. We were like "Hold on a minute." We all thought it was just you, doing your thing, and then gradually other things came in and then it turned out... and then it turned out there were three different groups of headphones, so the audience had different headphones on, and we were all (*Sic.*) listening to different things at the same time. It was phenomenal... Afterwards, we were all coming out and going "That bit when that woman tried to get past me", and they were like "What bit was that?" And I'm like "What do you mean?"... And then we all suddenly went "The fucker's tricked us, he tricked us all". (Wilson, 2019)

A complex effect is created. The headphones cultivate an experience of proximity to the performer, and therefore intimacy. However, they simultaneously sacrifice or complicate other forms of interaction and engagement that stand-up shows typically involve. Firstly, the uncertainties of receptive acts are foregrounded, with audience members unsure about whether something they heard was part of the live performance – a communal experience shared by everybody – or whether it was only a feature of the soundtrack to which they were listening. Secondly, they dismantle the collective communicative experience that is held to be fundamental to the live comedy experience. As Susan Bennett notes:

Semiotic analysis has stressed that the communication between spectators usually determines “a homogeneity of response” (Elam 1980: 96) despite variations in horizons of expectations and/or cultural values brought to the theatre by the individual spectator. In almost all cases, laughter, derision and applause is infectious. (1997, p.153)

In *Bleed*, however, the laughter that is usually the affirmation of collective reception is drowned out or, at least, muted by the presence of the headphones. Visual signals of the fragmentation of the audience that result in the individual audience member’s awareness that people around them are reacting in different ways and at different times – laughing where there has been no apparent punchline, for example – and are therefore presumably not responding to the same aural stimulus, contribute to the effect of disorientation. The deviation from the convention of the crowd laughing as a collective foregrounds the experience of the individual audience member’s isolation within that crowd, and the subjectivity of receptive acts more generally. This departure from convention is central to both the conceit of the show, its experience by the audience and its enjoyment: Brookes himself says ‘It was so amazing when audiences would go with it, and sort of go along for the ride... It was incredible to watch people’s reactions. That was really fun’ (Wilson, 2019). The fragmentation of the audience’s collective experience during the show, and the activation of the audience’s medial awareness, result in a distortion and relocation of the collective experience of communication. As Wilson’s account implies, it is

instead potentially located to a different time and space: after the gig, where audience members can engage meaningfully in an attempt to describe their different experiences of the show to each other. Again, the metareferential disruption of the conventional means of expression used by stand-up-comedians is not simply a gesture of pessimism regarding the challenges, or even impossibilities, of self-expression and communication through stand-up, other medial forms or even simply language itself, but an attempt to communicate alienation through experience at the formal level.

Brookes' work reflects a heightened awareness of the gap between stand-up's mediating conventions and 'the singularity of the individual experience and its ultimate unrepresentability' (Funk, 2011, p.134). However, by sharing this awareness with the audience, and working through this awareness, it nonetheless attempts to communicate that singular experience. His work is not typical or representative of widespread practices on the circuit-fringe axis. While not unprecedented in live performance – one reviewer compared the experience of *Bleed* to Simon McBurney's one-person show, *The Encounter* (Fane Saunders, 2018) – formal experimentation of the type demonstrated by *Bleed* is still rare in stand-up comedy. Issues such as funding, the time-limited nature of comedy club slots and the ad hoc nature of many stand-up performance spaces, limit the extent to which technological experimentation can be accommodated. Brookes has been described as a '(very) alternative comedian' (Fane Saunders, 2018), and his work viewed as possessing 'new levels of innovation and dramatic intensity' (Logan, 2018). Nonetheless, its appeal for audiences does reflect the desire articulated by Schulze for authentic experience (2017, *passim*), along with an interest in how that experience can be produced through stand-up comedy, in a context in which audiences are increasingly familiar with stand up's medial properties and conventions.

Conclusion

The establishment of authentic self-expression was central to the 'reinvention' (Double, 2020) of stand-up in both the UK and US, and its recurring metareferential

treatment among present-day performers suggests that the concept of authenticity – how it is produced and even whether it is possible – continues to be of importance in insider theorizing about the form. These metareferences, some of them constituting meta-works, provide a space for practitioners to reflect on, if not a ‘limit of the media or genre in question’ (Wolf, 2009, p.69), then certainly an aspect of it that is often assumed or taken for granted. They challenge the normative understanding of stand-up comedy as authentic and truthful, and performatively encourage other practitioners to engage critically with who or what they are presenting when they walk out onstage. They highlight the compromises involved between the authentic representation of self and the requirements of any type of performance, but particularly the facades necessitated and perpetuated by the entertainment industry and the present-day position of stand-up comedy as a branch of showbusiness. More positively, they participate in a culture of experimentation, demonstrating how stand-up’s communicative functions might be enhanced, and its challenges overcome, through the incorporation of technology, and the opportunities it might present for furthering the form.

As described in Chapter One, a criticism often-levelled at works that employ metaization is that they prioritise intellectual reflection over emotion. This has been negatively interpreted as producing artefacts that ‘divert attention from heteroreferential concerns and result in dry self-scrutiny, which may be amusing but can ultimately also be futile (Wolf, 2011, p.39), divorced from the concerns of the real world. The recipient-orientated functions explored here, however, resist this narrative. They encourage audiences to maintain a sceptical and enquiring attitude about the manipulations and contrivances of stand-up, and its claims to autobiographical truthfulness, honesty or authenticity. The scope of these metareferences extends beyond stand-up, however, with their illusion-breaking encouraging a more wide-ranging questioning attitude. Firstly, they activate and encourage awareness of any gap between the content of a speaker’s utterances and what lies behind those utterances. Secondly, they draw attention to the role of

narratives and performance in the construction not just of stand-up comedy performances, or personas, but of the self more broadly, encouraging the audience to reflect on the role that narrative and performance plays in how they construct their own identity – particularly regarding the fragility of those narratives and personas, and the artifice that underpins them.

Although Double positions the use of metacomedy in early alternative comedy as typically humorous in intent, many of the examples described here demonstrate the use of irresolution – both of humour and of narrative – as part of a project for achieving authentic communication. This experience of uncertainty as an obstacle to pleasure may result in this destabilization being dismissed as a mere joke, or ignored altogether. However, these disturbances also provide a route to authentic communication of the self through, rather than in spite of, the challenges to it.

Chapter Ten

'TV ready!': metacomedy and gender

Previous chapters have highlighted the ways in which reflection on apparently 'narcissistic' aspects of stand-up comedy performance might activate reflection that extends to 'the world and its problems' (Wolf, 2009, p.69), including how the self is constructed and expressed, and the political and social implications of production and consumption of present-day stand-up comedy. They refute the accusation that works that foreground metaization involve 'Excessively focussing one's attention on the media themselves rather than on the world and its problems... amount[ing] to a narcissistic shunning of important issues' (Wolf, 2009, p.69). However, this chapter examines the present-day use of metacomedy to address an issue that is explicitly 'worldly' in its concerns, by focusing on the treatment of one particular area of social and political activity: namely, the issue of gender in stand-up comedy, particularly the way in which the comedy industry, and facets of stand-up comedy as a form, both reflect and perpetuate the marginalisation of female performers.

The self-conscious commitment to the 'ethical stance... [of] explicitly rejecting sexist and racist gags' (Double, 2020, p.195) as part of a wider politics of equality (Double, 2020, p.171) is a frequently cited feature of early alternative comedy, and a significant part of its break with its nightclub and working-men's club forebears (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.395). At the level of metacomic performance, this found its expression in parodic undermining of the sexist content of packaged jokes (e.g. Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2017, p.395). The historic bias towards male comedy performers, and the privileging of men within the comedy circuit and within discourses on humour as a whole, has become subject to greater challenge and scrutiny in recent years, with the 'the emergence of a discourse about the marginalisation of women... in comedy which is intended to rectify the systematic

promotion of white male comedians' (Quirk, 2018, p.31)¹. However, despite continued work to combat this inequality, both from within performance and outside it, the comedy industry still demonstrates evidence of discrimination against, and marginalisation of, women. Stand-up comedy is 'theatre from the wrong side of the Great Divide, seen as being low, disreputable and unworthy of serious attention because of popular artistic qualities it possesses' (Double, 2017, p.7), and its processes of canonization have consequently been informal – the result of the type of vernacular theory that is the product of fan culture (McGlaughlin, pp.52-75). Nonetheless, in the informal canons frequently compiled by popular media, male comedians tend to dominate. On a list of the 100 best comedians compiled from a 2010 poll conducted by Channel 4, only six of the performers included were women (Benedictus, 2012). A *Rolling Stone* list of the '50 Best Stand-Ups of All Time', compiled in 2017, featured a top 10 containing nine men and one woman - Joan Rivers (Love, 2017).

This issue is connected to, and may be considered a subset of, a wider ongoing popular media discourse regarding the relationship of women to comedy and humour more generally: for example, the semi-regular discussion of the ability of women to be funny in magazine and newspaper opinion pieces. A 2019 article by Flora Gill in *The Spectator*, for example, offered a list of six reasons explaining 'why women aren't funny' (2019). The bias towards male performers in stand-up comedy still pertains, reflected in acclaim, media exposure and quotidian experiences on the comedy circuit (Benedictus, 2012). Expectations relating to gender, for example, are identified as a factor in shaping who is picked to appear on comedy panel shows, and who is excluded. On 14 December, 2020, the line-up for the annual festive comedy panel show, *The Big Fat Quiz of the Year*, broadcast on Channel 4, was announced on Twitter (The Big Fat Quiz, 2020). The host of the programme was the

¹ Some of the structural responses to this, such as the promotion of women only nights, and greater attention to bills that are truly mixed in terms of gender, rather than tokenistic in their approach to mixed gender bills, are detailed in Chapter Five.

comedian Jimmy Carr, and the male panellists were James Acaster, Joe Lycett, David Mitchell and Richard Ayoade – two stand-up comedians and two comedy writers and performers. The female panellists were Stacey Solomon and Maya Jama – a singer and TV personality and a TV presenter ('Big Fat Quiz...', 2020). The response from several comedians in the UK suggested that this was emblematic of a pattern in booking policies for comedy panel shows broadcast on television in the UK. Fern Brady tweeted: 'BIG FAT SAUSAGE QUIZ OF THE YEAR Q.1 In what year will it be acceptable to book funny women instead of insanely beautiful women?' (2020). Angela Barnes responded with 'Arrrgghh. Funny boys and pretty girls. Happens all the bloody time. WHY ARE THERE NO FEMALE COMICS ON THIS COMEDY SHOW?' (Richardson, 2020). Talking about her involvement with TV comedy, rather than live comedy, Brady has said that it feels like 'I'm just back to being judged for how I look' (2016b).

Unequal treatment may be observed at the level of audience reception, as well as among producers of comedy, and producers of content about comedy. For example, drawing on the work of Dorothy Smith, and focusing on stand-up comedy performed by women in the United States, S. Katherine Cooper has identified a tendency for audiences to perceive humour originating from a male point-of-view, and describing male experiences, as universal in its significance and appeal, while humour that originates from performers with non-dominant perspectives is regarded as niche (2019, p.110). She identifies social factors as a cause of this, arguing that these receptive attitudes are 'culturally primed' (2019, p.108), while specifically citing the traditional dominance of male performers within the form as reinforcing this condition – a dominance that expresses itself both in terms of the number of performers, and in profile and archetype (see above and Double, 2014, p.150; Brodie, 2014, p.104). Furthermore, she reports that recipients belonging to non-dominant identity groups tend to display 'bifurcated consciousness' in their reception of performances by men, accommodating and accepting different perspectives in ways that members of dominant groups do not (Cooper, 2019, p.11).

As Cooper points out, this may result in the dominant social group retaining the privilege of not having to accommodate or align themselves with other perspectives. However, she does argue that the audience is involved in 'positioning the comedian's identity on multiple axes of social status' (2019, p.112), resulting in a situation in which a range of factors determine whether or not the strategies employed by the comedian to advance their critical perspective are accepted by the audience. In particular, Cooper finds 'greater acceptance of (and greater pleasure in viewing) counterhegemonic comedy involving a comedian mocking cultural oppression or self-deprecating humor [*sic*] of one's own in-group' (2019, p.113).

This chapter examines the role of metacomedy's function in addressing sexism and gender inequality in stand-up comedy through the exploration of feminist stand-up comedy performances that foreground a sufficiently 'high degree of metareferentiality' to be considered 'meta-works' (Fuchs, 2011, p.389), rather than simply works that feature metareferential elements. It explores its use as a tool to defamiliarize features of the form that are considered natural and immutable, and make visible hidden structures and often instinctive receptive activities that contribute to the way in which the comedy industry more broadly contributes to the marginalisation of female performers. While it is not possible to definitively state whether these performance practices fulfil Zoe Coombs Marr's aspiration for her work to make 'the world... a bit of a better place' (Goldsmith, 2017b), all 'Action must begin with critique' (Gilbert, 2004, p.178) and, through its participation in this critique, metacomedy may be viewed as a necessary precursor to that action.

'Fellas know what I'm talking about!'

The work of Zoe Coombs Marr explores the ways in which stand-up comedy performance itself contributes to the perpetuation of the marginalisation of women in comedy, both as producers and recipients. In her meta-works, *Dave* and *Trigger Warning*, Coombs Marr presents what she describes as a 'drag show' (Goldsmith, 2017b), and 'a parody of quite an offensive character', in which she performs as 'an

aggressively mediocre male stand-up comic' (Goldsmith, 2017b). The parodic male character – the titular comedian Dave – is presented through a rudimentary set of signifiers that do little to conceal that the encoder and performer of the parody identifies as female: these include a loose-fitting blazer, worn with baggy jeans and a t-shirt, and a beard that has been carelessly drawn on with makeup. The character fits within the drag king tradition described by Maltz as 'neither a passing subject nor a subjectivity predicated on realness' (1998, p.283), and can be situated towards the end of a spectrum of ethos in which 'performers mock [masculinity] rather than own it as the male impersonators did' (1998, p.283). Dave is representative of 'mediocre male stand-up comic[s]' in general – he is an assembly of conventions – rather than a parody of one specific and identifiable performer, and these broad signifiers of masculinity reinforce the generality of this parody. The misogyny of the character is evident in the expression of stereotypical attitudes towards sex and gender in his material. Coombs Marr's performance of this character has been successful in both the UK and Australia. It has been nominated for the Best Comedy Show at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Dave's Edinburgh Comedy Awards, 2016) and was the winner of the Melbourne International Comedy Festival Award for Best Show in the same year. The success of the shows that centre around this character is an index of the immediate recognisability of the attitudes that are parodied, confirming their continued normative status, both within the culture of stand-up comedy and society more generally: they are sufficiently prevalent to be recognised and successfully received by audiences.

The parodic material performed by Coombs Marr as Dave includes observations on sex and relationships, in which the incongruities that constitute his attempts at comedy arise from a perception of women's behaviour as aberrant, and therefore an object of ridicule and amusement:

So, I'm single. **(Laughter)** Yeah, you too, mate? I don't think it's my fault. I don't think it's my fault. I think it's a fucking major flaw in the female anatomy. Fellas know what I'm talking about. This guy knows what I'm

talking about... Bloody major flaw. Something a little bit tricky to find.
(Laughter) Bloody special magic bean. This guy knows, this guy knows.
(Laughter) Bloody special button. Yeah? This guy knows what I'm talking about. Little man in the boat? Some of the ladies starting to catch on.
 Yeah, everybody's looking for it, no one can find it, they should change that thing's name from clitoris to Nemo! **(Laughter)**. (stamatia maroupas, 2021)

The parodic character constructs the female body as a flawed object from the point of view of a heterosexual male, which presents itself by comparison as authoritative, 'normal' and correct. The performance is both a 'satiric parody', and a 'parodic satire' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.62), with intra- and extramural functions at work. At the level of parodic satire, Dave works to ridicule male sexist attitudes. His assumption that the women in the audience are less familiar with their bodies than men are, combined with his ignorance about the location of the clitoris, produces a humorous effect, and the audience experience his ignorance as ridiculous through their laughter. The defamiliarization of what is taken to be 'normal' or 'universal' is furthered within the parody through the incorporation of elements of the grotesque: for example, Dave is presented as bleeding green fluid during *Dave* (Logan, 2016b). The audience experience Dave as both dominant and 'normative', as well as ridiculous and monstrous. As a result, the metacomedy provides a means to challenge cultural priming, and 'to denaturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as natural [...] are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us' (Hutcheon, 1989, p.6.2). Although its immediate focus is stand-up comedy performance, the meta-work can be read as using parody of male stand-up comedy performance to comment on the 'extra-mural' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.25) issue of the dominance and assumed correctness of the male point of view more generally.

In its ridiculing of the parodic male character, Coombs Marr's performance subverts the hegemony of the heterosexual male point of view among comedians, mocking the misogyny of their content, as well as the poor quality of their material.

Indeed, it parodically enacts Cooper's observation that the formal emphasis on universality may contribute to the exclusion of other points of view: the presentation of material that purports to be universal implies that representation from non-hegemonic groups is not required, as their experience will be different to the 'universal' experience of the hegemonic group only in ways that are considered trivial. The obvious failure of Dave's act – at the level of both content and as comedy – supplies an answer to why representation is important by appropriating the voice of a dominant group and rendering it stale, uninteresting and ridiculous. Positioned within a gendered critique of comedy, the derivativeness of Dave's performance is not simply the result of the creative failure of an individual: it is the consequence of the dominant status of one social group, resulting in a near-inevitable recycling of comic material resulting from a homogeneity of perspective and experience.

At the meta-level, Coombs Marr's performance constitutes a challenge to hegemonic approaches to observational comedy, a style based on 'the importance of sharing [experience], directly asking the audience to compare the comedian's experience with their own' (Double, 2014, p.208). As Double notes, this sharing is based on the assumption of the existence of a broadly universal set of shared experiences, implicit in the use of the second-person plural as a mode of address, as the comedian invites the audience to identify a resonance between their own experience of life and the one being described in the performance (Double, 2014, p.208). The common experience of the observations on which routines are predicated is thought to be fundamental to the success of observational humour: as Eddie Izzard notes, 'Your observations need to be something that people can relate to, for the audience to pick up on it' (in Double, 2014, p.208). Coombs Marr's performance, however, exposes the erroneous assumptions of what she describes as 'the false universal' (Goldsmith, 2017b), in which the heterosexual male experience is presented and packaged as an observation that will be recognised by all. By defamiliarizing the universality of this point of view through parody, Coombs Marr's performance lays bare the conditions that are required for acts of this type to

be successful: women in the audience are required to at least allow erroneous descriptions of the type described above to go unchallenged, and possibly to endorse them through laughter. Coombs Marr's work reveals the extent to which performances like 'Dave's' demand that women in the audience are complicit in their own ridicule, a phenomenon that Lisa Merrill has described in her observation that 'to be amused she [the female audience member] must discount and devalue her own experience' (1998, p.279), a phenomenon also described by Ellie Tomsett (2018, p.10). The 'false universal' demonstrated in the backgrounded text of Coombs Marr's performance rests on the creation of complicity between performer and audience, albeit a complicity of ignorance. Coombs Marr's foregrounded performance, on the other hand, constructs a complicity of 'knowingness' between her and the audience, reversing the in- and out-groups that Dave's performance attempts to construct, and situating him outside the community of knowing laughter².

By defamiliarizing the worldview that Dave represents, challenging its universality and dominance, the work reveals the falseness of this presumed universality to anybody viewing the performance from a minority or marginal position. As Coombs Marr notes:

I mean, there's no such thing as a universal. You're trying to find something that 'everyone', inverted commas, relates to... But it can also be very skewed, because the sorts of people who go to comedy shows, the sorts of people who do comedy, are very much a very specific wedge of society. By that I mean very male, very white, often very straight, privileged... This is why I have so many callbacks in my show. If you're trying to find a false universal, you'll see like a lot of guys do stuff about, "You know how it is, having a wife," and it's like, "No, no, I don't... I don't know that specific thing"... My experience of the world is vastly different to the majority of people in my audience. So, I can't relate to them on a level of going, "Oh, you know when this thing happens in your life?" Because they don't, and I don't. (Goldsmith, 2017)

² Ellie Tomsett has argued that 'In relation to the use of self-deprecation by female comedians... potentially this is an extension or continuation of such devaluing. Female audience members are arguably being asked to adopt a more negative position or attitude to their own body than they actually hold, in order to access the humour' (2018, p.12).

Crucial to the political intent and effect of this parody is contingency. Through the parodic repetition with difference, Coombs Marr highlights the gendered conventions of the form that have become automatized, and in doing so makes them contingent rather than immutable and inevitable, raising the possibility that they can be changed. In this respect, the parody fits into a transmedial tradition of using metareference to interrogate texts and genres through the lens of gender. For example, Patricia Waugh has identified a tendency in metafiction to highlight how:

the use of an implicitly male omniscient author in popular continuations of realism is tied to a specific ideological world-view which continues insidiously to pass itself off as “neutral” or “eternal” or “objective”, and which has its historical roots in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. (1984, pp.66-67)

Despite the relative novelty of stand-up as a form, the modern history of stand-up is one that has been (and, to an extent, continues to be) dominated by male performers (see above). As such, the presumed universality of the male point-of-view has become crystallized as a convention of the form. By highlighting the falseness of this presumed universality, Coombs Marr’s work reveals its ‘historical provisionality’ (Waugh, 1984, p.66) and, in doing so, identifies the possibility for change

‘Humour’ and ‘Women’s humour’

‘Dave’ fits into a tradition of feminist parody. In its methods and aims it closely aligns with Peg Brand’s fine-art focused definition of ‘feminist parodies’ (2006, p.180) as both a ‘feminist satire, and... a complex imitation of an original work of art by a male artist’ (2006, p.180), and in the way that it ‘expresses and values a woman’s point of view as it makes fun of prevailing artistic conventions and societal norms established by men’ (2006, p.180). However, uses of parody and metacomedy that express similar values without taking a ‘work... by a male artist’ as the object of their imitation are also used in present-day stand-up. In her analysis of Bridget Christie’s metacomical *A Ant*, in which Christie adopted the character of an ant comedian in order to comment on the conditions that face female performers in live

comedy, Ellie Tomsett identifies criticism of the perpetuation of sexism by performers on the comedy circuit, and the audiences' role in reinforcing this through their 'preconceptions' (2017, p.59). At one point in Christie's routine, for example, 'A Ant' speaks positively about the proliferation of ant comedians on the circuit, recounting a recent gig at which 'there were only ants on, apart from the compere, who was a wasp' (Alternative Comedy Experience, 2013). She goes on to say 'He wasn't very good, actually. He just did loads of material about being a wasp. Who's interested in that? He obviously only got the job because he was the token wasp' (Alternative Comedy Experience, 2013). The incongruous transposition of insects into the world of comedy provides a source of humour in this routine, as well as creating the distance through which the defamiliarization is achieved (Tomsett, 2017, p.59). The identification of 'material about being a wasp' as being of little legitimate interest to anybody constitutes another performative enactment of Cooper's identification of the acceptance of male humour as universal, while humour that issues from non-dominant perspectives is regarded as niche (2019, p.110).

Both Christie and Coombs Marr's performances critique and oppose hegemonic forces through ridicule. In doing so, they follow a tradition of a feminist use of parody that 'speaks the language of the dominant (which allows you to be heard)' but also, as Hutcheon says, 'to subvert it through ironic strategies of exaggeration, understatement or literalization' and 'without subscribing to its implied ideas and values' (O' Grady, 1997). However, while the use of metacomedy provides an opportunity to make critique entertaining, and to make entertainment out of critique, it is also susceptible to misreadings as a result of its double-voicedness, which may result not only in a distortion of its creator's intentions and a neutralisation of its political effects, but potentially work against those intentions. In formulating a set of conditions for the production of Feminist Visual Parody in art, to ensure that they 'foreclose on misreadings' (2006, p.182) and realise their creator's social and political intentions, Brand argues that Feminist Visual Parodies must 'be a subspecies of satire', on the grounds that 'satires are typically critical, sarcastic, and

leave little room for ambiguity or misinterpretation' (2006, p.182). It may be argued, as Hutcheon does, that satire is defined by its orientation, in that it is 'worldly' in its focus, rather than by its tone, and that a parody could be 'critical, sarcastic, and leave little room for ambiguity or misrepresentation' and still retain its identity as parody, becoming 'satirical parody' rather than 'parodic satire' (2000, pp.50-68). Nonetheless, it is clear within Brand's theory of Feminist Visual Parodies as a political tool that factors that may contribute to ambiguity must be minimised if the parody is to be read in accordance with its creator's intentions, and that orientation towards the 'aggressive' end of Hutcheon's spectrum of parodic ethos helps to achieve this.

Tonally, as the material cited above indicates, Coombs Marr's 'Dave' does conform to the 'critical and sarcastic' effect that Brand stipulates as a requirement for successful feminist parody, and the minimal attempt to construct the character through stagewear contributes to the distancing effect of the performance. However, political parody of the type presented by Coombs Marr requires both 'ideological as well as generic competence' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.95) on the part of the decoder, and can therefore only be 'realized or actualized... by those readers who meet certain requisite conditions' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.95). In short, the function of a parodic text is dependent on the reader for its completion, and a failure to recognise the text as parody will result in a decoder who 'merely read[s] the text like any other' (Hutcheon, 2000, p.94). While expressing a belief in the potential of stand-up comedy, and parody specifically, to produce social change, Coombs Marr attests that 'Dave' has been subject to misinterpretation, citing the example of a male audience member who, having failed to decode the ideology of the performance as parody, responded to the parodic character's criticism of feminists with cheers of support (Goldsmith, 2017b). In this instance, the failure to recognise the irony of the work results in the performance being enjoyed not as a parody of 'an aggressively mediocre male stand-up comic' (Goldsmith, 2017b), but as a sincere expression and reinforcement of the attitudes that are being parodied. Rather than shaping interpretation of the backgrounded text through ridicule, the foregrounded text is

eclipsed by it, and is instead made to carry the intention that it set out to subvert. Therefore, although it might be inferred that Coombs Marr's obvious identification of herself as a woman means that the irony of the parody is transparent, the performer herself has noted that the performer of parody fundamentally walks 'a fine line of making sure everyone understands the irony of it' (Goldsmith, 2017a), with failure to do so potentially resulting in the encoder's intention being lost³. Absorption in the performance, rather than ideological opposition, in combination with the specific character of the meta-element, may also result in its critical elements being overlooked: Ellie Tomsett, watching Christie's 'A Ant' from a feminist point of view, attributes the fact that she 'almost missed the underlying critique of gender stereotypes' (2017, p.59) to the surreal framing, and her 'willing[ness] to accept the premise of the performance, the concept of an ant comedian' (2017, p.59).

However, unlike many of the artefacts which make use of critically orientated parody, stand-up comedy, and other forms of popular performance that accommodate or emphasise direct and spontaneous interaction with the audience, provides an avenue through which misunderstanding or ambiguity can be resolved (Double, 2014, p.347). Furthermore, the dialogic relationship between performer and audience, in which the performer receives a succession of indicators of the audience's interpretation of and response to the performance, either through laughter, or in the more precise form of heckles or verbal interactions, presents an opportunity for the performer to identify misunderstanding, and explain their intention more thoroughly. Often, this will involve recourse to a further meta-layer (see Chapter Three). Coombs Marr, for example, recounting the misunderstanding referred to above, describes being able 'to sort of stop and say, "Oh, buddy. I just need to make sure that you know this is a parody, and when I say, 'Feminists,

³ This attitude is consistent with the 'eschewal' of ambiguity that Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies in the parody of early alternative comedians (2017, p.407).

booh!', I mean the opposite''' (Goldsmith, 2017b). In this respect, the flexibility of stand-up comedy to respond to its recipients – a possibility denied to the creators of Brand's fine-art feminist visual parodies (2006, p.182) – may be regarded as conducive to the successful production of feminist parody, and contribute to the communication of a political message.

'All panel shows are going to want me'

Coombs Marr and Christie's performances both foreground highly visible ways in which comedy production and reception, and popular discourses around women and comedy, contribute to the marginalisation of women within the comedy industry. However, less visible elements of the entertainment industry, their practices relating to gender, and their impact on stand-up comedy at the level of performance content, have also been metacomically examined. Eleanor Morton's show, *Great Title, Glamorous Photo*, for example, which she debuted at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2018, addressed the impact of gender inequality within the comedy industry on the content of the work of female performers. Morton describes it as a 'show about sexism, and the pressures that women are under when they perform and how I feel about that, and gender and stuff' (2018, Ibbotson-Wright). These metacomic themes of the show were framed through activation of metareferential awareness at the paratextual level. Publicity material used to promote the performances includes a poster featuring Morton in sharp focus and saturated colour, standing with her hands on her hips against a blurred backdrop of a residential street, wearing an evening dress, fully made-up and laughing confidently, her hair perfectly wind-blown. This framing, satirising the promotion of female comedians through the deployment of sexist conventions, established the show as a comment on the gendered practices of the entertainment industry, and contributed to heightening the salience of the metareferential content of the performance itself, which is so extensive and thoroughgoing as to qualify it as a meta-work.

A recording of the performance in 2019 shows that it is populated by three different personas: two parodic, and one that appears close to Morton herself. The dominant parodic character, which occupies most of the show, is that of a female comedian who repeatedly describes herself as ‘TV ready’ (Morton, 2019)⁴. The character has an American accent, wears a short, sparkling scarlet dress and stiletto heels, and the verbal content of the comedy predominantly consists of punchy material that addresses sex, relationships and body image: for example, ‘I go through a lot of guys, ok, ladies, am I right? A lot of guys. In fact, I go through men like I go through airport security. Quickly. ‘Cos I’m thin and white. Come on, yeah! **(Laughter)**’ (2019). The delivery is confident and extrovert, and many of the punchlines are followed with shouted injunctions for the audience to respond positively to the material. Interspersed with this is more personal commentary and explanation from the persona that seems closer to an authentic presentation of Morton’s self, framing the presence of the parodic character in the show as an attempt to advance her career:

[I’m] Trying a new thing. Trying to be more confident and glamorous on stage. Trying to be more TV ready, as it were. **(Laughter)** So here I am. I used to feel quite comfortable wearing whatever I wanted doing comedy. Jeans, t-shirts, sometimes a toga. **(Laughter)** (2019)

Having explained the development of an inclination to judge her appearance harshly, she says:

I’m quite an anxious person but that doesn’t matter, because this is Eleanor 2.0! Trying again, glamorous, sexy, confident... I’m master of the stage, and TV ready, and all panel shows are going to want me. I’m doing a Rihanna! **(Laughter)** Remember, Rihanna, when she started, she wore crop tops and jeans. Now she just wears diamonds. **(Laughter)** That’s gonna be me! (2019)

⁴ Answering ‘rapid fire’ questions about the show’s content in advance of the Fringe, Morton said ‘I’ve decided to become 200% sexier and more confident because that’s what the industry wants’ (Wrigley Worm, 2018)

In addition to these two female personas, Morton incorporates another parodic character, 'Sad Male Comedian', delineated through a simple costume of a plaid shirt. Unlike 'Eleanor 2.0', who enters the stage in an upbeat way to dance-pop music, the Sad Male Comedian's entrance music is a generic guitar track. His material, delivered in a diffident monotone, is presented as bland whimsy and clichéd observations about everyday life: 'I recently trained to watch the London Marathon the other day. What that involves is sitting in a chair for 12 weeks, watching the TV and occasionally saying, "Huh, I could never do that!"' (2019) Within the world of the show, despite the male comedian's poor material and unexciting delivery, which echoes Coombs Marr's presentation of Dave and is unfavourably contrasted with the energy and effort of the 'glamorous' female comedian, he is rewarded with an appearance on *Live at the Apollo*. The parody extends beyond purely aesthetic issues, and can be read as an illustration of the privilege of the hegemonic male within the contemporary comedy milieu, and the world more broadly, disproportionately rewarded at the expense of other performers. Its location in a metareference sharpens this critique by subjecting the audience to the feebleness of the male performer's comedy (see above). A community of 'knowingness' is constructed, and joins together to ridicule the dominant group.

As demonstrated by Christie and Coombs Marr's acts, the use of metacomic strategies through which to engage with the politics of stand-up may provoke misreadings which challenge their political function. A review of a performance at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe struggled to identify the source text of the main parodic character, 'Eleanor 2.0'.

Precisely who she is pastiching at this point is unclear – it doesn't seem to be an instantly recognisable type. There's a hazy and problematic implication that all popular female comedians are ones who adhere to, rather than challenge, patriarchal ideas about femininity, but this

implication is never really justified and is almost contradicted by some of the gags themselves. (McGrory, 2018)⁵

Although the review describes the performance as pastiche, the distance that is suggested between Morton's 'authentic' persona (see Chapter 9), and the other characters, aligns it with Hutcheon's definition of parody (2000, p.35), even if a single target or type is not immediately obvious. However, as the designation of the character as 'TV ready' and the paratextual framing of the performance indicate, the target of the satirical elements of the text is not 'popular female comedians', but the role of the comedy industry and, by extension, the media more generally, in favouring some versions of femaleness more than others, and the industry practices that reinforce gender stereotypes. Therefore, while the metacomedy of the show may not capture the details of the landscape for stand-up comedy on mainstream TV platforms, it does express a perception among comedians themselves of booking policies that continue to reinforce gendered practices of reception by shaping comedy taste through their control of mainstream exposure (see above), and provides its audience with an experiential critique of that.

The parodic elements of the show are interspersed with heteroreferential material that intensifies, and interacts with, the metacommentary. For example, Morton refers to an incident in which another comedian was asked to wear a dress while appearing on *8 Out of 10 Cats Does Countdown*, because audience comments suggested this was something that they preferred (2019). Morton's performance, which she begins wearing a short dress, before gradually covering up after declaring her self-consciousness, thematizes the extent to which the body of the female performer is subjected to 'gendered beauty standards' (Tomsett, 2018. p.8) and gendered standards of presentation within the comedy industry, that are in turn

⁵ Although the reviewer locates their confusion in the lack of a single identifiable parodic target, parodic texts that imitate a general recognisable style, or set of conventions, are common, as indicated in Chapter Eight. Perhaps, as Brand's guidelines for 'foreclosing' misreadings imply, feminist parody is more immediately discernible by the recipient when it is both unambiguously critical, and it is imitating a male work.

extensions of the gendered standards of beauty and presentation that contribute to wider social controls of the female body. The autonomy of the performer as an expressive individual, one of the issues that are frequently explicitly addressed by metacomedie, and one of the foundational conditions of comedie as art (see Chapter Nine), is constrained and impinged on by the comedie industry, not merely with reference to the verbal content of the performance, but also the performer's physicality. The conflict that occurs through the performance, with Morton uncomfortably adapting her natural inclinations to conform to this template, implies that this filtering on the part of the industry results in performers shaping the content of their performances to conform to these gendered expectations as a result. In this context, Morton's performance constitutes another complication and challenge to the ideal of comedie as authentic self-expression (see Chapter Nine), revealing the levels of social mediation that may occur between the individual comedian and their public utterances.

In the US, Brodie has argued that the significant commercial and artistic success of performers such as Margaret Cho, Sarah Silverman and Maria Bamford, means that 'women comedians in general are no longer seen as the aberration they once were' (2014, p.78). This, he claims, has resulted in a situation in which women are no longer required to conform to a single stereotype of the appearance of a female comedian – which he characterises as typically 'androgynous... mannish sports jackets with shoulder pads, trousers, and the occasional waistcoat' (2014, p.77) – if they are to be accepted by audiences. Instead, he says that 'women stand-up comedians wear on stage what they would wear were they going to see themselves perform' (2014, p.78). The appearance of women performing comedie is more heterogenous, reflecting their emergence from a position of marginality that can only be accommodated when it takes the form that is normative (Brodie, 2014, p.78). Morton's meta-work, within the context of contemporary UK comedie, complicates this idea of progress. It critiques the different conditions that apply within the context of stand-up that is broadcast on TV in the UK, where women are expected to

conform to gendered standards of presentation. Failure to perform an acceptable version of a marginalised identity results in a perpetuation of marginality: the exclusion of non-conforming female performers from mainstream platforms aimed at large audiences. This reduces visibility of the diversity of female comedians, containing those who do not conform to the requirements of broadcast platforms within alternative live networks – including the type of ‘alternative’ gigs that present a heterogeneous line-up within the context of an inclusive framework, and those that attempt to expand inclusion by focusing on platforming specific identities e.g. women-only comedy nights (see Chapter Five).

Tomsett has argued for the importance of television exposure as a means through which ‘norms that are in need of disruption’ can be challenged (2017, p.65). However, Friedman has described the manner in which television scouts, who he characterises as ‘active brokers’ (2014, p.302) between audiences and performers, reproduce and intensify existing patterns of comedy consumption. For example, scouts focusing on audiences that are perceived as possessing higher levels of cultural capital select performers they regard as demonstrating ‘restricted’ characteristics. On the other hand, those working in what he describes as the ‘mass sub-field of comedy’, guided by the ‘imperative to reduce economic uncertainty’ (2014, p.302), pick acts they regard as likely to be successful with a large audience, often based on what has been successful before. Friedman concludes that much of this matching is based on ‘very strong preconceptions’ regarding the tastes of audiences, which were seldom related to ‘any empirical understanding of comedy taste’ (2014, p.303) — the work of the scouts is, to a large extent, informed by their habitus. As such, their responses and judgments may be regarded as automatic. Morton’s meta-work lays bare the entrenched nature of these judgments in the context of gender, and emphasises the cyclical nature of the problem: how can social norms be challenged through television when access to television audiences requires conformity to social norms? The metacomic performance is identified as a phenomenon in which the potential for stand-up comedy as a means of self-

expression is limited as a result of the narrowing of access to audiences through the marginalisation of social groups. Quirk has argued that 'These industry gatekeepers have more power than individual artists— or collectives like ACMS— to bring more diverse comedy forms into the reach of more diverse (and larger) audiences' (2018, p.99). While this acknowledges the limited reach of performances such as Morton's, it also highlights the necessity of them in participating in public discourse about the way in which this power is wielded and the effects it produces.

Rebecca Krefting has argued for an expanded focus of feminist discourse on comedy, building on Hannah Gadsby's critique in *Nanette* of the way in which 'standup's formulas... elide the complexity of lived experience' and the way in which the obligation to produce humour 'forces comics to generate humorous resolutions to any tension created, which can function to diminish the serious nature of social critique' (Krefting, 2019, p.166). Krefting suggests that 'Scholarship can benefit from examining larger industry forces—comedy club bookers and managers, agents, network executives, advertising and social media—as networks of power that reproduce social inequalities and perpetuate masculinist comic traditions' (2019, p.170). By thematizing the way that 'larger industry forces' act on female comedians Morton enacts this task within the framework of comedy, not scholarship. As a result, the agency for the examination is retained by the performer, and its recipients are allowed to experience the effects of larger industry forces through performance, as well as rationalizing them. Furthermore, it concretizes the critique, presenting the audience with a situated subject directly enmeshed in the phenomena that are described: it confronts the audience with the critiquing self, and presents that self as 'caught in the... cultural constraints' (McGlaughlin, 1996, p.163) it is critiquing, placing it 'ever more intricately into the cultural systems that it questions' (McGlaughlin, 1996, p.163). These strategies contribute to discourse about comedy among audiences, performers and less visible members of the comedy industry, such as promoters, scouts and television bookers. In doing so, they may shape the direction in which the industry travels.

Institutional receptive practices

In addition to the obstacles presented to gender equality by the production practices of stand-up comedy, the practices of comedy critics, who shape and influence public attitudes towards comedy, have also been performatively explored. Although not strictly a stand-up comedy show, *Wild Bore*, written and performed by Zoe Coombs Marr, Ursula Martinez and Adrienne Truscott, is a meta-work that explores cultural criticism, specifically criticism of comedy performed by women, through reviews written about the performers themselves. The publicity material for performances of the show in 2017 ironically described it as a 'delve into the torrent of critical fury that has been aimed at baffling, misunderstood and downright awful works of art' (Truscott, 2018). In part, this involved the performers reading excerpts from real negative reviews with their exposed backsides pointed towards the audience, as if to suggest that they are 'talking out of their arses' (Malthouse Theatre website, 2017). Each individual review contributes to a larger metareview of the show itself:

The text is, for the most part, one big sneering review of 'Wild Bore' (ie a review of itself), cobbled together with some virtuosity from a myriad other reviews of completely different plays... About two thirds of the way through the three start suggesting possible meanings and messages to the show. (Lukowski, 2017)

The performance has been described as a critique of 'criticism [that] reveals more about the critic and their prejudices and expectations than it does about the work' (Gardner, 2017). In particular, it has been described as highlighting the critical prejudices of 'mostly white men of a particular class, age and educational background' (Gardner, 2017). As Waugh identifies, metareferentiality can function as a critical statement through creative expression prompted by a perceived crisis of form (1984, p.6). *Wild Bore* is a critical statement responding to a perceived crisis of criticism of stand-up comedy, connected to an under-representation of women reviewing comedy on major media platforms, and the systemic disadvantages for female performers that this leads to.

The show presents the gendered hegemony of criticism as a factor in distorting critical response, and challenges the disinterestedness from which the authority of the critic, at least in popular media criticism, is assumed to derive. Furthermore, the reversal of the flow of criticism, from the performer towards the critic rather than the other way around, creates an inversion of power. The parallel metacritical space opened up within *Wild Bore* facilitates a disruption of the authority that the male critic typically enjoys in his description of the work of female performers. Where Waugh regards metafiction as creating a ‘formal tension which breaks down the boundary between “creation and “criticism”’ (1984, p.6), *Wild Bore* disrupts the hierarchy of judgment between ‘creation’ and ‘criticism’, and the latter’s claims to authority. In doing so, it also disrupts the affiliative community of recipients that criticism constructs – sharing their judgments as part of an in-group made up of ‘the audience’ – and reconstructs the affiliative community consisting of performers and recipients, with the institutional figure of the critic located outside this.

Writing on the representation of critics and criticism in the work of the Restoration poet Anne Finch, Michael Gavin has argued that ‘we see in Finch a poet rethinking criticism as an instrument for advancing poetry’ (2011, p.634). *Wild Bore* articulates how the dominance of male critical voices, and by extension, a lack of representation in general, does not ‘advance’ stand-up comedy, or the position of marginalised groups within the form, through the intelligent appreciation and platforming of work by performers not necessarily well-represented within comedy or criticism. Instead, it is identified as limiting artistic and social progress through the perpetuation of social hegemonies under the guise of aesthetic disinterestedness. Through the clarity achieved through this critical distancing, *Wild Bore* serves a ‘developmental function’ for two different forms: comedy criticism and stand-up comedy itself.

The potential for texts to make an impact on the world in a tangible way is always contested. However, *Wild Bore* can claim to have had a discernible effect. Critics writing about the show commented on the difficulty they had in reviewing it,

admitting that the content of their criticism had been impacted by the pre-emptive comments contained within the show itself. For example, Lukowski writing in *Time Out* responded to the show by saying:

Reviewing Zoe Coombs Marr, Ursula Martinez and Adrienne Truscott's 'Wild Bore' is a bit like trying to clumsily pull the cheese out of a loaded mousetrap. An acerbic performance piece in which most of the text is stitched together from hostile theatre reviews, it sees critics coming a mile off and there is almost no analysis I can offer of it that it hasn't already pre-empted with an ironic smirk. (Lukowski, 2017).

In doing so, *Wild Bore* fulfils Coombs Marr's ambition as a performer 'making political stuff' to effect change: 'the ultimate outcome [of the performance] is not people thinking I'm a great comedian, it's actually that the world is a bit of a better place' (Goldsmith, 2017b).

Conclusion

The political potential of much present-day stand-up comedy has been located in its willingness to create alternatives to the mainstream, rather than necessarily directly oppose or engage with that mainstream (e.g. Quirk, 2018, pp.115-16). The structural responses to gender inequality described in Chapter Five, such as the creation of new nights that only platform performers from marginalised groups, are examples of this. Performative approaches to addressing these issues may complement structural ones. However, for some audience members at comedy nights with explicitly progressive agendas, the Janus-faced function of parody, which draws on historically hegemonic forms to point towards something new, may be regarded as superfluous, and potentially antagonistic. For example, Chris Coltrane describes his *Lolitics* night as a left-wing club that believes in the possibility of achieving radical change.

All of the comedy is – first of all it's political but 'political' can mean anything meaningful, you know, it could be the economy, climate change, feminism, race issues, science, religion, anything with substance. But not only is the comedy left wing, it's also hopeful. So I try and make it so the audience leave happier than they were when they came in. Erm, which is

hard nowadays. But, you know, I try and say to the acts, like, don't just talk about the thing, offer solutions. (Quirk, 2018. p.42)

In the context of this approach to making a progressive political contribution through comedy, in which not just problems but solutions are articulated, it is possible to argue that ridiculing parody emphasises the former rather than the latter, and results in a pessimistic perpetuation of hegemonic power (O' Grady, 1997), rather than providing optimistic strategies for resisting and overthrowing it. Coombs Marr's experience of performing the character Dave reflects this situation. She describes people she regards as 'peers, like queer women and feminists, watching *Dave* and being quite... offended by it, and taking it on face value' (Goldsmith, 2017a), citing an example of performing as Dave within a context in which she expected the intention of the parody to be clearly understood:

I was doing a gig in London, earlier in the year, at a queer club, and it was part of a drag king night... So it was a very clear context. It's like drag king, queer club, I'm a woman pretending to be man doing a parody of sexist stand-up comedy, and I was doing a bit about how you can't find the clitoris because there's a major flaw in the female anatomy and women are bitches for being so deceptive with their genitals. And then these women started yelling at me, "There's nothing wrong with women's bodies". And I was like, I had to drop character, and I was like, "Yeah, I know, I'm in one...". And they kept yelling at me. I was like, "I am a woman." And they were like, "Yeah, but you're being really rude about other women's bodies"... I think it's like generational shift... They probably don't want to see me dealing with those things through comedy. That's the way that I've had to deal with those things, that's my way of carving out space, but it's not necessarily theirs. (Goldsmith, 2017b)

This account illustrates one of Hutcheon's 'paradoxes of parody' (2000, pp.69-83) – that '[P]arody... implicitly reinforces even as it ironically debunks' (Hutcheon, 2000, xii). Therefore, if the didactic function contained within a parody is already understood - if no 'debunking' is required for its recipients - then it may instead be perceived as needlessly 'reinforcing' the values or practices it seeks to overturn.

However, for those audiences not actively engaged with these issues, for whom its 'debunking' function is of use, parody may prove a source of education and

enlightenment. This reflects the view of the creators of the popular parody Twitter account, 'Feminist Taylor Swift', whose experience of running the account leads them to believe that parodies of popular culture can provide a way of 'bringing more people into feminism and gender-critical (*sic*) conversations' (Elphick, 2013). This is an understanding of parody that regards referencing of the dominant as an occasionally necessary step in communicating with recipients in order to move beyond it, reflecting Waugh's schema for metafiction's programme of artistic transformation, in which avant-garde approaches are limited in their communicative power by their unfamiliarity:

The audience... has its own requirements. The forms and language of what is offered to it as creative or experimental fiction should not be so unfamiliar as to be entirely beyond the *given* modes of communication, or such fiction will be rejected as simply not worth the reading effort. There has to be some level of familiarity. In metafiction it is precisely the fulfilment as well as the *non-fulfilment* of generic expectations that provides both familiarity and the starting point for innovation. (1984, p.64)

Furthermore, while these meta-works may not explicitly propose solutions to the problems that they identify, their laying bare of the gendered conventions of stand-up comedy and the practices of the comedy industry do reveal contingency and the possibility of change, and 'provide an environment in which [radical questions] can thrive' (Ruffell, 2011, p.429). Reflecting on the practical and performance considerations that inform her approach to stand-up, Bridget Christie says, 'I never want to look like I have any of the answers or take myself seriously, because I haven't and I don't. That's not my job' (Interview, 2020).

The performances cited here activate awareness not just of how external social factors influence receptive attitudes towards comedy by women, but how the often-invisible conventions and assumptions of stand-up comedy performances, such as the presumed universality of the male experience, reflect and perpetuate these factors. They participate in an anti-sexist tradition in stand-up of critiquing sexist performance content through ridiculing parody and explicit metacommentary.

However, rather than remaining focused on the contribution of performance content to the perpetuation of sexist attitudes, both within comedy and more generally, they encompass a wider sphere of comedy industry practices that contribute to marginalisation. Part of this involves taking visible elements of the comedy industry as their focus, critiquing performances and media criticism that reinforce the conventions and assumptions that centre the worldview and experiences of male performers, while explicitly and/or implicitly marginalising or othering the experiences of female performers. This has a recipient-orientated function, constructing an audience that is alert to the way in which these conventions both mirror and reinforce societal attitudes. However, it is also directed at the less visible aspects of commercialization and institutionalization of UK stand-up – the practices of the television industry, for example, which contribute significantly to determining what stand-up comedy audiences see and, in doing so, shape expectations of what they will see in the future. Through metacomedy, these performances alert audiences to how these invisible factors shape the performance they are currently watching, and the social factors that limit more expansive approaches to programming.

This chapter has identified a confluence between the metareferential treatment of the dominance of a false universal (male) perspective in stand-up comedy and a false universal (male) perspective in literature. Wolf has highlighted the potential for metaization to transcend its immediate work- and system-based contexts, and constitute a statement about other medial systems. Therefore, the significance of the metacommentary delivered within and about the medium of stand-up comedy may be viewed by its recipients as resonating beyond its immediate medial context and activate their awareness of similar phenomena across other media and artistic forms. Indeed, given the potential of metaworks to position themselves within a tradition, and influence the way in which that tradition is viewed, these performances not only contribute to defamiliarized and debunking readings of present-day stand-up comedy performance practices, but can also be used as a tool through which to read

the performances of the historic male performers who make up its informal canon. Furthermore, it is clear that these performances, far from having ‘nothing to do with “life”’ (Hutcheon, 1980, p.5) and everything to do with art, as some critics of metaization might contend, take place within a larger network of feminist social practices.

Although I have focused on the potential of feminist metacomedy in cultivating an audience that is more alert to the gendered conditions of UK stand-up as part of a wider set of feminist parodic practices, the metaization described here provides another important function: through the complicity it constructs with its audience, it contributes to the cultivation of a group identity with shared aims and a shared understanding of the world and, in doing so, reaffirms a sense of community. And, while these performances do demonstrate the hazards of employing metacomic strategies by highlighting the contradictory functions and effects that the same performance might produce, and the potential for misunderstanding (e.g. Tomsett, 2017, p.59), they also employ metaization as a potential solution to that problem, consistent with the explanatory function that has been posited for it. However, while the historical backdrop has often been used in this project as an index of change in metacomic practices, and therefore in the culture of stand-up comedy as a whole, the examples described also highlight continuing inequality within the comedy circuit. While the focus of their critique may be more expansive, and interrogate performance practices and conventions that express sexist attitudes implicitly as well as explicitly, their existence points to stand-up comedy’s continued role in the perpetuation of these attitudes.

Chapter 11

Conclusion

This thesis has explored uses of, and explanations for, metacomedy in stand-up comedy in the UK, and the potential effects of this activity. Building on scholarship that has identified metacomedy as a significant feature of early alternative comedy, it has identified a correspondence between this proliferation of metareference and Wolf's identification of high-levels of metareferential activity at the beginning of a genre or style. It has explained the salience of this metareferential activity as the result of a combination of factors, including the relative prominence of the performers presenting metacomedy in their acts within the alternative comedy circuit, and the frequently critical character of that metacomedy, resulting in an increase in its discursive potential in comparison to the type of metareference demonstrated by the club comedians who dominated UK stand-up immediately prior to the alternative's first wave. The use of metareference in early alternative comedy can be seen as an aesthetic contribution to the cultivation of an 'in-group' around which the new performers and audiences that were critical to its success could coalesce (Double, 2020, p.60).

Within a more recent context, this thesis has identified a change in the salience and visibility of metacomedy as a feature of stand-up comedy performance concurrent with the period known as 'the comedy boom'. It explains this, in part, as a consequence of the growth in popularity of stand-up comedy within the UK entertainment industries, and the challenges and opportunities that this presented for performers, leading to widespread use of metacomic elements that served author-, work-, recipient- and context-centred functions. Within the narrative of metareference as a symptom of a prevailing negative situation (Wolf, 2011, p.31), the potential narrowing of acceptable approaches within the form as a result of disproportionate representation of particular styles on mainstream broadcast platforms, and a concomitant closing down of audiences' expectations and openness

to experimentation, encourages use of the explanatory work- and author-centric functions of metareference among performers, particularly those that deviate from a perceived orthodoxy. It can be used as a means through which unusual, experimental or challenging performance content can be explained to audiences in advance, in the hope of securing a positive reception, or employed retrospectively as a response and adjustment to an unexpected audience reaction. This constitutes an important part of the performer's toolkit in a medium in which the consequences of a failure to communicate are perhaps more immediately felt than in other mediums, in line with Limon's view of stand-up as 'uniquely audience dependent for its value because joking is, essentially... a social phenomenon' (2000, p.12). Furthermore, the observation of frequent use of the insertion of intracompositional comment among performers at the lower-level of the comedy circuit may partly be explained by a desire for these performers to assert their distinction within the context of a superabundance of amateur performers (Goldsmith, 2012). Although many uses of metacomedie as a response to the comedy boom are explained as arising from attempts to ameliorate or overcome its negative effects, the use of metacomedie is also situated within a positive explanatory narrative (Wolf, 2011, p.31): as a creative response to the existence of a comedy-savvy audience resulting from the proliferation of stand-up within popular culture, contributing to the conditions in which work that takes stand-up comedy as its subject is received by an audience that is both interested in it and sufficiently knowledgeable to enjoy it.

The examples included here demonstrate that 'fringe' comedy in the UK is highly metareferential in character. Building on previous scholarship, a point of continuity has been identified between early alternative comedy's use of metareference not only as a vehicle for critique, but as a means of performatively asserting its distinctiveness from other iterations of the form, and the activity of present-day comedians associated with a new alternative movement. In the present-day context, examples of this activity can be interpreted as consistent with another negative explanation of metareferential activity: a perceived threat to the sub-cultural identity

of alternative comedy. While early alternative comedians often thematized their difference from the reactionary content of working-men's club performers, and their perceived lack of artistic merit, a frequently recurring subject for metacomic distancing among present-day performers is the dominance of a commercial identity for stand-up comedy. Echoes of the 'styling of the amateur' that Bonello Rutter Giappone identifies in early alternative comedy (2018, p.107) can be seen in the implicit and explicit metacomedy of present-day comedians, its salience heightened by the highly commercial identity of stand-up comedy now. Therefore, it demonstrates a context-oriented ideological function – a perception that stand-up comedy should be autonomous (e.g. Friedman, 2014, p.12), and an attempt to cultivate or restore this identity within a context in which stand-up has become a successful entertainment product (Chow, 2008, p.131), constructing an identity in opposition to, or outside the mainstream. Stand-up comedy, particularly 'alternative' or 'fringe' scenes and their present-day iterations, is one of the genres and practices, such as punk (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, *passim*; Butler, 2011, pp.514-22), that make extensive use of metareference to construct a sub-cultural identity, signal difference from a perceived mainstream and issue criticism.

The eclecticism of styles that have been subsumed under the banner of 'alternative comedy' has resulted in a genre that is hard to define through performance conventions. Instead, the various uses of alternative comedy as a generic name suggest it may be thought of most accurately as what Anderton, in his classification of progressive rock, describes as a 'meta-genre', expressive of 'an *attitude* to making music rather than a set of stylistic traits or political engagement' (2010, p.420), resulting in a 'highly inclusive, overarching framework within which numerous "progressive" styles and genres (some of which, like Krautrock, are subdivided even further) may be discussed in relation to each other' (2010, p.430). At its most basic level, the attitude of alternative comedy that draws in a wide range of styles and approaches is one that emphasises the development of an 'individualistic... style' (Anderton, 2010, p.420). As a result of this emphasis on the development of an

individualistic style, the understanding of alternative comedy must encompass an acceptance of its 'fluid and encompassing nature... [that] allows it to adapt to new developments' (Anderton, 2010, p.421). However, the identification of the continuing proliferation of metareferential practices among fringe performers seeking to critique, comment on or situate themselves outside the dominant stand-up practices of their time may go some way towards contributing to an understanding of an alternative comedy aesthetic: not all works or performers who identify with 'alternative' scenes will engage in critical metareference, but the presence of critical metareference may result in a work or performer being identified as 'alternative'.

However, while this feature of metacomic activity represents continuity between early alternative comedians and present-day performers, there are differences to note. The use of 'alternative comedy' as a tradition that can be performatively invoked in order to assert difference in the present day is not a neutral act. In the same way that Stonehill sees 'literary history appear[ing] inside the self-conscious novel' (1988, p.11), so comedy history appears within the performances of comedians that invoke the alternative comedy tradition and, in that process, is subjected to transformation – one that leaves it unrecognisable to some of those who identify with it. Furthermore, the meta-comments that early alternative comedians directed towards their more traditional predecessors have been characterised as direct, unambiguous and frequently aggressive. The more recent examples analysed here, however, self-consciously acknowledge the condition of the performer and the performance as enmeshed within the object of their critique, and implicate their recipients in this activity too. This reflects a present-day comedy scene in the UK that, unlike the 'civil war' (Allen in Wilmut & Rosengard, 1989, p.29) that existed between traditional club comedians and early alternative performers, is not easily divided into two distinct camps.

The use of metareference as a means through which the performer can guide the development of the form and, through the classification of the work as an artefact, assert their presence as its creator (Bonello Rutter Giappone, 2018, p.107), is a

significant point of overlap between the uses of early alternative comedy and present-day practices. However, the reactive nature of much metacomedy, which functions as a critique or questioning of dominant practices, means that while some themes of metareferential focuses will remain the same, others will fall away and be replaced, reflecting the dominant practices at a given time. This is demonstrated by the differences between the focuses of metacomic critique for early alternative comedians and more recent examples of this practice. For example, much of the focus of the metacomedy of early alternative comedy addressed the packaged jokes, or reactionary material, of the club comedians that dominated the identity of stand-up in the UK at the time. The minimal engagement with packaged jokes, or overtly reactionary material, in contemporary metacomedy is the result of the relative marginality of this type of content within stand-up in the UK now. Instead, this thesis has identified some recurring themes that are the subject of metareferential examination, primarily within the UK, but with some application to comedy in other countries too. These include commercialization of the form, the dominance of specific approaches, such as observational comedy, the aesthetic criteria on which the status of comedy as 'art' are judged, stand-up comedy as a vehicle for expression of an 'authentic' self and the position of women within stand-up comedy performance.

The foregoing list is not exhaustive, and further examples could be added. Indeed, some of the critical metareferential elements described in this thesis – such as the interrogation of the perception of stand-up as a vehicle for authentic self-expression – function as an index of the extent to which the innovations of early alternative comedians, both artistically and politically, are now established conventions that make up the dominant approaches and attitudes to the form. A similar phenomenon may be seen in the treatment of artistic and emotional 'complexity' into stand-up comedy. While this was something that was attempted and encouraged by early alternative comedians, it is now the subject of parodic treatment by many performers, viewed as the latest mechanistic convention for manipulating desirable

responses and judgments from an audience within a context in which comedy consumption is tied to the market, albeit one that trades in an alternative or 'high-art' product. While early alternative performers used metacomedy to critique the reactionary heteroreferential content of the jokes of club comedians, the feminist uses of metacomedy described in this thesis expand the focus beyond the content of the performance itself and to the situation of the performance, and other performances like it, within the context of stand-up comedy as an industry. Rather than limiting their focus to the discouragement of reactionary performance content through critique, they address structural issues within stand-up comedy as whole, including the industry and its audiences, and reflect contemporary concerns regarding representation: that what matters is not only what is said on stage, but the identity of the person saying it.

Just as the focuses of metacomedy change over time, so does the character of the metareferential elements themselves. For example, this thesis has analysed metareferential elements occurring within paratextual material that foreshadows the metacomic character of the performance, contributing to a potential increase in its salience and contributing to an overarching metareferential effect. This is the product of the increasing prominence of the Fringe or arts centre show in stand-up comedy, with its potential for creative experimentation and its identity as an 'album' (Law, interview, 2017) in which the performer has some degree of creative control over all elements of the work, including promotional material. Technology has also been identified as a means of activating metareferential awareness, to both challenge the possibility of authenticity in stand-up comedy and to strive for it.

Both Double and Bonello Rutter Giappone have argued for 'directness' as a property of early alternative comedy (Double, 2020, p.140), and Bonello Rutter Giappone (2017) has identified this as specifically pertinent to the critical parodies of early alternative comedy, eschewing subtlety and irony in a spirit of urgent artistic and political engagement, and as a response to a revised, and often more rumbunctious, relationship between performer and audience. However, close

analysis of present-day uses of metacomedy has been used to expand understanding of its range of ethos beyond the aggressive critical examination used to overturn dominant artistic practices and social and political attitudes that have been emphasised in studies of early alternative comedy. It has demonstrated that the use of metacomedy – even of a parodic nature – among present-day performers operates along the full range of a spectrum of encoding ethos, from the negative to the positively charged. These examples can also be placed on a continuum of ‘directness’, to retain Bonello Rutter Giappone’s analytical language, with some presenting a clear attitude towards a medial convention or tradition through their metacomic treatments, and others adopting a more ambivalent position.

Explanations for this are multi-factoral. For example, this thesis has suggested that the development of comedy in the UK, particularly its (at least partial) enshrinement as art and/or culture rather than ‘only’ entertainment and/or commerce, has resulted in a changed performance context and environment, encompassing performance length, venue, audience behaviour and receptive attitudes that are not only more conducive to subtlety and nuance, but sometimes demands it in exchange for critical approval. Metacomedy has been shown as something that both seeks to challenge the enshrinement of these aesthetic criteria, and participates in them.

Furthermore, while Double emphasises the humorous properties of metacomedy in early alternative comedy, the examples considered in this thesis demonstrate evidence that metareference in stand-up comedy may problematize or resist laughter in order to challenge or question elements of the form, and that the denial or problematization of laughter (see also Luckhurst, 2019 & Balkin, 2020) may contribute to the experiential component of this challenge. Nonetheless, humour continues to be an important feature of metacomedy and its effects. Wolf has argued that, over time, the relationship between metareference and comic modes of fiction and drama have ‘slackened’, and that ‘serious drama, in particular of the absurdist variant, seems to be much more attained by metaization than comic drama’ (Wolf, 2011, pp.16-17), while Funk positions metareferential artifacts as prioritising

functions such as the interrogatory and the critical above the entertaining and the ludic. I have not attempted to address the type of narrative-based fictional and dramatic forms of representation to which Wolf alludes. However, stand-up comedy is one of the pre-eminent contemporary artistic forms through which the comic mode is continued, and this thesis has demonstrated that metaization has, and continues, to play a prominent part in its performance tactics, serving multiple functions. Not only is metaization a recurring and prominent feature of its identity, it is one of the means by which the form sets about highlighting, interrogating, evaluating and attempting to alter or resist aspects of that identity. Furthermore, while the illusion-breaking comic function of metareference has tended to be emphasised in fictional forms such as the novel, this thesis has illustrated metareference's employment to anti-illusionistic effect in stand-up comedy too, puncturing the illusion of spontaneity and the illusion of emotional depth, among other things. As many examples from this study illustrate, metaization is not simply a feature of contemporary stand-up comedy as a genre or form located within the comic mode: it is often the source of humorous incongruity in the performances themselves. This removes the requirement for a distinction between the humorous and critical content of these performances: the humorous content is often the critical content, and vice versa.

The repeated demonstration of the use of metacomedy as a source of pleasure through humour, and its potential to engage its audience in a more active relationship, constitute a continuation of the refutation of the accusation that meta-works or meta-elements in comedy produce a 'sterile' experience for the recipient. In addition, the recipient-orientated function of many of these works has the potential to activate reflection not just about stand-up comedy, but about many of the 'real life' issues that have been the traditional subjects of stand-up comedy, and of art more generally. These include attempts to resist commodification and commercialization, the construction of the self, the processes through which evaluative judgments are reached and the issue of gender equality within society.

The accusation that these are 'self-indulgent', or 'cul-de-sacs' with no significance beyond themselves, cannot be maintained.

There are a range of narratives about the effects of meta-activity. The foregoing partially aligns with narratives that emphasize its radical potential – artistically, socially and politically – identifying its potential to assault an established citadel of dominant artistic practices and reactionary attitudes. However, this thesis has also demonstrated the potential for these performance practices to cultivate a recipient who conceives of themselves as possessed of an in-group knowledge which sets them apart from others – a cognoscenti audience, the in-group identity of which is founded on the assumption of a supposedly 'deeper' understanding of the work or types of work in question (e.g. Scorzin, 2011, *passim*). This has been shown to have the potential to accord with contemporary uses of comedy consumption as a sphere for achieving social distinction (*per* Friedman, 2014, *passim*), reinforcing hegemonic power in social groups through the activation of cultural capital by constructing new in- and out-groups: for example, those who enjoy performances that are dominated by these supposedly commercially dominant practices are constructed as having taste that does not conform to aesthetic or artistic standards which are regarded as 'correct'. This may entrench perceptions of what constitutes 'good' and 'bad' culture, reinforcing the power of certain recipients in the process. Certain forms of metareference, particularly those which are implicit and rely on pre-existing knowledge, may further contribute to the intensification of a cognoscenti, or in-group identity, among the audience. However, many of the examples of critical metacomedy demonstrated in this thesis are explicit, and demonstrate high levels of discernibility. They lay themselves bare to the recipient, and invite them to participate with and in the performance on revised and more democratic terms. As Cardiff says with reference to the 'debunking' BBC comedy, the subject of their 'knowingness' *can* be shared by everyone (1988, p.57). Within the context of the contemporary comedy milieu, these apparently competing narratives co-exist.

There are limitations to this research. It is predominantly focused on a network of performers involved with 'arts centre-y, Edinburgh' comedy (Lexx in Interview, 2020), rather than covering metacomic activity across the breadth of practices in UK stand-up. However, it may provide a model for examination of metacomedry outside this network, including in other countries. For example, the American comedian Bo Burnham has identified a similar relationship between oppositional or critical practices, and the US alternative comedy scene, and metacomedry, resulting from the over-exposure or 'exhaustion' referred to in this thesis:

American comedy is more steeped in irony and self-awareness. America really experienced the stand-up comedy boom so much harder than you guys did in the 1990s. We're so familiar with stand-up clichés. Over here, Stewart Lee does bits mocking observational comedy and is a legend. It's a revolutionary concept to do here - turn comedy in on itself - but in America it's pretty common. (Armstrong, 2010)

Burnham's characterisation of the 'revolutionary' nature for UK performers and audiences in 2010 of turning comedy in on itself is contentious, and this thesis, alongside other work on the metacomic elements of early alternative comedy, may be read as a refutation of it. However, his explanation for the proliferation of metacomedry in the US in the 90s as a response to 'used-upness' appears congruent with one of the explanations for a similar phenomenon in the UK. Nonetheless, proliferations of metareference are not monocausal in their explanations and, as has been shown here (Wolf, 2011, 37), stand-up comedy is no exception. A fuller account of this phenomenon in the US might reveal more information about the specific effects, functions and explanations of critical metacomedry, while providing a wider range of examples regarding its uses in stand-up in general. While I have highlighted the United States as an obvious example for further investigation, other comedy cultures, at varying levels of exposure and development, could be investigated to provide still more examples. For example, while it is possible to identify some evidence of 'a relatively high degree of metareference in the early stages of a genre or medium (explicable by the need to establish and advertise itself

as something new)’ (Wolf, 2011, p.38) in the prominence of metacomedy within the emerging subgenre of early alternative comedy in the UK, it occurred within the context of a developed stand-up culture. It would be interesting to see if a transnational study could identify this as a recurring pattern in countries with more nascent homegrown stand-up comedy circuits.

As the hybrid descriptors of ‘comic-critical’ or ‘creative-critical’ referred to at the start of this thesis imply, the use of an artistic object to criticise itself, and/or other objects of its kind, can be seen as ‘break[ing] down the distinction between “creation” and “criticism”, resulting in a form of hybrid discourse that may be ‘conceived of... as crossing the border between the media and critical (meta)discourses related to them’ (Wolf, 2011, p.33). As a type of vernacular criticism, it aligns with the DIY understanding of stand-up as a ‘performer-driven’ art form (Chow, 2008, p.123) that has a tradition of being democratic in its opportunities for participation, and not reliant on large institutions, establishments, authorities or financing (Quirk, 2018, pp.115-123). Metacomedy allows its performer-centric nature to be carried through into the domain of critical conversation, with performers explicitly articulating commentary on the form, advancing personal histories of it, interjecting themselves into its traditions (reshaping them in the process) and contesting its future direction – its artistic content, its social and political function and potential, and its commercial and organisational structures. Within the context of a live stand-up performance that is not being broadcast, the performer has the freedom to determine what appears in their work (within the limits of the law). Therefore, metareferential criticism of the form, in theory at least, is subject to fewer limitations to its potential: it can meet Sierz’s desired criteria for criticism of being ‘strong... informed and fearless’ (2020), as a consequence of not being dependent on the input of editors or the commercial sensitivities of the publication that is paying for it. In doing so, it disrupts conventional processes of production and reception and challenges the monopoly of audiences and critics over the articulation of judgment. In particular, it contests the right of external critics to

shape the conversation around specific performances and stand-up in comedy in general, challenging Yun-Cheol Kim's claim regarding theatre criticism that 'the direction of influence between the two' only flows one way: 'criticism influences theatre; not vice versa – at least not through immediate interaction' (2010). The acknowledgment of metacomedy's provision of aesthetic education by comedy critics cited in this thesis demonstrates that this is false. It muddies a dyadic view of the relationship between art and criticism, artist and critic, making the two processes indivisible. Furthermore, despite the academic background of some prominent producers of critical-creative fictions, such as John Barth, the product of this hybrid discourse is not subject to the conventions of academic or popular criticism. As Olson indicates, critical-creative discourse foregrounds the subjectivity of the critic, in this case in the form of the comedian, negating Kim's description of criticism as 'a form of subjective discourse, in which an individual critic tries to remain as objective as possible' (2010). The embodied presence of the comedian engaging in an act of criticism, their visible subjectivity, reminds us of the fallacy of viewing critics as 'ideal spectators' (Kim, 2010).

Quirk has argued that the manipulative performance techniques employed by stand-up comedians, and the way in which the dynamic between audience and performer functions to facilitate 'debate and discussion' provide it with a 'unique power as an educational tool' (2011, p.173). Consistent with the educative function that has been posited for metareference (e.g. Wolf, 2009, p.67, Baeva, 2019, *passim*), metacomedy presents the performer with the opportunity to deploy this 'unique power' (2011, p.173) to educate audiences about stand-up itself. Furthermore, it facilitates public critical conversation between performers and audiences – it is a form of 'public discourse that explores political, moral, cultural and aesthetic concepts' (Ruffle, 2011, p.429) – and it does so in a way that preserves the performer's autonomy and control. As a result, it meets the conditions for individuality set out by Atton as an important factor in challenging dominant ideologies (2009, p.55) through critical discourses, in which the privileging of

individual voices can contribute to a 'fracturing of the authority of the master narrative' (2009, p.67). However, consistent with the contradictory effects outlined for metareference in Chapter One, the metacomedies explored in this thesis have demonstrated potentially contradictory effects, destabilizing some dominant practices while potentially reinforcing others.

The critical attitude of much metacomedies is often echoed back towards it as criticism. It is cynical. It is detached. Its critique is motivated by an impulse to exclude, and by suspicion of the qualities that draw people towards comedy in the first place, such as escapism and fun. However, metacomedies are not only an expression of dissatisfaction with the limits or flaws of stand-up comedy, or a means of activating cultural capital, or cultivating an audience: it is also an expression of fascination and attachment. McLaughlin has described fanzines as part of a 'critical culture' of the everyday, engaged in 'a great deal of practical cultural criticism' (1996, p.68). They are rarely aligned with a 'movement that fosters theoretical insight' and theoretical issues arise 'out of local interpretative imperatives, questions' that come up (1996, p.69), but they are 'motivated by a desire to master details of a complex and valued phenomenon' (1996, p.71). This characterisation could be applied to many of the examples included in this thesis, which demonstrate a desire to examine, interrogate and argue about stand-up with a community that shares an enthusiasm for the form and enjoys that process. The connection between metareference and an aficionado culture captures this dynamic (Scorzin, 2011, *passim*). While the concept of the aficionado is associated with discrimination and connoisseurship, and the elitism implied by that, its etymological root is located in something less clinical: affection.

Reflecting on the proliferation of metacomic deconstructions of conventions during the comedy boom, and the perception of some comedians that they had become as 'hack' as the conventions they critiqued, I wondered whether perhaps this was a general indicator that something that has often been positioned as 'a remedy for exhaustion, ha[d] itself become exhausted' (Thoss, 2011, p.566). This is implied by

Stuart Goldsmith's 2012 diagnosis of metareferential deconstruction as something ubiquitous, particularly among open mic performers and, in the characterisation of it as 'only scraping the surface of a structural thing' (2012a), as something shallow and superficial. However, in addition to demonstrating the highly metareferential character of present-day fringe comedy, the metareferential elements cited here demonstrate a diverse range of approaches, frequently engage with issues that are central to the artistic, political and social identity of stand-up comedy and are responsive to shifts in stand-up comedy, at the level of both content and form. Furthermore, rather than merely 'scraping the surface', those which could be described as meta-works engage in extensive discursive exploration of stand-up. The prominence of metareference in stand-up comedy functions as an index of a culture in which comedy has come to occupy more space, and is therefore considered deserving of critical scrutiny. It is used to mock stand-up comedy, point to its deficiencies, limitations, or assumptions, while simultaneously insisting it is worthy and deserving of the scrutiny and attention that this entails. This thesis demonstrates a continued proliferation of metacomedy in '(post-)postmodern' (Wolf, 2009, p.7) stand-up, and a continued interest in stand-up comedy that explores the nature of stand-up comedy itself among audiences for live performances, critics and awards judges and, through the reach and media exposure of global streaming platforms such as Netflix, a potentially expanded popular audience. Metacomedy, therefore, continues to be a significant feature of stand-up, and will continue to shape the development of the form in a new era.

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