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# Preaching to the converted? How political comedy matters

**Abstract:** Practitioners, audiences and critics are often dismissive of political comedy's impact. It is argued that audiences only attend political performances if they already agree with the performer; further, that audiences will not laugh at ideas that they find too subversive. As laughter depends upon consensus and success depends upon laughter, the comedian merely preaches to the converted. This article challenges these assumptions by examining the diverse strategies of two political comedians: Mark Thomas and Stewart Lee. Through analysis of performance, and their methodology and intent as related in practitioner interviews, I demonstrate that the nature of consensus in political comedy is more complex than has generally been supposed. Far from being a sign of comedy's impuissance, consensus is used as a tool to enhance and develop political engagement. I suggest that in order to discover whether political comedy matters, we must first broaden our understanding of how it matters.

**Keywords:** stand-up comedy, consensus, impact, Mark Thomas, Stewart Lee

## 1 Introduction

On the night of 19 March 2003, comedian Mark Thomas performed a gig in Edinburgh. Before the morning, the American military would have commenced air strikes on Baghdad, taking both Britain and America into an acutely controversial war with Iraq. Both Thomas and his audience were aware that war was imminent. For a high-profile peace campaigner and political activist, this was a critical moment to be performing.

The significance of this event is demonstrated by the decision to record the show and release it on CD (Thomas 2004), with the dramatic title *Mark Thomas: The Night War Broke Out (TNWBO)*. Thomas was aware of the drama and significance that this event would draw from its timing. The show starts with a segment of The Clash's *Rock the Casbah*, played as intro music. Thomas begins by apologizing for "the scares"; rumors that he had been arrested earlier that

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day and the show was cancelled (what was true was that he and some collea-gues had been removed from the Scottish Parliament for causing a disturbance, including showering its members with anti-war confetti). This hints that the show is a little bit dangerous; there would be good reason for some authority to prevent Thomas from performing on such a night. Thomas goes on to comment on the structure of the show and ask if there are "any students in", getting a respectable laugh as he quips, "oh just, sort of, about three or four, really. Which is good, 'cause that's concessions, which is less money."

The response becomes really explosive at the following gag (in this and all transcriptions of performance, square brackets denote audience response). Thomas asks, "just out of interest, have we got any French people in?" A quiet "yeah" is audible on the recording. Thomas responds: "Fucking love you! [Laughter followed by cheering, applause and whistles] ... Fucking love you. You are fucking gorgeous ... French people are sophisticated and classy and classic and the word '*veto*' [laugh]." This is the first direct reference made to the war. France had flexed its right to veto a United Nations resolution that would give Iraq an ultimatum beyond which war would be automatic; thus the French had come to be seen as allies by peace protestors. Americans, by contrast, get a rougher deal: "Any Americans in, at all? [silence, followed by slightly nervous laughter]. Are you sure? [laugh] They've learned, haven't they? [laugh]."

Clearly, this is a case of preaching to the converted. Despite a national climate of controversy, the audience in this gig is unified. They respond instantly and emphatically to support anti-war activities, demonstrating pre-existing allegiances. The question is: what does Thomas' act of preaching to the converted actually achieve, if anything?

In an interview published in 1994, fellow comedian Stewart Lee critiqued Mark Thomas in the following terms:

> I said [to Thomas] ..."if you're doing political stuff, and you're concerned about it, as you are, there's not really that much point in doing most of the gigs you do, because all the people there agree with you anyway. If you've really got something to say, you should take it out to the prostitutes and tax gatherers and see what they think of it, and see if you can use your comedy skills to win them round." (Cook 1994: 225)

Lee's comment embodies a common criticism of political comedy, and of poli-tical art in general: that it achieves little because the audience who chooses to access it already agrees with its message. Lee frames this as a problem for political art. He assumes that the way to make a difference is to take the message to those who do not already agree; or, to look at it in another way, to expound ideas that audiences will find challenging and unfamiliar, rather than those with which they are already comfortable.

Mark Thomas and Stewart Lee both began performing in the 1980s. In addition to their live performance work, each has achieved a high profile through successful radio and TV series spread across the last three decades (most recent examples include five series of *Mark Thomas: The Manifesto* [BBC Radio 4 2009–2013] and three series of *Stewart Lee's Comedy Vehicle* [BBC Two, 2009–2014]). Their careers have stretched beyond comic performance, with both, for example, authoring books and serving as press journalists and columnists. Both are described as political comedians, and both have been accused of preaching to the converted. Both theorize their work in ways that seem to refute the basic assumptions of such a phrase, seeing their comedy as a means to engage audiences in empowering processes. Their tactics, however, are very different. Lee has developed a distinctive performance style that purposefully disrupts clear-cut interpretations and unanimity of audience response. Thomas, meanwhile, makes a virtue of preaching to the converted. This article examines these two very different approaches, arguing that political comedy matters, and that it matters in diverse and complex ways.

## 2 Discord and consensus: The problem of laughter

Notions akin to the accusation of preaching to the converted can be detected running through comic theory. On the one hand, the literature points to joking's important role as a means of disrupting or challenging dominant norms and power structures. On the other, joking is seen as a way of reinforcing group consensus: it takes place among an in-group as a means to assert the group's sense of community and affirm norms.

Theories seeking to explain why things are funny are commonly divided into three strands: superiority, relief and incongruity. Superiority theories cite defects found in others as the source of funniness. While there are many finely nuanced expressions of this idea, the basic premise is that laughter celebrates the laughers' comparative excellence. Hobbes (1987: 19) theorized joking as the "apprehension of some deformed thing in another" and "observing the imperfections of other men." Long before, Cicero (1987: 17) had identified that "the seat and province of the laughable ... lies in a kind of offensiveness and deformity." This is to say that the butt of the joke is guilty of impropriety: superiority theories imply that joking reinforces dominant norms and values by punishing those who do not conform. Beyond the superiority strand, the notion that joking relies

upon a shared understanding of 'normal' is often explicitly highlighted as a fundamental element of joking. As Critchley (2002: 4) states, "in listening to a joke, I am presupposing a social world that is shared, the forms of which the practice of joke-telling is going to play with."

Relief theories tend more towards the interpretation of joking as a disruptive practice. In his influential *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious,* Freud (1960) said that jokes were a means of temporarily eliding civilizing influences to express hostile, unpleasant or otherwise seditious ideas. Herbert Spencer (1911: 298–305) thought that laughter constituted the release of excess nervous energy through "odd movements" of the body, namely the "half-convulsive actions we call laughter." At root, then, relief theories signify the subversion of normal activity – whether physical, emotional or cognitive – or of decent thoughts and behaviors. Like the superiority theories mentioned above, this implies a shared sense of what is 'normal'; the difference is that relief theories cite the subversion of these norms – rather than their reinforcement – as the source of funniness.

It is in incongruity theories that we see the most sophisticated expression of joking as a means of disruption. In these theories, the joke is created by a clash of incongruous ideas. Schopenhauer (1987: 62) expressed this notion in terms that begin to lend themselves to politicization, suggesting that, at its best:

> [H]umour depends upon a subjective, yet serious and sublime mood, which is involuntarily in conflict with a common external world very different from itself, which it cannot escape from and to which it will not give itself up; therefore ... it tries to think its own point of view and that external world through the same conceptions, and thus a double incongruity arises, sometimes on the one side, sometimes on the other, between these concepts and the realities thought through them. Hence ... the joke, is produced, behind which, however, the deepest seriousness is concealed and shines through.

In these instances, joking is an expression of discord. The joke "will not give itself up" to the norm. Hence it is an expression of rebellion, however smiling.

Lash (1948: 119–120) also sees joking as a practice that destabilizes the norm by suggesting alternatives:

> Where the failure of the object to fit its archetype is intentional, as in the case of wit turning a value upside-down, the incongruity is presented for the purpose of edification through the agency of the imagination. A new norm, to supplant or to modify the original, is suggested; a new point of view is invited ... For any given situation, there exists a myriad of possible norms ranging in degree all the way from that traditionally posited to its opposite ... To select one of a given number of related norms, though it may seem truest or best, is to exclude others ... Does not each one convey, as it were, an insight into that sector of life which, though it be not yours, nevertheless, is?

In Lash's (1948: 120) philosophy, wit leads us to a "keener perception of the actual" by reminding us that our norms are selective and constructed; however natural our standards of normality may seem, alternatives do exist. The political significance of this is more precisely articulated by Mary Douglas (1999: 150), who defines joking as "the juxtaposition of a control against that which is controlled, this juxtaposition being such that the latter triumphs." She concurs with Lash's notion that incongruities allow alternative norms to be mooted, and asserts that in doing so, "[t]he joke … affords opportunity for realising that an accepted pattern has no necessity. Its excitement lies in the suggestion that any particular ordering of experience may be arbitrary and subjective" (Douglas 1999: 152). Indeed, Douglas (1999: 152) offers a strong statement of joking's function as a disruptive social force: "[w]hatever the joke, however remote its subject, the telling of it is potentially subversive … a dominant pattern of relations is challenged by another."

There is, however, an important caveat to the idea of joking as disruption: that it is limited by the boundaries of consensus. Critchley (2002: 11) allows that joking, at its best, can challenge power and "expose its contingency," such that "we realise that what appeared to be fixed and oppressive is in fact the emperor's new clothes." However, such instances are in the minority: "[m]ost humour, in particular the comedy of recognition – and most humour is comedy of recognition – simply seeks to reinforce consensus and in no way seeks to criticise the established order or change the situation in which we find ourselves." Although Mary Douglas (1999: 152) saw joking as essentially disruptive, and argued that every joke was "potentially subversive," this disruptive power is always limited by the consensus of its audience:

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

For Douglas (1999: 155–159), a joke must carry an "element of challenge," but the joker's "disruptive comments … are in a sense the comments of the social group upon itself." Douglas (1999: 159) arrives at the conclusion that the joker "merely expresses consensus."

Both Critchley and Douglas choose rather loaded adverbs, respectively describing jokes as "simply" and "merely" dealing in consensus. Such choices embody the same assumptions as accusations of preaching to the converted in political art, implying that to express the group's consensus is an act of little or no political significance. In comic performance, though, consensus has particular power because it is demonstrated through laugher.

As Limon (2000: 12) so emphatically states: "your laughter is the single end of stand-up." Double (2007: 13) elaborates:

> Stand-up comedy is like a conversation in which the audience makes a contribution that is as limited as it is vital. Normally, they stick to a very narrow set of responses (laughter, applause, heckling, etc.), but these are absolutely crucial to the comedian. The sounds the audience make are part of the rhythm of the act, providing the energy which fuels the performance. They are also an important indicator of success or failure. An appalled silence at the end of a joke gives a clear message.

Audience responses can be subtle, and "comics become very skilled at reading them," discerning the different messages audiences are giving (Double 2007: 13). Audiences also listen to one another, and are competent in interpreting group response. As Carr and Greeves (2007: 181) note:

> When jokes are told in public, people edit their responses unconsciously and continuously. All of us are much more likely to laugh out loud when we're part of a group rather than when we're alone – we are signaling that we get it, that we are part of a group with a shared sense of humour. Equally, we understand, even if only subliminally, that when and how we laugh can give something away. In judging whether we should take offence at a joke, we apply a complex set of measurements of which we're usually only partially aware ... we look around at the other listeners, to see whether they are laughing and whether we're allowed to laugh in their company.

Although they may not be entirely cognizant of it, the audience of a stand-up gig know that they are engaged in something more complex than free, individual and organic responses; as Zijderveld (1968: 295) observes, "the joking situation is not as 'natural', or 'spontaneous' as one might think, since it is closely related to the values dominant in a particular society."

Laughter is an expression of inclusion and conformity. As Bergson (2008: 11) states, "[y]ou would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo ... Our laughter is always the laughter of a group." According to Lorenz (1967: 253), laughter can be a mechanism for "produc[ing], simultaneously, a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders. Heartily laughing together at the same thing forms an immediate bond ... and simultaneously draws a line." Laughter exerts a social pressure to conform: a straight choice between joining in with the fun and cosy group activity, and finding oneself isolated. In a comedy gig, the audience is performing, responding to substantial pressure to vocalize a response that is in keeping with the group reaction.

For all its promise as a disruptive and challenging social practice, this backs political comedy into rather a bleak corner. The joker is bound by the consensus of the group; it logically follows, therefore, that political comedians can only

hope to attract audiences who already agree with them, at least if they want that audience to laugh. Worse still, our knowledge of the social pressure to conform with group laughter could suggest that audience members can be coerced into mob-like behaviour, causing them to celebrate or conform with ideas that are not their own. Freud (1960: 103) noted "the joke *will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible*. It will further bribe the hearer with its yield of pleasure into taking sides without any very close investigation." [original emphasis]

This is not merely a theoretical concern; some practitioners are also uneasy about the potential for laughter to become a 'mob' response. We now move on to explore two different responses to these fundamental issues: the anti-mob policy of Stewart Lee, who embraces discord, and the consensus-mongering tactics of Mark Thomas.

# 3 Courting discord: Stewart Lee and the comedy of disruption

Stewart Lee (2009) describes his unusual methodology, saying: "the most obvious thing to do in stand-up is to try and get everyone on side, but I like to create a feeling of confusion in the room where people don't really know if they're supposed to be laughing or not." What is unusual about this approach is that it eschews the demands of consensus. Rather than "getting everyone on side," Lee often denies the audience this sense of group harmony, creating a peculiarly discordant response.

Performing in Glasgow, Lee (2010) delivered a controversial routine which was ostensibly about presenters of the BBC program *Top Gear* – namely Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond – but is perhaps more helpfully understood as a political piece about 'soft' bigotry in mainstream entertainment. The BBC is funded by television license fees that are compulsory for all British homes where live television is watched or recorded, subject to some exemptions. *Top Gear* is a highly popular program on the network about cars and driving. Clarkson, May, and Hammond remained the show's presenters until March 2015, when, following several scandals around political incorrectness, Clarkson was finally fired for punching a producer. May and Hammond left soon after. Lee's routine begins by saying that he hates *Top Gear*, which gets a modest laugh and one cheer from a single audience member. Lee comments on this response, triggering a few more people to cheer and applaud. Lee then gestures to a small area of the audience on his right:

> *There's a little pocket, isn't there, spread across here and here and here, of, like, the liberal* Top Gear *haters [laugh] but on the whole, here, tonight in Glasgow, probably the majority of the audience are going "well we like* Top Gear. *It's funny, what's your" [laugh] – "why?" – the problem is I hate* Top Gear *[laugh]. And I hate anyone that likes it, [laugh] right. And I'm now, I'm gonna explain why that is for about forty-five minutes [laugh followed by applause].*

This introduction breaks with convention. Where a comedian might normally try to establish a shared attitude toward the subject of a routine, Lee instead stresses diversity of opinion. This denies the establishment of consensus and highlights discord on several levels: Lee claims that the audience are not in agreement with each other, that most of them do not agree with him, and even implies that this Glasgow audience's response is unique. Lee then introduces a notion on which it should be easy for his audience to find consensus:

> *The reason I hate* Top Gear – *and even if you're a* Top Gear *viewer, like most of you are, you have to relate to this – the reason I hate* Top Gear, *is 'cause it is willfully and deliberately politically incorrect ... I like political correctness, I think it's good, so I can't relate to* Top Gear. *But I don't think it's aimed at me [laugh] right? It's aimed at a different kind of middle-aged man, isn't it, a kind of frightened [small laugh] middle-aged man, in his house, he's scared of how the world's changing, and political correctness has gone mad, and he likes to watch* Top Gear – *don't you, cause it pays [laugh] pays no heed to the political correctness ...*

On the words "don't you," Lee addresses the audience to his left, implying that they are representative of the "frightened middle aged man" who likes *Top Gear*, and thus emphasizing the imagined division between different factions of his audience.

Lee's comments here should embody easy points of consensus for the leftist, liberal audience who are likely to attend his show. This audience can be expected to value and adhere to the standards of political correctness that characterize alternative comedy. When Lee identifies a knot of the frightened-middle-aged-man type to his left, the audience laugh because they know it is a prank: clearly, none of Lee's audience would wish to be described as reactionary bigots. Lee should indeed be preaching to the converted in this context.

However, Lee goes on to utterly disrupt this consensus. He swerves into a personal attack on Richard Hammond, making specific reference to a real, life-threatening car accident in which Hammond was involved during filming for *Top Gear*. Lee calls Hammond "a man who's been able to carve out a best selling literary career off the back of his own inability to drive safely"; a reference to Hammond's subsequent best-selling book. Lee jokes that Hammond should have published with the publicly-funded BBC because, "you and me – the license payers – we funded that crash ... and therefore we are entitled to feel the benefit of any profits derived from it." Lee does not deliver his gags with a wry smile,

but as if they were intended as serious commentary, leaving it to the audience to spot and apply the irony inherent in the routine. This enhances the feeling that consensus is lacking; their response seems at odds with Lee's demeanor.

Finally, Lee comes to a bold statement:

> I think [writing a book about the crash is] a cynical thing to do, and I hate him for it, and I wish he'd been killed in that crash [big laugh and some applause]. I do. I wish he'd been killed [small laugh] and, er, and decapitated [small laugh] and that the next series of Top Gear had been presented by Jeremy Clarkson, James May and Richard Hammond's severed head on a stick [laugh].

Lee takes the microphone away from his mouth, letting it hang by his side as he moves downstage to look out over his audience, his face betraying no malice or excitement. He continues: "And if that seems a bit much. For all the *Top Gear* viewers. It's just a joke, like on *Top Gear* [big laugh, growing into applause with some whoops]."

At this point, it appears that Lee is re-establishing consensus. He reveals that his offensive comments about Hammond were all a ploy to expose the inadequacy of a defense commonly made for the politically incorrect joking on *Top Gear*: that "it's just a joke." However, Lee is not about to make it this easy for his audience:

> "It's just a joke" – the Jeremy Clarkson defence – "it's just a joke" [laugh]. So when I said that I wished Richard Hammond had been decapitated and killed, right, like when they do their jokes on Top Gear, it's just a joke [small laugh]. But coincidently [laugh] as well as it being a joke [laugh] it's also what I wish had happened [big laugh].

Wishing that a real person had been killed in a real car crash, takes the routine back into hazardous territory.

Lee elaborates on his reasons for disliking Hammond, comparing the way he laughs along with Clarkson's bigotry to "a horrible little shit-weasel kid at school, hanging around with all the bullies, laughing at their jokes, in the hope they won't pick on him." He relates an example of this dynamic, wherein Clarkson jokingly referred to former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown as "a one-eyed Scottish idiot." Lee takes issue with the decision to mock Brown's visual impairment, particularly drawing a moral basis for his argument from the fact that Brown lost his sight in childhood. Lee imagines a parent with a sick child in hospital, trying to reassure them:

> But presumably, there came a point where Gordon Brown's parents didn't do that any more because he was blind and that was that, and Jeremy Clarkson thinks that's a funny thing to do a joke about [small laugh]. Now, Jeremy Clarkson has three daughters, and I hope they all

*go blind [shocked laughter and some smattered applause] Not one of them in one eye, all of them in all their eyes! [laugh continues] Come on, it's just a joke like on* Top Gear!

The audience response at this point is particularly fragmented. There is some fairly unified laughter, a smattering of applause and a couple of isolated whoops. The only audience members visible on camera are two men sitting in a small patch of light in the front row. They are smiling – perhaps laughing – but are not applauding; they look around and at the floor, seemingly trying to discern what is the appropriate response in this situation. While Douglas' (1999: 159) assertion that the joker "merely expresses consensus" could be applied to many joking situations, it seems that Lee is employing the opposite strategy here. In fantasizing about death and blindness befalling real, and specified, people, Lee has chosen an approach to his topic with which he knows his audience cannot possibly agree.

Offstage, Lee (2009) explains why he seeks discord rather than unified laughter:

*I don't like consensus, really ... I think when there's loads of people laughing at the same thing it just feels nasty, y'know, I like the idea that there's some kind of exchange or process going on ... And there is something unpleasant about lots of people all laughing at the same thing in the same way. It's a bit like a rally, you know.*

Lee also equates the audience who laugh uncritically and in unison with a 'mob', echoing Bill Hicks' statement, "to me, the comic is the guy who says, 'Wait a minute' as the consensus forms ... He's the antithesis of the mob mentality" (Lahr 1993).

This aversion to the mob mentality may stem from recognition of the problem with laughter: it can bribe audiences to laugh for the sake of fun or inclusion, rather than engaging critically with the ideas offered. Lee (2009) himself states: "you sort of do feel obliged to take an opposition point of view ... You're supposed to be the person asking uncomfortable questions, I think, even if they're about trivial things, rather than the person agreeing with everyone. You shouldn't be agreeing with everyone. You should be disagreeing with them just for the sake of it." Many political comedians espouse counter-cultural or anti-establishment views for an audience of like-minded dissenters: this is the method Mark Thomas employs in the example quoted above. What makes Lee's approach so distinctive is that he actively manufactures discord among his audience within the gig.

This decision is at least partly artistic. Lee (2009) explains:

*In somewhere like The Comedy Store or Jongleurs [two of the most famous comedy club franchises in the United Kingdom] ... there'll be a guy talking about things, and the people in*

*the audience nudge each other going, "that's what you're like", "you say that", "oh, I did that!" Whereas what I like, is I like to be in an audience going "I would never have thought of that!", or "I would never have said that!", or "why would you possibly think that?!" ... I like to be taken by surprise. So I think it just depends what people want.*

As an artist, Lee (2009) enjoys the challenge inherent in his approach: "I do like to do things that I think might not work ... You kind of make things difficult for yourself to keep yourself awake, really."

There is, though, a political dimension to Lee's preferences. His argument in the above routine is that political correctness should be prized over cheap bigotry sold through entertainment; surely there are many strategies he could have employed to win his audience round easily to consensus with this point of view, gaining easy and unified laughter. Interestingly, Lee has instead chosen to make an easy ideological battle into a difficult one. The motivation for this is both artistic and political. Lee (2009) elaborates; "part of the pleasure of any piece of art (and I think stand-up is art), is having the fun of figuring it out for yourself ... I build that in quite self-consciously, giving the audience the pleasure of figuring it out for themselves ... and I like that, 'cause it means they're, sort of, engaged."

Lee's political content is delivered not only through what is said, but also in the form that his comedy takes. For him, the way in which audiences engage with the material seems at least as important as the message conveyed. Recognizing that it is not only about what audiences hear, but also how they engage with it, is key to understanding the potential for impact in the more straightforward case of preaching to the converted presented by Mark Thomas' *TNWBO*.

# 4 Mark Thomas and the importance of preaching to the converted

*TNWBO* has an explicit aim for political impact. Thomas (2004) encourages his audience to participate in active protest against the war. He gives several examples of potential actions, from invitations to attend protest demonstrations to more imaginative bits of mischief-making. The anti-war campaign had amassed the largest protest march that Britain had ever seen. Thomas has a suggestion:

*If you were on the demonstration today – [or if] you go tomorrow – the cops will go filming ya, right? If you were on that demonstration in London – the big fucking Ministry of Defence*

*people will have filmed every single fucking demonstrator. Under the Data Protection Act you are entitled to claim your video image [laugh]. Write in [small laugh]. Write in: "Dear Police Officer – Dear M.O.D. [Ministry of Defense] I was on the march. I do believe you were filming." [small laugh] "Under the Data Protection Act I would like to declare all the video images of me. Here is a passport photograph, a copy of a recent utility bill – ah, proof of where I live – and a cheque for ten pounds which you're obliged to, er, to ask for but you don't necessarily have to cash in. I would like all video images of me. I do note that any video images of other people included on the tape would be illegal and in breach of the Data Protection Act" [laugh]. "Find me if you can" [laugh].*

Thomas imagines a police officer sat in a room watching endless reams of footage, then builds to a big laugh and applause as he says: "and if we all fucking did it, it'd be fucking great! In fact, even if you're not on the march, fucking do it – that's even more important! Every one of you, join in!"

Some of Thomas' audience are already involved in action on some level. He asks who went on the mass anti-war protest marches, and a smattering of applause and cheering indicates that some of this Edinburgh audience did indeed travel to London or Glasgow to participate. The majority of Thomas' audience, though, seem not to have gone on the march, and may be particularly averse to engaging in more errant modes of direct action.

The show does much to make direct action seem more accessible to this relatively moderate audience. Thomas acknowledges that he sometimes feels nervous or overwhelmed. He relates the story of a protest in Whitehall, a London street that houses many government offices, that "got a bit lively." His friend Martin, and a fellow activist called Gideon, have stopped a police van by leaning against it. Thomas is chatting to them:

> *Suddenly everything changes because the cops charge from the other end of the street. Everything changes: the noise, the feeling, the atmosphere. And in those moments, I head for the side of the street, press myself against the wall and try and look like brick [laugh] … And I saunter back, and Martin and Gideon are still there [small laugh]. 'Aven't fuckin' moved [small laugh]. Just in front of them there's a pile of horse shit [small laugh] where one of the cop things has gone past. I go "alright lads?"*

> *Martin, performed by Thomas: Yep (grunt). Looks like you left something, Mark [laugh].*

By including incidents in which he himself comes across as scared or inept, Thomas makes the notion of activism more accessible to his audience. This suggests that activists are ordinary people, and it is okay to be nervous and uncertain. In fact, Thomas (2004) cites this as a potential strength: "that's what really gets them. They don't like it when people go, 'we are a little bit frightened, and we haven't done this before, but we are prepared to get nicked [arrested].'"

Thomas also demystifies the processes by which direct action is perpetrated and controlled. Several of Thomas' stories involve protestors undertaking risky activities but coming to no legal or actual harm. For example, Thomas' story about his friend Martin continues with a phone conversation that took place while Martin was chained to a petrol pump:

> I said, "What did the police do?"
>
> He said, "Well the police came along and said, 'Have you got any intention of breaking the law?', I said 'No'" [laugh]. "They said, 'well if you have no intention of breaking the law we'll leave you to it'" [laugh and applause].
>
> I said, "You're kidding"
>
> He goes, "No. They said, 'How long are you gonna be?' I said, 'About ten hours.' They said, 'If you're not gonna break the law, that's fine'" [small laugh].
>
> I said, "But – but"
>
> He goes, "Yeah, I know, aggravated trespass. But they weren't gonna say anything; I fucking weren't" [big laugh and applause].

These examples disrupt the traditional sources of authority that might prevent moderate people from engaging in activism. The Police's authority is dependent upon their choosing to exercise it; the law is an ambiguous realm in which the protestor's creativity, or the sheer weight of numbers, often results in the protestor escaping repercussions. This reflects Critchley's (2002: 11) notion that "by laughing at power, we expose its contingency." By laughing together at the Police's decision not to intervene, and applauding in celebration of Martin's good luck, the audience recognizes that there is a limit to conventional authority.

For Thomas (2008), this is an important part of the work:

> It's about activism, but it's also about something that exists outside the theatre. If it doesn't exist outside the theatre at the end of it, I've failed. Because actually all of this is about ... having an impact is an important thing, telling people that they can do it, actually, and you can do it with fun is really important. And actually, I hope that that sense does go on.

It is important to Thomas that his audience is encouraged to take practical action. Such impact is, of course, significant, but it is unlikely that every member of Thomas' audience goes on to engage in actual activism; indeed, it may be the vast minority who do so. While Thomas clearly hopes to engage audience members in some specific activities, he, like Lee, also hopes that his work will engage people on a more fundamental level:

> I was brought up in this culture ... that actually art did influence people's decisions, that actually art could change people's minds. But also it wasn't just about that – it was about someone actually being in the fucking moment, so that you're part of the debate, you're part

*of the argument, you're part of the forces that are going on ... So for me, art was always about something ... Art and culture was always – had a purpose to it, it had a point to it, it was about engaging in something (Thomas 2008).*

It is easy to assume that political comedians seek to cause specific, unilateral and pre-determined changes in audience attitudes or behaviors. This would amount to mere indoctrination, and ill accords with the way either Thomas or Lee articulate their own intentions for their work. For Thomas, the aim may be to use comedy to engage audiences in a debate, and even to advocate particular political views and behaviors, but this should not be confused with intent to indoctrinate. His aim, as stated here, is not to cause fixed and unilateral changes in either attitude or behavior, but rather to engage individuals in a more democratic societal process.

When asked about the impact of his work, Thomas can point to concrete changes in various areas including law and the practices of big businesses, as well as getting some audience members involved in protest. However, he also relates his impact to a more subtle and pervasive line of public influence:

*The whole point about this is that it should be fun, but it also should have a significance. If you can't play with these big ideas then, you know, what you're saying is, is that some things are sacred, and we can never change them. And as soon as you say that, it's just like you've just become part of the obstacle. You know, the whole point is it's open to change ... If we see ourselves as part of a continuum of democracy that goes back to Chartism [a movement, beginning c. 1837, that demanded rights and principles that later became fundamental precepts of British democracy], or goes back to the public debates, then actually we've got fucking masses of stuff that's gone on ... So, actually, if you look at it in those terms, masses of change happens. Change occurs all the time. It's about whether you can shape or change, and influence its direction (Thomas 2008).*

This is arguably the key to understanding the real impact of Thomas' stand-up comedy performance. People are constantly acting and communicating, and "change occurs all the time"; the challenge, surely, is to understand what shapes these less dramatic, but more pervasive, activities.

One important thing that Thomas (2004) does on *TNWBO* is to re-tell the story so far. The mainstream "propaganda", to use Thomas' term, has spun a narrative in which the Iraqi government was holding dangerous weapons of mass destruction and America and Britain were reluctantly stepping forward to save the world – and the Iraqi people – from an aggressive and dangerous regime. As far as the narrative of the anti-war movement is concerned, this moment could be seen as a tragic end to the tale: all is lost, the war begins anyway.

Thomas systematically reinterprets these narratives, using some dense factual information to support his own version of the story. He argues that the

impending war is better understood as a strategic maneuver designed to defend America as an empire. As for the accusation that the anti-war movement has achieved nothing, Thomas says, "we put ten years on that fucker and that's enough [laugh]. Ten years. Somewhere in Downing Street there's a portrait getting younger and that fucking suits me just fine [laughter and some clapping]", a reference to Oscar Wilde's *The picture of Dorian Gray*, in which the protagonist maintains his untouched, youthful beauty while his portrait ages with his every act of debauchery. At the end of the show, Thomas summarizes the collective dilemma: "and I'll tell you what it's about, for each and every one of us. It's about when we wake up in the morning, and we look at ourselves in the bathroom mirror, can we live with what we see? Good luck and thanks for coming." The encore concludes, "thanks and keep going." Whether or not his audience goes on to perpetrate hardcore activism, he has successfully reframed the narrative as one of continuing struggle. The invasion of Iraq is a critical plot point, but it is not the end of the story: their struggle continues.

To implicate an audience in this narrative is a powerful thing. Walter Lippmann (1922: 10–11) noted that "human culture is very largely the selection, the rearrangement, the tracing of patterns upon, and the stylizing of" the information we can glean from our environment; "for the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it." Lippmann (1922: 10) identifies that the need to summarize information into a more manageable form leads to the "insertion between man and his environment of a pseudo-environment"; the individual experiences the world not as it is, but as he has constructed it, summarizing it into a manageable form. The individual's behavior is then a reaction to this pseudo-environment, "but because it *is* behaviour, the consequences, if they are acts, operate not in the pseudo-environment where the behaviour is stimulated, but in the real environment where action eventuates" (Lippmann, 1922: 10). Thus the patterns by which people arrange their experience of the world have direct influence on their behavior and the way they function in society.

Novitz relates this concept directly to the relationship between narrative and politics. He argues that human behavior is shaped by the stories that individuals tell about themselves, and thus "we can change people's ideas about what constitutes a normal, decent, or natural human being by bringing them to accept and respect the stories we tell about ourselves … It is not just that we can change one another's ideas about what is natural in human behaviour, but that in changing these ideas we can change our behaviour" (Novitz 2001: 155).

Mayer (2014: 81) further argues that stories "can so frame an issue that acting becomes an expression of identity and, indeed, a moral imperative":

> *So, too, in social and political life, we can be pulled to act by the stories that engross us ... Caught up in story, pulled up onto the stage, we find that we must rescue the victim, must fight for justice, must sacrifice for the cause, because our identity is at stake, because those acts are what the plot demands of our character (Mayer, 2014: 98).*

Human beings must constantly make decisions about how to act. It is commonly accepted that we make these decisions by drawing on our understanding of the role that we think others expect us to play: our notion of proper behavior. To do this, we necessarily deploy simplified patterns. As Allport (1979: 8–9) notes, "life is so short, and the demands upon us for practical adjustments so great, that we cannot let our ignorance detain us in our daily transactions. We have to decide whether objects are good or bad by classes. We cannot weigh each object in the world by itself. Rough and ready rubrics, however coarse and broad, have to suffice." It is in contributing to these "rough and ready rubrics" that Thomas makes his most pervasive impact.

The audience knows that Thomas is preaching to the converted. For them, this is the point. Where this translates into impact is in the use of the audience as a peer group; a mechanism by which the individual determines what interpretation of the world is correct for people like them (Merton 1968: 335–440). By laughing, cheering and applauding together, the faithful affirm and develop their own notions of propriety. This may or may not translate into activism, but the evidence suggests that affirming their membership of this anti-war community, and coming together to verify what this community collectively thinks and feels, is bound to affect the way these individuals function in society. This may not be a dramatic way of understanding efficacy; to covert non-believers or cause outright revolution would doubtless be more exciting. This impact is subtle, but this is not the same as being insignificant.

Twelve years later, speculation about the Iraq war continues. Many British people still hold the view that the war was illegal; speculation that the then-Prime Minister, Tony Blair, should face prosecution for war crimes is particularly rife (even the current leader of Blair's own party, Jeremy Corbyn, insists that the war was illegal and has hinted that Blair could face prosecution [Watt 2015]). The government has been pushed into some concrete action, setting up the independent Chilcot Inquiry in 2009 to, "[consider] the UK's involvement in Iraq, including the way decisions were made and actions taken, to establish ... what happened and to identify the lessons that can be learned" (Iraq Inquiry, 2015). Of course, Thomas was not the sole cause of these developments: it was along with numerous other voices that shaped and encouraged the anti-war community that he played his part in perpetuating their narrative. The war is long since over, but the resistance to it fights on.

# 5 How political comedy matters

Both Mark Thomas and Stewart Lee seek to engage their audiences in processes of thought: to define, query or problematize mainstream notions of normal. Their work illustrates that to say joking "merely" or "simply" expresses consensus – and to see this as a practice that exists in binary opposition to challenging, confronting and making a difference – is to oversimplify the social function of comedy. Lee and Thomas both employ strategies that combine consensus and disruption. Lee disrupts pre-existing consensus in order to circumvent the passive compliance of the mob; Thomas uses consensus to make his audience aware of their own role in on-going societal developments, thus shaping and enabling participation in these processes.

Thomas and Lee have different aims and employ different strategies; other comedians have yet more methods. Their work demonstrates that we must move away from some simplistic notions: that comedy's impact is to be found solely in some pre-determined and measurable change to individual opinions and behaviors, and that to preach to the converted is a practice of no value. Comedy's efficacy may take a range of forms, and these assemblies of the faithful are the best place for these to begin. This is how political comedy matters.

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# Bionote

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