

**Laughter's Entanglement: Value struggles,
liminality and affect in live comedy consumption
and production**

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Declaration of Authorship

I Adam Carter hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date: 20/04/2018

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Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which laughter is entangled with cultural valuation processes in live stand-up comedy. This is explored through a combination of video observations of three live stand-up spaces in London, narrative interviews with comedians and focus group discussions with audience members. This thesis is concerned with how the practice of laughter relates to the social reproduction of cultural value, and how 'value struggles' are experienced, reproduced, and potentially challenged, through the production and consumption of stand-up comedy. Valuations and identifications based on class, gender and ethnicity are shown to be influential in the experience and understanding of laughter and stand-up comedy. This thesis analyses the mechanisms by which the cultural reproduction of value is maintained, through the lived experience of stand-up comedy and the discursive resources drawn upon by participants to understand their place in the field of comedy. Evidence is presented on how the collective laughter of groups can challenge, but not necessarily overturn, valuations; how laughter establishes affective territories that limit and impact who can laugh or what is found laughable; how readings of audience laughter by comedians, and the different valuations placed on different people's laughter, influences the creative process of comedians; and how the ritualistic, intensely affective and liminal character of the live stand-up space ensures these experiences matter deeply and become socially influential. This thesis contends that laughter does have the affective potential to disrupt the reproduction of power relations, and that stand-up comedy could be an arena where alternative valuations might flourish, but that its current entanglement renders it relatively impotent.

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Chapter 1: Laughter's entanglement?

I fucking hate *Mrs Brown's Boys*.¹

This - particularly amongst these heady academic circles I'm now apparently flitting around - is an uncontroversial judgement to make. It is an assumed point of view – everyone hates *Mrs Brown's Boys*. We all have pretty decent taste here in the academy, so of course we hate it. That bloody show is a throwback - it's 1970s sitcom shite, it has nothing new to say, there is no point spending time considering it. Other than to state categorically that we are not the kind of people who could possibly watch such rubbish. None of us have really watched it of course, but it only takes a minute whilst flicking through the channels to realise that it's not for us, and that we fucking hate it.

It's an evening a few years back now, December 2012. I'm in the middle of my Masters year and I'm mulling over ideas for my dissertation. I think I'll do something about comedy – do your dissertation on what you are interested in is always the advice, and comedy has been a bit of a lifelong interest. This partly explains why I have such impeccable comedy taste. As if to taunt me, on the TV in the corner is *Mrs Brown's Boys*. It is a re-run of one of the Christmas specials – it's on in the background, I'm not really paying attention to it. One of the boys is dressed up as a Brussels sprout for some reason. I decide to just leave it on, figuring something else will be on soon, *Pointless* maybe. Good God, it's shit. How does anyone like this? It's backward, it's somehow offensive, it's...

...Why am I laughing?

I have terrible taste. I'm a bloody fraud. I can 'objectively' point out everything that is awful about *Mrs Brown's Boys*. I can hold my own discussing meta-textuality in the stand-up of Stewart Lee; A+ taste discourse. But then my body just gives me away, laughing at a human Brussels sprout. Come to think of it, the programme

¹ This is a British/Irish television sitcom, shown on BBC One in the UK. It stars Brendan O'Carroll as Agnes Brown, a swearing Irish mother and her adventures with her six children (five of whom are the 'boys') and other assorted family and friends.

that most consistently gives me belly laughs is *You've Been Framed*. Prtfalls in a paddling pool - there's my comic nirvana. Shameful. I have my Grandad's sense of humour after all.

If I hadn't been in a dissertation-deciding frame of mind, this tiny event would have passed me by. But this little escaped laugh instead led me to reconsider questions that had troubled and interested me all my life – all to do, as it turns out, with the judgement of value and values. How some comedy gets to be seen as worthy, and others as worthless. How these judgements transfer to the people who consume them, who laugh at them. How all of this feels so hideously natural, or at least as 'second-nature'. It also got me thinking about this apparent disjuncture, however brief, between 'taste' and 'laughter'. Was this just a one-off? Am I the only person to have laughed despite myself? Definitely not. I thought of all those times I've been to a live stand-up show where the audience laugh, and then try to suck it back in or turn it into a groan, realising they've laughed at something 'tasteless', or offensive, or bad. Whilst my reflection started with a reaction to TV comedy, by the time I started this thesis, my focus was very much on live comedy, and whether these judgements hold in 'real-time'. More accurately then, this little laughter breach drew together concerns that had been building up over a long time – drawing together a string of personal interests and academic frustrations. This event had a history, and this event would alter my path ahead.

These strands of my interests, and their crystallisation in a moment of reflection brought on by bloody *Mrs Brown's Boys*, gives some hint to what I mean by 'laughter's entanglement' in the thesis title. On face value this might seem an overwrought problematisation of what appears to be a very simple equation – funny thing happens (or funny thing is said), laughter ensues. Nothing tangled or messy there - it is a stimulus-response relationship. Georges Bataille (translated by Annette Michelson) (1986) recognised that 'we can, with fair precision, observe and define the various themes of the laughable[...]we possess veritable recipes, we can in various ways provoke laughter[...][and] produce objects of laughter' (1986:89). That is all that happened to me: one of Mrs Brown's boys dressed as a Brussels sprout was funny, and therefore I laughed; thesis done. And yet my laugh at *Mrs Brown's Boys* was not, nor do I think can ever be, just a

laugh. It hints at embodied histories, it reacts to an object of laughter in the form of a comedy product, it provides a judgement and is itself judged (by me mainly). Laughter draws itself into questions of taste, it drives actions of self and - had there been others around to witness my 'shameful' laugh - it may have driven the action of others in earshot. Laughter, then, draws the personal and the social together - it is a point where the body literally opens up to the social, mouth agape. It is thoroughly *entangled* in the machinations of the social.

All of which leads me to the central research question that drives this project - how does the practice of laughter relate to the social reproduction of cultural value? I do not think all of the vectors of laughter's sociality are possible to engage in a single thesis, and so here I aim primarily to explore three areas of this entanglement, which I sketch out broadly below. The first regards the comedy industry, with consumers and producers. The second regards embodiment - how laughter might be conceived as expressing something from within, but also as something that 'moves' bodies - as simultaneously reactive and enactive, embodied and embodying. The third regards fields of valuations and judgement in comedy - taste, and the terms on which people might differentiate themselves and others through valuations of comedy.

Comedy consumption, production and inequality

I am a confessed 'comedy junkie'. Most of my leisure time is taken up with watching funny things, and it can take on the appearance of addiction. My first big comedy fandom, Eddie Izzard, started when I was gifted a VHS tape of *Definite Article* in 1996. From that fandom onwards, comedy has been very important in my personal and academic life - I've turned my hand to performing comedy (although not stand-up funnily enough, which seems terrifying), my social life revolves around going to gigs and comedy nights, and academically it has been a longstanding obsession - my undergraduate sociology dissertation was called 'I Love Eddie' (true story). I have a hunch, however, that I'm not alone in feeling comedy as an important part of life.

People give great importance to the sitcoms, sketch shows and stand-ups of 'their' era, suggesting they have an important role to play in how consumers think of themselves and others. The recent release of *Friends* on Netflix, a sitcom about

a group of 20-somethings in New York which ran from 1994 to 2004, has garnered assessments and reassessments regarding its cultural importance, including how it does not fit the taste sensibilities of 'millennials' (Duff, 2018). Alongside the ongoing celebration of comedy past as important to contemporary society, current comedy consumption has seen something of a boom. Through the alternative scene of the 1980s, the comedy as 'rock'n'roll' era of the '90s and the sheer proliferation of gigs and programming in the '00s, comedy finds itself towards the centre of mainstream popular culture (Friedman, 2014). There is a world of comedy products that people use as resources in their lives, 'obsessively' or otherwise. Sharon Lockyer and Lynn Myers (2011), for instance, suggest a number of reasons for why audiences might go to see live comedy. One such reason involves the way in which a shared comedy experience gives patrons a resource for conversation and laughter, particularly after the event.

These uses of cultural products cannot be torn away from the powerful machinations of the cultural industries. Just as laughter is entangled with the social, consumption is entangled with production. The inter and intra-relation of the two also forms part of the interest of this thesis. A recently released report *Panic! It's an Arts Emergency* (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018) draws together a number of findings to squarely remark that 'the cultural and creative industries are marked by significant inequalities' (p.1) and demonstrates a number of paths through which these inequalities take root and persist. A problem of social and cultural exclusion persists despite, and indeed partially because, the majority of people working within the creative industries believe that their sector is meritocratic, despite the over-representation of white, middle-class men in most sectors of the cultural industries (p.12-13).

It is a problem reflected in comedy. Gender representational imbalance has received most attention - Stuart Lowe² (2017) compiled a database of guests by

² An important caveat to the use of Stuart Lowe's work here - this work has not been taken through a peer review process. Lowe could be described as somewhat of an enthusiastic amateur when it comes to gender politics and data analysis. That said, he was involved with the Open Data Institute, and completed a PhD in radio astronomy, ensuring more than a passing familiarity with statistical method - the cautious findings appear sound, and do at least indicate a problem of gender diversity in the comedy industry.

gender on panel shows since 1967, revealing that most of these shows have male hosts, male regular team captains and mostly male guests. Only one edition of one panel show in the database had an all-female line-up, compared with 1,488 all-male line-ups. Lowe also finds that 17%-24% of those on the established comedy circuit are female, a figure garnered by monitoring popular UK comedy website Chortle's database of comedians (Addley, 2016). Representational issues around ethnicity and social class have received less focused attention, and certainly no quantitative findings exist at the time of writing. There are indications of similar issues here however. For example, there is a joke shared amongst Black comedians in the UK that they're waiting for Sir Lenny Henry to die to free up space for one of them on TV (Mahdawi, 2017), and head of BBC comedy commissioning Shane Allen has suggested, or admitted, that TV comedy has been dominated by the perspective of 'Oxbridge white blokes' (Chortle, 2018) for a long time.

Again, similarly to the findings of Brook, O'Brien and Taylor (2018), and despite this very recent admission from Shane Allen, there are assumptions that within the comedy industry that the meritocracy is functioning fairly. In an interview in 2017, long-term comedy reviewer Bruce Dessau interviewed comedian Stuart Goldsmith and asked: 'What has surprised you the most during your career in comedy?' - the response:

That there is no "comedy industry". That all of the competitions, awards, blogs, reviewers, promoters, producers and TV shows are all just people trying to make their own thing work, just like comedians themselves. Nothing is "official". That realisation was genuinely mind-blowing. (Dessau, 2017:np)

Within this quote, there is an underlying valorisation of the place of 'effort' - of 'people trying to make their own thing work' - as defining the success of the comedian, which ignores more structural factors. Indeed, it does not simply ignore structural factors, but denies the existence of anything remotely 'industrial' or institutional. It seems a strange perspective to have given that major television companies have comedy commissioning departments (Mills and Horton, 2017), and that profitable concerns such as Avalon act as agents for certain acts and

are involved in television comedy productions (Lockyer, 2015) - both of these industrial facets have an air of officiality and it is unclear what would count as official if those examples do not. Besides this, the sheer prevalence of stand-up comedy DVDs, arena and theatre tours, and the existence of comedy clubs in every major city in the country would suggest that the realm of the 'funny' is operating on an industrial scale. Of course, comedians (and those in the assorted allied professions) are making efforts to get their work heard. But the comedian's labour also operates in a framework whereby people will be trying to extract profit from that labour, which may then impact on who or what gets heard and considered a legitimate cultural product. These processes again have direct influence on the central question of laughter's place in comedy cultural relations – what forms of laughter will equal profit?

Another response to the concept of a 'comedy industry', besides denying its existence, is to set-up as a comedian who is counter to that industry. Identified and reported on by Tim Jonze in 2007, a 'DIY ethos' has come to define at least part of the comedy scene in the UK (Jonze, 2007: np) with comedian Josie Long held up as a figurehead of this movement. In an interview with scholar and comedian Oliver Double (2014:58), Long states 'there's like a real shift between *the circuit*, the big clubs, the weekend clubs and the clubs that I do and my friends do and the gigs that I get to do...It's really like trying to grow your own audience. I suppose in that way it is smaller and it is more real'. The scene therefore defines itself in opposition to a mainstream - the implication of this comparison being that the mainstream has large (perhaps mass) audiences, who are just a given, who do not need to be grown, and are somehow inauthentic. With regard to growing the audience, Long elsewhere states her approach: 'you can always publish a comic or make a podcast or put shit on YouTube. If people stopped coming to see you, you could always find more out there' (cited by Jonze, 2007).

Long's declaration that 'you can always publish...', as well as an ever-ready ability to 'grow your own audience', assumes a level of equal opportunities in the field of comedic production which simply does not bear out when looking at who is represented in the cultural sector- who is 'getting in and getting on' (O'Brien, Allen, Friedman and Saha, 2017, see also Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018; O'Brien, Laurison, Miles and Friedman, 2016, Oakley and O'Brien, 2016; Saha,

2017). This draws my interest again to questions of who gets to be a comedian, on what terms, and how something as seemingly ambiguous and frankly trivial as the creation of laughter may be implicated in broader structures of inequality.

Furthermore, the oppositional or 'alternative' DIY ethos to the mainstream seems to replay a split that mirrors that of 'high' and 'low' culture (Jameson, 1979; Frith, 1991; Bourdieu, 1996; Filmer 1998) - with mainstream comedy being cast as that of the low, of the masses, consuming comedy in a somehow 'unreal' way, and this DIY-inspired comedy cast as high, 'authentic' comedy. Drawing this point into contact with my laughter at *Mrs Brown's Boys* - this show would surely be cast as 'low', it appeals to the manipulatable masses shown in its viewing figures.³ My laughter at it, therefore, would be inauthentic. My body faked a response to this mass product – perhaps manipulated by the much-maligned phenomenon of the 'laughter track'. Yet a central tenet of this thesis is a scepticism towards this position. It is underlined by my adherence to Pierre Bourdieu's point that the qualities of (comedy) cultural artefacts do not intrinsically make a given artefact better than the other (Bourdieu, 1984). Rather, we ascribe value to certain products over others based on who consumes them, or at least the assumptions we make about who consumes them. There are of course differences in the comedic qualities of the stand-up of Josie Long compared to that of the sitcom *Mrs Brown's Boys*. But one is not more 'real', more authentic - i.e. better - than the other based on those qualities. This is not an appeal to inversion either - that all popular products are somehow intrinsically good – but an appeal to the idea that we need to look more closely at how unfair value judgements are entangled with notions of what counts as quality comedy. Another question, therefore, addressed in this thesis concerns how certain comedy gets this valuable veneer, and how that relates to assumptions about the audience:

Discerning how positioning, movement and exclusion are generated through these systems of inscription, exchange and value is central to understanding how differences (and inequalities) are produced, lived and read. (Skeggs, 2004a: 4)

³ The last *Mrs Brown's Boys* Christmas special in 2017 had 6.8 million viewers, a 32.6% share of the Christmas day audience (Gayle, 2017).

Which links to a final problematic assumption regarding audiences: in the Goldsmith quote above, the audience disappears - again, the comedian (or interested party) is making their thing work through their own efforts. Where is the audience? In the Long quotes, the idea of audience appears, but is again assumed as a manipulatable group, even if it is manipulated or 'grown' in a 'better' way than a popular audience. The assertion that you can always find an audience seems to underplay the multitude of ways in which consumers might make decisions and operate with their own agency regarding their own consumption. It also ignores broader factors that may impact their consumption outside the domain of comedian effort. I started this section considering the importance of cultural products in the lives of consumers but have argued that this cannot be torn away from the conditions of the production of artefacts. This also, crucially, works the other way - cultural production cannot be torn away from the conditions of its consumption (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016). It is an intra-related process, and thus a central point of this thesis relates to the ways in which these realms intersect and interrelate, and again how this revolves around laughter - How is laughter experienced and understood by comedy consumers and producers? This, I argue, is related to valuation processes in society at large: how comedy, producers, audiences and audience members are all given differential values.

Taste and embodiment

Before moving on to consider value specifically, I will iterate one of the key theoretical planks that I argue with and against throughout the thesis: Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field. I have outlined already that comedy feels important to people, and the idea of habitus gives a framework for thinking this through. I have also suggested that comedy production, in common with much of the cultural and creative industries, has a social reproduction issue whereby the powerful remain powerful. The relation between habitus and field gives a framework for thinking this through. Finally, I have suggested that audience agency needs to be reconsidered in relation to production, to incorporate how audience action impacts comedy production. Again, Bourdieu offers at least an initial framework for analysing this. However, I also want to suggest the limits to this theorisation and how I intend to move beyond these.

For Bourdieu, the habitus concerns embodiment. It is described as 'embodied

history [...] the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product' (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). It encapsulates the idea that social actors carry with them accumulated dispositions, actions, discourses, which inform how they interpret, and act within, everyday life. It is the 'structuring structure' (p. 53), the social thing that gives solidity to the perpetual ideas and thoughts that social actors go through, and the confusion of social life.

Bourdieu was keen to leave space in his master concept for the individual to act in unpredictable ways, but at the same time asserts that the habitus does predispose actors to act in certain ways – the extent to which he succeeded in this balancing act is debatable (see Lovell, 2000). Human action might most usefully be conceived of as 'regulated improvisations' (p. 57) generated through the habitus; the social actor is 'making it up' as they go along, but within certain limits and boundaries. In terms of this thesis, these ideas relate most keenly to that of 'comedy taste' – within the social actor there is an accumulated history of what it is that people find funny and not funny, what comedy they find satisfying and dissatisfying. In the viewing of any comedy, people bring their taste to bear in how they will react and consume this comedy. The limits and bounds of what they will or will not successfully consume are more or less set by their taste history.

I want to hold on to this contention that comedy comes to be felt as deeply important, and that it may engender certain acts. Yet an immediate limitation to this regards how laughter might be theorised. Does it simply bounce around the limits and bounds set by taste history? Is it simply an after-effect of the application of embodied taste, the result of a pseudo-economic transaction between embodied taste and a given comedy utterance/ product/ occurrence? I want to leave the conceptual door open for laughter to express something beyond taste, or as potentially revealing the cracks between 'regulation' and 'improvisation' (Yang, 2013), or cracks within the habitus - i.e. laughter as escaping structure.

For Bourdieu, the limits and bounds of these structures are not only 'internal' but also external and apparent in the notion of 'field'. If habitus is an incorporated or embodied history, then the field is an 'objectified history' (p. 66). Any given example of a field is defined by 'the stakes which are at stake' (Jenkins, 1992:84).

The field is made up of 'a network [...] of objective relations...in the structure of the distribution of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake' (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989:39). As Jenkins interprets, the field is therefore a 'structured system of social positions [...] structured internally by power relations' (Jenkins, 1992:85).

For this thesis then, as shown through a Multiple Correspondence Analysis of the comedy field conducted by Friedman (2014), the structured positions within the field of comedy are between comedians or comedies that are 'objectively' considered highbrow or lowbrow; this could relate to the relation between mainstream comedy consumers vs DIY comedy consumers. For Bourdieu, it is the habitus of different groups and individuals that take up these social positions, and it is the relationship between these habituses that reveals the structure of power relations within a given field. As it happens, more 'working class' consumers express a taste for mainstream comic Michael McIntyre, and more 'middle class' consumers express a predilection for the more DIY-inspired Stewart Lee (Friedman, 2014) – thus a power relation is revealed in the differential consumption of comedy products in the field.

Bourdieu asserts that fields structure the habitus through which actors act – the 'sediment' of the habitus is accumulated from interactions with, and the internalisation of, the 'rules' of the field. In another sense, the habitus constructs and reconstructs the field in which it plays, giving it its value and meaning (Bourdieu in Wacquant, 1989: 44). There is an iterative relationship between field and habitus, which forms the dynamics of social life. Therefore, when a given habitus embodies the 'rules of the game' required to successfully claim the stakes which are at stake, it is like a 'fish in water' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 127) and can comfortably enjoy that field. Conversely, a mismatch between the habitus and the field can lead to discomfort and self-consciousness, or indeed a barring from the field altogether (Skeggs & Loveday, 2012:475). At the same time, the ways in which those with the required habitus enact their social position - their expression of the 'rules' - constitutes the field, marking the boundaries, producing the value and values that make up that field (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:127). Here, it is not just the fact that people consume Stewart Lee and therefore accumulate valuable resources for the habitus, but once they have consumed the

valuable product they are able to set the rules of the game, the *ways* or practices needed for successful and valuable consumption.

This represents a very important way in to considering how comedy and laughter are entangled in cultural valuation processes. Yet there are also some troubling assumptions here for this thesis - it assumes everyone is interested in playing the game. This may well be the case, but it precludes the possibility that different values may be lived, and whilst they may not be valued in the 'official' social game, they are still values that deserve airing and bolstering. I think here of Skeggs' (2004b:89) assertion of the possibility of recalcitrant subjects, giving a 'f*** off' to the genteel feeling rules of comedy consumption. In a purely Bourdieusian schema, this might be placed as expressions of a 'low cultural' value system, when actually it is a direct challenge to the idea of any value system based on middle-class power. Again, I do not wish to limit the potentials of laughter as being stuck in an economic value game; it may break through and reveal other possibilities.

A further Bourdieusian theoretical contribution that will be useful in this thesis is that of the 'capitals'. Part of the way in which the habitus is able to establish its position in the field is through the deployment of various 'capitals' in its possession. Bourdieu (1986) suggests four key capitals – economic (material resources), social (connections/networks with other people), cultural and symbolic. It is with the cultural and symbolic capitals that this thesis is most concerned, related as they are to taste, cultural artefacts and the uses and abuses of these through the symbolism of their consumption. Part of the embodied habitus takes the form of 'long-lasting [cultural] dispositions of the mind and body' (Bourdieu, 1986:47), that orientate the individual towards an understanding of what cultural forms count as 'legitimate' and how to appropriately show appreciation of these forms. This embodied 'wealth' of dispositions allows particular individuals and groups access to culturally valued products or artefacts, as it is deployed or 'spent' in the social world– in the field, where cultural capital resides in an 'objectified state'(ibid).

Embodied taste (embodied cultural capital) can be spent to consume high value cultural artefacts (objectified cultural capital). The notion of spending cultural

capital in the field can be usefully linked to Bourdieu's view of 'consumption' as a 'stage in a process of communication [...] an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposed practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code' (Bourdieu, 1984: 2); here, consumption does not have to include any sense of the deployment of economic capital, it can be a purely communicative enterprise. In this sense, cultural capital can be viewed as the 'mastery of a cipher', the embodied key to consumptive 'choices'. Indeed, for Bourdieu, cultural capital - that 'constancy of dispositions, tastes' - more satisfactorily explains the observation 'that the structure [...] of expenses are not affected by short term variations in income [...] consumption outlays display a high degree of inertia [...] they strongly depend on prior consumption patterns' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 131).

Our cultural dispositions, as part of the habitus, drive us to consume certain things in certain ways, which give us value in any given social field. The key to cultural capital's claim to power is through its conversion into symbolic capital – 'the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognised as legitimate' (Bourdieu, 1989:17). To bring it back to the earlier example, when a comedy consumer successfully consumes the comedy product 'Stewart Lee', what is crucial is that taste in Stewart Lee is not seen as someone with high cultural capital successfully consuming a high cultural capital product through their accumulated dispositions, but that taste in Stewart Lee is (mis)recognised as symbolising that someone has legitimately *better* taste than someone who happily consumes Michael McIntyre. The consumption of these different products is assumed to be a fair and justified way to work out the worth of those consumers, to measure the value of people.

Once again, I want to hold on to the foundational importance of this Bourdieusian theoretical toolbox. However, turning to a notion of affect, as signified through the relational importance of laughter, means that this model requires complicating. I intend to centre laughter in these machinations, and to conceptualise comedy consumption as 'affective practice' (Wetherell, 2012, 2015) - where laughter may well be considered to be part of a cipher that unlocks valuable capital, but also where it might resist and reconfigure the relation of subjects towards the imperative of capital accrual. Drawing a focus towards laughter brings bodily uncertainty as the starting point in the (re)production of embodied histories and

the establishment of social fields. What I will show is how these uncertainties offer hope of escape, but also how quickly such uncertainty and possibility become trapped by established discourses, ways of being, and the demands of the field.

Comedy, value and class

In a further twist of self-indulgence, early personal experiences of the classificatory, value-laden power of comedy consumption is part of the reason why an interest in evaluations of audiences has become such a key part of this thesis. As a twelve-year-old fan of a transvestite comedian, I came to realise that what you consume, laugh at and enjoy is used by others as a marker of value. Apparently naive boy that I was, off to school in south Essex, I would try and share my burgeoning fandom with those around me and became immediately aware of the judgements that came into play. These judgements did not restrain themselves to the realms of having good taste, or bad taste. These judgements also became about who I was, what kind of subject position I inhabited, what kind of personality traits I held - in a sense, subject positions became a matter of taste.

Laughing at a comedian, feeling it as important, embroils you in some form of cultural game that can lead others to classify and value you in particular ways. And let us not pretend that I was above making similar valuations. The judgement game I was most aware of regarded, perhaps obviously, sexuality and gender, but also social class. Another big comedy name at the time was Lee Evans - an Essex boy (born in Bristol but brought up from the age of eleven around Billericay). I regarded those sharing their Lee Evans impressions as more 'blokey' than me; he was particularly popular amongst the football lads. And it appeared my fandom of Eddie Izzard marked me out as a big gay posh boy. Whilst down the pecking order of masculinities, I had 'refined tastes' compared to those 'louts' - the possible beginnings of a comedy snobbery (Friedman, 2014:111). Comedy taste was not the whole story here, but it was certainly a cultural resource used to mark out distinctions between selves and others.

I therefore wish to consider here how comedy intervenes or forms part of broader judgements: how comedy products become distinctive and judged differentially, how this is wrapped up in processes of inequality, and how distinction and judgement become part of the comedy consumptive process. In short, I am

interested in the way value relations suffuse the production and consumption of comedy. 'Value' is therefore a central concept, and one that I have primarily taken from the work of Skeggs (1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2011, 2014):

First, how do certain bodies become *inscribed* and then marked with certain characteristics? Second, what *systems of exchange* enable some characteristics to be read as good, bad, worthy and unworthy? Thus, how is *value attributed, accrued, institutionalized and lost* in the processes of exchange?[...]Third, how is value produced through different *perspectives* (different ways of knowing, hearing and seeing that represent particular interests)? Fourth, we need to know how these systems of inscription, exchange, valuing, institutionalization and perspective provide the conditions of possibility for being *read by others in the relationships* that are formed between groups; what are the effects? (2004a: 2; *emphasis in original*)

My use of the term 'value' throughout this thesis refers to how different subjects or groups of subjects come to be regarded as having different levels of importance or worth, both in a pseudo-economic sense, and in terms of 'moral worth' (Sayer, 2005). This is to further emphasise how value does not work in purely economic terms, although certainly *systems of exchange* are thoroughly entangled in the processes of comedy production, consumption and laughter, which I outlined earlier. Foundational to this thesis' understanding of value are the capitals beyond the economic as conceptualised by Bourdieu (1986) - cultural, social and symbolic capital – and how the uses, displays, enactments and performances of these 'capitals' work in the accrual, or depletion, of person-value.

Sam Friedman's (2014) study gets closest to the issues of value outlined here, and to an application of the theory of habitus and field, in the realm of comedy. The study draws on survey and in-depth interview evidence to bring a taste analysis to bear on British comedy. He suggests that there are modes or 'styles of comic appreciation', embodied forms of cultural capital that lead the body to enjoy things, or at least express enjoyment, in socially differentiated ways. For instance, Friedman identifies the use of a 'disinterested or enlightened aesthetic'

(p. 349) used by middle-class comedy consumers that distinguishes them from those who enjoy comedy in a non-sophisticated way, forming a claim to symbolically more powerful social positions. To illuminate this, Friedman identifies the different ways in which middle- and working-class people show their appreciation for comedian Eddie Izzard. All groups showed a similar degree of liking for Izzard, but the nature of that liking was different. Those with 'lower cultural capital' valued Izzard for his 'energy' and 'silliness', whereas the high cultural capital group referred to the 'surreal', 'whimsical' and 'challenging' nature of his work (p. 358).

Salient here is laughter's entanglement in a symbolic battle. Amongst many of those with 'high cultural capital', laughter is seen as 'contaminating the true experience of comedy' (Friedman 2014:74). Whilst others privileged with cultural capital conceded that a measure of pleasure was a criterion for the judgement of good comedy, their 'passionate reactions...only took hold after initially being thrilled intellectually' (p. 75). Conversely, those with low cultural capital resources held up laughter as the key criterion to judge the quality of comedy, and some expressed a certain amount of pity for those who 'can't enjoy the more instinctively pleasurable elements of comedy' (p. 82). Friedman's work, following a particular form of Bourdieusian analysis, points towards the practice of the body in the consumption of cultural forms as a probable locus of social differentiation and the politics of power. To accrue high symbolic value through comedy taste, it is necessary to alienate the self from bodily pleasures, an embodiment of refined rational consumption. It is not what people consume that produces difference, it is the way people consume it.

Exploring Friedman's work here leads me to clarify my position towards social class. Skeggs (2010: 340) distinguishes between two forms of class analysis, one which emphasises class as hierarchical, and another that emphasises the centrality of struggle, exploitation and antagonism (Skeggs, 2010: 340). In Friedman's work here, the balance of analysis falls into class as hierarchy. In some of the study, he explores how those with 'high' cultural capital actively use a disinterested aesthetic to then cast those who enthusiastically enjoy comedy (through laughter) as unsophisticated (2014:51) - a fairly direct example of the use of cultural resources to exploit one subject position to bolster another.

However, the overall picture provided by the work is the identification and reification of a taste hierarchy. Those who express their comedy taste in one particular way have 'high capital', and those expressing it another way have 'low capital' – these levels of capital related to middle- and working-class positions respectively. It is immanent in the very use of the terms 'high' and 'low' - those with working-class forms of capital end up being categorised as 'low', and the middle class as 'high'. What I emphasise throughout this thesis is the exploitative, antagonistic side of class relations. I explore how considerable efforts are made by those in powerful positions to enable the continual revaluation of certain cultural practices as valuable, and thus to cast others as lacking value; I also consider how those cast as 'low' may struggle against such a categorisation (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). What values do comedy consumers and producers bring to bear in reflecting on their experiences of comedy and laughter?

I also want to emphasise how class relations are contextual. Again, the picture presented by a hierarchical approach to class in comedy is that expressions of comedy taste would hold relatively steady in any given context. I would refute this and argue that class difference (indeed all cultural difference) is enacted in a variety of ways dependent on the context within which social actors find themselves. Briefly returning to some of the personal reflections at the beginning of this section, the context of the school playground saw class relations related to Eddie Izzard run very differently to the context of Friedman interviewing research participants. Indeed, research contexts overall will impact how social class is enacted and read (Skeggs, Thumin and Wood, 2008).

Of course, the meaning of a taste for Izzard could also be because the field of comedy has changed over time. Lee Evans' star has waned, to the extent he does not appear as a cultural touchstone in Friedman's work.⁴ But this simply underlines the point of context and situation - temporality plays its part too. The relations between an empowered and disempowered social position are continually reconstituted and reenacted, by and through social actors who may

⁴ Lee Evans is mentioned once in the book in a footnote that lists some previous winners of the Edinburgh Comedy Award (Friedman, 2014: 161). It should also be noted that Friedman did not include Lee Evans as an option in the original large scale survey of comedy taste he conducted, entailing a problem of researcher imposition in what does count as a legitimate cultural referent.

hold differentially classed, gendered and racialised value and values. It should alert cultural scholars to the problem of creating schemas and hierarchies - classifiers carry different meanings at different times, in different places, to different subject positions. There is a problematic potential in the creation of a hierarchy that cements the importance of some classifiers, effectively contributing to the problem of differential value relations. The overall point is that in this thesis, I argue and explore how social class is therefore 'relational, situational and in progress' (Benson and Jackson, 2018: 63) and complicated by the intersectional nature of subjective classed experience (Crenshaw, 1989: 139).

Chapter synopsis

Below is an outline of the contents of the chapters in this thesis, to hint at some of the ways in which I explore these questions of laughter, cultural value and classificatory social practice.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review - Laughter: A life-force of ambiguity

This chapter outlines some of the key areas of literature drawn upon to make sense of laughter's role in valuation games. I begin with humour theories, and suggest that while they highlight how laughter competent utterances and performances may be structured, they ultimately miss out on the resources beyond the comedy text and embedded in social relations. I then consider the role of comedy cultural capital as one of these possible resources (Bourdieu, 1986; Friedman, 2014), but suggest there are limitations in applying Bourdieu, particularly when trying to understand laughter. I draw on critiques of Bourdieu and his (non)approach to affect, before then turning to affect theory to explore some of the ways in which laughter may be alternatively understood. Again, these are revealed to have limitations in how they conceptualise of affect as 'punching through' social signification. I invoke a notion of affect as ambivalent and ambiguous, as a force that can be crushed by the impact of deep cultural inscription, but that sometimes can escape as creative potential, most closely related to the concept of 'affective practice' (Wetherell, 2012). I then turn to briefly consider the broader cultural context of laughter, exploring laughter's hope in the 'cultural industries', and again suggest that laughter has a Janus-face – at once complicit in the dominance of consumerist culture, but in its visceral burst suggesting a place beyond the grey of market relations. I then go on to consider

the concept of 'cultural value', emphasising how this thesis rests on an understanding of cultural value as radically relational. Skeggs and Loveday (2012) are drawn upon to highlight how ongoing relational differences can be characterised as 'struggles for value', and I argue that focusing on the lived experience of laughter may highlight how these struggles play out. I then consider how the notion of 'liminality' (van Gennep, 1960[1906]) offers some purchase on the messy relations, where struggles, affect, and value intertwine, in the comedy club.

Chapter 3 – Methodology: Approaching the Betwixt and Between

This chapter concerns my efforts to 'zero in' on laughter and its entanglement. Taking a performative approach to the live comedy environment, and understanding that my research practice is inevitably entangled in the relations that it wishes to study (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013:6), I account for how I set up a 'provocative conversation' with the live scene of comedy consumption. I outline my approach to exploring value relations, which involved the use of video observations of three comedy events, allowing me to pay fine grain attention to bursts of laughter as part of the performance of cultural practice. This, I argue, allowed me to investigate laughter as an affective force that can 'reinscribe or passionately reinvent' (Diamond, 1996:2 in Denzin, 2002:113) value structures in everyday life. I discuss the problem of researcher imposition when identifying such bursts of laughter, I then go on to describe how I attempted to make my method more 'sociable' (Sinha and Back, 2014) to ameliorate this interpretive issue - through using identified key incidents, surrounding laughter and found during my video analysis, as video elicitation devices with performers and comedy audience members. I then outline my approach to narrative interviews, carried out with comedians to explore their connection to comedy, and also how I used video in this context. I describe my approach to focus groups with audience members, again designed to explore their understanding of comedy and laughter. Finally, I describe how I analysed the discursive data, in ways that draw attention to how discourse is relationally produced and performed.

Chapter 4 – Essex girls in the comedy club: Ridicule, stand-up and struggles for value

The first empirical chapter considers the experience of one of my participant groups – a hen party from Essex who found themselves in the front row of one of the comedy nights I video observed. My participants here came face to face with gendered and classed ridicule in the form of Essex girl joking from the white, middle class male comedians that, whilst wrapped in humorous discourse, was contrived to control the Essex hen party through intense devaluation. The analysis reveals an ambivalence in how the group view their ‘Essex girl’ status that at times challenges the view that this is a ‘valueless’ identification. Within the stand-up comedy environment, the women inhabit and play up to an Essex girl role. It is they who draw attention to the fact they are from Essex, inviting the comedians to ridicule them. Being in the front row and in the firing line of the comedians’ mockery ‘made their night’. Their ‘style of comic appreciation’ included the notion that ‘being picked on...is the funniest bit of all’. By inhabiting the Essex girl role, the group use this often-devalued subject position to garner value on their own terms, *becoming* ‘the funniest bit’ and *making* their night. The humour and laughter these women experience, in pursuit of taking centre stage and ensuring the group come away with valuable memories, seems to allow them to escape from devaluation. This escape however appears temporary. The group spend much of the focus group discussion disidentifying from the ‘Essex girl’ trope. When shown video recording of their behaviour in the comedy club, the group spontaneously started to discuss how they did not fit the Essex girl mould, and single out traits of the Essex girl that they do not identify with. Even though they clearly enjoyed their time in the comedy club through ‘being Essex’, shame takes over when reviewing their behaviour - their own Essex girl behaviour is a threat to their person-value. For this group, there is a contradiction between being women of worth and respectability, and being women who can playfully, freely and brazenly enjoy comedy - ‘Essex girls’ in the comedy club find themselves oscillating between these subject positions, and struggle for value.

Chapter 5: ‘I give no shits’: Laughter, processes of privileging and non-performative policy

This chapter examines how privilege can mingle with affect to dominate proceedings, influenced by and influencing who laughs in a comedy space, and

what comedy material might be found to be laughable. The empirical focus is on one night in a comedy club that has consciously and consistently set itself up as a non-discriminatory night. It has a strong policy of 'no kicking down', and wears its principles of diversity with pride, with a promoter who books gender-balanced bills for his shows, and is intent on showcasing working-class performers, and a diverse range of ethnicities. The promoter is a dedicated activist and sees comedy as a way to break down barriers, such as those discussed earlier with regard to inequality in the culture industries.

Yet even with this focus, white-male-middle-class-ness appears to dominate proceedings, and is exemplified through the laughter of one man in the audience that consistently affectively impacts the comedy night. This audience member, Reece, has a long, loud laugh that when in full gale is referred to by regular audience members as the 'Reec-ess' – a one-man laughter break that has become an expected and enshrined part of the night. Here, I compare how the laughter of middle-class white male is treated very differently to the laughter of the women from Essex in the previous chapter. I consider how 'informalization' (Wouters, 2007) around the acceptability of laughter in public spaces, that mirrors the mainstreaming of stand-up comedy, has seen some people using their privilege to negotiate more freedom to laugh whereas other subjects still face emotional censure. The terms of this renegotiation of laughter are explored, and the chapter concludes by suggesting some reasons as to why the reproduction of white male middle-class privilege can be achieved in a space that appears so vigilant against inequality.

Chapter 6 – 'You can do comedy!': Comic creativity, the comedy world and differential valuations of audience laughter

I turn more decidedly to the world of comic production in this chapter, and consider on what terms stand-up comics come to view their own material as good material. Comedians, in the cut and thrust of comic performance, are reading their audience and receiving immediate feedback to their material through audience laughter and non-laughter. This is especially true when trying out new material and building 'bits' of comedy that might later form part of a routine, and so audience laughter has a fairly direct impact on comedic creativity. Completely unsurprisingly, every single comedian stated that it was laughter that they searched for, and this they took as a key indicator of the quality of their material.

Yet the comedians' reflections on their performances start to reveal how they read different audience members differently. The analysis shows how some instances of laughter are perceived by comedians as more valuable than others. Valuations are informed by assumptions about who has taste or a good sense of humour, sometimes marked by classed, gendered and racialised judgements. The laughter of white middle-class men is often, although crucially not always, centred as the key indicator of whether comedy material is 'good enough' to be performed again. In turn, comedians hone their material and performance in the pursuit of 'valuable laughter'. In this way, the creativity of comedians and the material they produce unwittingly becomes entangled within wider power relations, as part of an 'affective economy' (Ahmed, 2004). Analysis also reveals, however, that the affectively-charged comedy space provides disruptions where the comedian's prosaic assumptions are challenged. Audience laughter can enter into a 'value struggle' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) with the prevailing attitudes of the comedian. The chapter also considers whether these disruptions have any hope of lasting impact on comic creativity.

Chapter 7 – 'Is this play?': Communitas, schismogenesis and value in the live comedy experience

In this final empirical chapter, I turn to anthropological considerations of ritual, play and liminality to suggest how the trivial space of the comedy club comes to deeply affect, and have important consequences, for the reproduction and renegotiation of cultural value. Comedy clubs are set-up to invoke laughter, itself a 'liminal affect' - both inside and outside the body, it is simultaneously very personal and very social. This drawing forth of liminal affectivity is related to ritual formations of 'rites of passage', which manage the crossing of participants from one social status to another, deeply stamping and inscribing individuals with status as they go. That comedy draws people into close contact with a powerful affectivity in laughter leads me to argue that these comedy contexts have very real potentials to similarly stamp individuals. I explore how the experience of live comedy forcefully brings groups together, but also splits them apart, through the processes of 'communitas' (Turner, 1969) and 'schismogenesis' (Bateson, 1935). Both comedians and audiences are being tested, put through a liminal affective trial, to be imbued with different statuses. I argue that it is in these liminal experiences during cultural consumption that much of the reproduction of cultural

value takes place, re-consecrating social statuses and differential positions of power.

Chapter 8 – Laughter's Entanglement in Struggles for Value

This chapter summarises the main findings of the research by returning to the key areas identified in this introduction - consumption, production, inequality, taste, embodiment and value - and surveying the ways in which laughter is entangled with these processes. I consider the notion of 'permanent liminality' (Szokolczai, 2017) as a characterisation of late modernity, to suggest laughter and the unboundedness it heralds can find itself contributing to these perpetually testing times. I return to the notion of value and values to reiterate that whilst the neoliberal understanding of taste and cultural consumption may form a strong discourse, it by no means has totalised all forms of sociality. There are values beyond value (Skeggs, 2014). There are other ways of being that deserve a strong advocate, and tapping into laughter, cautiously, as a communalising affective force can help to make this effort all the more effective.

Chapter 2: Laughter: A life-force of ambiguity

I ended my introduction suggesting that laughter is a central component of the reception and production of culture, particularly comedy culture, and deserves primary focus from a sociological perspective. Back in 1983, Anton Zijderveld expressed some measure of surprise (verging on incredulity) that humour and laughter had not found themselves as a central concern in sociology, arguing that humour and laughter are 'eminently social' (p.2) and suggesting a direct relation between what humour does, and what sociology purports to do - debunk 'common sense' in the routine of everyday life (p.3). There have, of course, always been a few sociologists interested in laughter - Erving Goffman (1956,1963) and Peter Berger (2014) being two prominent examples. More recently, however, there appears to be a more sustained surge in sociological interest, a growth of interest in comedy, humour and laughter as worthy focuses of study: Sharon Lockyer (2010) can take much credit for raising the profile of engaging humour and laughter from a mainly sociological perspective through the launch of the Centre for Comedy Studies Research at Brunel University in 2013. Additionally, Giseline Kuipers (2006), Sam Friedman (2014), Helen Davies and Sarah Illott (2018), and Kate Fox (2018) have drawn comedy closer to processes of distinction and differentiation (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), revealing entanglements with tastes, discourses and the politics of representation.

Other disciplines historically have had a more sustained engagement with humour and laughter – obviously humour studies, but also anthropology, cultural studies, literary studies and psychology seemingly having a somewhat easier relationship to the unserious side of human life. The task of this literature review, therefore, is to explore the ways in which laughter has been approached, from within and without sociology, and to highlight and take forward into the thesis ideas that may be useful for a sociologically-informed account of laughter's entanglement with a major sociological issue: valuation processes.

I start by exploring some of the major theoretical perspectives of humour studies, suggesting ways in which they relate to questions of social and personal valuations, and how laughter might add to and deepen the impact of the

reproduction of social difference and inequality. I then outline currents within the affect theory/studies literature to explore how notions of affect may augment an understanding of the rushes of feeling and bursts of laughter that I hope to bring into focus in this thesis. I especially want to hold onto the notion that laughter has some form of visceral potentiality, which holds some hope of disrupting valuation structures - of not simply deepening the problem but providing a way out. With this said, I then turn back to considerations of cultural value, value struggles and the impact of the cultural industries to assess some of the barriers or entanglements that might dull the potentials of laughter. Review of these arguments leads to something of a theoretical impasse for laughter's place in value and consumption, seemingly at once complicit and innovative, conservative and world-shattering. I then move on to consider how liminality, and particularly more recent attention to the potentials of this concept, can point ways forward to approaching this central ambivalence and ambiguity in laughter's entanglement in the social classification game.

Humour theories: Superiority, Incongruity, Relief

One such repository of useful perspectives on laughter comes from humour studies. There is substantial time and effort invested into the 'craft' of creating stand-up comedy shows, precisely to hone the way in which laughter can be invoked through jokes, gags, lines, gestures, skits, sketches, set-ups and punchlines. These are units that are specifically designed to affect the body in a particular way. Humour studies, and the main theories that have constituted the area, give clues as to the tricks, tropes and rules that underlie the production of comic objects. They also coalesce around certain views of the comedy audience, attempting to pinpoint what it is that human subjects 'get', which then leads to a laughter response.

There are three oft-cited, dominant theories of humour that seek to explain what it is in a 'funny' instance that creates laughter. These are the theories of superiority, relief, and incongruity:

[...] the superiority theory asserts that we find humour in the misfortunes of others; the relief theory says that we laugh to release emotional or psychic tension and that this produces feelings of pleasure; and the

incongruity theory says that we find things that confound our expectations funny. (Watson, 2015: 5)

Before going into the specific relevance of each of these theories as they relate to valuation processes, it should be noted that these theories should not be considered as competitors. Indeed, John Morreall (1989:248) posits how the classic 'slipping on a banana skin' gag, hilarious as it is, can be explained using superiority and incongruity theory - we laugh because we feel superior to the unfortunate idiot who steps on the skin, and we laugh because the conventional expectations of the behaviour 'walking' are confounded by the disruption of 'slipping'. Cate Watson (2015: 34) shows how relief theory can also be used to explain why this instance might encourage mirth - psychic tension accumulated at the fear of danger is pleasurably released through laughter when that danger is shown to be non-dangerous. These theories, therefore, are better understood as tools whereby instances of humour can be picked apart to reveal how laughter has occurred and, crucially for this thesis, illuminating their 'cognitive, affective, social, ethical and psychological aspects' (Lintott, 2016: 357) - the entangled nature of laughter. In common with the drive of this thesis, I am most interested in the clues humour theory provides to how laughter is entangled with valuation.

Superiority theories - sometimes referred to as degradation theories (Billig, 2005: 38), or disparagement theories (Zillman, 1983: 85) - relate to humorous utterances or texts where there is a clear 'butt' of the joke (Davies and Ilott, 2018: 7). Stand-up comedy is replete with examples of the use of superiority to elicit laughter, many of which I am not interested in reprinting.⁵ For instance, Frankie Boyle's jokes regarding the Queen (which focused on her age rather than her privilege), Olympic swimming medallist Rebecca Adlington and people with Down syndrome – were both headline-grabbing in their offensiveness (Davies and Ilott, 2018: 2-3). The latest prominent, news-worthy example involves Trevor Noah

⁵ Billig (2005) describes how humour analysts often face the dilemma of whether to reproduce or replace problematic language in their academic work. In the context of his work on racist joking, he outlines the two sides - 'The argument for replacement is based on the assumption that some racist terminology is so offensive that it should never be reproduced...The argument for reproduction stresses the context of reproduction.' (p.27). I have decided to omit the precise nature of any jokes or humorous utterances that have disempowered targets, both here and throughout the rest of the thesis.

mocking Aboriginal Australian women based on their appearance (BBC News, 2018). These jokes raised laughs in the audiences present at their hearing, and that laughter, it is asserted, comes through a 'sudden glory' - a becoming awareness of being better than somebody else (Hobbes, 2005 [1651]:45 cited in Friedman et al, 2011: 123). With the examples I have presented, this superiority is presumably based on feeling superior to women who stray from conventional beauty standards, or old people, or disabled people, or black people. As such, it is this form of humour that is most related to a social function of discipline and social control (Bergson, 1921; Billig, 2005) - this humour draws out supposed non-conformities through comic discourse, leading non-conforming subjects to be attacked with laughter.

This form of humour can also be much less shocking and obviously offensive, but still fall under superiority theory. Indeed, much of political satire is based on a form of superiority (Watson, 2015: 34-5), albeit where a supposed social superior faces a lampooning from an inferior jester and a laughing public. For example, Rachel Parris' monologue, as part of satirical news programme *The Mash Report*, asking, 'Is Jacob Rees-Mogg as fun as he seems?', included a joke about Rees-Mogg's questionable adherence to Christian principles: 'Thinking about it, Rees-Mogg would have absolutely hated Jesus. He was an immigrant who could walk on water, aargh!' (The Mash Report, 2018). The laughter, argued from the perspective of superiority, comes at feeling that we are better than someone who practices hypocrisy, and from a sense of self-satisfaction that we are not hypocrites. All of these instances involve a laughing *at* somebody, with that somebody being the 'butt' of the joke: a target for our derision to whom we can positively compare ourselves; we laugh with our flush of (temporary) power.

In Keith H. Basso's (1979) exploration of Western Apache Indian humour, the 'superiority' form can be seen in how his participants used mimicry and imitation of 'The Whiteman' to characterise the 'other' and affirm common values. Basso explains:

For while Apaches acknowledge that they distinguish openly among themselves according to differences in economic, political and religious status, they are adamant in their insistence that none of these differences

is of sufficient importance to warrant or justify smug displays of personal superiority [...] The characters portrayed in joking imitations of Anglo-Americans are cited by Apaches as prime examples of people who 'look down' on others. (1979:71)

This is the use of ridicule in order to 'punch up' against those who are perceived as deserving to be laughed at – simultaneously it is a celebration of one group of values against another. Superiority humour that 'kicks down' at people with less power can also be seen as related to values - presumably these less powerful people being an affront to dominant values in some way. This theory therefore - more obviously than the others I will go on to explore - relates to humour and laughter's relation to insider and outsider statuses, and accompanying value judgements: this theory highlights how laughter in some instances can be said to pull on and reproduce value structures, to delineate with great visceral clarity those subject positions and/or values that are to be heartily celebrated, or to be denigrated. The line between the laughable and non-laughable is central to the ways in which sociality inscribes certain subjects as being of value, respectable, and others as lacking value - as ridiculous (Billig, 2005). Crucially as well, it shows how humour might be used as a cultural defence mechanism, producing a strong 'insider status' to fend off a conventionally more powerful outsider. Laughter, understood through superiority theory, is then thoroughly entangled in value and values (Skeggs, 2014).

Alternatively, incongruity theory posits that laughter is 'an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (Kant, 1790 cited in Goldstein and McGhee, 1972: 8), the perceived resolution of a mismatch between a concept and the 'real' object. It is, in essence, the comedy of surprise. Aspects of an utterance run contrary to our expectations, and on realising the difference, we laugh through the enjoyment our perception gives us. Again, examples of this abound in stand-up comedy: for the sake of illustration, a Bridget Christie joke: "I've run this joke past all my gay friends, and he said it was fine" (Stand Up for Her, 2018). The incongruity comes from a very small difference in the expected language used by the comedian – the listener expects to hear '*they* said it was fine' after being set-up to anticipate this by the utterance 'all of my gay friends'. When the utterance '*he* said it was fine' is instead heard, the listener

realised the expectation has been strained, and laugh through what our perception has revealed. It should also be pointed out that superiority theory can be used to explain part of why this is funny – Bridget Christie is setting herself up as the butt of the joke, her humorous lack of friendship diversity held up for laughs.

This theory places the trigger for laughter squarely in the comedy text or performance. It is the tricks played in the comic presentation - the clever author, twisting language and perception, setting up precarious scenarios and performing fools - that stimulates the laugh. However, locating the stimulus for laughter purely in the comedy text does not take into account a very simple fact: not all incongruities lead to laughter in all people (Bain in Billig, 2005: 96). What seems abundantly clear is that whilst this form of textual analysis has been shown to tell part of the story of 'laughter', it gets nowhere near to telling the whole story. Through these theories, the comedy audience is drawn as a purely reactive mass, taking in the joke, appreciating the humorous device (whether consciously or unconsciously), and then emitting the laughter response. Missing from this theory are the social actors who are directly involved in the desired response: the laughing audience(s). Rather than simply assuming a reactive audience, it is essential that research focuses on the way in which the comedy audience is active; it is the bodies of the audience members that constitute and 'emit' laughter. The category of 'funny' does not reside in comic products, but in the interaction between a comic product and an audience – it is relational and intertwined with value.

Adrian Hale (2018) argues that instances of 'failed humour' reveal that people may not laugh at a given humorous text or utterance for a range of reasons. One might be that they lack the linguistic competence to get the joke, where some sort of 'semantic/pragmatic miscommunication' has occurred (p. 37). Others are based, however, on getting the joke but perceiving that it will be a threat to them in some way if they laugh, and they have a range of responses open to them to deflect or resist the intention of the joke (pp.49-50). It seems that this would be obvious in instances of humour in-line with superiority theories - the 'butt' of a given joke may resist their placing as inferior, but also the audience of such a joke may resist laughing at a joke that would place them as superior because of an

ethical commitment of some description - a committed anti-racist may receive a racist joke, see that it is a racist joke, and withhold laughter because it is racist. It is possible to conceive of denying 'sudden glory'. Coming back to Bridget Christie's incongruous utterance, it is conceivable that linguistic competence may be a barrier – differentially distributed along social class lines and as part of cultural capital (Sullivan, 2001). It is also conceivable that someone would find the mere mention of homosexuality in a joke unconscionable and therefore withhold laughter – which would bring the appreciation of incongruity into contact with value and value judgements.

Simon Weaver (2011a) also addresses the so-called 'problem of incongruity' – 'whenever an instance of humour, or a joke, fails when it was intended to create laughter' (p.257). Through an analysis of online fan blogs, Weaver suggests that the perception of a humorous incongruity is dependent upon whether that incongruity can 'stretch the boundaries of the habitus' (p.269) of the audience or audience member, but leave that boundary intact. A perceived humourless incongruity either breaks the boundary of the habitus, or does not even stretch it in the first place. One example pertains to a Chris Rock joke - 'Here today, gone today' - uttered in the context of a music award ceremony. The intention of the joke is to apparently poke fun at the disposable and frivolous nature of modern pop. Weaver notes how, in a fan blog that addresses this joke, it is described as 'an exaggeration...but not that far off and even more true today' (Helligar, 2010 cited in Weaver, 2011a: 270). Here it is suggested that the utterance is found funny because it aligns with the broad view of the listener's habitus (a taste value that pop music is disposable) but is exaggerated to comedic effect (turning 'here today, gone tomorrow' into 'here today, gone today'). The listener's expectation is stretched, but their 'feel for the game', their habitus, is confirmed.

Conversely, those who do not find this utterance funny would therefore either perceive the assertion as wrong, that popular music is not disposable and frivolous, or find the assertion so obvious as to be completely unsurprised, or unstretched (Weaver, 2011: 270). Again, the values resident in the habitus of a comedy consumer are part and parcel of the reception of 'humorous' utterances, and are entangled with laughter. Both Weaver's and Hale's responses to the problem of humour/failed humour point to the way in which laughter may be

socially-impacted, taking it away from the funny text and placing the origin of the laughter in the decoding capabilities, discursive interests or social dispositions of the audience. They urge a perspective that explores the 'specifics of audience response' (Friedman et al, 2011:123) – suggesting valuation processes as a powerful mediator of audience responses to comedy.

A further theory within humour studies that seeks to fill in some of the gaps on the path to the laugh is 'relief theory' (Billig, 2005: 86). This psychological- based theory is most commonly related to the work of Freud and pertains to the ability of humour or comedy to remove the restraint on suppressed desires. Energy is spent every day by subjects in 'erecting and maintaining a physical inhibition', a suppression. When we are relieved, even momentarily, from the pursuit of our own inhibition, we experience pleasure that manifests as laughter (Freud, 1989[1905]: 145). Whilst comic devices - such as those expounded upon within superiority and incongruity theory - can allow the conditions for the venting of repressed desires, it is the actuality of repressed psychological desires that is the cause of laughter. This theory, therefore, pulls the act of laughter away from the comedy text per se and gets closer to the embodied nature of laughter - that uncontrollable, visceral reaction, experienced as a sudden release of pent up energies.

There is an unsatisfying aspect to this theory: in maintaining the primacy of the 'fact' of nervous relief, it perhaps moves too far away from social categorisations that seem important to the comprehension of, and reaction to, humour. It would be oversimplifying Freud here to say he did not consider the social: he himself was clear in noting that an instance of humour is no such thing unless it is affirmed by an audience and that laughter is part of a social process (1989 [1906]:171-198). Yet even here, Freud overcomes some of the troubles with predicting the response of the audience by discussing some of the 'secondary or auxiliary techniques' of the 'joke-work' (p. 180). The source of laughter finds its way back into the 'text'. Freud does not engage with the probable intricacies of social life that may impinge on the success of overcoming the 'repressions' of which he speaks. Within a theory that is about the embodied reaction to humour, he is again painting the subject as reactive, as at the whim of a cleverly constructed joke and a repressed feeling.

I do not want to completely deny the importance of the comedy text – as I have stated, much productive effort is put into the language and performance of stand-up comedy, to increase the likelihood of laughter. But my reading of these theories here is that humorous utterances and performances are not where laughter lies, and that this is based on a complex communicative negotiation between performer and audience. Moreover, this communicative negotiation is skewed by valuation processes. Therefore, the perceptions of audiences on what counts as funny are critical in showing where the societal value fault-lines may lie. For the purposes of this thesis, therefore, it is important to maintain focus on how the subject is alive to comedy, and how the audience is active in making meaning - perceiving the humorous and producing laughter. Through this lens, it may be possible to account for the cultural/discursive resources on which the audience draws, focusing on whether there are resources or structures *outside of the comedy text*, which may be differentially available to audiences, and which may constrain some individuals more than others in their responses to comedy.

Comedy Cultural Capital and Laughter

The notion of structures and ‘differentially available’ resources leads us back to Bourdieusian schema of habitus, field and capitals, and Friedman’s (2014) exemplary application of these concepts in the consideration of comedy consumption, as considered here in Chapter 1. The resources drawn on in this sense are: embodied cultural capital, resident in the habitus of subjects; discursive strategies deployed by middle-class comedy consumers to distinguish themselves from other consumers; and, moreover, how these understandings of what counts as laughable/unlaughable may be put into action by consumers in their perceptions of the humorous. This understanding, and Friedman’s extension of these basic tenets, have been absolutely instrumental in my approach to this study. However, as also briefly discussed in Chapter 1, there are limitations to employing Bourdieu in an attempt to centre laughter. In Friedman’s study, laughter as a practice in consumption is not addressed, not heard, not experienced; laughter emerges as a symbolic resource alone. An essential component in the consumption and production of comedy is taken away from the bodies of those engaged in the experience. This may well be because of the methodological reliance on interviews, leading to a model of comedy

consumption characterised in a 'homo-economicus' (Skeggs, 2014: 2) sense, imbuing consumption with an ongoing thoughtfulness that does not quite ring true with the 'in the moment' enjoyment of funny products. In fact, to give Friedman his due, in the conclusion to his study he confesses to wanting to explore these processes further - the enactment of cultural capital in the cut and thrust of social practice (2014:172), the 'actual processes and pleasures' of consumption (Claessens and Dhoest, 2010:68).

Friedman's approach to comedy consumption is emblematic of a certain use of Bourdieu that underemphasises the ongoing experiential processes of social existence. It often rests on an assumed ontology of the subject as a sealed carrier of capitals that are 'spent' through everyday interactions and practices that reproduce social differentiation and power relations. This iteration of Bourdieusian sociology relies so much on the notion of a habitus that perpetually gives in to the demands of the field, made up of various levels of capital, that 'situational and experiential nuance in...cultural production' becomes side-lined or downplayed (Riley, 2004:309). The implication when approaching live comedy is as follows: if we were to look at an audience and were able to ascertain the class positions of individual audience members and extrapolate what level of cultural capital they embodied, we would be able to predict who would laugh and who would not laugh when shown a given comedy product. What we end up with is a not much more sophisticated understanding of the impact of comedy products than a pure stimulus-response relationship between 'comedy product' and 'laughter response'. Laughter here is an expression that depends on a set of internal resources, given just the right external trigger. In fact, to win in this capital-accrual model of the habitus, you do not need to laugh at all – the affect, the pleasure, the laugh disappears.

Probyn (2004: 232), in critiquing one of the few times Bourdieu engages directly with the status of emotion in his approach, reveals more clearly this over-socialised ontology. She argues that this particular conception of habitus assumes that the 'body feels, enacts an emotion, and brings into being the past'. That is to say that the body itself cannot act, through emotion, without imputation of an actable past; event occurs, body parses event through historically embodied understanding of the event, emotion is enacted. The feeling body becomes simply

an extension of the historically constituted habitus. The body knows before it laughs. Which begs the question: if action or emotion are but only an extension of the already constituted habitus, how does the habitus become constituted in the first place? How does anything ever change?

Lovell (2000) precisely tackles this issue, calling into question the primacy of habitus through the example of 'gender passing' specifically in the field of the military. Presenting examples of women taking on the dress, 'bodily hexis' and 'honour' of military men and successfully 'passing' as a different gender, and furthermore exploring some examples where, even on discovery, these women were accepted as part of the honourable military brass, Lovell asks: 'How was it possible for them to acquire these skills and aptitudes, given that they would have been denied access in early life to the practices in which the masculine habitus is founded?' (p.14). Similarly, McNay (2008) highlights the 'determinist tendencies' at work in Bourdieu's thought, 'over-predicting the accommodation of individuals to social structures' and presenting agency as purely driven by strategic aims (p.11), yet asserts that late-Bourdieu moves much further towards a phenomenological position, that is, one that emphasises 'change, continuity and resistance' in agency (p.12). All of this serves as a warning that employing Bourdieu in approaching laughter carries the risk that laughter gets lost in a world of scheming subjects – i.e. over-cognitized.

Bourdieuian concepts will be indispensable in offering a way to interpret the differential trajectories of social subjects as they approach the field of live comedy, but these 'determinist tendencies' (McNay, 2008:11) are a problem. Bringing back Probyn (2004), she goes on to make the more radical call that the assumed order of causality – thinking before feeling – should be inverted. A case is made for exploring how an opposite causal relationship might work; what might happen 'when the body outruns the cognitive capture of the habitus' (p.232). This suggestion deserves more coverage here - the idea of affect as escaped and escaping the grab of sociality, a claim made in much affect theory, which has radically challenged sociological approaches to social phenomena. Moreover, one of the foundational moments in the explication of affect theory involves laughter, a key concern here, and this has been used as the basis for some huge claims by affect theorists

Laughter as Affect

Both Connolly (2002:82-83) and Damasio (2004:74-75) draw on a neuroscientific example to argue for the existence of a precognitive affective realm that produces laughter and drives the body into action. The case involves a 16 year- old girl, A.K, who underwent electrode stimulation in different areas of her brain to identify where her previously diagnosed epileptic seizures were emanating from. During the course of the electrode exploration, surgeons hit upon an area of the brain that when stimulated made the girl laugh uncontrollably. The interesting part of this for Connolly is in how every time the laughter response was produced, the girl would offer a rationalisation *after the fact* based on what she could immediately see before her; to the girl, the researchers were 'extremely funny guys' (Connolly, 2002:82). The behaviour came first, and only afterwards did rationalisation take place; the interpretation was retrospective (ibid). Damasio (2004) makes a similar point, arguing that the electrical stimulus in the example mimics any other 'laughter-competent' (p.76) stimulus and comes before any feeling of, or reasons for, 'merriment or mirth' (p.75). Meaning, signification and intentionality are always playing catch-up to the far more powerful affective realm. Laughter, in particular, emerges from this account as a powerful re-configurer of our rationalising structures, bursting through and forcing us to reconsider the world around us - the body laughs before we figure out why.

The glaringly obvious point here is that comedy is not an electro-stimulation rod. The scientific 'truth' uncovered in this experimental moment is generalised far too easily to suggest that in all events, the affective is always outrunning the rational. Bruno Latour (2004) uses the example of genes to note how 'some phenomena are used to bulldoze their way through [...] disciplines [...] treated as archaic and obsolete because they raise non-genetically framed questions' (p.220). The 'local success' (ibid) of the experimental moment is imbued with such authority that instead of exploring further how genes might interact in a plethora of other environments, in contact with other ideas, the original conception of genetic power rides roughshod over any other mode of explanation. Latour (2004:221), following Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret, suggests that any generalisation should be a 'vehicle' for articulating the phenomena in alternative ways, or subjecting the phenomena to different sorts of questions that may open

up other properties. Connolly and Damasio's take on the laughter experiment is all too eliminationist, taking this experimental moment and assuming its local success will be replicated wherever a brain is present. If their account of the power of this force was to be brought into the realm of comedy consumption, encountering no other phenomena, the comedy product would become nothing more than an electrode - a laughter competent stimulus striking the brain, presumably facsimiled through the sensory apparatus of the body, provoking the body to laugh, followed by rationalizing structures (such as tastes/ conventions/ discourses) attempting to understand the laughter.

There is something utterly alluring about these accounts of the laugh: the burst, the interruption, the uncontrollable, which drives the body into action. This form of analysis does get closer to the effervescent experience, the being taken over and moved by laughter. Yet trying to apply this to the question of laughter's implication in humour, taste and the social reproduction of cultural value gets us nowhere. As can be seen in the criticism Lawrence Grossberg makes of Brian Massumi's (2005) work on the affects of security alerts in the US:

I can't escape the feeling that Brian Massumi's recent work, for example, on the colour-coding of terror alerts reduplicates a kind of old-fashioned media-effects model. You know, you flash these lights at people and there is some kind of bodily response. Well, there isn't! Affect then becomes a magical way of bringing in the body. (Grossberg, 2010:316)

An 'old-fashioned media-effects model' would take us back to the beginning – laughter as caused by a media input – an incongruity perhaps, delivering a bodily response. This same criticism can be made of Connolly and Damasio, and certainly the idea of a 'laughter-competent' stimulus. This form of affect theory leads us to a reanimation of Freud's relief theory; the magic of bodily energy released by just the right trigger. It may well stand that electro-stimulation of the brain can excite laughter, but if it was as easy as this in relation to comedy texts, all audiences would laugh at every 'laughter-competent' trigger and then be rationalising to themselves, completely collectively, about what a funny thing had just made them laugh. What is abundantly clear is that different subjects, or different audiences, have different thresholds as to

what counts as a 'laughter-competent' stimulus. These thresholds seem unlikely to be genetic, given the patterns based on class and education found in the Bourdieu-inspired surveys of comedy taste mentioned here in Chapter 1.

If comedy really were in any sense an electro-stimulation rod, then it would be a faulty and malfunctioning one – it comes back to this central problem of comedy consumption iterated earlier: not all laughable things produce laughter in all people. Laughter-competent stimulus in the form of comedy cannot and does not directly strike the brain- there are a lot of, ironically enough, *bodies* in the way. Certainly, there is something to this notion of laughter as felt more or less uncontrollable, the body moving seemingly of its own accord, a material life force that, under very particular circumstances, acts in a very powerful way. But in moving this experimental finding into any consideration of comedy audiences, the question of much more interest is in how this powerful affective bodily potential is entangled in the everyday consumption of comedy, such that not all people laugh at the same comedy. What entanglements alter its potential?

Here is the predicament. Having argued that Bourdieu - through Friedman - produces too rigid a picture of taste, consumption and pleasure, the inversion informed by affect theory is just as unsatisfactory, positing as it does a strange kind of freedom through affective potential - presumably if the post-affect, rationalising structures disappeared we could be free to roll around in uncontrollable fits at any laughter-competent stimulus that might bounce our way. As much as Bourdieu underplays the visceral and unpredictable instances of emotion/affect, much of affect theory attempts to wipe-out the importance of cultural inscription altogether. Ahmed posits that before we are affected, 'things are already in place that inclines us to be affected in some ways more than others' (2010a:33) - affect is not some form of boundless force, it is subject to the social just as much as any other force. Further, Ahmed suggests that we need to look closer at what is 'in place' and how it operates, such that what is in place does not affect all in the same way, and in so doing suggests an approach that takes as its first focus 'the messiness of the experiential' (ibid). Grossberg (2010: 316) also identifies this tendency in affect-oriented sociology to sidestep 'specificity', ignoring how affect may be part of 'regimes that organise the body and the discourses of our lives... [which] might include will and attention, or moods, or

orientation”; indeed, ‘orientations matter’ (Ahmed, 2010b: 234).

Hemmings (2005: 564), in taking issue with Massumi’s reading of Deleuze, contends similarly that the treatment of affect as autonomous ignores the possibility of affective cycles or loops, where chains of affect and cognition assemble to influence ‘the individuals’ capacity to act in the world’. Tyler (2008b) warns of how the turn to affect, often seen as a reaction against the textual, discursive and ideological, would do well to keep in mind some of the lessons learnt in the previous ‘turns’. She suggests that in the Massumian conceptualisation of affect, there is a sense in which past concerns with ideology were somehow a weight on the shoulders of theorists, a metaphorical clay through which the social theorist had to push through in order to make claims to something emancipatory (p. 87). As Tyler points out, these ideologies do not simply disappear through being ignored - she argues for an orientation towards affect that would ‘acknowledge the unfinished histories and projects of feminism and postcolonialism’ (p. 90). As these theorist’s positions indicate, there are quite clearly different ways in which affect can be conceptualised, ways which do not completely tear it away from cognition and discourse, and moreover from the grasp of empirical investigation (Hemmings, 2005:563).

From this reading so far, it seems that in order to go forward, a path has to be reached to understand the comedy audience as existing between embodied dispositions, explored previously through attention to habitus and capital, and bodily autonomic responses, or affect. In more concrete terms, this would be between the structures apparent in comedy taste/appreciation, in and through the habitus, and the affective expression of the laugh. One orientation that may be generative in exploring this terrain comes from Margaret Wetherell (2012:4), through the concept of ‘affective practice’. Fleshing out what an ‘affective habitus’ might involve, she contends that in the ebb and flow of everyday life, discursive (socio-cultural) and affective elements move in and out of prominence at different times (p. 52), to the extent that ‘no easy distinction can be made between visceral and cultural meaning-making’ (p. 67). Wetherell argues for a conceptualising of affect that takes into account chains, or ‘affective assemblages’, which lead to practice or action - assemblages that recruit (parts of) the body and the mind through a multitude of affective repertoires (p. 119), interactions with others and

with self, which draw on discourse, social relations, ways of life and which are then performed in particular situations (p. 14). Here, affect becomes part of communication, subject to organisation through the rubric of practice, yet crucially is dynamic, with potentials and possibilities to disrupt and move the body and practice into different directions (p. 13). With all of this potential for affect as a perpetually flowing and moving force, the focus then becomes how affective practice is 'accomplished and ordered' (p. 53). This seems in the spirit of the original challenge to Bourdieu's work, with its focus on potential, but does not completely deny that cultural inscription can and does play a role. Taking this approach would appear to provide purchase on how laughter might be both embedded in the powers of social structure and able to outrun those very structures.

Therefore, the notion of affect I wish to invoke incorporates the ontological suggestion that the body and its processes of feeling are, at the very least, of huge importance to understanding wider social processes, but that this can be done without discounting the role of power, discipline, regulation and inscription in the very lived experience of social life. I argue that focusing in on the experience of bodies in comedy consumption has the potential to illuminate even more clearly the ongoing and unequal impact of inscription and inculcation, as well as to highlight the creative potential and impact of affect in everyday lived experience. By centring laughter as a primary concern, how it is expressed, shared, bound and understood by laughing people, a window opens to view the everyday processes that seemingly give foundation to the social reproduction of inequalities. Crucially, this simultaneously opens up the possibility of accessing the 'cramped spaces of politics where libidinal energies break through the processes of inscription that attempt to contain and govern' (Skeggs, 2004b: 89), to take these seriously in their own right as emerging properties of the new, not just as temporary ruptures in the old.

Yet by countenancing that anything new, resistive or powerful can be found in the realm of consumption - let alone in a cultural realm often side-lined as trivial - enters this thesis into another argument. There is a strong tradition within cultural theory more generally to see the consumptive realm, and particularly the popular cultural realm, as already vanquished as a potential incubator of social change.

This has, however, often been countered by more optimistic analyses of popular culture, which highlight the potentials of revelation, and alternative readings that challenge the established order of things. I survey some of these arguments below, particularly those that pull on either the idea or experience of laughter, revealing the essentially ambivalent and ambiguous place of laughter in consumption.

Laughter's Hope in the Culture Industry

Adorno and Horkheimer (2002 [1944]: 94-136) coined the famous notion of the 'culture industry' whereby in late capitalism all popular cultural products are produced to satisfy the ever-growing consumer 'need' for entertainment. This need for entertainment in itself is produced by the drudgery of workers' servitude within the capitalist system. Whilst these products may provide a fleeting amount of satisfaction, they also stop the populace from considering their subordinate place in capitalist relations. Culture becomes an extension of labour relations, making more profit from the misery of labour by offering just enough 'fun' to keep the masses trudging onwards.

The ghosts of Adorno and Horkheimer, understandably, haunt anyone even considering taking the processes of popular consumption seriously. In this interpretation of their work, consumption of any popular cultural form is castigated as politically bad, as falling prey to capitalistic consumerist pressure or of being a 'cultural dupe'. Any feeling or pleasure from this consumption must also be somehow bad. Laughter inspired by, for example, Sarah Millican or her ilk, part as they are of this monolithic culture industry, is anything but 'a good laugh' – the simple 'laughable object/laughter' relationship is already here bound up in the morality of consumptive practice. Laughter in particular has been drawn into this view:

Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness [...] In wrong society laughter is a sickness infecting happiness and drawing it into society's worthless totality. (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002 [1944]: 112).

This, however, is an oversimplification of Adorno and Horkheimer's stance - it

would be more accurate to read from them that in all forms of culture there is a dormant and unexploited potential that faces repression and restrictions from the forces of capital. Benzer (2011), for example, points to passages in Adorno's 'Negative Dialectics' (1973) wherein Adorno is expounding on the greyness of a life within the 'inescapably dense web' (p.369) of capital exchange relations, but then asserts – 'greyness could not fill us with despair if our minds did not harbour the concept of different colours, scattered traces of which are not missing from the negative whole' (p.377). Similarly, by stating that laughter in a particular place ('wrong society') is a sickness, he seems to suggest that in a different place (right society?) laughter would be healthy or, at least, free from the conditions of exchange relations. Laughter, then, becomes a potentially 'good' force that is repressed by the wrong society - capitalist domination. Not only that, but within the grey of consumptive relations, the remnants of a 'colourful', life-affirming laughter might exist.

Elsewhere, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002 [1944]: 60) suggest this potential force more clearly: 'Laughter is in league with the guilt of subjectivity, but in the suspension of law which it announces, it also points beyond that complicity. It promises a passage to the homeland.' Laughter here oscillates between complicity and escape: being 'in league' with prevailing power structures, but 'pointing beyond'; a false laughter, but the key to the 'homeland'. This problem of laughter is evident in considerations of the Rabelaisian carnival as drawn on by Bakhtin (1984). The carnivalesque is intimately related to 'carnavalesque laughter' - 'a laughter of all the people...directed at all and everyone...[it] overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations and as such it has a utopian character' (p.12). It is laughter that can break out, renew, rejig and reassemble the world - laughter bursts forth in righteous escape from the trappings of everyday serfdom, of a life led under the auspices of a power elite.

Yet, as Eagleton observes (1981:148), carnival is a 'permissible rupture' taking place in a space that is thoroughly official. The carnival - the hedonistic, topsy-turvy anarchy - is a licensed event: the powerful orders allowing the mockery ritual, which rings with the sound of rebellious, carnivalesque laughter as it acts as 'a safety valve, a release of pent-up energies, anxieties, and frustrations' (McHugh and Fletchall, 2012:385). Laughter does not simply burst through

tearing convention apart, it is absolutely complicit in the building of convention. It is part and parcel of the 'medicinal bath', soothing the woes, but not finally releasing anybody from their woes. Relating this to contemporary comedy consumption, the spaces of laughter that are opened up within the comedy industry - the comedy clubs, the theatre venues, the living rooms enraptured by sitcom or stand-up - do contain some elements of transgression, of power being questioned, of rudeness and vulgarity being celebrated, of mockery being made. These are often offered, however, by a multi-million pound industry featuring acts picked by a handful of production companies (Friedman, 2014: 125-161). Besides this, Stallybrass and White (1986:19) point out that carnival often violently demonised certain social groups. This can certainly be seen in some forms of modern comedy, where racist jokes, misogyny and class-based ridicule still feature (Tyler, 2013). This leads to the consideration of whose affect might be able to punch through, whose carnivalesque laughter is ringing out; this is not necessarily the 'laughter of all the people'.

Contemporary debates on the nature of the culture industries also tend to emphasise its ambivalent functioning. Talk of a monolithic 'culture industry' tends to elide the difference between divergent areas of cultural production. We might more accurately use the term 'cultural industries' (Hesmondhalgh, 2002), also referred to as 'creative industries' (Hartley, 2005), or the 'cultural economy' (O'Brien, 2014: 75) - which draws attention to a central conflict between values, broadly understood as cultural constructions, and value, related to economic valuation (Skeggs, 2011). Part of the contention of this thesis is in how comedy as an industry, with its focus on laughter, may have different compromises and opportunities embedded in its functioning when compared to other creative areas. Further, the use of the term 'creative' draws attention to the fact that these industries or economies are made up of *people* - it is not some faceless edifice. These institutions are made up of people trying to bring their ideas into fruition in the form of cultural products. There is an enormous amount of action, agency and effort made by actual people, not just a totalising imperative to keep consumers docile - creative workers may want to stimulate ideas contra a 'culture industry' or produce 'real' pleasure. Certainly, comedians would seem interested in the production of laughter, a pleasurable activity. This is not to say that comedians, like any cultural workers, are immune to power relations embedded within the

economic imperative of the cultural industries, but it does hint at the conflicts and frictions that these creative spaces may contain.

O'Brien (2014) defines the context of cultural policy and production as being replete with ambiguities. He first affirms the broad context of modernity itself as riven with internal contradictions, for example, promising freedom at the same time as state power increasingly penetrates individuals' lives (p.28). The context of British cultural policy - impacted by modernist contradiction - is drawn managing a precarious balancing act between emphasising the cultural, social and/or economic impact of cultural activity, and containing inevitable conflicts and frictions between these conceptualisations of value (p.38-46). Perhaps most importantly given the interest of this thesis in the lived experience of the comedy club, O'Brien also considers the ambiguities and ambivalences of cultural work itself. He refers to the 'pleasures and pains' (Oakley, 2009:7 in O'Brien, 2014:86) that are constantly negotiated by those working within the cultural economy. There may exist the need to endlessly pitch ideas, and the lines between work and life can become damagingly blurred (p. 85-86) - accommodations may have to be made to the market (p. 87). But these experiences of cultural labour can be felt as pleasurable, and as a form of freedom - at least these workers are not chained to a desk or stuck in a factory (p.86). Moreover, O'Brien points to evidence that those who work within the cultural industries are not focused on market imperative, and get satisfaction from feeling they are creating cultural value (O'Brien, 2014:87, following Oakley, 2009). Here then I want to hold onto the idea that there is a wider cultural economy context that will be implicated in the actions of comedy producers and consumers, but that there are spaces in the fissures and fluidity of the field of the cultural economy that challenge the dominance of prevailing values and the weight of the market.

The central question of this thesis regards how the practice of laughter relates to the social reproduction of cultural value - these arguments suggest it both reproduces and challenges the reproduction of cultural value. Moreover, those who might be engaged in the practice of producing laughter - i.e. comedians - are also actively taking part in activities that may challenge or reproduce cultural value; this exists within a broader cultural economy context that can sometimes be celebrated for facilitating the hearing of marginalised voices, whilst also over-

representing some voices. This thesis illuminates part of this productive process - the part that comedians directly deal with. Before I move on to consider how the concept of liminality may enable me to get some purchase on the slippery, ambiguous and ambivalent notion of laughter and its contexts outlined here, I consider the concept of cultural value and how it has come to be framed in cultural policy and sociological approaches.

The Uses and Abuses of 'Cultural Value'

During the New Labour years, the notion that culture can have positive social effects was made explicit (Oakley and O'Brien, 2015: 5), governmental cultural policy working on the assumption that if participation and consumption of cultural forms can be enjoyed by people from all social groups, then communities will be strengthened and social barriers removed (see for example Department of Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2015: np). Furthermore, cultural consumption is seen as a way to build 'person value' (Skeggs, 2011) – it is said to increase academic performance, and support creativity and the development of talent (DCMS, 2015: website). Viewed in this way cultural forms therefore have value insofar as they effect people in the 'right' way; people who consume culture become 'better' people. Cultural resources are a form of capital to be accrued – if only everybody accessed these cultural goods, enriched individuals would exist in strong communities with no social barriers. The problem of 'social barriers' is therefore individualised – barriers are not actually the problem, it is (working class) consumer's lack of aspirational consumption that is the problem (Loveday, 2015:577).

As Oakley and O'Brien (2015) suggest, whilst this instrumentalist and individualised view of culture was widely criticised, it did at least amount to an 'official' admission that culture does have an impact on broader social relations. Yet contrary to governmental assumptions, when the relationship between cultural consumption and society has been scrutinised it has often been found to be 'replicating and reinforcing inequality' (p.5). Miles and Sullivan (2012) point out, people who do not engage with those forms that are designated as 'cultural' are often cast as deficient in some way, constructed as a social problem. By arguing that there is a better way to be through cultural consumption, there is the suggestion that there is such a thing as a 'worse' person; this person is one who

does not partake of legitimated cultural forms. For instance, research partly commissioned by the DCMS into the 'Social Impacts of Culture and Sport' (see Taylor et al, 2015) define what constitutes culture in line with the Office for National Statistics 'Taking Part' surveys. This lists 21 activities as part of an 'arts attendance' question, and includes such forms as ballet, opera, theatre, 'circus (not animals)', yet does not include television or - interestingly enough for the broader scope of this thesis - comedy. Therefore, those who engage with culture, more broadly conceived, through television or comedy clubs are counted as 'socially excluded' – constructed as a social problem. Cultural value can only be accrued through the consumption of the right kind of culture – not all cultural forms have the same level of value.

The assumption here is one of cultural magic; there are amounts of cultural value residing in cultural goods and when consumed by somebody, this cultural value passes into that person. The accumulated values of the goods they consume then gives you the type of person they are – valuable or not-valuable. This reflects a particular understanding of social classification as based on status and relatively firm hierarchical structures, forming the basis of influential work on contemporary class analysis, particularly the Great British Class Survey (Savage et al, 2013). Here, different social classes are defined by: the cultural activities they take part in (indicative of cultural capital); the economic resources they have at their disposal (economic capital); and the social networks people can draw on (social capital). The aim appears laudable: incorporate Bourdieusian capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) to inform a 'new, multi-dimensional way of registering social class differentiation' (Savage et al, 2013), producing a new British class system made up of seven strata - from 'Elite' (broadly defined as having high levels of economic, cultural and social capital) to 'Precariat' (defined as having low levels of these attributes). Savage (2015), refocusing the work of the GBCS onto the workings of the elite, argues that we can explore how the high capitals this group possesses are used to 'accumulate advantages' (p.235):

The vital question then becomes one of how specific embodied individuals can seek to claim a stake in [...] dynamic and deterritorialized flows of capital in ways which permit them to enjoy...their benefits and their potential to accumulate. (Savage, 2015:234)

There is an underlying sense here that the ‘capitals’ these ‘specific embodied individuals’ have are not in themselves already accumulated ‘advantages’ – the story only begins once we have defined a group as having certain capitals and then analysing how these capitals are deployed. This hierarchical capital formation is taken-for-granted. Any sense of the relations between different groups, the injustice of the inequality of the primary valuation, is forgotten. The ‘elite’ cultural forms can only be high value in relational opposition to ‘precariat’ cultural forms that are actively and continually devalued. For this thesis, and its more particular focus on cultural value and comedy consumption, the key question sidestepped here is: how do certain cultural pursuits become legitimised as having value over others? In Bourdieusian terms, how does this cultural capital come to be *symbolic capital*, a powerful sign of being elite or not elite?

The GBCS form of analysis has taken the dynamic and antagonistic power relations (Toscano and Woodcock, 2015) of cultural life and condensed them into a form of measurement very closely related to economic forms of valuation. You too can measure yourself against this stratification typology by logging on, filling in your details and finding where you rank. Moreover, Mills (2014) rightly points out the reinforcement of a faulty logic at work with concern to cultural consumption more specifically:

To bring up one obvious absurdity, they would have to accept that people could change their social class at will simply by changing their cultural preferences. By giving up Mills & Boon and taking up Dostoyevsky or turning off the Beatles and turning on to Beethoven they could alter their class position. (p.443)

This Mills quote pulls out a couple of concerns that feed into the interests of this project. Firstly, the changing of ‘cultural preferences’, or ‘taste’, is not a simple endeavour – cultural preferences are intertwined with processes of deep cultural inscription. Secondly, class positioning is not wholly reliant on consuming the ‘right things’ - class positioning is more reliant on who can position whom, and on who controls the terms on which that positioning occurs. In terms of comedy consumption, it is not the consuming of Stewart Lee’s ‘highbrow’ comedy that

makes people middle class; middle-class people are somehow able to position their own taste as 'high-brow', and position others' tastes as inferior.

Struggles for Value

The underlying point I have been arguing so far is this: approaches to class that are an exercise in identifying and categorising social strata fail to take into account how cultural consumptive practice is part of wider practices of 'differentiation and distinction' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) based on struggle and exploitation (Skeggs, 2011). Toscano and Woodcock (2015) draw attention to how middle-class power does not only rest on the ability to accrue value through accumulation of capitals, but on the ongoing devaluation and exploitation of a powerless working class. To try and understand how individuals are able to differentially accrue value and therefore take up a place in an arbitrary typology somewhat misses the point – there needs to be a sustained focus on the antagonistic relations of value, that is, how exploitative relations between groups work in a way that means that one wins, and one loses. The accrual of value is entangled in the processes of how different groups accrue value from each other. There is growing evidence that inequalities do not solely rest on the consumption of different cultural forms - i.e. the difference between someone who consumes opera as opposed to someone who consumes musicals (Bennett et al 2009:52) - but increasingly on how that consumption is performed or practiced.

This form of value accrual is particularly apparent in the consumption of what might be considered 'lower forms'. For instance, Skeggs and Wood's (2012) research on reality television consumption reveals how middle-class participants are able to accrue value from their viewing of reality television, defending and explaining their enjoyment through highlighting the 'educational' value of such consumption (p.121). Additionally, Friedman (2014) notes how for younger generations, comedy had become a legitimate cultural product, perhaps suggesting that value boundaries around culture are disintegrating. However, within the appreciation of comedy, Friedman finds clear taste hierarchies: through the use of their own 'disinterested appreciation' of comedic forms, some consumers were able to claim more value for themselves through positioning others' enthusiastic appreciation, including laughter, as somehow contemptible (2014:51) - laughter emerges as a device 'of differentiation and distinction'

(Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). The boundaries and brutalities of societal division and classification (Tyler, 2015) do not magically melt away through the communal consumption of cultural products, legitimate or otherwise. The crucible of consumptive practice is often where these damaging relations are formed and performed. Therefore, value does not simply reside in a cultural good to be passed on to anyone who should happen to consume it, like a jug of water filling a glass. Cultural value is created and accrued through the positioning of others as being of less value, valueless or beyond value (Skeggs, 2004).

Skeggs and Loveday (2012) highlight the ways in which people who are prevented from accruing value in the culturally prescribed 'right way' engage in 'value struggles'. They argue that contemporary social formations are moulding persons and selves who will constantly work to accrue 'person-value'. This value, following the same Bourdieusian concepts as the GBCS, comes in many forms – the self in current conditions does not only have to accrue material wealth to be legitimate, but must have the 'right' connections, 'good' taste and 'appropriate' status symbols - the possession of which leads to further opportunities to collect more value. Yet the way in which these concepts are pulled upon here places them firmly in their correct context: there is a socially and historically constructed difference in the availability of these 'raw materials', which can be used to generate value. Unequal access to these capitals, and crucially differences in acculturation, serve to reify distinctions. Exploitation cuts deep. Constant competition leads to an ever-strengthening divide between those who win, and those who lose. Part and parcel of this intensification of competition is an expectation that the self will continually perform its value – that is, constantly facing scrutiny through comparison with an invariably white, male, heterosexual, middle-class ideal. As part of this process, those with access to the dominant symbolic resources constantly and continually position others as lacking value in order to claim comparative value against this constructed 'useless' other. The losers in this symbolic game are not readily accounted for in Bourdieu's model - how do people positioned as beyond *valuation* live their lives if the whole purpose of contemporary society is to have selves who accrue (the 'right') value?

How do we comprehend what value means to those symbolically positioned to have no value, the wrong culture and defective psychology, who are held

morally responsible for all the structural inequalities they inherit and by which they are positioned? (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 487)

Those positioned as beyond value, those culturally and discursively formed as the very limit of respectable personhood, Skeggs and Loveday suggest, engage in 'value struggles'. Through their exploration of working class reactions to a government initiative that, fairly explicitly, worked to position certain subjects as beyond respect, they suggest an approach to value that not only refers to resources as distributed in an economic sense but focuses on 'values' (Skeggs, 2014) operating relationally 'as a more general ethos for living, for sociality, and connecting to others, through dispositions, practices and orientations' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). How cultural forms are consumed in ways that accrue value, and how those who are positioned as beyond value work with and against this intense devaluation (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) - within the consumption of culture (Oakley and O'Brien, 2015) - deserves more analytical focus. The aim of this thesis, in focusing on the lived experience of laughter, is to not only show how deeply these valuation processes cut, but to give an airing to alternative valuation structures that may live (even if only briefly) in the burst of laughter.

Stuck in the middle

There are, then, two axes to the arguments I have reviewed so far. One key argument is between structure and 'experience': is it the structure of comedy taste and value, or the event of experience that has primacy when considering how laughter finds its place in consumption? Indeed, going back to the original consideration of Bourdieusian concepts, there is a conceptual space between 'habitus' and 'field' that is not completely resolved. The other argument is between a view of the dominating (comedy) culture industry as controlling cultural dopes against a view of popular cultural enjoyment as potentially revolutionary – mirroring the self-same issue of the primacy of structure or event. In these arguments, the middle ground is revealed as ambivalent and ambiguous, with laughter at its core, at once reinforcing and puncturing taste, structures and domination. Laughter finds itself betwixt and between these 'worldviews', and by approaching laughter as part of these arguments, I am attempting to approach the space between structure and the event of consumption, as well as between consumption as 'good' and consumption as 'bad'. I want to conclude this chapter

by arguing that a concept that can help to approach this space is that of liminality.

The term liminality was introduced by Van Gennep (1960[1909]) to describe the middle stage of a rite of passage, the movement from one status position to another, such as child to adult. The first stage constitutes a rite of separation, the detachment of an individual or group from their current social status, from 'what is there'. The last stage, the rite of incorporation, establishes the new status position or identity, to 'what is here'. The liminal stage, the rite of transition, is therefore the passage in-between that must be successfully negotiated for an individual or group to make it over the threshold from one status position to another (p. 10-11). It is in this phase where 'all that [is] stable around the individuals, the structure of the community, its rules and norms, the individual's place in the society, even his/her identity [is] suspended' (Szakolczai, 2013: 23). Victor Turner has emphasised what a serious consideration of liminality entails. If liminality is at the centre of what it is to be a social being, to have a social role or status, then we need to embrace that society is chaotic at its core. Rather than social life being relatively stable, rational and 'governed by 'compatible and logically interrelated principles' (Turner 1988:74), it is instead a:

(S)et of loosely integrated processes, with some patterned aspects, some persistences of form, but controlled by discrepant principles of action expressed in rules of custom that are often situationally incompatible with one another. (ibid)

In short, it is 'a process rather than a thing' (Turner, 1969:203). Szakolczai (2009) takes this further to suggest that this triadic process performed in a 'rite of passage' might be the very basis of the 'structure of lived experience' (p.147), moving from limited to potentially 'unlimited', but immediately involved in the re-demarcation of limits; limits are suspended, but limits are restored: 'Formative powers can only be activated if there is some unformed material available: if a liminal situation is created by lifting the previous limits. The "in-between" is a temporary situation betwixt two structured orders' (Szakolczai, 2009:152).

The liminal phase is when, if performed 'correctly', an individual or collective can be 'stamped' or 'imprinted' with the required status for safe reincorporation into

wider society. Therefore, crucially, considering experience as liminal enables us to get past some of the problematic dualisms discussed earlier – the liminal space links external expectations, the situated context and the individual or collective subjects whose beings are shaped by these experiences (Szokolczai, 2009:23). As such, liminality is at the roots of human experience.

How might affect be drawn into this? Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel (2013), drawing on the processual philosophy of Whitehead, take up the issue of affect as part of the structuring of experience. Whitehead's proposition that 'feelings are 'vectors' - for they feel what is *there* and transform it to what is *here*' (Whitehead, 1985:87 cited in Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel, 2013:238) - posits a view of affect as part of the passage *in between* structure and event. Affect is liminal. That is, rather than affect as unbounded potential, it is part of the material between boundedness and possibility – it is at the threshold between what was and what can be. As such, affect is at the centre of the iterative process of social life between breaks in structure and restoration of 'order' (p.239). Affect's effects announce at least the potential of transition and change, and the requirement that structure or limits be restored. Stenner and Moreno's (2013) drawing on 'affect' as part of this liminal process, allows for a focus on affect as essential to the 'mutual constitution' of an 'impure and mixed space', that feeds the 'transition from actuality to actuality' (p.238). As Thomassen (2014:11) states, 'to think with liminality very basically means to realize that human life is organized as a precarious balance between the limit and the limitless'.

Liminality in the contemporary: Turner and the Liminoid

Turner (1974) devised the term 'liminoid' to suggest how the liminal phase of rituals had become embedded in contemporary consumer societies, which may point to some ways in which the concept of liminality has relevance to comedy consumption and laughter. Of particular interest here is how Turner saw the space of consumption in the 'industrial leisure genres' (or culture industry) as an 'independent and critical source', which 'can generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living' (p. 65). In the consumption of these cultural forms is a space for play, creativity and uncertainty – in these liminoid moments, society opens up to a world of possibility - to play. Here it may reconstitute itself in different ways or confirm the ongoing constitution of things.

The positive potentials that Turner attaches to the liminoid can also be seen in his celebration of the liminal more generally (Turner, 1969). These moments 'in and out of time' offer a glance of a world where ties of hierarchy are suspended, where subjects are relatively undifferentiated, forming a 'communion of equal individuals' (p. 96). This phenomenon of a 'coming together' of humanity in these liminal periods he termed 'communitas', where recognition of an essential humanity abounds - it is directly contrasted with the static, inequality-ridden being of the normative structure. Indeed, Turner celebrates the liminal way of being as 'anti-structure', producing a list of direct comparisons between liminality and the status system - equality vs inequality, absence of property vs property, and minimisation of sex distinctions vs maximisation (p. 106). Laughter here is directly linked with the positive potentials of the liminal: Turner describes an initiation rite for a Ndembu chief that insists that he must not 'keep his chieftainship to himself' and to accomplish this he must 'laugh with the people'; laughter represents 'fellowship' and 'good company' (p. 105). Generalising this into the liminoid laughter in the culture industries, we can again see laughter being held up as a break from the normative, where communitas has the potential to abound. Indeed, Turner remained resolutely optimistic on this point, suggesting that 'flexible and mobile' modern societies are more likely to spawn 'existential communitas' (p. 203). For this thesis, then, laughter has to again be affirmed as holding this powerful potential for bringing together, rather than creating social divisions.

There are problems with the optimism given over to the liminoid. Thomassen and Balle (2012) suggest that to invoke all consumptive activity as positive and playful, and constitutive of communitas, is problematic. Based on the example of bungee-jumping, they assert that in most cases, there is 'no element of self-reflection whatsoever [...] it is hard to see how the performance of extreme sports...impact social and moral order' (p.87). For Thomassen and Balle, 'contemporary consumption culture' is connected to the 'maximization of the emotions, the titillation of the senses, a way to freely indulge in pleasure, fear, laughter and the enjoyment of goods', but yet that in this consumer wonderland there are 'a growing number of people' relying on 'drugs and medicine...to make real the most basic of human experiences: feeling joy at all' (p.89). Similarly, it

is conceivable that most people who go to a comedy gig are not necessarily going to have their worldviews shattered and rearranged, or to play with the social roles they inhabit. The consumption of these is not an automatic 'good' break-away from the domination of prevailing structure: similar to the carnival as society's safety valve, consuming comedy may be a temporary break from normative drudgery. The issue is that whilst Turner is parsing the concept of liminality into the liminoid, he trims it of the potential negatives. It has been noted that Turner was producing this work in an optimistic historical period (Szokolczai, 2009:142) when new social movements had hope of breaking through the normative structures of society. In effect, what is being rehearsed here is the argument between the figure of the 'cultural dope' and the figure of the 'resistive consumer', with Thomassen mirroring Adorno's pessimism, and Turner mirroring Bakhtinian celebration. In the spirit of liminality, I would like to maintain that there is an ambiguous space between the two.

There is a final facet of liminality needing consideration within this literature review. As stated earlier, the liminal phase involves the passage from one status to the next, where structure is lifted, where subjects are stamped anew or 'restamped' to ritually bolster the prevailing order of things. For this to occur, the subject goes through 'trials or ordeals' (1969:169) with twin functions – firstly, the teaching of societally valued attributes (humility, manliness, endurance) and secondly, rendering subjects as 'prima materia', ready to be stamped anew on passing the trial (pp.169-70). To earn the right of reincorporation into the social fabric with an elevated social status, these tests must be passed, and the subject must be judged to have passed them. Returning to the laughter of the Ndembu example earlier, laughter is something that *must* be done in order to pass the trial of moving from actuality to actuality – the laugher is judged on the ability to laugh in the right way. This all serves as a warning to consider the liminal, and affect by association, as in some way liberatory: as a break from the crushing normativity of everyday life, it is implicated in the ongoing construction and reconstruction of the normative. Indeed, if we hold on to Turner's contention that the liminal has converted to the liminoid in contemporary consumer culture, then a very possible feature of those liminoid relations is continual testing – can you consume this culture appropriately? Do you exhibit good taste? Do you feel the appropriate feelings, and laugh in the appropriate places?

In the next chapter, I describe and explain how I attend to these testing conditions. This literature review suggests that there are a multiplicity of forces and processes that have some bearing on the live comedy environment, the actions and understandings of comedians and audiences in that space, and the entanglements laughter finds itself within. I suggest ways in which I attempt to bring primary analytical focus on the burst of laughter in the comedy club, as a way to show simultaneously how deep the games of cultural valuation go, as well as holding up the possibility of breaking through unfair valuation processes and their social reproduction.

Chapter 3: Approaching the betwixt and between

In the preceding literature review, I argued that the field of consumption - and particularly the situated, affectively infused, space of the live comedy event - is characterised by something of a conflict between the affective potential of laughter and structures of power, taste and value. I went on to suggest that the concept of liminality may offer some way to give purchase to how these conflicts might be resolved - it is in liminal space where the 'unlimited' is available, but also where constant delimiting takes place. It is the iterative, ongoing intra-related process between reproduction and change, pattern and disruption, domination and escape that becomes the focus of this research – where an answer to my original research question might reside: how does the practice of laughter relate to the social reproduction of cultural value?

To explore these moments, the obvious site for conducting my research is within live comedy clubs, where people are in situ, consuming comedy, performing comedy, laughing or not laughing, and more than likely wittingly or unwittingly engaging in value(s) games. Asserting liminality as a central concept in an understanding of how contemporary society, consumption and affectivity operates engenders an approach that accesses the 'flow and pattern of life as it is lived' (Dant, 2004:41) – important here as I want to attend to how the social body acts through experiential processes, moving from what was, to the 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1969), to the what could be - 'transition periods' (Thomassen, 2014:7). Additionally, the understanding of affect as radically relational can be understood through Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel (2013) as a key feature of liminality, and therefore draws the intensity of laughter into the centre of the experience. Laughter is a powerful way in which humans relate to each other in testing liminoid moments, and also exists as a disruptive potentiality.

This in situ passionate relationality is attended to in my methodology. But I did not want to just attend to moments of possibility through the force of affect: - my approach is still very much informed by an interest in the influence of the habitus - laughter as entangled with embodied histories. I am keen to avoid 'the trap of now' (Back and Puwar, 2012:3), and so my methods attempted to account for how subjects understand their own tastes, cultural histories and affective attachments, to trace the line between everyday practice and extra-interactional

fields of power relations and cultural value. Focusing in on the liminal space where embodied habitus meets affective stimuli, where comedy consumers and comedy producers meet, my methodology sets out how I approached the 'social production of experience' (Loveday, 2015: 4) in the live comedy environment. I also explore how understanding my methods as 'performative' avoids the viewing of the world as an external 'reality', but instead allows for provocation and purchase on latent social forces, and gives space to marginalised voices. I consider this of vital importance as an interest in 'struggles for value' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) involves being 'attentive' (Back and Power, 2012:13) to the emergence of alternative values.

This arena has been approached through a qualitative strategy that includes overt participant observation (as an audience member) and video observations of three comedy nights, qualitative interviews with some of the comedians at the observed events, and focus group discussions and interviews with audience members in attendance at two of the observed events. The aim was to build an augmented picture of the live comedy environment. The video observation captured 'fine-grain' (Jewitt, 2012) situated action forming the basis for analysis of the intersubjective and 'intensely felt' practice of comedy consumption and performance (Bottero, 2010:10), designed to capture the trace of value struggles. 'Critical incidents' were then taken from the video recording and used as elicitation devices in the subsequent interviews and focus groups. These were intended to explore the values people attribute to their own action within the comedy environment, to explore the connection between event and history, experience and habitus.

The chapter proceeds by describing how I 'captured' the live comedy experience using video recording, and how this was influenced by my central interest in laughter as affect. I explore how I attended to the methodological problem of 'reactivity' of participants to being video-recorded, and link this to debates around social research as 'performative'. In this vein, I explain how video reactivity became something of a virtue, rather than an undermining problem, for this project. I then set out how I analysed this video data, primarily looking for critical incidents, particularly where laughter is bursting through the scene, rupturing or transgressing proceedings. I discuss how I used these critical incidents as video

elicitation devices in further stages of the research, during narrative interviews with performers, and in focus groups with small groups of audience members. I sketch out what I achieved by introducing the video data to these other research contexts. I draw on critical discourse analysis to explain how I attended to the transcripts of the narratives and discussions, which enabled me to explore how participant discourses were relationally produced and performed in connection to value, values and laughter.

Phase one: Video observation of three comedy nights

Observation as part of the research strategy here was absolutely intended to answer 'the affective turn's' call for an understanding of sociality that goes beyond discourse, text and talk (Lorimer, 2005). Back (2010), for example, has highlighted how the qualitative interview has dominated – and continues to dominate – sociological research practice. It is, indeed, a method I use later in the research process. The interview, of course, draws the researcher' eye to language, its content and its form, and these I believe to be important to the story of the comedy experience I explore. But I also wanted to get close to the affective power of the live comedy experience, to get some purchase on the visceral delights of comedy.

To this end, I video observed three comedy nights, and at each I trained one fixed camera on the performance space, facing the performers, from the back of the room. The other fixed camera was placed at the front and to the side of the rooms, facing towards the audience. Access to these three venues was achieved by sending emails to the venues or named promoters of comedy nights, found on comedy night websites. I sent emails to fifteen London comedy nights and clubs including student nights, open mic gigs and more established club nights. I received five positive responses to these emails, and picked three that I thought would give me a good range of acts and audiences - one was a student comedy night at a pub near a west London university, one was a night that aims to introduce more diverse acts into comedy (including an open mic element) in east London, and the final an established, popular club, regularly hosting television-level talent in central London.

An immediate ethical concern was garnering consent for the video observation

from performers and audience members. How this was managed developed in the course of the project. I originally gained ethical approval from the Goldsmiths Sociology Department Research Ethics Committee to use signed consent forms which would be distributed and signed on the comedy nights observed. This consent form included information about the project – what the study was about, who was carrying out the study, the right to withdrawal, and how the data would be used. I used these signed consent forms in the first observation at the student night, however it proved disruptive – feedback from the promotor on the night suggested she felt compelled to mention the consent forms multiple times and that this felt like too much responsibility on top of the actual running of the night, and it took multiple attempts going around and through the audience to check that forms had been signed and returned – the research was potentially disrupting this social arena (I consider this later in the chapter). In sum, the use of signed consent forms in such a space threatened to overtake the primary function of the night – to perform and enjoy comedy. Whilst I would maintain the research function did not take over completely at this first comedy night, I did not want to run the risk of being too disruptive in subsequent video observations. After this event, I have contacted those people through email or Facebook whose images have been used in the thesis, to check consent and to ensure they have my contact details should they wish to withdraw.

I then renegotiated and agreed with the Goldsmiths Sociology Department Research Ethics Committee to change the approach – in the next two video observations, I distributed information sheets about the project to performers and audience members who were ‘in shot’ of the cameras, and placed information posters near to the set-up cameras. The information sheets again included details on the what and who of the study, the right to withdrawal and data usage. Signed consent was then sought in the subsequent focus groups and interviews with those people whose images were to be used in the thesis, to double check that participants knew the data would be used in this way, and to provide the right to withdrawal. This was also important as, on the comedy nights themselves, some participants had been drinking alcohol. The opportunity to re-inform and re-establish the right to withdrawal was therefore paramount.

There were also other opportunities beyond the formalised approach to ensure

consent that presented themselves as the project unfolded. In the process of setting up the second video observation in east London, the night's promoter asked me to provide essential information to him including contact details to discuss concerns, which he included in a mail out to those who had tickets to the event. It was also at this second video observation where I was asked briefly to take to the stage to describe the project, and to ask if anyone had any particular concerns. In the observation in central London, I had the opportunity to speak to performers personally and inform them of the aims of the research alongside the information sheet, and before the show began I had time to talk to everyone in the front couple of rows to answer a few questions regarding the project and why the camera was there. Again, all of those people whose images have been used in this thesis have my contact details through email and/or Facebook, should they ever wish to withdraw.

A further ethical consideration here regarded data management of the video files. This thesis is not on an especially controversial topic, but there was still the possibility that personal information that participants would not want to be available could be contained in the recordings (Jewitt, 2012:7). At all times post-recording, the video data has been secured in an encrypted file on my personal password protected computer to mitigate against the possible accessing and sharing of this data.

Whilst not about comedy, a monograph I read as an undergraduate has stayed with me ever since because of the feeling I remember it invoking - *Tramps like us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* by Daniel Cavicchi (1998). In the first chapter, Cavicchi produces an alive and engrossing observational/ethnographic account of a Bruce Springsteen gig. He comments on the behaviour of the audience, the almost ritualistic interactions between audience and performer, the intensities and importance of this arena of social life (pp.28-29), lucidly describing the 'pace', 'electricity' and 'sensation' that filled him up, enabling a glimpse of the affectivity that characterises cultural consumption (p.31) - 'the audience respond with a resounding "Yeah!"' (p.30), 'the crowd roared their approval' (p.32), 'people were screaming at the top of their lungs, dancing in a frenzy' (p.33). Pertinently, those last three quotes still include some form of utterance - a 'yeah', a roar, a scream. But they carry with it that intensity that you

also want to *feel* - observations enable me to hold more firmly onto those textures. Cavvichi even spots, from his place up high in the arena, that groups of people were relating in a range of ways to different songs (p.30-31), highlighting the distinctions in how people were being affected - another factor I am interested in for this thesis: the (re)production of social difference through cultural consumption.

As my introduction to this thesis portrayed, I am a comedy fan, and I would have been well placed - immersed enough in a world of comedy consumption - to produce an ethnographic account of live comedy full of such feeling and intensity. Participant observation is part of the strategy used: on the nights I attended for research purposes, I had the traditional tools of notebook and pen to create a written record of those things that struck or stood out to me. These observations, my recollections of being there and some of the notes I scribed between laughs, have certainly influenced the accounts I give in the proceeding empirical chapters. I hope to have brought feeling into the fold. But the notion of affect I am working with here is not just based on the incorporation of feeling - it is about how affect is inherently messy (Ahmed, 2010c: 33), so often very fleeting (Law and Urry, 2004: 403), and coming through in unpredictable liminal processes (Turner, 1969: 203). I attempted to square my focus primarily on *moments* - 'shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions' (Lorimer, 2005: 84). This rendered a more straight-forward observational approach as fraught with methodological problems. To illuminate the processes that are so critical to the circulation of cultural value (Ahmed, 2004) involving laughter, I needed 'other ways of "noticing" and attending' to affect (Blackman and Venn, 2010: 9), of 'attending to the textures and rhythms of social life in motion' (Bates, 2015: 1).

To this end, I introduced cameras to my observational toolkit - two, basic HD cameras equipped with a video recording ability, capturing images and sounds of the scene they were focused on and embedded within. Carey Jewitt (2012: 6) highlights how video as a 'fine grain' record can get to details of 'gaze, expressions, body posture' in which action can be rigorously examined. Emma Renold and David Mellor (2013) suggest that their multi-method approach to

capturing the 'doing of gender' (p.25) in a nursery - which included audio and video recording alongside traditional observation - allowed them to explore 'how bodies are sites of struggles, forces and intensities [...] in micro-processes of regulation and rupture' (p.33). Holding on to this notion of affect as the body's capacity to affect and be affected, these affordances that video data offered could illuminate those moments when affect was at its most potent.

Renold and Mellor (2013) also suggest the sounds the video recording picked up allowed them to explore the 'sonic environment' of the nursery (p.29) and learn about 'the sounds of relationship cultures of boys and girls in the nursery' (p.30). Similarly, Charlotte Bates (2015:14) draws on Les Back (2010:17) to describe how in her analysis of video diaries of people living with long-term illnesses, she shifted her focus from the textual elements and towards the 'soundscape and sound image', 'feeling for the less obvious sights and sounds'. In a similar fashion, whilst I was of course drawn by the humorous, textual constructions of the performers, I also wanted to capture what the sound of laughter, and the 'more-than-textual' elements of the comedy experience, could mean for social relations. The recording of behaviour through video, then, enables a deep audio-visual transcription of micro-processes that are not so easily apprehended through traditional observation techniques.

This use of video, however, also draws into view concerns about how devices introduce a level of reactivity that undermines the validity of the data captured. I briefly examine the arguments around the reactivity problem of the use of cameras below, before suggesting a way out that moves the methodology towards, rather than away from, the overall goals of this thesis.

Reactivity as a methodological problem and virtue

'Device-induced effects' are often assumed to distort or disrupt the very behaviour intended for capture, and invalidate results (Speer and Hutchby, 2003:333), even when the camera is fixed rather than roving and more obviously 'taking part' in social action. An example of this problem comes from Sophie Scott (2014) who, whilst studying laughter from a neuroscientific standpoint, attempted to set-up a comedy club in a lab. Audience members were asked to wear breath belts and hats to measure certain physiological responses and were also filmed in order to

capture facial expressions. To allow for facial expressions to be clearly seen, audience members were bathed in light. Scott reports that these interventions had an impact on the elicitation of laughter: 'our audience felt odd, exposed and uncomfortable, and it did affect their laughter' (Scott, 2014:np).

One response to this problem was to lessen the ways in which reactivity might impact the people being recorded. I did not introduce any of my own lighting - whilst in the central London venue this did affect how many of the audience participants I was able to see, the ambient light from the stage was ample for a fair proportion of the audience to be surveyed. In the other two venues, light was dimmed, but still plentiful for the cameras to pick up fine grain action. I also set up cameras in fixed positions - not roving in and around people which would have been unacceptable and unnecessarily distracting in such a space - and as far as possible were towards the side of the action, so as not to be completely obvious while the comedy performers were on stage. I also left the cameras without operators for most of the events - I checked on the cameras every so often to ensure that recording was taking place.⁶ The idea here was to minimise the presence of 'the research' in the comedy event – this was to allow the comedians and promoters to do their jobs, and allow audiences to enjoy their night.

I also found through the course of the recordings that problems of reactivity are over-exaggerated. Heath, Hindmarsh & Luff (2010) suggest that to presume an influence from devices, as with presuming any sociological factor will always have a predictable influence, pre-supposes the actions and denies the agency of those participants being recorded (p.48); presence does not constitute relevance (Laurier and Philo, 2012:184). The camera presence did not mean it was impinging on all behaviour, action and reaction in the scene. Hubert Knoblauch et al (2012:11) assert that the video effects 'become negligible after a certain phase of habituation' and Heath, Hindmarsh and Luff (2010:49) similarly argue that throughout their work on a range of settings 'within a short time, the camera is 'made at home''. This I certainly found to be the case for much of the time and

⁶ Many DSLR cameras have an inbuilt function of stopping recording every twelve minutes or so. I therefore used the DSLR as the performer camera, situated at the back of the room, so I could check on this more frequently without encroaching on the space between audience and performer.

through much of the recordings. Indeed, in the Central London recording, one audience member was so oblivious to the camera that he knocked into it whilst taking his seat, thankfully merely wobbling the camera on its apparently sturdy tripod.

However, this is not to say that my cameras or indeed my own presence at these comedy nights had no impact whatsoever. Whilst I made efforts to limit the 'influence' of 'the research', I would not want to be accused of holding onto a 'naïve naturalism' (Hammersley, 2003:344) where every day social life is perceived as somehow 'pristine and natural' (Speer and Hutchby, 2003:317), and that therefore my job was to simply stand back and let the 'normal' course of events take shape as far as possible. Indeed, it is the contention of this methodology - influenced as it is by notions of affect - that the methods used in the course of sociological investigation are not, and should not, strive to merely 'mirror' an objective, out-there 'reality' (if such a thing even exists). Methods are involved in the co-creation and co-constitution of what they survey; methods affect 'realities' constructed through their use. Whilst I was keen to keep the recording discrete to not be a complete nuisance, this was not out of some notion that what we think of as the social world is an 'external reality' that can be faithfully committed to a digital recording. Indeed, it was more to recognise that a video camera might (but is not certain to) initiate certain performances that would obscure the relations of interest, rather than provoke the relations I am centrally interested in for this thesis.

There is great opportunity in thinking through the research process like this. All methods, not just those that use technological devices, are unavoidably *performative*. That is, what a method is set up to detect produces a boundary between what is present and what is Other (Law and Urry, 2004): 'they are involved in the creating, shaping and reconfiguring of the world' (Staunæs and Kofoed, 2015: 50). The argument over whether video can really capture 'reality' is a red herring – the point becomes to take account of and explore how the camera *might* intervene in the scene in any small way, and from there to understand the 'perspectives, values, practices and experiences that underpin social interactions' (Jewitt, 2012: 10); in essence, this is about thinking through the way in which method is a provocation in the unfolding of social process, and

seeing how other parts of that process enfold the camera, and me as the researcher, into proceedings.

Performative possibility of video recording

Bringing back Scott's (2014) laughter experiment - from a neuroscientific viewpoint, it can be seen why reactivity is framed as an intractable problem. The very instruments that give quantifiable purchase on the inner biological workings of the human body as it laughs are disruptive of the very bodily reaction of interest. From a sociological viewpoint, however, Scott's findings are fascinating. Here we have a bodily exuberance that is so often characterised as natural, deeply embodied, so utterly uncontrollable - and yet appears to be obstructed by a hat, or a band around the chest, or by the face being exposed to light. It underlines the social processes entangled in laughter. When Scott reports that respondents felt exposed, exposed to what? Could it be scrutiny? To the gaze of not just the researcher, but also of other audience members? This failed experiment is not failed at all - it has revealed that laughter is not just about the singular body that produces it, it is also about a social context, about relationality and, perhaps, intra-related affective processes.

From the point of view of my research, therefore, any apparent 'reactivity' to the research apparatus, carefully scrutinised, came to be seen as emphasising the socially entangled essence of the practice of laughter, rather than threatening the internal validity of the study. Reactivity became a virtue - the intervention of the research had social effects that were potentially just as interesting as finding out how the ribcage moves whilst laughing. Scott probed the world, and the world spoke back - just not in the way required for the neuroscientific perspective which she is exploring. There are potentials revealed through the intervention of the researcher, and more particularly the performativity of the camera. For instance, Tim Dant (2004), whilst maintaining that the camera in his study of mechanics at work was most of the time ignored, notes that there were some moments where 'technicians nervous(ly) glance' (46) towards the camera when their work was going wrong. Similarly, Eric Laurier and Chris Philo (2012) whilst considering 'naturalistic data' from fixed cameras in a coffee shop highlight one instance where a customer starts to fool around in front of the camera, waving and then pulling a funny face. Not only do the subjects react to the camera - they interact

with it, and in so doing reveal the 'café as a place where fun can be poked at officialdom' (p.186). In the context of comedy audience behaviour, a glance at the camera or some form of interactions with the camera came to signify an avenue of analysis, rather than a fault in the research design. The nature of the recording itself was not the issue, it was what was made of that data, whatever the 'reactivity', that became the central concern.

Coleman and Ringrose (2013) argue that taking seriously the idea that methods are performative draws attention to the ways in which researchers, and their chosen ways of approaching the world, 'are themselves entangled'(p.6) in the relations they wish to study – it is not a case of revealing the world, but relating to the world, viewing method as a 'system of interference' (Law and Urry, 2004:397). Remaining alert to this performative possibility enabled more rigorous reflection on my own place in the findings (Hammersley, 2003:344-345). Here, the video camera is recast as reflexive tool – from this perspective, how the camera was involved in the scene (or indeed not having any perceivable impact on the scene) became a point of investigation.

The use of this technology is also in line with the understanding of liminality and experience considered in the literature review. The research event in situ is where a range of elements come to combine and become constituted in a processual fashion, but with ambivalent and ambiguous liminality at its core. The research event and the interference of the camera can therefore have a potential to stimulate 'latent social realities' (Wilkie, Michael and Plummer-Fernandez, 2015:82) not intended to be brought into view by the researcher. As Donna Haraway states, 'we are not in charge of the world' (1988:594) – it can surprise us. It was in this spirit that I adopted video recording; to enable a provocative conversation with the lived experience of the comedy club. In that environment, it is not always apparent that classificatory practice is taking place, that we might react outside of what we consider our 'tastes', that laughter is acting in multiple ways beyond the mere audible appreciation of comic material - the use of the camera was to provoke the world into revealing some of these latent tendencies. Yet, going into the analysis, I also had to remain open to the likelihood that the world would not speak back in the ways I expected – 'a possibility for multiple – in principle, open-ended – encounters and responses' (Knudsen and Stage,

2015: 15).

Video analysis: Noticing relations

Julia Snell (2011:253) suggests the volume of rich data that video recordings provide can lead to a 'sensory overload', leading to researchers feeling compelled to describe everything and thus the possibility of weak analysis. It was a warning I intended to heed. I thought I had done so - three recorded shows, each show around three hours long, two cameras in each recording - eighteen manageable hours of video data. I then started the preliminary analysis of the videos and realised that even this modest amount was somewhat unwieldy. Snell suggests a remedy to the feeling of overload through the organisation and application of a coding frame, using a software program to aid the process (p.255). However this seemed too structured a response, especially as I was committed to opening up myself to the potential of being surprised. Laurier (2014) simply suggests watching and rewatching as a way to begin noticing that which might remain hidden from traditional observation:

[...]the repeated viewing of a recording of a familiar practice is a reliable way of defamiliarising that familiar practice. On the first viewing of a recording, it is usually recognisable as that sort of familiar practice. On a second viewing quite what we are seeing begins to change. A second viewing of a mundane practice is already a peculiar way of watching it [...] On a third viewing, part of that first seen barely noticeable thing is dissolving and other aspects of what it looks like begin to become apparent. As the re-watching of the fragment continues, the seen-but-unnoticed features are, in dribs and drabs, in minor differentiations and, then, sometimes in lightning flashes of wonder, noticed. (p.255)

I did not continually rewatch all eighteen hours of data - I watched through all the data two times, taking notes as I went, attempting to pinpoint moments or scenes where it merely seemed something interesting was taking place. On the first viewing, I found it very difficult indeed to pull my attention away from the talk in the clips - i.e. the comedy - much of my notes from this first viewing were imperfect transcriptions of the jokes and stories being told. No doubt these are important to the ongoing construction of the comedy experience, and joking

behaviours have become a focus of the analysis to different degrees in the empirical chapters. Yet through the second viewing, the broader 'soundscape' (Back, 2010) started to emerge - obviously laughter, but also silences or pregnant pauses, shuffling of chairs, clinking of glasses - the world beyond the voice. It was also through this second viewing that the forces of face work (Goffman, 1956), gesture/movement (Laurier, 2014: 261-265) and slight inconsistencies in how different audience members were behaving (Cavicchi, 1998:30-31) emerged more forcefully.

From there, I started pulling out video fragments⁷ of material. Again, in line with the performative approach I adopted with this study, I focused on finding examples in the bodily performances that were leading to social regulation and moments of rupture (Renold and Mellor, 2013: 33). A loose guide to my thinking whilst deciding on which fragments to take came from Dwight Conquergood (1998), who establishes three main understandings of the term performance in social theory writ large – mimesis, poiesis and kinesis- 'performance as imitation, construction, dynamism' (p. 31).

Mimesis is related to the work of Erving Goffman (1956), where the performance of social actors is framed through cultural convention – just like the actor on the stage has a role, and is committed to convincing you that they really are that role, so everyday interaction is based on individual social actors keeping up an 'impression of reality', to persuade others that they are sincere, that front-stage matches backstage even when it does not (p. 17). This mode of performance was absolutely at the forefront of my mind when the comedy performers were apparently keeping to a well-scripted bit, or carrying out an expertly-choreographed movement, and when the audience were working apparently very well in the interaction ritual of the comedy performance (Rutter, 2000). A focus on how a range of social actors were keeping a 'scene' together also drew my analytical eye to those moments when audience or performer appeared to struggle to keep up appearances - holding their bodies in check in some fashion; a hand to the mouth, a pointed look downwards or away, a distraction wilfully sought.

⁷ Using the word 'fragment' rather than 'clip' emphasise the only ever partial picture offered by a slice of video data (Laurier, 2014: 269)

However, this was problematic for the methodologically performative stance I wished to take. The concept of 'mimesis' rests on an assumption that the aim of any social action is to bow to cultural convention - is in some way 'fake'. Take the term 'impressions of reality' - social action becomes a fake in pursuit of the reality of cultural convention. It becomes somewhat hopeless in that the end-game of social interaction is the relentless bowing to social order reified as real (Denzin, 2002). This is not to refute that cultural normativity has stultifying impacts on affect felt as part of comedy consumption, but it takes away from the idea that these behaviours are also *immanent* to 'reality', not merely aberrations covered up to keep 'reality' unsullied.

Keeping an open eye

Which is why an openness to poiesis and kinesis as part of the analysis of the recording was so critical - it necessitated thinking through how the scenes I was reviewing were continuously constitutive and dynamic. Focusing on poiesis and kinesis drew my eye much more keenly to that which I wish to reveal, where the *doing* of performance and the *done* of performativity are in constant *struggle*. Conquergood (1998) credits Victor Turner as the 'pivotal figure' who moved understandings of performance towards a constructional theory, to 'making, not faking' (p. 31). Performances, coupled with the understanding of the 'performative' as actions or utterances that 'actually do something to the world' (p. 32), that they themselves create the scene. There is no 'real' or 'fake', no 'pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured' (Butler, 1993:141 cited in Denzin 2002:112) – performances are actualities.

Furthermore, Conquergood describes how this constructional/performative understanding ushered in performance as kinesis, with a more political emphasis, performance as action that 'incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates and antagonizes powerful master discourses' (1998:32). When analysing the video data, I attempted to maintain a lens that focused much more on the action of participants as constitutive and disruptive, and moreover how laughter heralded these passionate moments of possibility. Again, this was also much more in keeping with the understanding of liminality I brought to the analysis - the way in which the normative is constituted and 'stamped' during liminoid moments, but

also times that escape that stamping and testing. 'As cultural practices, performances reaffirm, resist, transgress, and "reinscribe or passionately reinvent" (Diamond, 1996: 2) repressive understandings that circulate in daily life' (Denzin, 2002: 113).

These video fragments of mimesis, poiesis and/or kinesis became the key incidents of the comedy events, and it was these fragments that I viewed incessantly through the analysis period of this study, continuing attempts to keep 'noticing' (Laurier, 2014: 255) beyond the obvious; watching and re-watching, holding to the contention that affective relations can be seen and interrogated through the observation of action (Wetherell, 2012:4). Viewed through these more dynamic analytical lenses, the way affect was organised became not simple cases of mimesis, but as paradoxical, ambivalent and therefore open to alternative readings that resisted the status quo.

Again, this presented somewhat of a problem - ambivalence and ambiguity might mean there are many readings of a situation that could be considered 'valid'. With each of these identified key incidents, at least in these first flushes of analysis and notwithstanding the open stance attempted to adopt throughout, I was inevitably bringing my own positionality to the analysis of the data - making interpretive leap after interpretive leap between observed behaviours, bringing some of this latent theoretical knowledge into explanations of those behaviours. Just because I can tweak my researcher eye to be open to poesis and kinesis, this does not mean that those people actually in the scene meant their actions in the ways I perceive them - the researcher gaze takes over, and my own reading of the comedy experience is re-enlivened through this analysis, and the struggle of practice these participants were engaged in become glossed over by my singular perspective. The crucial element underplayed through my own analysis of the video data, however iterative and rigorous, was that of reflexivity in the practice of the participants. Here, reflexivity is understood as the ability of 'social actors to monitor themselves' (Crossley, 2001:117), not necessarily always following their embodied habitus, or reacting to the impetus of mimetic affect. For moments of affective disruption, when the body is affected and for some reason is struggling against 'going with the flow', are there particular reasons behind that? Could it be that this participant is enacting a different history? Or following

different values?

The most important perspective on these actions was the person exhibiting them. This entailed interviewing performers and conducting focus groups with audience members - the aim of doing this was – a) to explore the embodied resources of participants, in order to trace a line between the actions in the live comedy context to ‘person value’, ‘cultural value’ and a flexible understanding of the habitus and b) to collaboratively analyse the critical incidents, the video fragments, in which participants were involved - in a sense to check my own eye, and to allow for the explication and formulation of alternative valuations. The interest in affect did not disappear. The analysis inevitably moved to the words that my participants used to give their accounts, but the interviews and focus groups were suffused with affect - helped in part by the use of the video fragments as elicitation devices. I go on now to account for how I conducted these interviews to ensure a sustained focus on affective dimensions, and particularly laughter.

Phase two - Interviewing comedians

I conducted ten interviews in all, two from the central London comedy night, and four from each of the other two nights. I had talked to all of the performers on the nights I filmed, and many had offered their contact details then and there. Those who had not, I contacted through the night’s promoters, or through their social media presence - all of those I contacted were happy to take part. On meeting, I rechecked their consent, not just for the use, and recording to a dictaphone, of the interview data, but also the visual data as part of this project.

The interview method I used was a modified version of the biographic-narrative-interpretive method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2001) - chosen as it was a design of narrative interviewing that would enable me to explore my participants life history, and how they felt this intertwined with the comic experience. The potential here was in the interweaving of more ‘intimate’, psychological concerns with societal/cultural factors - in the process of narration the participant is engaging with the process of the construction of who they are, and doing so using the resources they have available, often sociocultural in nature.

It has been argued by Ciaran Burke (2015) that the BNIM is useful in exploring

the 'repetition of actions and positions that demonstrate the habitus' (p. 61), but that also gives due attention to the 'malleability of the habitus' (p. 63). Burke talks of the habitus as forming 'trajectories' (p. 65), lines of flight from the embodied habitus into experiences of the world that can alter (but never completely deny) the trajectory of the habitus (p. 68). This was in line with the notion of habitus I wanted to use - to track the activation of the habitus in social life and identify ways that this enactment produces or denies value, drawing attention to the relational way in which different habitus are produced and reproduced as being of value or not. As interested as I am in how this narrative technique could engage 'embodied history', it was not my intention to use narratives as a way to access an authentic self, to get to the 'core' truth of a person. What I wanted to excavate through the sensitive application of narrative interviewing was the resources that my participants were drawing on to produce their sense of self, and to establish these resources as potentials that are activated (or not) in everyday social life.

Conceptualising of the accounts, views, opinions, statements, tastes of interviewees as potentials presses the point that the things they revealed in the interviews are not part of a concrete subject who can or will act in purely predictable ways. The point of this form of interviewing was to allow space for the participants to explore representations or accounts of themselves. It was about trying to step into the 'life-world' as it is understood by any given participant (Atkinson, 2012:116). Bridget Byrne (2003) draws attention to the way in which narrative interviewing can explore processes of subjection whereby participants draw on material and discursive resources in order to position themselves and others. These material and discursive resources may be broadly determined socio-culturally, such as through the habitus, but that does not lead to an inevitable telling of the self, a steady and predictable cause and effect relationship between the social characteristics and the manifestation of ongoing social action.

For Byrne then, interest in narratives is part of an attentiveness to 'the more uncertain and creative processes of construction and fabrication' (p. 30) of how people navigate social life. To underline this point, Byrne presents three narrative accounts – the first is from someone with 'a story to tell'; it is chronological, establishing a range of contexts in which the self has been enacted that accounts for gender, class and 'race', with a clear cast of characters (p. 40). The second

and third narratives are rather different – the second is a much disrupted account of the self, indicative of someone who has an ‘ambiguous relationship to the nature of her subject position’ where her sense of self cannot be accommodated by the discursive resources available to her (p. 43); the third sees a narrative of self with no turning points, an inevitable progression from one normative life stage to the next, no twists or turns – she is who she is, and there is little that needs to be explained narratively (p. 45). Normative discourses allow her to easily embody a subject position – it clearly feels natural to be ‘a normal and coherent person with agency’ to this respondent.

Therefore, I felt narrative interviews were best placed to reveal the potential meanings that people bring to their understandings of themselves and their place in the world, potential meanings that then may guide action in future episodes. Through this, I could have purchase on the ‘habitus’ without reducing it to embodied destiny.

The ‘pure’ BNIM technique involves three subsessions within an interview. The first involves the interviewer asking a single narrative inducing question, the second sees the interviewer going through the narrative and using the same words at the interviewee to ask for further narrative elaboration on key events. Finally, non-narrative questions can be asked in the third subsession, to clarify, to probe for justification and explanation (Wengraf, 2001: 119-120). In every interview, I kept as close as possible to the first and second subsessions. I asked a single narrative inducing question, and phrased it similarly to how Tom Wengraf advises (2001: 122) - this is what I said every time:

As you know, I'm interested in people's experiences of comedy. In a minute, I'm going to ask you to please tell me the story of how comedy is important in your life. Please tell me any events and experiences that are important to you personally. I'll listen, I won't interrupt. I'll just be taking some notes in case I have any questions for later. Please take your time. Please, begin wherever you like.

This approach was very successful in nine out of ten interviews. Answers ranged from ten minutes to just under thirty minutes to just this one question, where

participants told stories and explained some of the key events related to comedy, humour and laughter. It veers slightly away from Wengraf's model in that he advises keeping questions as 'fuzzy' as possible - the 'how comedy is important in your life' part could be constructed in a 'fuzzier' way. However, because I was interested in accessing some of the values that my participants attached to comedy, I deemed it necessary to have the stronger term 'important' within the question. This allowed me to hold on to the expansive nature of BNIM, but maintain a focus on value and comedy. In the one interview where this question did not elicit a long answer (the participant responded for just under one minute), the response was not related to a life story, and took the form of an opinion on whether comedy had any value. This could have been through the respondent misunderstanding the question, or coming into the interview with a preconceived idea of the type of responses I was expecting. In this instance, I was a little more directive with my questioning - 'How was comedy important to you when you were younger?' and 'where did you start your comedy life?' - which eventually gave some narrative details that I could start to expand in the second subsection of the interview.

As the interviewees gave their first answer, I would be take note of each event and experience they recounted, any comedy names they brought forward as a sign of what might constitute their comedy taste (or not), as well as when participants referred to strong emotional episodes. The next subsection of the interview is then focused on asking a question about each of these specific events/experiences to elicit deeper narratives and allow participants to clarify and underline the importance of these memories. For example, keeping as close as I could to using the question constructions again suggested by Wengraf (2001: 126) - I asked questions such as:

You mentioned 'experiences as a woman in comedy'. Can you remember any situation that would tell me more about those experience?

You mentioned Amy Schumer. Can you remember any more details about the time when you watched Amy Schumer?

You said 'you enjoy making people laugh'. Can you tell me more about an occasion when you felt like that?

Every time, the question is attempting to induce a narrative by encouraging the participant to think of precise instances or situations where what they said in their initial narrative became important.

Affect, narrative and video

Where I modified most of all was in the third sub-session - where Wengraf (2001:121) suggests this part is focused on justification and probing of the narrative, I introduced relevant video fragments for the same reasons. The intention was to introduce the video data as a means to probe the narrative given, and to explore ways in which participants account for their actions that might fit, or indeed challenge, the narrative self they had previously constructed in the interview. As already stated, the use of video is absolutely to assert the focus on laughter and affect in this study, as a means of paying close attention to bodies impacts on bodies - here, it was another means of bringing a more prominent focus on affect in the interview context.

Interviews, even without video elicitation, are suffused with affect. Walkerdine (2010) makes clear the usefulness of interviews when dealing with affect – she carried out ‘long, unstructured, narrative-based interviews, that aim[ed] at engaging with feelings and experiences’ (p. 92). Walkerdine connects affect to her work (on the impact of mine closure in a Welsh town), through exploring a ‘sense that emerged from her reading’, the interview ‘stimulating an affective response within the author’ (ibid). This underlines the potential impact of words as carriers of affect, but also as elicitors of an affective and relational experience – the interview event itself. This was certainly the case with most of the interviews - laughter was of course a prominent part of the experience, but also many of the narratives included tales of struggle and hardship, stories of the highs and lows of performance and accounts that touched on how their comedy lives were wrapped up in meaningful associations with families and friends. These were affective in the interview itself, but also in the transcriptions and rereading - affect lives in words.

Affect is also carried through video recordings. The strategy I adopted is similar to that of Staunæs and Kofoed (2015) who explored the affective governance and construction involved in a learning management strategy in a school. Their

design involved them recording student review interviews and then showing the interviews back to the students, individually, a week later. The students, through this 'double-loop' design, are 'exposed to the visual impulse to remember, re-experience, and contemplate the peer-review conversation' (p. 47). During this re-living of the experience, students are interviewed about the experience, asked what their reflections are upon it, and how this related to other aspects of their school life. In their relating of how this worked in practice, they suggest that the provocation of the visual stimulus material 'mobilised multiple cross-connected senses' and 'feelings such as embarrassment, surprise, disparagement, pride, pleasure, or even disgust' (p. 55).

Similarly, the way I used the video in the interviews was an attempt to performatively elicit the strong affects associated with performance, and to connect this with the narratives the comedians had already presented. I wanted to establish 'affective-discursive patterns' (Wetherell, 2012:84) in how comedians make sense of their live comedy experience - but again stay mindful of moments that challenge discursive capture. In terms of question structure here, the conversation was a lot more fluid and open. As we watched the fragments together, I asked the participant to stop the recording whenever they spotted something they wanted to talk about. I also did the same, asking them about analytical points I had identified in the recording that needed more clarification and exploration.

To underline, then, the use of narrative interviewing in this thesis was to give a sense of the discursive and material resources available to participants – how people go about inhabiting certain subject positions through their narratives appears contingent upon, but not determined by, classed, gendered and racialized positions, which speaks to the generative power of the habitus. It also lays bare how the narration of the self is processual - an uncertain, ever-contingent experience of the self. Again, the tension here is between performance and performativity – the performatively constructed habitus, constituted through its interactions with a field of relations that build an embodied history, is in tension with the performance of the self, often interrupted by experiential disruptions and affect. The theme from the video data concerning the picking out of ambiguous scenes can be carried out again in the analysis of the interview data - looking for

disruptions and bumps in the road.

Phase three: Focus groups with audience members

The initial plan was to get a small group of audience members together from each of the comedy nights for a focus group each, meaning that each event would have three perspectives - my own, the comedian, and the audience. This, however, did not pan out. I got together a group from the central London and east London comedy club, but not the other. First, the successes - I asked for the contact details of the group from the central London club on the night of the recording, in the course of seeking and checking their consent for the cameras to be present during the video observation. In due course we were able to get together for a focus group discussion. Contacting the group from the east London club was less straight-forward. On this event, I was asked by the promotor to introduce myself on stage, to inform the audience of the presence of the cameras, and to ask if anybody had any problems or would rather not be recorded to let me know. Thus, the opportunity to talk to individuals on the night to take contact details did not readily present itself. However, I contacted the promoter of the night and asked him to put me in touch with one of the audience members I was interested in talking to (he was a regular attendee) – which he did through Facebook. I was able to get a couple more group discussants through him. The student group from the west London night proved impossible to get together - I had their contact details from the night (this night I used consent forms which included the option for participants to provide contact details) but whilst trying to arrange a meeting, I was informed that two of the people I was trying to contact were no longer on speaking terms. Life got in the way of method.

Additionally, the initial plan was to have a range of people from apparently different groups in the audience come together, and compare their experiences in the focus group. There were a couple of reasons why this did not occur. The placement of the audience camera, at the front-side of the audience inevitably meant that audience members in the front row were most visible and drew my eye. Not only could I see the face-work and the mouths opening to laugh, but also body position, gestures and movements, as well as objects that participants were keeping to hand and what they were doing with them. Therefore the 'pool' of possible audience participants got slimmed down to those most visible.

Furthermore, these groups, sitting together towards the front, were obviously friends. During the initial video fragment reviews, this emerged as another potential positive that could be taken advantage of through this methodology. Jenny Kitzinger (1994:105) argues that tapping into friendship groups can lead to something approximate to 'naturally occurring' data as 'one of the social contexts within which ideas are formed and decisions made' - indeed, friendship groups who go to the comedy together could represent a site where the practice of laughter in the social reproduction of cultural value could be interrogated. As well as this, Jonathan Gray (2003: 77) suggests friendship groups have the advantage of being 'familiar and comfortable with each other' and to have already 'discussed the text in some capacity' previously. Here, the 'text' is the comedy night itself, and indeed this did appear to be the case in the focus groups. The experiences they had had at these events had already been used in the social practice of these participants, it was my intention in the focus groups to establish some of the ways in which this may have been done.

Another issue that might be argued to further undermine my focus groups is their size. The east London group consisted of three audience members, and the central London group, four. Suggestions in the literature tend to put the lower limit at six (Denscombe, 2010: 355, Liamputtong, 2011: 42), however, there are exceptions to this. Recently, David L. Morgan's (2017) work in dyadic interviewing suggests that small groups are just as 'data-rich' as larger groups (p.414) suggesting the importance of a minimum group size is overstated. He also suggests a distinct advantage comes in the form of more time for each participant to take part in the discussion (p.415). Each of my focus group participants had, on average, forty minutes each to take part. It has also been suggested that smaller group sizes are easier to facilitate and manage (Morgan, 1996: 146), yet I did not really feel the need to interject directly very often, another advantage of friends as participants in focus groups.

The structure of the focus group session again started with one question. Whilst I did not want to bring out narrative in the same way in the focus group, I wanted a measure of comparability with the comedians' responses. The question I used in this context was simple - 'how is comedy important in your lives?', and in both sessions stimulated good starter discussions, again ranging from experiences of

comedy that stuck out in their memory, how they related to comedy with their friends and family, and also suggesting some comedians or comedies that they particularly liked. This part of the session helped to establish a sense of a 'collective taste habitus' through which the groups were working.

However, the emphasis in the focus groups was most certainly on the analysis of the video fragments - these ran like a workshop. Johnson et al (2004) suggests 'groupwork' as a fruitful analytical method that can explore the 'combined and multiple readings', 'coexisting but divergent processes' and 'ethical and political issues' that arise when analysing 'cultural transactions' (p. 255). I showed each prepared fragment (I used six clips, between 30 secs and 2 minutes long, with each group) - some showing a big burst of laughter, some showing dead jokes, others where reactions within the group diverged - all with the intention to provoke discussion. I was amazed by how successful this was in revealing the multiple values and positions that people take up, how controversial fragments of material could be, and how diverse the reflections on them were. Taste certainly came up as a reflective resource, but so much more than this was marshalled by the participants to explore and explain their behaviours - memories, jokes, stories, feelings and gestures. The video data gave participants another chance to express themselves, a different forum for 'enacting their investment in the social roles on display' (Skeggs, Thumin and Wood, 2008: 20). Using the video elicitation here in the focus group allowed me to listen and see better, and to constantly check and recheck my own perspective with those of my participants (Sinha and Back, 2014).

There is a limitation often discussed in relation to focus groups, which posits that the validity of responses may be undermined, as group influences can impact individual opinions – as Gibbs (1997) states, 'it should not be assumed that the individuals in a focus group are expressing their own definitive individual view. They are speaking in a specific context, within a specific culture'. Stewart et al (2007:19) assert that 'the usefulness and validity of focus group data are affected by the extent to which participants feel comfortable about openly communicating their ideas', and go on to list a range of possible constraints on the comfort of participants (p.19-37). Again, for this research, this represented an opportunity. Part of the reason I chose to conduct focus groups was to set up the

conditions for the collective constructions (Kitzinger, 1994: 104, Denscombe, 2010:352) used to understand comedy and laughter. As Skeggs, Thumin and Wood (2008:18) outline, the focus group does precisely this; it '*creates* types of classed discourses', the research method was absolutely concerned with 'generat(ing) the conditions of possibility that frame the object of analysis', the 'modes of articulation' based on the available cultural capital within the collective habitus of my research participants (p. 20). Too much of a focus on the 'comfort' or freeing up of individual responses would lose the point of having a group there in the first place.

That is not to say that I did not want to hear from individuals, and did my best as a researcher here to ensure that every participant had a fair space to give their views⁸. My aim in the facilitation of the groups was to listen as much as possible, to allow for the development of group dynamics, but keep aware of how these dynamics may be silencing some and endeavour to introduce those voices to the group. The group dynamics, and the power plays within it, are of course analytically interesting. But to only focus on this would have been to ignore the possibilities of oppositional voices and escape from processes of social reproduction - where individuals were giving a challenging view, I tried to ensure this was fully explored as well. Quite besides this, to simply leave individual participants to the whims of other, louder members, to abandon them to sit in silence would be plainly unethical. My focus in facilitation was to promote comfort, minimise the likelihood of any feeling of having been 'wronged' (British Sociological Association, 2017:6), and also to release voices that in everyday life may be 'buried by noise' (Sinha and Back, 2014: 486). This necessitated a balancing act whereby facilitation was simultaneously active and passive, and involved judging at what points interjection was required in order to keep the interactions fair and flowing, but to not interject so much as to make *my concerns* the object of study rather than the participants.

I am disappointed that I did not manage to get bigger groups, or a group at all for the west London event. However, the time spent with these groups and the depth of their responses, particularly to the video data, does give analytical purchase

⁸ Twelve years as an A level sociology teacher has given me experience of sensitively drawing sometimes reticent subjects into contributing to discussions.

on everything required to move forward in answering my key question - how the practice of laughter is entangled in the social production of cultural value. This deep engagement with these processes was helped further by how I moved to analyse the discursive data that came from both the interviews and focus groups.

Analysis of discursive data

I analysed both sets of data using the performative narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) approach, or dialogic analysis, which drew attention to how narrative accounts among speakers were relationally produced and performed.

When reviewing the interview and focus group transcriptions, the questions that lead the analysis were “‘who’ an utterance may be directed to, ‘when,’ and ‘why,’ that is, for what purposes?” (p.105). Performative analysis is therefore interested in how these accounts are given and how they are done in practice, alongside the content of the words themselves. This brings into the analysis a concern for the broad cultural contexts that may be at play in the narrative and who the intended audiences, the very stuff of cultural value games and social reproduction. It also brings an appreciation of my role as researcher, and how I might have impacted the data extraction and analysis - things I reflect on when they appear most important in the forthcoming empirical chapters. Keeping all of this in mind during analysis entailed a finely detailed interrogation of what words were being used and the intention behind their use in the recounting of experiences and in the discussion of the video fragments.

Further to this, I am interested in the critical discursive concepts of ‘interpretive repertoires’, ‘ideological dilemmas’ and ‘subject positions’ (Edley, 2001: 189), and again they have been instrumental in thinking through the processes at issue in this thesis - the construction and negotiation of everyday understandings (the taken for granted), the sociocultural resources that individuals use in order to recreate and reify (rupture or reproduce) certain understandings, and the implication of wider relations of power in everyday experience (p. 196).

Interpretative repertoires are ‘relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events...the building blocks of conversation...drawn upon and utilised in the course of everyday social interaction’(p. 198). Ideological dilemmas refer to the contradictory ways in which taken-for-granted things can be discussed,

illuminating the way in which social objects are constructed rhetorically (p. 204). Finally, the concept of subject positions (Byrne, 2003) draws attention to the presentation of the self, which inevitably draws from a 'language provided for us by history' (p. 210). At the same time, this form of discourse often places 'the other' through contrast to the subject position being claimed by the speaker (p. 213). These concepts proved to be invaluable in maintaining attention on the constant tension and struggle in social experience – this form of discourse analysis drew my attention to the slippages, disruptions and discontinuities of how people account for their experiences, and the discursive work so often engaged in to try and fix up or 'pass off' those contradictions.

Bringing it all together – an 'augmented observation'

After these processes, I had multiple stores of data analysed in a number of ways – the video data had been analysed by myself, with some fragments of video data also analysed through the interviews and focus groups; the interview data, which presented accounts of life narratives, as well as perspectives on the video observed in the interview settings, analysed through discourse analysis; and the focus group data, exploring the some of the collective constructions and values drawn on by consumers to make sense of the comedy environment, analysed through discourse analysis.

The final stage in my method was then to draw these different streams of data, produced through the different phases of the multi-modal qualitative empirical strategy, into contact with each other. This had already been central to the methodology, drawing the video fragments and indicative findings from my preliminary analysis of the video data into the latter phases. The strategy from here was to compare and contrast the findings from these different 'streams' or phases of the data analysis, as to not over-rely on one mode of data than another, to marry up and connect the different perspectives, those of the performers, audiences and, inevitably, my own. This was to underline the commitment to approaching these spaces as potentially indeterminate, liminal, and so to hold on to the possibility of multiple perspectives finding themselves negotiated in situ, as well as a commitment to revealing how these multiple processes are enfolded in 'affective practices' (Wetherell, 2014), conceived of as 'affective-discursive

patterns' (Wetherell, 2012:84) in social action. The exercise of drawing the 'affect' video data into contact with the 'discursive' situations of the focus groups and interviews was a first stage in revealing this affective-discursive terrain. Similarly, in this final phase of analysis, I was interested in how the affective and discursive had come through, complemented and/or contradicted each other in the collected analyses.

Towards the beginning of this methodology, I stated that my own experiences of comedy consumption, as well as my more immediate experiences of the comedy nights observed as part of this project, have also been a source of data and have influenced the analysis here. I have attempted to make sure that my own perspective does not necessarily take precedence - at the points in the coming empirical chapters where I have brought in my own experiences and understandings, I have corroborated these against the video record, and judged whether my own perspective adequately aligns with the findings of the analysis and the perspectives of my participants. It is the collective and iterative coming together of these perspectives, analyses and sources of data that I use to justify the claims in the coming chapters. Mindful here also of the low sample numbers, I argue that validity is assured through the depth of analysis achieved through the multiple processes that the data has been put through, checked and re-checked, in order to build an augmented observation of some of the social processes at play within the live stand-up comedy environment. This, crucially, reveals the multiple ways in which cultural value flows within these processes.

I have presented here an account of how I proceeded with the empirical and analytical work in this thesis, my methodological rationales behind these actions, and how I believe these methods attend to the key questions that came out of the literature review. In the following chapter, I present material from one of the research contexts - the central London club - looking in-depth at how the comedian's perceptions and audience perceptions of the comedy space clashed, how laughter became a central and important factor in this fissure, and how broader power discourses influenced the reflections on the comedy experience.

Chapter 4: 'Essex girls' in the comedy club: Stand-up, ridicule and 'value struggles'

Having outlined my methodological approach to the comedy field in the last chapter, this chapter presents evidence from one of the nights that I video observed, and draws on comedian interview and audience focus group material. I explore how those who face comedic devaluation engage in struggles for value through laughter and humour, and consider what hope there is for revaluation through humour and comedy consumption. The chapter examines the experiences of a group of four women from Essex, who decided to go to a central London comedy club to celebrate a 'hen night'⁹. Part of their experience on the night included facing Essex girl-based ridicule from two comedians. I draw on Skeggs and Loveday's (2012) notion of struggles for value, discussed in Chapter 2, to explore how my Essex participants negotiated and responded to this ridicule.

Contemporary UK society is saturated with classed, gendered and racialised value judgements. Certain groups find themselves routinely devalued, and experience this as a structuring force within their lives (Loveday, 2014: 722). White, working-class women often face denigration through the cultural signifier of the 'Essex Girl'.¹⁰ I use the expression 'white working-class' cautiously. Gurinder K. Bhambra (2016) clearly articulates the issues with using it, and how it often expunges the multi-ethnic nature of the working class. This is not my intention in using it – the working class is not white. However, the term 'Essex girl' has been historically applied to white women in the working class (Biressi and Nunn, 2013: 38-39), and I would not want to generalise the findings in this chapter to different ethnicities who form part of the working class.

The Essex girl is, as Skeggs (2004) states, the 'condensed signifier of the epitome of the white working-class woman in the UK' (p.112) - tasteless, promiscuous, loud, fake. This cultural cipher has come to the fore of UK public life through the 'structured reality'¹¹ television series, 'The Only Way Is Essex'

⁹ Hen nights are a pre-wedding celebration for the bride-to-be, usually only attended by female friends and family. They have come to be associated with drunken excess (Skeggs, 2005).

¹⁰ Essex is a county of the UK, situated in the South East of England.

¹¹ Structured or scripted reality programming 'looks like drama...but is based on

(2010-). Faye Woods (2014) draws out how the re-emergence of the Essex Girl tag has coincided with new vitriolic classed discourses surrounding the demonisation of the 'chav', characterising the working class as 'lazy, tasteless, unintelligent or criminal' (Tyler and Bennett, 2010 cited in Woods, 2014). In online discussion and newspaper commentary - both middle-class dominated forums - the Essex girl tag is conflated and merged with the 'chav' (Woods, 2014: 205-206) to form a potent set of judgements that women, and particularly white women from Essex, find they must struggle with and against.

Stand-up comedy is also no stranger to mockery, ridicule and joking which has included the Essex girl joke (Davies, 2011: 65) and the classed and gendered ridicule of women (Lockyer, 2011; Tyler, 2013). As discussed in Chapter 2, comedy taste has also been shown to be a battleground where boundaries around value and worth are drawn and reinforced (see Friedman 2014) Styles of appreciation are used as distinction strategies to draw strong symbolic boundaries between a tasteful, 'enlightened' 'us' and a tasteless 'lacking' 'them' (p.69). How somebody reacts to a comedy product is (mis)recognised as a legitimate basis on which to judge the 'worth' or value of that person. In this way, comedy and humour are used to 'police the boundaries of cultural and class identity' as a form of symbolic violence (p.168). Not only does devaluation of 'Essex girls' happen through the more direct and overt form of comic ridicule, but there are assumptions about how women who might be labelled as 'Essex girls' do not enjoy comedy in the 'right way'. The bind is double: white working-class women are laughable, and they cannot laugh back correctly.

I begin by exploring the potentially serious influence of Essex girl-based ridicule and its involvement in valuation processes. I reflect on a couple of key incidents captured through the video observation, and consider how the women went about 'making their night'. I then go on to analyse the comedians' interview data to draw focus to the strategies of power and control these comedians felt were vital to their successful comedic performance. The Essex focus group data is then discussed, revealing how the group's 'Essexness' is both central to their approach to comedy consumption, but also perceived as a shameful subject

the real lives of their subjects. "Story producers" plot out what they are going to film in advance after discussion with the cast' (Raeside, 2011: np).

position from which they attempt to disidentify. I conclude by reconsidering the 'disciplinary' function of ridicule and suggest that the 'Essex girl' trope may hold the potential of positive revaluation in specific contexts.

Ridicule as a serious business

Contemporary UK society has a strong public arena for joking and ridicule in the mainstream, through the culture industry of stand-up comedy. It is the contention in this chapter that this does something *serious* in a society. Michael Billig (2005) suggests how ridicule and humour define social boundaries and carry out a disciplinary function. Humour feeds into social constructions of who counts as laughable and reinforces the terms on which someone might be considered worthy of ridicule. It is associated with social control and processes of devaluation, related to ethnicity/race (Billig, 2001; Weaver, 2011b; Kuipers, 2011; Malik, 2011), sexuality (Finding, 2010), and ability (Montgomerie, 2010; Mallett, 2014), but here I am more specifically concerned with humour's entanglement with social class (Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Lockyer, 2010; Tyler, 2008) and gender (Abedinifard, 2016; Gray, 1994; Foka and Lilequist, 2015; Pailer et al., 2009). These critical humour studies demonstrate how joking and ridicule are part of the process of the 'othering' of specific disempowered groups, simultaneously reflecting and reinforcing power relations.

Humour and joking also impinge on the behaviours of people in their everyday lives. Billig (2005: 219-220) argues that avoiding ridicule - and the laughter associated with embarrassment and shame - is a central component of social order. This relates to cultural valuations: to be tainted by ridicule and to be laughed at is a potential threat to your 'person value' (Skeggs, 2011). The central trope of concern here, the 'Essex girl', finds herself as a figure of 'fun' precisely because she is socially incongruous to expected standards of valuable 'respectable femininity' (Skeggs, 2005). Her supposed sexual promiscuity is an affront to these standards, and therefore laughable. This effects everyday behaviour: to avoid attracting such laughter and ridicule, women from Essex may change their behaviour to eschew such a disreputable label.

A recent campaign launched by two women from Essex to get the term 'Essex girl' removed from the Oxford English Dictionary and the Collins Dictionary (The

Guardian, 2016) indicates how women from Essex may feel this cultural formation as a real structuring force in how they are viewed and valued. The organisers of this campaign repudiate the unsavoury aspects of the trope and suggest reclamation of it based on examples of 'talented and inspirational women' from Essex that they know – the fundraiser, the full-time worker, the entrepreneur (motherhub.co.uk, 2016). The term Essex girl would be of worth if it meant being materially productive – it is a thoroughly classed conception of valuable femininity. This message of productivity is embedded in the history of the Essex girl joke - linked to the construction of the blonde joke (Davies, 1998; Kuipers, 2006), which itself blossomed and spread alongside the late 20th Century growth in women as part of the labour force (Oring, 2003). The Essex girl joke is functioning as intended – impacting behaviour and valuations to the point that women embody productive, respectable femininity. Indeed, in railing against the Essex girl trope, these campaigners are in a sense doing its work for it. This cultural construction, then, represents quite a serious bind. The choice becomes either live with the label Essex girl, and be positioned as laughable and subject to denigration, ridicule and discipline, or repudiate the label on the grounds that women from Essex are actually some kind of model neoliberal citizen (Davies, 2014: np), itself a form of discipline.

Giselinde Kuipers (2011) notes that those who find themselves the subject of ridicule, and therefore subject to similar binds, struggle to find 'elegant responses' (p.76), particularly emphasising the example of women's reactions to humour. Women can laugh along, ignore the joke, or object, though the latter opens the likelihood of being positioned as humourless – for instance, a 'feminist killjoy' (Ahmed, 2010). Kuipers suggests that the route of 'escape' is to joke back, but that this is only open to those in a powerful position bolstered by other intersecting factors (2011:77). Lisa Merrill (1988) suggests that if women laugh along they 'reinforce the negative view of women depicted in the joke' (p.275) – that female laughter at jokes that ridicule women is complicit in self-denigration.

Additionally, Friedman (2014) highlights how the consumption of stand-up comedy that uses ridicule is entangled in cultural class relations. For the comedy consumer with 'high' cultural capital, comedians who ridicule the powerful are fine and good - 'punching up' is tasteful, but comedy that ridicules disempowered

groups is tasteless – no comedian should ‘kick down’ (p.75). However, these same ‘high cultural’ consumers pull on classed assumptions and use devaluing classed language to express their disgust for audiences who laugh at humour that kicks down.¹² Value judgements concerning the appropriate use of ridicule are used to elevate one cultural class position against the other: the working class are drawn as ‘cheap and lazy’ (p.117), mindlessly lapping up comedy at other people’s expense, leaving the middle class as untainted, ethical consumers.

Yet here there are anomalies – in Friedman’s research, ‘Little Britain’ is noted as having ‘relatively evenly distributed’ appeal amongst all social class groups (p. 62). This television comedy sketch show has been the subject of some controversy in that it plays on chav-stereotyping (Lockyer, 2010) features problematic sketches in its approach to race (Peters and Becker, 2010) and some material is decidedly misogynistic (Finding, 2010), suggesting that the middle-class disdain for ridicule may be more complicated. Hunt (2010) notes how the comedy of Roy ‘Chubby’ Brown is not entirely dissimilar to that of Jerry Sadowitz, yet Sadowitz is often lauded and consecrated as UK comedy’s ‘misunderstood genius’ (p. 186), and held up as a favourite amongst other ‘highbrow’ comedians. Hunt suggests that the real differences come down to differential levels of cultural capital:

Alternative comedy is strongly middle class in its appeal. Defences of Sadowitz usually rest on the contention that he is tweaking his audience’s political sensibilities...To the middle-class observer, Brown’s audience is a ‘rough’ crowd...Sadowitz’s audience are a less intimidating prospect...almost as white as Brown’s, but considerably more affluent. (Hunt, 2010: 187)

The middle-class consumer of comedy stakes a claim to a socially powerful position by contrasting their own taste against an imagined community of working-class people who laugh along with the ridiculing comedian. These are class-coded judgements – working class people are positioned as having an unsophisticated attitude towards ridicule, an unenlightened view of what counts

¹² See Friedman, 2014, pp.116-117 for one such example.

as funny. Ridicule, that still uses offensive stereotypes and tropes, is given a pass if it is used to remind the middle classes of how enlightened they are. This pass is not afforded to consumers of comedy from less powerful social positions.

Some recent work, however, has established that people's responses to attempts at classed and gendered positioning are not readily determined. Helen Wood (2017) describes the situation that faces young working-class people who participate in the structured reality programme *Geordie Shore*. These participants could easily be seen as dupes, pawns in a game of symbolic violence. Yet through an exaggerated performance of working-class aesthetic values - 'being mint' (p.45) – they can stake a claim to a form of value that represents 'one of the depressingly few routes to some form of ill/legitimate subjectivity' (p.52). Moreover, Anne Graefer (2014) demonstrates how audiences of *Geordie Shore* are not necessarily revelling in the ridicule of the show's participants, but instead their laughter is delighting in the relatability of their excesses – 'affective solidarity amongst women' (p.118). This would at least theoretically suggest a space of possibility for those facing ridicule to find strategies or embody values (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), which can then accrue person value (Skeggs, 2011), despite the intention of the ridicule. Participants, audiences and laughter have polysemic potentials that might frustrate the vagaries of classed and gendered power plays.

The working-class woman from Essex, therefore, is taking somewhat of a risk if she publicly attempts to consume comedy – which sounds ridiculous. Consider, however, that an evening out at a comedy night for women from Essex runs the risk of exposure to material that will directly target them - that draws them, in a public gaze, as being promiscuous, unintelligent and distasteful. If they laugh at a comedian who is indulging in ridicule, they are either drawn as classless dolts or are complicit in their devaluation. If they do not laugh, they are humourless, running the risk of more targeted ridicule. Yet there is a hope that in the struggle against devaluation, spaces for revaluation might be forged. The focus of this piece is precisely on a group of female friends from Essex who, celebrating one of their numbers' coming nuptials, decided to attend a comedy night in central London, sit in the front row and face direct Essex girl-based ridicule. Which begs the questions: what do my research participants get out of comedy, and in becoming targets of class and gender-based ridicule, how do they negotiate their value in this potential mine-field?

Participants and Positionality

For this chapter, I focus my analysis on the video observation carried out in a central London stand-up comedy club, a subsequent focus group discussion with a group of four women from Essex who attended this comedy night, and interviews with two comedians who performed on the night. The front row of the audience included my Essex participants, in attendance to celebrate a 'hen night': Jan, the bride-to-be; and three of her 'hens', Chloe, Esther and Megan. Occupationally and educationally, these participants would be 'classified' as working class - two are housewives, one is a customer service assistant in a supermarket, and one works part-time as an office administrator. None of the participants had completed university education, although one participant is part way through an education studies degree. The two comedians performing on this night – Jack and Martin – are white middle-class males. Both have a university level education: Jack attended theatre school before turning his hand to stand-up, and is now a full-time comic; Martin, alongside his work as a comedian, owns a comedy club and is the landlord of several properties in East London.

It should be reiterated here that none of my research participants were planted by me. As described in my methodology chapter, I contacted the comedy venue to gain access to carry out the video observations, went to the venue to set up my cameras, and then waited to see who would end up in the frame and who would be performing - accidental participants. On this occasion, I was able to talk to those in the frame before the event started - it was at this point on that night that I became aware that the front row was a hen party of women from Essex. It is the experiences of that night and the analysis of the data that have led me to consider the Essex girl trope, and ridicule more generally, as a feature of value struggles in the experience of comedy. I am therefore looking at how the cultural formation of the 'Essex girl', and what it carries by way of cultural value, is active in the experiences of the participants within the comedy club, and in the participants' understandings of their actions.

A salient point to add in the context of this chapter is my own positionality. As a white male academic, my immediate presence in the interview and focus group will have influenced the narratives provided, and the discussions had. That being said, with my Essex participants, I had a certain level of 'insider' access – as

described in the introduction, I am an 'Essex boy', brought up in the town of Benfleet, nestled between Basildon, the spiritual home of 'Mondeo Man', and Southend-on-Sea, notable for having the longest pleasure pier in the world. My knowledge of the county and my accent, similar as it is to my Essex participants - but also my experience of negotiating my Essex-ness in forging an academic career - has inevitably influenced the analysis set out below.

The next section focuses on some of the key incidents identified in the video analysis of the night itself, drawing out ways in which the actions of audience and performer are wrapped in gendered and classed value associations, but how these emerged in some unexpected ways. The chapter then moves into linking this situated action to broader power relations through the analysis of the more 'discursive' data.

Essex girls in the comedy club

The idea of Essex establishes itself in the interaction of the event early in the proceedings. The compere of the night, Martin, finds out quickly that the front row comprises of women on a hen-do. Martin is initially alerted to the front row by some 'out of place' laughter from, as it turns out, the bride-to-be. Here, he engages them:

Martin: settle down ladies, settle down, what the fuck, is this some sort of celebration?

Jan: It's my hen-do!

Martin: Oh it's a hen-do, that's why you're all so fucked up and pissed.

Martin then implores the audience to clap for Jan, vigorously gesturing – it is a way to restore some order, to re-establish that he, as MC (emcee), oversees the affective happenings in this space. He goes on to state that hen-dos are 'a comedy gig's worst nightmare', alluding to the fact that drunken disruptiveness does not necessarily help comedy to work, supporting the idea that he is trying to re-establish a comfortable performer-audience dynamic (Rutter, 2000). His next utterance again is an attempt to ameliorate the perceived threat of a potentially disruptive group, but perhaps does not go quite as planned:

M: Now usually a hen-do is a comedy club's worst nightmare, but these ladies seem quite middle class and well-to-do so we should be able to...you're, you're not?

[the group look at each other, laugh]

J: You don't know us yet.

M: Whereabouts are you from?

J: We're from Essex.

M: Oh fucking hell, Essex hen-do everybody.

The significant point to note here is that there is an understanding on both sides of the interaction that geography is entangled with class – when Martin perceives that the group are refusing his middle-class label, his next port of call in establishing their class 'credentials' is to ask where they are from. This, I suggest, is a valuation practice, a way in which the comedian can size up the 'value' of the audience member to ascertain how laughable they might be. For her part, in rejecting the attempt at middle-class labelling, Jan does not simply answer Martin's question flatly. Her gesture and intonation make it abundantly clear that she knows her utterance will meet with class-based judgement, and that it is related to the performance of femininity: the movement and facial expression starts sweetly, almost coquettishly, before breaking into a full laugh and ending with a defiantly raised arm (Figure 1). There is an implicit understanding that the confession of Essex-ness may not be viewed as valuable, but the bold gesture suggests she will fight for value regardless – a value struggle.

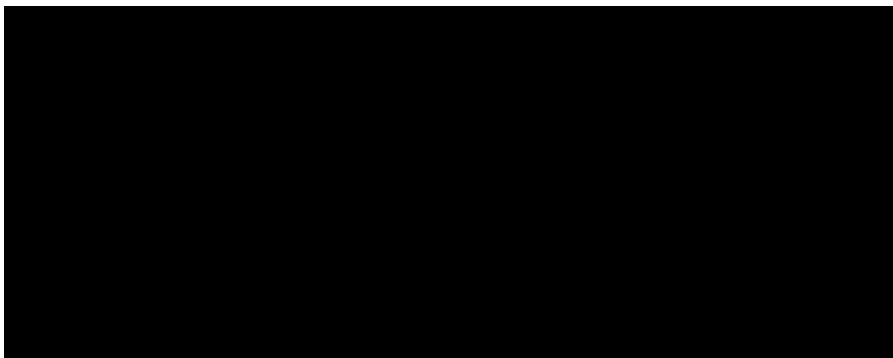


Figure 1: 'Essex girl' confession – smile, punch, laugh.

As noted earlier, the disciplinary function of humour works through people avoiding the potential embarrassment of ridicule (Billig, 2005). The behaviour of

Jan in this first instance does not fit this view – indeed, when offered the relative safety of a middle-class characterisation, she rejects it. In the topsy-turvy world of the comedy space, Jan is positively and rebelliously embodying Essex, and opening herself up to ridicule.

Which surely comes. Throughout the rest of the evening, the Essex girl jokes and associations are played for laughs by both Martin and the later performer, Jack. I'm not inclined to give these jokes another airing; suffice to say they played on the familiar tropes, Martin alluding to tastelessness, criminality, and lack of intelligence, whereas Jack played on promiscuity – an exact fit for the checklist of stereotypical judgements used to draw the valueless white working-class woman (Woods, 2014).

The ongoing ridicule, however, does not meet the response that might be expected. The women again do not fall under disciplinary control through the onslaught of ridicule, indeed quite the opposite – as the event moves on, where Jan made the early running, the rest of the group start to coalesce around these behaviours. There is a hint of this in Figure 1, where behind Jan's raised fist, another participant, Chloe, is laughing hard, testing the waters of rebellion. The more the ridicule continues, the more they revel in the event. There are instances where the group are provoking the performers, to break up the normal run of performance/audience response; they collectively emerge as loud, brash 'Essex girls'. To give one example, early on in Jack's performance, Meg and Esther can be seen trying to get Jan's attention, for Meg to take a photo of the bride-to-be using her mobile phone (Figure 2). It is very obviously done, undermines the expectations of comedian/audience interaction, and initiates the desired response – the comedian beginning a prolonged interaction with the group, with more doses of ridicule. The more they become the centre, the more they double over with laughter (Figure 3).



Figure 2: Taking over.

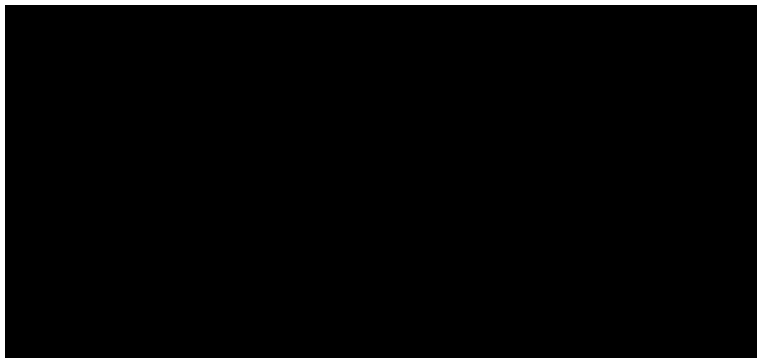


Figure 3: Convergence of joy in ridicule.

This convergence of behaviour - this in situ negotiation and building of a collective response - can be usefully characterised as an 'affective alliance' (Grossberg, 1992:59): groups of people who come together in shared affection for a cultural product, and through this indicate possible shared 'activities, practices and identities' (ibid). In the original use of the term, a cultural product brings people together who are already aware of their affective connections to products – i.e. people who go to see Eddie Izzard would assume that others going to the show have a similar affective connection to Eddie Izzard, and are therefore open to affective connections with others in that setting. I use this concept in an emergent sense, less based on a presumption of connection and more on the active audience practice of building connections: 'affective alliance building'.

The group could not presume a pre-existing 'fandom' for the comedians, so they actively work to ensure some level of convergence in experience. In one sense, this is a form of 'affective contagion' (Wetherell, 2015: 146); however, as Ahmed (2010:36) notes, contagion does not capture how an individual's behaviour may impact their likelihood of 'catching' affect. A metaphor of alliance building leads

my analysis to emphasise how the group are constantly active and enactive in this experience: they are doing precisely this through their provocations, through their processual taking on of the ridiculed role; they are building their own experience.

This does, however, leave open the question of quite why they took up the role of the Essex girl so passionately. The video analysis suggests that this group, led primarily by Jan, were determined to draw focus. They leveraged conventionally devalued characteristics to do this, and successfully garnered value on their terms (Wood, 2017). They had a wonderful time. This could, however, also be interpreted as a sign of complicity (Merrill, 1988): are they laughing along to deflect shame? This needs to be approached carefully – it is entirely possible that through their use of ‘Essexness’, the group are both inviting ridicule *and* collectively protecting themselves from the potential negatives of ridicule – this is what ‘value struggles’ are about. At the very least, however, I take forward the finding that ridicule based on devaluation, in specific circumstances, may have the potential to enable the devalued to accrue value on their terms.

Before I try to illuminate further these value struggles using focus group data, I first draw on the interviews giving the performers’ perspective. This is to clarify what my participants were up against concerning attempts at devaluation, and to underline how their value struggle in the comedy space was quite an achievement, subverting the intention of the comedians.

Performers’ perspective: Controlling the room

There is an understanding amongst comedians that being able to control the room is a fundamental part of successful comedy. This indicates that in the first instance, comedy and laughter have a relationship to power: performers are to have more power than the audience. Any good feeling that is aroused should be based on the skill of the comedy performer to control a room and stimulate laughter.

Double (1997:132) refers to this need for control when discussing ‘the confidence trick’. He suggests any competent comedy performer must pull this off - the creation of the impression (at least) that ‘you are in control of the room’(ibid). This

is needed because, as Double puts it, 'like a dog, [audiences] can smell your fear...they will not believe that a frightened comic has the power to make them laugh' (ibid). There is a marked assumption of an oppositional relationship between a potentially intimidating room and a comedian who must wrest control from the jaws of hostility.

Certainly, the comedians on this night give the impression that this characterisation of the comedy room is uppermost in their mind. I explored the performer's perspective through the interview technique outlined in the methodology - a first part that asked them how comedy had been important in their lives, and a second part where I showed the comedians video fragments from the night where they were observed. During this latter part of the interview, I ask the comedians to reflect on their performance, on the behaviour of the audience, and to tell me if they notice anything in particular that they would like to talk about. These interviews provided valuable insights into the concerns of comedians and the ambivalences involved in making it in the comedy world. In this chapter, most useful was how the reflective part of the interviews gave insight to the iterative power relations of the live comedy performance - how they negotiate their way through a performance, handle the uncertainties of facing live audiences, and use their material in these kinds of spaces.

They perceive the tussle between comedian and the audience members as a power struggle. The relationship between performer and audience is perceived to be antagonistic - for Martin, control of the room is key. While discussing those he admires as successful comics, 'stage confidence' is the number one trait for a good act. When reviewing his performance, he was very anxious and self-critical of what he was seeing, and couched this anxiety in opposition to what he was saying about acts he admired - 'sometimes I can be very commanding, but sometimes I slip and I can't fucking control it'. His notion of what it means to be a comedian is entangled with ideas of being in control - control of the self, and confidence in the self, leads to a commanded room.

Jack also drew on notions of power. As described in the earlier section, a mobile phone made an early appearance in Jack's performance. Later in his set, Jan takes out her phone, which Jack spots quickly. She protests - she was just taking

a picture. Jack says that he will take a picture of the hen party with the phone. Jan hands it over, Jack slips it into his back pocket and says, 'You can come and collect it later'. Typically, the women react with gales of laughter (as does the rest of the audience) – another occurrence of their successful involvement in a memorable hen party moment. For Jack, this is a 'typical power move', a tactic he has used many times. It highlights the comedians' view that the responsibility for laughter is their own; to accomplish this, they need control of the room to get through their planned act. It also reinforces how comedy spaces are therefore a place where struggles for power, and value, are played out.

There are cultural assumptions that the comedians bring to and utilise in their attempts at control, and quelling of the potential threat of an Essex girl front-row. During my interview with him, and after reviewing the video footage of the exchange described earlier, Martin declares the following regarding Essex:

The Only Way is Essex. For fuck's sake, why is it [...] such a popular show? ...They are, they are literally nightmares, right? ... So self-confident, so self-absorbed, so unaware...ruining things for everybody else, they are literally the worst form of humanity (laughs).

Strikingly, the notion of confidence comes up again – the performer must be confident, the confidence of the audience must be under control. He goes on to suggest why these unruly Essex folks attend comedy clubs:

They love ruining it, they actually joyfully, that's the whole point, they're out to ruin it...that's why they're having fun, because they are ruining it.

Martin is attempting to keep control of the room, as that is what successful comedians do. He is particularly keen on controlling the front row because, immanent to his reading of these 'Essex girls', they are 'fucked up', 'nightmares'. Their rowdy laughter, Martin understands, comes from the enjoyment of ruining it for everybody. His efforts at control, then, are not just in the service of smooth comedic performance – they are expressions of classed and gendered disgust. Martin seems particularly primed to perceive working-class women as threats to his control and employs humour (and altogether more bare-faced power moves)

to enforce a hierarchy. Moreover, his distaste for them is intertwined with the depiction of people from Essex in structured reality television (Graefer, 2014; Wood, 2017). He is also calling into question their taste –they do not laugh as hard at the carefully constructed material of the comedian as they do at the direct interaction with the comedian and their antics - they laugh at the wrong things. The (mis)recognition of taste is a force that further informs devaluation practices in everyday life, but their effects are not predictable – the hen party was not doomed to be quelled. In fact, direct ridicule paradoxically enabled them to live out their values, garnering value on their terms.

Taste values and disidentification

I now turn to the hen party's account of their tastes and how this impacted their audience behaviour, as well as how they viewed their antics post-event, in order to highlight how their comedic experience is structured and negotiated through value struggles. This draws on the data from a focus group discussion conducted with them three months after the comedy night, and held at Esther's house.

The comedy taste of the group has important effects on how they generally function as a friendship group, on how they came to be in the front row of the club, and in how value was negotiated. As part of the focus group, a discussion was had on the comedians the group liked and why, with the aim of exploring their comedy taste and seeing how it enmeshes with their value judgements. While names were offered, no one professed to be a 'fan' of any particular comedian. Moreover, the taste exhibited by the group was bound up in a sense to its 'use-value' – the group discussed a couple of types of comedy, but always came back to what it did for them as a group, rather than focusing on the 'formal' qualities of comedic performance. This supports Friedman's (2014) contention that the boundaries of taste, and I would argue value, are more to do with 'embodied cultural capital' rather than 'objective cultural capital' (Friedman, 2014) – the how and why of taste, rather than the what.

The first taste value expressed was a preference for comedy that relates to the everyday - observational humour. This is often dismissed as 'easy stuff' by those with high cultural capital – indeed, in Friedman's scheme (2014), my participants' taste for the observational would place them in the 'low cultural capital' group.

The 'high' cultural taste view tends to assume that observational humour is simplistic, the humour is set at a lower bar. I argue here, however, that this group has a form of cultural capital that leads to different tastes from those of the middle classes and that these are embedded in a different set of social values. The group's notion of the point of comedy includes creating a sense of belonging. The comedians they like are 'real', or are engaged in 'banter' (Megan). Discussion of the appeal of Mickey Flanagan, a comedian whose material is based on his East-End roots and experiences, celebrated him as being 'the sort of person we know' (Esther), 'our sort of Essex-y' (Jan). Some of the characters that Flanagan evokes in his act bear a funny resemblance to those in the women's lives: 'We know people who would go out in their slippers to the pub wouldn't we?' (Chloe).

The group even suggest that it is only their 'sort' who could relate to Flanagan's material properly: 'we get the jokes more than what a Scottish or northern person would' (Jan). Their taste for his material chimes with how they see themselves as a group: it is enmeshed with assumptions about wider identities, and about the importance of comedy to reflect the experiences of wider groups. This is not to say that the group only watched comedians who met these identifications, as the group suggested a liking for northern comic Peter Kay and British-Iranian Omid Djalili, amongst others. It does suggest, however, that when they approach comedy, they are expecting it to relate to, or become part of, their story. For this group of friends, comedy is a way of sharing memories and making exciting experiences through their own identities. This understanding, I argue, can be seen directly in the way the group behave in the comedy club – the comedy becomes a conduit for them to create a memorable experience in celebration of a coming wedding.

The other taste value they show a strong affection for is ridicule:

'I like people taking the mickey...I find it funny when he picks on people'
(Esther)

'I like to see people squirm' (Jan)

Again, a taste for straightforward mockery could be analysed as the preference

of those who lack sophisticated taste, who are part of a lower cultural capital group (Friedman, 2014), a tasteless other (Skeggs, 2004). This is not the impression gained from my time spent with my participants - instead it is again the expression of a different value, or set of values, based on an attitude of not taking oneself too seriously. Indeed, it is related to the idea of relevance discussed above: everyday life is funny, the everyday things that people do are laughable. To be 'over-serious' is in some way to deny the inherent ridiculousness of everything: 'you have to see the funny side of everything, even Trump' (Esther). During the focus group, ridicule of themselves and each other suffused the discussions - at one point in my notes I write: 'they really enjoy taking the piss'. Ridicule, an act that is to do with diminishing the status of others, is pleasurable for this friendship group. This is not only the act of ridiculing others. The experience of being ridiculed is somehow pleasurable.

This was most acutely revealed in a brief discussion on the comedian Paul Chowdhury. His act is based on ridiculing a wide range of social groups, but the mockery of racial groups, and the ridiculing of his racial background (Chowdhury is of Punjabi Indian descent), dominates the act; the material has, however, been criticised for being outright xenophobic (Logan, 2014). Yet my participant group work with the attitude that if ridicule is doled out fairly and equally, and that the ridiculed are happy to laugh along with the mockery, then the objectionable humour can be given a pass. Everybody, laughing together at themselves and each other, is assumed to create a kind of togetherness. The problems we face as groups are based on taking our problems too seriously.

There is a sense though that this like for ridicule is also part of a cultural defence mechanism. As Chloe states:

"You have to be able to take the pee out of yourself, so it doesn't really matter if anybody else does" (Chloe)

A threatened self can deflect the seriousness or reality of the threat through taking one's self to be laughable. Ellie Tomsett (2018) suggests that this form of feminine humour, which is essentially self-deprecation, has multiple functions - it can be read as appeasement, accommodating the dominant valuation of oneself as less

than; it can, however, also call 'cultural values into question by lampooning them' (Gilbert, 2004: 141 cited in Tomsett, 2018: 9). In the terminology of this chapter, then, this taste for ridicule points solidly to the idea of how value struggles are part and parcel of the experience of comedy for my participants. It suggests at the very least that they know there is a 'person value' (Skeggs, 2011) to be salvaged, and that this needs balancing with the values of non-seriousness and togetherness that, counterintuitively, can be reached through exposing the self to ridicule.

The twin tastes of relevance and ridicule were central to the group's value struggle that night. Being in the front row and in the firing line of the comedians' mockery 'made their night'. Their 'style of comic appreciation' included the notion that 'being picked on...is the funniest bit of all'(Jan). By inhabiting the Essex girl role, the group use this devalued subject position to garner value on their terms, becoming 'the funniest bit' and making their night. The humour and laughter experienced, in pursuit of taking centre stage and ensuring the group come away with valuable memories, seems to allow them to escape from devaluation.

This is, however, also subject to a value struggle. While the Essex girl trope facilitated my participants in taking up a position and generating the experience they precisely wanted, in the focus group they were far from 'owning' this subject position. Thirty minutes into the focus group discussion, I played the clip discussed earlier, where Martin discovers the group are an Essex hen party. Unusually, the group did not wait for me to ask a follow-up question based on the clip - they immediately launched into a discussion, the opening point being 'I don't think we fit into the "Essex girl"' (Chloe). Distancing and 'disidentification' (Skeggs, 1997) – a strategy of creating self-value through denying particularly classed and gendered aspects of identity – came to the fore. They primarily deny that their part of Essex has any true 'Essex girls', then focus on how they do not look like Essex girls (no fake lashes and nails for instance), before establishing some character traits which no member of the group fulfils: 'I'd like to think we've got a little bit of brains between us' (Esther). When asked outright regarding how they would define their social class, all identified emphatically with a middle-class label, in stark contrast to their denial of such an identification in the comedy club.

In the context of this focus group - a relatively formal encounter compared to that of the comedy environment, and taking place in the normal environment of one of the participants' private homes - shame takes over. Through reviewing their behaviour, and while continuing to assert throughout the focus group discussion how much of a great night they had, their own Essex girl behaviour becomes a threat to their person value (Skeggs, 2011). Being 'Essex' in everyday life holds very real potentials for shaming. Vik Loveday (2016) argues that we can think about 'shame as the product of 'affective practice'' (p. 1146) that is to say that it is relational, not residing 'in' these women from Essex, but is processed and formed through relations of inequality (p. 1143). Moreover, Loveday asserts that it is the affective practice of judgement that facilitates the "seepage' of shame' (p.1146) - here then, my participants are exhibiting their awareness of judgemental standards, and the potential for their laughter to be read as shameful. There is an oscillation, a struggle, between self-disciplining through shame and revelling in joy. Loveday uses the example of classed accents to suggest how the shaming potential of affective practices are fundamentally contingent. One of her participants resolutely held on to his Cockney accent, refusing to 'submit to the field' (Skeggs, 2004b: 29) whilst others tried to change their accent because of the potentials of shaming (Loveday, 2016: 1146). I would argue that a similar process is affecting my participants here - their laughter is felt as shaming or joyful based on the contingencies of space, place and social context.

This reveals the depth of the struggle concerning class, femininity and behaviour. For this group, there is a contradiction between being women of worth and respectability, and being women who can playfully, freely and brazenly enjoy comedy. 'Essex girls' in the comedy club find themselves oscillating between these subject positions, and struggle for value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). The struggle for respectability manifests itself in the most mundane of pleasures – laughing at the comedy.

Conclusion

Facing ridicule does not necessarily lead to devaluation, but this does not deny that humour is entangled with what it means to have 'proper personhood' (Skeggs, 2014, see also Wickberg, 1998 cited in Kuipers, 2011: 76). Indeed, what this chapter demonstrates is that ridicule, in certain situations and under certain

conditions, has the facility to open spaces for people to find value in previously devalued statuses: ridicule and humour are negotiated with and through value and value judgements, but the outcomes of this are not straightforward. I want to argue here, therefore, against understanding mockery and ridicule as having a straightforwardly disciplinary function. An overemphasis on the disciplinary function of humour gives a deterministic power to the humour of the powerful, a power that I have demonstrated they do not have in certain contexts. In my examples from the comedy night, my participants found a way to use ridiculing statements to their advantage, through building and collectively harnessing an affective alliance that enabled them to create their memorable night out of comedic actions intended to devalue and control them. By suggesting that ridicule always works in the way the powerful intended, we paradoxically give away power to those who seek to devalue others.

By understanding ridicule and humour as part and parcel of 'struggles for value' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), this chapter shows how deep classed and gendered boundary-making goes, as well as highlighting the potential values which can be used to fight dominant forces. Ridicule is a social practice that can be used by active agents to attempt to devalue others, or crucially to gain value for the self. It is part of the ongoing process of the social construction of groups and values, but this does not doom the ridiculed to devaluation.

It must be stated, however, that ridicule in current social conditions is commonly utilised to reinforce boundaries that suit the already powerful. It is not that this mockery made my participants feel worse, at least not directly. The temporariness of their joy on the night through 'being Essex' appears to define even more clearly for them how they must act in their everyday lives to be 'women of value'. The playful ridicule of the stand-up comedy club is the exception that proves, and may in effect strengthen, the rule.

Finally, I want to contend that the joyous identification the group experienced in the context of the comedy club has the potential to become a valued identification in everyday life. Towards the end of our focus group discussion, a couple of the participants seem to re-engage, tentatively, with 'being Essex':

Jan: I like that we're from Essex.

Chloe: I guess it's a group to be part of.

Perhaps if the comedic space were being defined by comedians who did not instantly view groups of women as a threat, then the value of their Essex identification could have been celebratory rather than defiant. There is still a decided lack of female representation on the comedy scene, and more so a lack of working-class female comedians. With different performers - who might manage a space not based on an assumption of antagonism and control, but on the taste values of togetherness, relevance and ridicule - women might not find themselves having to deny the obvious joy of the laughter and alcohol-fuelled excess of the hen-do. I hold on to the hope that these forms of female experience can become a source of pride and value, rather than shame and disidentification. However, this hope remains slim. In the next chapter, I explore the relations of a comedy club that prides itself on featuring consistently diverse bills, with comedians from a range of backgrounds: a comedy club that stills seems to centre white, male, middle-class laughter.

Chapter 5: 'I give no shits': Laughter, processes of privileging and non-performative policy

This chapter draws on the audience response of three comedy fans to four comedy acts at a night in Shoreditch, East London, and explores how laughter is entangled with the valuations and tastes of the participants in this space. The comedy club examined here is markedly different from that of the previous chapter. I was drawn to explore this night as it has a policy regarding performer/audience interaction, and wears its 'diversity' credentials with pride. The night's organiser ensures a gender balanced line-up, and there are strict ground rules that include a 'no kicking down' policy – no sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic or classist joking is allowed. Within this, no picking on the audience is permitted, and in return the audience must agree to no heckling of the performer. The show is also pay what you like, with a declared emphasis on creating access for disempowered and economically deprived groups.

One person's laughter featured prominently throughout the night. It was a loud, long laughter, sometimes out of sync with, and always determinable amongst, a whole audience reaction. In other comedy clubs, this might be expected to meet with almost obligatory derision. Not so in this club. The laughter here has been given a place all of its own, becoming part of the fabric of the night. The one-man laughter break heralded by the uncontained guffaws of a regular attendee has been given its own name by other patrons – the 'Reec-ess', named for the originator of the laughter, Reece.¹³ Given its exceptional quality, the Reec-ess provides the starting point for my exploration of how taste and value work in this space. I explore its immediate embedded effects, and the meanings attached to this laugh amongst fellow audience members, the performers, and the laughter himself.

That it has been given a name and space 'to be' already draws a stark contrast to the laughter considered in the last chapter – the laughter of the Essex girls, out

¹³ Names have been changed for all participants in this thesis, and so 'Reec-ess' is the term I came up with based on the anonymised identifier for this person, Reece. The real special name given to this laughter break was also a pun based on the laugher's name.

of place and off beat with the usual rhythm of the comedy night functioned to highlight their existence to the performer, and this in effect became the basis for them becoming targets of ridicule in that night. Their conspicuous laughter was perceived as lacking value, and attracted a concerted effort of ridicule and devaluation by the comedians, intertwined with particularly gendered and classed judgements. Reece's laughter does not go unnoted by performers – in special contravention of the night's policy, the laugh does sometimes draw brief comments, but these are infinitely less pointed or scathing than the remarks faced by the women from Essex. Any comment to Reece about his laughter does not draw on his masculinity, his class or his ethnicity, and is celebratory in tone. The policy can be broken to elevate the status of this laugh even fleetingly. Reece is, perhaps all too predictably, a white, middle-class, heterosexual man.

I contend that somehow, in this space, Reece is in receipt of a very real privilege to laugh in such an unabashed manner. What I investigate in this chapter is how the practices of those in this comedy club operate in providing the privilege of laughter most forcefully to this man - a privilege that the women from the last chapter struggled for, and indeed other audience members in this comedy club do not feel entitled to enjoy. His laughter, I argue, is not only an expression of his already accumulated privilege, but adds to its own ongoing privileging, contributing to a process whereby the laugh and its carrier have become an 'institutionalised' part of the comedy night over time. I further assert that quite contrary to the intentions of the promoter, the stated diversity policy of the night lends itself to the reproduction of this affective privileging, which has serious implications for the efficacy of such policies. This laughter is therefore thoroughly entangled in power relations, and can enforce and reinforce prevailing power structures. It is both an embodied privilege and a contributor to privileging.

As in the previous chapter, the data is drawn from a video analysis of one night where, like before, I was keen to find 'key incidents' to use as elicitation devices in subsequent focus group discussions and interviews. In this case, the key incidents included stand out instances of the Reec-ess, and noteworthy reactions to more 'risqué' material on the night that seemed to be hitting the boundaries of the comedy night's policy. The footage of the incidents was used in a small discussion group with three members of the audience who were sat at the front

of the recorded comedy night. The three members of the audience were two men and one woman: the aforementioned Reece, plus Chris and Alexa. Chris is male, Alexa is female, and they are both white, middle-class and heterosexual. Relevant here is the fact that, whilst they all have full-time jobs, they are also involved in comedy or improvisational performance on a semi-professional or amateur basis; indeed, this is how the three know each other. They therefore have access to a very specific comedy cultural capital, which does feed into the discourses later explored in the analysis.

The four performers on this particular night are Rebecca, Leah, Kannan and Thomas. All of the performers are middle-class, Rebecca and Leah are female, Kannan and Thomas are male. Rebecca, Kannan and Thomas identify as heterosexual, and Leah as bisexual. Rebecca and Thomas are white British, Leah is British Jewish, and Kannan is British Asian, tracing his heritage to Sri Lanka. In this chapter, I do not draw directly on the interview data from all the performers, but they are mentioned as featuring in the video fragments reviewed and the reflections offered by the audience members. I do draw on Thomas' interview however, as he is the promoter and organiser of this particular comedy night, and is seemingly careful to institute a broad-based inclusive bill. This diversity is not reflected in the types of people who choose to attend the night as part of the audience, pointing to one issue with the reach of the stated policy of the event.

To explore how this laughter is thoroughly engaged in the social reproduction of privilege, I draw on, and extend, some of the key tenets that underline Bourdieu's theory of practice. I then move on to highlight some of the instances in which Reece's conspicuous laughter 'took over' the room, before moving on to discuss some of the meanings attributed to the laughter by Reece himself and others in the audience. I then broaden out to suggest links between comedy taste values and differentially allocated cultural resources that explain how this laughter has come to be not only allowed and accommodated, but celebrated as part of the night. Finally, I draw the connection between this laugh, these taste values and how they thrive in a place with a stated policy of diversity, suggesting that such a policy does cause some discursive disruption, but will only ever have limited success in the context of the broader cultural economy of the comedy market.

Privilege, Bourdieu and Affect

This chapter seeks to establish how laughter is part and parcel of the reproduction of privilege, and as such is concerned with processes of privileging, and how affect and emotion are central components of that process. There is some debate as to the extent to which 'affect' as a force is subject to social organisation (Hemmings, 2005; Leys, 2011; Altieri, 2012), a discussion explored in the literature review of this thesis. This chapter takes forward the suggestion that affect is absolutely entangled in the ongoing machinations of the social – it does not escape in the way suggested by Massumi (2002) or Thrift (2004) and on occasions where it appears to 'reorganise' and burst through, it is quickly reincorporated and normalised through how that burst is interpreted and then subjected to discursive forces. I first elaborate on how I conceptualise privilege and privileging in this chapter, drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice, before suggesting how affect becomes part of this practice, utilising Wetherell's concept of affective practice (2012) to think through the organisation of apparently abundant affect.

Privilege can be viewed as something one has, either in a material form in tangible resources, or in a cultural form as 'ways of being' that are considered more valuable socially (Ahearn, 2013: 241). Yet those material or cultural artefacts are conferred social value through ongoing processes of privileging – certain resources and ways of being are only viewed as valuable because they are given value repeatedly through social processes. As Ahearn (2013) points out:

By approaching *privileging*...scholars might be more likely...to look for the ways in which privilege is not a given but rather is created, recreated, reconfigured, and sometimes contested through everyday social and linguistic practices...privilege has a certain *performative* aspect to it. (p.242, author's emphasis)

These ideas can be easily related to some of the foundational tenets of Bourdieu's theory of practice - the way in which forms of capital held by social actors, working alongside the 'sediment' of embodied 'preconscious intention'(Bourdieu, 2013:47) in the habitus are transacted in the field of social

relations, producing the everyday social actions and practices of individuals and groups that feed back into the habitus and the ongoing accrual (or loss) of capital. The 'having' of privilege can be conceptualised as the economic, social, cultural and symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1986) that agents may have accumulated, enabling them to take advantage in the social field. Privileging can be conceptualised as those ongoing social practices that enable the holding of, accrual of, or indeed loss of capital. Privileging is the ongoing uncanny ability of privileged actors to use their capital(s) to 'win the game' (Bourdieu, 1990:64), the successful enactment of these capitals in the field of social relations. Winning the game entails being able to understand the rules of the game and have the skills and attributes to successfully take advantage of those rules, being in ownership or mastery of the 'practical sense' with which to make the most of a given field (Bourdieu, 1990: 61). Referring to Ahearn's definition of privileging, this only covers the 'creation' and, partially, 'recreation' of privilege. What of the reconfiguration and the contestation of privileging?

Social actors with plentiful capital can recreate their privilege by perpetually winning and can write and rewrite the very 'rules of the game' in the field to fit their own privileged habitus. This is also achieved without acknowledging that there is any kind of social game being played: the domination of a field created by the privileged for the privileged is misrecognised as being a 'universal property of human experience' (Bourdieu, 1989: 18). These underlying rules constitutive of the field of social relations are not neutral. The very surface itself is biased in favour of the purported 'skills' and 'attributes' of the privileged. Therefore, a key part of the process of privileging is in how these rules of the game are reconstituted, reconfigured, and on what terms this negotiation of the field (not just *on* the field) is carried out.

Bourdieu (1977:164) sheds some light on this practice through the notion of 'doxa':

the *sense of limits*, commonly called the *sense of reality*, i.e. the correspondence between the objective classes and the internalised classes, social structures and mental structures, which is the basis of the most ineradicable adherence to the established order.

Doxa refers to the taken-for-granted, unquestioned 'shared beliefs' that guide practical action in the field allowing social constructions, influenced by relations of power, to feel natural. As such, doxa are essential to the workings of the field as they determine 'the stability of the objective social structures through the way these are reproduced and reproduce themselves in a social agent's perceptions and practices; in other words in the habitus' (Deer, 2008: 121). Doxa, through the 'somatization of the social relations of domination' (Bourdieu, 2001: 23), gives the sense of what one feels limited in being and doing, and becomes embodied through everyday interactions that work to normalise and naturalise those limits.

The underlying and unquestioned assumptions of doxa are what give social differences their appearance, and feeling, of solidity. Thinking through the notion of doxa, therefore, opens the door to considering how the unquestioned becomes unquestionable, how the social field comes to be 'naturalised' and, ultimately, how privilege maintains itself through processes of privileging. The concept, wrapped up as it is in embodiment and practical action, also suggests the possibility of unpicking these processes through the close examination of everyday relations. The practice of laughter, therefore, could be entangled in processes of doxic 'naturalisation': its apparent burst appearing to come from a place of unbidden, unconscious affect, when in actuality it is an expression of a long-constructed set of embodied understandings as to what counts as laughable or unlaughable. In turn, the reliving and reprocessing of this taken-for-granted doxa contributes to the social reproduction of cultural value. By closely reviewing the relations in a live comedy setting, between comedian and audience and intra-audience relations, we can start to interrogate how this social reproduction is achieved through social practice.

Whilst these Bourdieusian concepts help to conceive of the creation, recreation and reconfiguration of privilege, room for the contestation of doxic assumptions seems sparse. Skeggs (1997) alerts us to the danger of extending Bourdieu to a totalising view of contemporary relations, using these concepts to 'code behaviour in a cold and mechanical classificatory manner' (p.10), which only works to reify an arbitrary code of distinctions and valuations. As Kraus (2006:124) usefully reminds us, the 'habitus should not be seen as an isolated 'thing', but in

its social context: one must always look at habitus and institution, habitus and history, habitus and the social order together.' Something of the struggle with and against classificatory practices, the ongoing battles involved in reconfiguring the field of social relations (Tyler, 2015) is lost when simply describing the haves and have nots, the privileged and the underprivileged. The struggle between forms of capital in the habitus and the interactions within the field, which do not or cannot submit to the logic of doxa, leads to some of the affective dimensions of lived experience: the feeling of struggle, lived through the joys and shames of comedy consumption. In common with the themes explored in the last chapter concerning the women from Essex, and how they fought and won for value, I want to leave space in this consideration for the way in which doxa can be challenged not just in the interests of the powerful.

This space is offered theoretically by Wetherell's (2012) concept of 'affective practice'. This draws together the idea that affects, feelings and emotions are intertwined with power relations and struggles in the field. Wetherell contends that in the ebb and flow of everyday life, discursive, cognitive and affective elements move in and out of prominence at different times (p.52), to the extent that 'no easy distinction can be made between visceral and cultural meaning-making' (p.67). Wetherell argues for a conceptualising of affect that considers chains, or 'affective assemblages', that lead to practice or action - assemblages that recruit (parts of) the body and the mind (through a multitude of affective repertoires in an affective habitus) (p.119), interactions with others and with self, that draw on discourse, social relations, ways of life and that are then performed in given situations (p.14). Here, affect becomes part of communication, subject to organisation through the rubric of practice, yet crucially is dynamic, with potentials and possibilities to disrupt and move the body and practice into different directions (p.13). With all this potential for affect as a perpetually flowing and moving force, the focus then becomes how affective practice is 'accomplished and ordered' (p.53).

Bringing this to a Bourdieusian theorisation of how laughter might work as part of a process of privileging in a comedy club, the affective burst of laughter is at once inscribed with value through its interaction with an individual habitus, and through its reliance on certain cultural capital, or taste resources, to recognise a cultural

product as 'laughable': it carries a value in relation to the individual laugher - 'privilege'. Once 'in the field' the laugh is ascribed value through the interpretation of others to that laugh. The meaning ascribed to this affective practice is influenced by doxa, that which is taken for granted, (mis)recognised and attributed value. Yet the affective potential of laughter leaves open the possibility of disruption, laughter escaping the stricture of habitus, challenging that which is taken for granted by those engaged in the affective practice of the comedy club.

The possibility of disruption also relates to the central paradox of the comedy club discussed in this chapter. The promoter sees the establishment of the comedy night as somewhat of a unique achievement. The very clear set of written rules (distributed with every ticket notification and advertisement of the night) declares its support and celebration of diversity and 'progressive' comedy, establishing itself against other London comedy nights which are characterised as brash, offensive and expensive. The night itself, in a sense, is trying to encourage affective practices that challenge the power relations that underlie societal doxa. Yet these unwritten rules, the taken-for-granted notions of everyday action somehow mean that the most prominent people in this 'alternative space' remain white, middle-class men. The doxa subverts the written policies, and this chapter explores how this occurs through the rubric of practice, the struggles of taste enactment in situ, and the power of affect as a naturalising force in the game of social relations.

Laughter as refrain and the limits of 'contagion'

The power of Reece's laughter and affective practice establishes itself at the very beginning of the show. The master of ceremonies (MC) who will guide us through the night, Thomas, strides onto the stage to cheering and applause. Reece whoops with hands clasped around his mouth to make the high-pitched signal louder. The whoop continues a few beats longer than the rest of the audience noise, leading to a brief interaction between Reece and Thomas, the MC playing with the whoop, raising and lowering his hand to increase or decrease the noise. Reece is visibly excited, excitable, and ready to display his enjoyment - he is sat front and centre, and indeed sits in the same spot every time he attends the show.

This whoop is the first instance where some form of auditory dominance is

established, and then the laugh starts to be revealed. A puncturing burst whenever it appears, it stands out from the crowd. It is not unpleasant or necessarily grating (although I have on subsequent club nights heard a few people tut when the laugh gets obvious), but it is undeniably loud and discernibly 'different' in its auditory quality to most audience laughter. Sometimes, it is audible marginally before the rest of the wave of audience laughter, giving Reece's laugh - and by intimate association Reece - the impression of being a leader. Reece's laugh often starts with a high-pitched howl, appearing a beat before the more generalised sound of the rest of the audience. However, most of the time, the laugh hits at the same time as the rest of the audience, but is distinguishable above the rest of the laughter, and lasts longer than the general audience noise. Because of this, flitting as it does to before and after the 'norm' of laughter, it marks nearly every audience laugh for the whole evening. It is a rhythmic element that gives a shape to the proceedings, seeming - at least on face value - to accentuate the jovial atmosphere of the event.

Reece's laughter therefore is active in the production of the space in this comedy club - it is a 'refrain', an affective lynchpin for the night that contributes to the atmosphere of the night. Phil Emmerson (2017: 2086) draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988) and Derek P. McCormack (2013) to conceptualise a 'refrain' as a repetitive element that 'adds structure to an otherwise chaotic world' that has a relationship to the creation of 'atmospheres':

the refrain provid[es] a mechanism for explaining the ways in which certain atmospheres are drawn together, and atmospheres in turn capturing some sense of the territories that refrains produce. We can therefore understand laughter as a refrain that draws out an atmospheric territory with a particular "felt" quality. (Emmerson, 2017: 2087)

In drawing attention to laughter in this way, Emmerson seeks to emphasise the impact that laughter has quite separate from its communicative function as a show of appreciation for humour (p. 2083). Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2004), Emmerson goes on to characterise laughter as 'transpersonal...exceeding representation through generating intra/inter-actions within and between different bodies', which focuses the analyst on laughter's 'relationality with other elements

of the spaces in which it occurs' (Emmerson, 2017: 2085). Whilst it is correct to note that Reece's laugh most often appears in response to the utterances of the comedian before him, the laughter itself enters and transforms the atmosphere of the comedy club and, as an affective practice, is communicating with other audience members, as well as the performer. Crucially, it is related to wider relations of power as it is contributing to, and drawing out, a territory, working to 'align people with others and against other others' (Closs Stephens, 2016 cited in Emmerson, 2017).

Reece's laughter refrain, as well as his whooping, cheering and clapping, contributes to drawing out this territory, and appears to most obviously recruit the affect of people who are similar to Reece – white, middle-class, and male. In the last chapter, I suggested that the women from Essex were building an 'affective alliance' that ensured they aligned themselves in defence against the provocations of the comedian, and that on first appearances this could all too easily be characterised as 'affective contagion' (Brennan, 2004; Thrift, 2008). Similarly, the Reece-ess and its accompaniment to the general laughter of the audience could lead to an assumption of contagion. However, analysis of the video reveals that his laughter is not passed around the room 'smoothly' (Ahmed, 2008), there are certain people in this space who laugh, clap and cheer with more freedom and abandon than others.

This becomes more obvious at points in the night where laughter takes over the room, and Reece's laughter reaches its heights. I focus here on a point in the night that contained the biggest audience laugh, including a 'Reec-ess', where Reece's laugh becomes exceptionally prominent and elongated. Here, Reece laughs marginally before the general laughter, immediately followed by a group of eight people who join Reece first in laughing and clapping hard - seven are white men and one is a white woman. When the rest of the audience joins in this huge reaction, save for this one clapping woman, the laughter action of the men is decidedly more animated than those of the women.

I argue that the refrain of Reece's laughter, alongside the special attention drawn to Reece and his whooping at the very beginning of the comedy night, may work as a form of 'affective priming' (Klauer and Musch, 2008) - a technique to

'influence behaviour, thought and action in ways not consciously registered' (Blackman, 2015). Whilst it is assumed that laughter in its priming effect inspires convergence - for instance, how 'laughter tracks' have been demonstrated to influence audience laughter (Martin and Gray, 1996), Reece's laughter privilege primes certain members of the audience and not others, unevenly impacting the affective atmosphere of the event, leaving others to feel less involved, less part of the social territory. Epstude and Mussweiler (2009) suggest that the concordance and discordance of affect is impacted by social comparison, the way in which people perceive themselves as socially similar or different to others (p.2). Those who perceive themselves as more like Reece are empowered, following his privileged refrain, to live their laughter more fully than those who do not. In empowering some to laugh and not others, these affective practices have the consequence of retrenching power relations, of contributing to a process of privileging.

To underline this point more clearly, compare Reece's laughter action to that of another audience member, Alexa. The figures below are taken from the same point in the night described above. Reece's body is revelling in its own laughter: his mouth is agape, his hands sway and clap, he contorts and rocks back and forth in his chair in the euphoria that laughter can uniquely provide. Alexa's deportment is dramatically different: her mouth barely opens, although it does eventually extend to a broad smile with some seemingly controlled laughter; her head is steady, only tilting from side to side slightly, the rest of her body staying quite still, with hands firmly clamped to her lap. No contortion, no being 'taken over' by her own laughter, there are signals of enjoyment from Alexa, but her body is apparently disallowed from delighting fully in its own raptures. For further context, Reece and Alexa are friends, and are sat a couple of seats apart, with other (male) friends between them who do more forcefully live their affect. Given this, the notion of affective contagion might lead one to expect the force of Reece's laughter would invoke a more animated reaction from Alexa. Again, to allow for the contagion of laughter, one must be open to it or more precisely socially empowered to be open to such contagion.



Fig 1: Reece's laughter



Fig 2: Alexa's laughter

There is one point in the evening where Alexa does laugh more fully, and audibly on her own. This comes during Rebecca's act, and specifically at the end of a story where Rebecca has gone to the doctor to discuss contraception as she has had a successful patch of sexual relations, and also to get herself weighed, finding her BMI is on the edge of being overweight resulting in the diagnosis of 'fat slag-itis'. Here, the laugh pushes through Alexa, jolting her body slightly before her mouth opens to let out her, as it turns out, lonely laugh. Yet she is not taken over fully by her laughter. Her body remains fairly static, her arms firmly crossed. As soon as she has ascertained that she might be laughing on her own, she moves to capture her own laughter by forcing her face downwards, her hair flopping as if to try and stop any more noise leaking. There is a moment where Alexa's body is moved into action by material that, I am assuming, is salient to her experiences as a woman – the body delights, but is quickly held back again. The analysis so far suggests that this might be because it in some way challenges

the affective atmosphere, dominated as it is by the laughter of men. Her sense of the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 2012) of the space, set up as they are by Reece's refrain, lead Alexa to suspend the joy of her laughter.

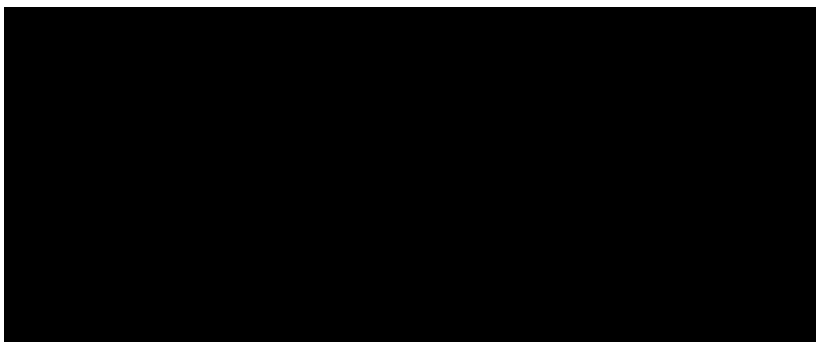


Fig 3. Alexa laughter 2

What it does not, and cannot, reveal however, is how Reece's laughter got to this privileged position in the first place, and how white, male middle-class laughter moreover came to dominate. Alexa's burst clearly shows she has the powerful potential to add to the cacophony, to the refrain, to the atmosphere, and yet somehow feels unable to do so. That the laughter of a white, Oxbridge educated, heterosexual male has come to dominate I do not think is coincidental nor inconsequential; however, to trace this laughter more firmly to these bases of power, I turn next to how Reece's laughter is read by Reece, by Alexa, and by a mutual friend of theirs, Chris.

Gendered Laughter

As part of the focus group discussion with Reece, Alexa and Chris, I used video fragments from the comedy night where they were all in attendance. I play the fragment that contains the laughter action shown in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 in order to elicit discussion on Reece's laughter. As we get to the height of Reece's elation in the video, Chris utters:

"Yay! Reec-ess!"

It is an early sign of the clear and relatively unambiguous value given to this laughter, and a confirmation that for some reason, it has become an integral part of the experience of this comedy night. After I have shown the fragment, and based on the observation from the earlier analysis, I suggest to the group that

Reece might be a 'laugh leader'. Reece was very comfortable with this designation, indicating that he was happy to be a leader, and clearly enjoys the suggestion that his laughter is important. Alexa and Chris slightly disagreed with the idea that Reece was a leader; however, they nevertheless supported the idea that the Reec-ess was a positive influence in the room and that this was related to how it encourages others to laugh.

"[Reece is] influencing other people...helps everybody out...I love the side quest of when will Reece's laugh take over for a few seconds" (Chris)

"I don't know if he leads the laugh, but he definitely continues the comedy"
(Alexa)

This is not necessarily explained by Reece's friends just being supportive. Reece suggests this view has been backed up by many others at the night. Upon viewing his own laughter, he first describes the experience of seeing it as 'incredibly interesting'. This in itself suggests that in the moment of laughter, he is not consciously aware of his laughter action, his body just goes with it. He then states:

"everyone tells me that, you know I'm sitting at the front, I'm laughing really loudly, and it enhances their experience [...] people tell me it enhances their experience"– (Reece)

This reinforces the strongest theme to emerge in discussions of Reece's laughter: that it is something to be admired because it is assumed to encourage others to enjoy themselves through laughter. The assumed goodness of laughter underlies this discourse: because Reece's laughter contributes to the jovial atmosphere causing others to laugh and therefore building 'good' feeling, the laughter is therefore good. This is related to the common-sense idea that humour, and by association the action of laughter, is a positive force. Billig (2005:10) suggests that the positives of humour have been accentuated within 'a society that offers its inhabitants the dream of constant, positively productive pleasures' – as long as the pleasure is felt then the way in which this is achieved becomes less important. This is in contrast to the more nuanced historical understanding of

laughter's Janus-face, in its relation to both joy and aggression, as full of positive and negative potential (Conybeare, 2013: 69-70). The race for laughter and the pleasure of the affective moment might smuggle in some of the negative potentials.

Looking again at the brief quotes offered in support of the positive view of Reece's laughter, there is the slightest hint of a negativity from Alexa. It is curious to note the difference of opinion between Chris and Alexa, especially in the light of the in situ affective behaviour discussed in the earlier section. Chris is clearer in supporting the view of the positive influence of Reece's laughter, and refers to 'people' and 'everybody' to explain the impact of the laugh as subjectively felt. Chris was indeed one of the seven men from the above analysis who were quickly influenced into laughing by Reece. Alexa, it would seem, does not feel the nudge in the same way – she does not get washed away in the same way as Chris by this refrain. She discursively relates Reece's laughter to 'comedy' and distances it from the bodily impact of her 'laugh'. Alexa does not, or cannot, join in with the power of the refrain, and therefore sees Reece's laughter as an object, rather than something she subjectively appreciates. Whilst the discourse of 'positive laughter' is prominent, there is an implicit understanding shown here that this is uneven in its effects, and yet still is given value regardless. This tallies with the observation that Alexa is often unmoved and unyielding to the affective atmosphere of the room, and supports the notion that this atmosphere, the unsaid affective rules of the space, are not fitting her habitus.

The confirmation of Alexa's affective discordance comes soon after, when the group discuss further how Reece's laughter is so 'helpful'. In this light, they start to consider the connection between laughter and embarrassment – this discussion instigated by Alexa:

“People get embarrassed by laughing...and I think if you've got somebody who literally gives no shits...then people feel more comfortable enjoying the comedy”

For Alexa, the act of laughter has associations with shame (Loveday, 2016). Embarrassment is something that Alexa is acutely aware of in relation to her own

laughter, but even here she is deferent to the Reec-ess. Her utterance here is more positive than above, but she still does not relate the power of Reece's laugh to her own enjoyment – 'people feel', whilst 'I think'. It is as if Alexa is expecting Reece's laughter to have an effect on her but, as we have seen, it does not. Alexa is seemingly having to tread a fine line here, in support of laughter as a good thing, but also as something that holds potential negatives. In furthering this discussion, I suggest to Alexa that the video shows she does not give away laughter easily. She offers an explanation as to why:

"I do a lot of more smiling than outward laughing, I think potentially that when I do outward laugh it comes out like HAAA...I'll try and avoid that one!"

Alexa's suggestion is that she is consciously stifling herself and avoiding a particular reaction: she is carrying out 'affective discipline' of herself in relation to her laughter. Goffman (1961: 22) defined 'affective discipline' as the way in which individuals understand 'the very general rule that one enter[s] into the prevailing mood in the encounter' and that this 'carries the understanding that contradictory feelings will be held in abeyance' – it is the suppression of 'unsuitable affect' (ibid). What Alexa highlights is that certain people will find themselves constrained, and indeed exercise constraint upon themselves. Whilst she holds on to the contention that laughter is good, and that Reece's laughter is good because it makes other people laugh, she must forego this 'good', as to live her laughter might bring embarrassment. In short, Alexa is involved in a value struggle (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), making the social calculation that whilst laughter is good, the risk of embarrassment is too high.

As stated earlier, Reece does not employ conscious thought in the regulation of his laughter, and certainly does not feel that this comedy club has any influence on his affective control. Echoing Alexa's point, he gleefully points out in the focus group discussion that 'he gives no fucks':

"I just get to enjoy myself the way I sort of naturally would...recognition of it is a pleasant feeling for me"

This is a classic example of the perfect fit between a bodily habitus, capitals and field, fitting in to the rules of the game and enjoying doxic experience – Reece here is ‘as a fish in water’, [he] does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself for granted’ (Bourdieu, 1989:43). The comfort and unconfined joy of Reece again reveals the biases in the arbitrary structure of the objective social space: there is not a hint of struggle in his relation to this field. Not only this, but the laughter is recognised, and given value, by others which appears to embolden the pleasant feelings of this experience.

Again, this is clearly not something Alexa feels she can enjoy. She does not revel in her own positive affect, and feels there is a chance of negative valuations based on the noise she makes. Whilst Reece’s affective power is maintained and bolstered, Alexa’s is diminished. It indicates, at the very least, that the doxa governing the affective relations of a comedy club is fundamentally gendered. Reece does not only have an inbuilt habitual feel for the game that enables him to laugh, his laughter also relationally enters the atmosphere of the comedy club and is given more value via the interactions of those around him. The privilege, through its reading by others, is given more privilege – a process of privileging. This can be fruitfully compared to the findings from the previous chapter, where the laughter of my Essex participants was read as out of place, and entered into processes of humorous censure, disciplining and ridicule. Attempts were made to diminish their laughter, albeit through humorous control strategies. However, my Essex participants did revel in their laughter eventually, the hen party temporarily producing an anti-doxic bubble, reading each other’s transgressive laughter and giving it value - *privileging* it - within their friendship group. The point stands though that female laughter struggles for value in ways that male laughter does not have to.

My contention here is that different laughter rules - embedded in doxa and influencing how people here are consciously controlling (or not) their affect - contribute to male laughter being able to accrue value and privilege more readily than female laughter. Yet the context here is a comedy club, the precise place in which laughter might be expected to be allowed. It would be reasonably assumed that this is at least one place where embarrassment associated with laughter should be disregarded to ensure people enter into the ‘general rule’ that plenty of

laughter is required in a comedy club. How is it that such divergent understandings of the appropriateness of laughter, based here most obviously on gender, survive in a place that is set up precisely for the purpose of laughter?

Informalization

[...] to laugh, to speak jocosely, does not seem an acknowledged sin, but it leads to acknowledged sin. Thus laughter often gives birth to foul discourse, and foul discourse to actions still more foul... If, then, thou wouldst take good counsel for thyself, avoid not merely foul words, and foul deeds, or blows, and wounds, and murders, but unreasonable laughter, itself.

Saint John Chrysostom cited in Morreall
(1983:86)

The positive associations that abound in contemporary society regarding the goodness of laughter (Billig, 2005) would make many assume that it has always been thus. Yet the above quotation indicates that historically, laughter has operated in negotiation with a very different doxa – it has not always been the ‘best medicine’. The contention I want to make here is that there exists in the corpus of cultural history diametrically opposed conceptualisations of laughter - different discourses of laughter that associate themselves to different subjects - in turn influencing the way in which people live their laughter. To address the problematic of different feeling rules being followed by different people in a space where the overriding rule seems to be to live the pleasure of laughter, I consider how it is that any such space might have emerged given the historical abhorrence of laughter, and how laughter has in any way become related to positive social relations. Considering how the value of laughter has been given license to rise may shed light on how differential values attached to different peoples’ laughter and how these may have been negotiated along the way.

In light of the above quotation taken from a fourth century Archbishop, the Reecess with its loud resonations and limitless quality would at one time have been viewed as wholly suspicious. It has taken centuries for laughter to shake off some

of these negative connotations. Indeed, laughter has long been associated with the indecorous and unmannered. Norbert Elias, in the recently translated and published 'Essay on Laughter', notes how laughter was 'pruned [...] to a moderate size [...] the more ebullient, boisterous forms of laughter tend to disappear' (Elias and Parvulescu, 2017: 284). This is related to Elias's broader project on the process of civilization, the key ingredients of which focus on the relationship between 'sociogenesis' and 'psychogenesis' (Elias, 1994) - how socially produced structures and the production of 'the self' are intimately entwined and how this intra-related process is one of 'continual transition'(Dunning and Hughes, 2013 :151). Laughter's pruning, then, was related to the processual becoming of *homo clausus*, the closed off individual, which itself became in relation to the changing forms of the nation-state in the West (Elias, 1994): as the state monopolised control over legitimate violence, social subjects turned to other means to project their power - manners and etiquette. The closed off individual was one who could hold their ugly emotions in abeyance.

Anca Parvulescu (2010), similarly to Elias, draws a line between etiquette manuals and laughter's marginal place in the discourse of manners. Pertinently for the consideration of a middle-class man's laughter, she draws on one example from Lord Chesterfield's 'Letters to his son' (1774 cited in Parvulescu 2010: 37) that states 'frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill-manners: it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things'. Morreall (1983) suggests the condemnations of laughter become more apparent in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, for instance citing Baudelaire who relates laughter to the 'dark side of human nature' (p. 87).

The invocation of the mob from the Chesterfield quote links the self-control of laughter to, as Parvulescu points out, questions of class (2010:38) – to laugh excessively as a middle-class man, is to indulge in the manners of the lower strata. If laughter does find its way out of the body, it is likely to face censure because of its relation to the base elements of society, and to sin. Bringing this into relation with the consumption of comedy, Friedman (2014: 25) points out that comedy was until the 1980s considered 'lowbrow art par excellence'. If this was the prevailing situation, we could expect the 'Reec-ess' to be viewed as an

aberration to be controlled. Additionally, that a middle-class man is enjoying the comedy stylings of a stand-up comedian, of all things, would have at least carried the risk of social contempt. Reece's unabashed laughter display suggests the process of civilizing laughter has changed shape to incorporate laughter 'freedom', at least for some people. The hangover of homo clausus appears to still impact Alexa's laughter behaviour.

Part of this transformation may be accounted for in changes to the production of comedy. Friedman (ibid) states how stand-up was subject to 'significant upward mobility...incorporating a complex internal hierarchy of legitimacy and an array of both 'lowbrow' and 'highbrow' producers'. The rise of the alternative comedy scene in the 1980s and the subsequent mainstreaming of stand-up comedy has meant that renegotiation over the value of comedy has taken place (Friedman, 2011: 348). The certainties of the (lack of) value attached to pre-1980s stand-up fragmented after the incursion of the 'alternative' ethos – the field of comedy became, and continues to be, a field of struggles. In consciously borrowing from high art, stand-up during and after the 1980s could start to claim that it was part of the 'civilizing' march of progress.

This change in the social acceptability of laughter is related to the overall renegotiation of manners as detailed by Cas Wouters (2007). In developing the work of Elias, he demonstrates that the 20th century was a period where the process of civilization took a turn towards 'informalization', neatly summed up as 'the controlled decontrolling of emotional controls' (p. 93). Whereas Elias suggests the process of civilisation had curtailed laughter, perceived as a dangerous emotion in need of control, we can therefore suggest through Wouters that ebullient laughter was given license to be heard again, at least in Western Europe from the 1890s onwards. He suggests that this occurs through the 'course of the integration of "lower" social groups within Western societies and the subsequent emancipation and integration of "lower" impulses and emotions in personality' (p. 215) – the lower strata and its manners trickle up (Dempsey, 2009:318). Elias and Eric Dunning suggest that this controlled decontrolling often takes place in the context of the 'leisure industries' (Elias and Dunning, 1986: 96); I would suggest therefore that laughter found its controlled decontrolling through the consumption of stand-up comedy.

The negotiation of privilege

There are a couple of occasions where the traces of this renegotiation can be seen in the comedy club. Reece's out of place laughter *does* draw comment. In response to a joke regarding the societal reactions towards terrorism deaths versus bee sting deaths, the performer responds to the Reec-ess with a throwaway line: "big fan of the terrorism". The next occasion comes from a female performer, who simply says to Reece: "you're my favourite". This might suggest that the vestiges of a middle-class code regarding laughter are still at least partially present in contemporary social relations. It shows an awareness at least on the part of the performers that this excess of laughter is 'out of the ordinary'. Yet the contrast with the rebuke given to the women from Essex detailed in the last chapter, who were literally told to 'shut the fuck up', could not be starker. The comments to Reece are more akin to an accommodation than a censure, a celebration more than an attempt at control. The middle-class codes related to laughter have changed. At least, for middle-class men.

Indeed, the person who seems to be more influenced in their action by the negative connotations of laughter is Alexa. She 'prunes' her laughter in order not to be seen as overstepping the mark affectively, under the assumption that enthusiastic laughter would draw negative attention. I argue that the laughter of these different subjects carries different values in relation to one another, and that in the renegotiation of laughter rules, those with accumulated privileges – white middle-class men – somehow become situated as most valuable. The doxa surrounding laughter has shifted to the extent that effusive middle-class male laughter does not hold association with the lower strata – indeed, it is something to be accommodated and celebrated. Female laughter has not changed in quite as radical a way for women – the laughter of the women detailed in the last chapter was certainly assumed to be related to potentially disruptive forces. Alexa self-disciplines on the assumption that her laughter would be seen as unseemly; feminine laughter is still low, masculine laughter is newly minted as being of value. Not only has it become acceptable for the middle classes to publicly indulge in mirth (and, indeed, in mirth-making activities as stand-up comedians), but their laughter has become a sought-after commodity in comedy clubs - a notion I explore in more detail in the next chapter, analysing the processes of how

audiences are read and valued by comedians.

What appears to emerge, therefore, is a 'naturalised' understanding and assumption about the roles of different genders in laughter. Frances Gray (1994:21-22) spots how through the history of comedy in the 20th century, women are often assumed to be the 'handmaidens of laughter', visible in how women are utilised in shows such as *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *The Benny Hill Show*. The doxa provides the assumption that women are there to help laughter. The problem is not of feminine emotion per se, but of excessive enjoyment. In everyday life, feminine laughter oils the machine of sociality, particularly in mixed gender groups (Dovidio et al, 1988; Provine, 1993, 2001; Mehu and Dunbar, 2008). The status and value associated with feminine laughter is where Alexa finds her person-value: laughing to be helpful, laughing to be caring. Alexa does laugh in the comedy club, but not to excess; excess would not be helpful, excess would not be caring.

I argue that over time, doxa has been renegotiated to meet the needs, and further re-entrench the power, of the powerful. The trace of this can be seen in the actions of those in this comedy club. The taken-for-granted assumptions are allowing Reece to live more fully his affective life. The taken-for-granted assumptions have not bent in the same way for Alexa – the doxa that guides her actions still leads her to hold her own laughter in abeyance. I suggest that based on this evidence, the loosening up of controls on public laughter can be 'taken advantage of' by those who already have considerably more sociocultural power. In the literature review, I suggested that the live comedy club might function as a liminoid space (Turner, 1969) where continual testing of social subjects takes place. I would extend this understanding here to suggest that the liminoid space of the comedy club is where processes of decontrolling are being managed - where the renegotiation of how the affective/emotive burst of laughter is to be legitimately lived, read and understood as part of ongoing value relations. A disrupted field can still, in practice, be turned to the value advantage of those who entered that social space with the privilege of being male, white, straight and so on. The doxa will yield most often only to those with the resources to make it yield.

As Alexa states: "I support with my face and smile rather than a noise". She is

following the rules of emotional discourse – women have a useful role in emotiveness, but they should do just enough to be helpful. In the allegedly ‘topsy-turvy’, affectively disrupted field of comedy consumption, habitus does not get left at the threshold. Alexa’s following of this toxic demand relates to female respectability and propriety. For a woman of propriety in this space, to laugh excessively may be seen by the valued self as a threat to person-value. I would again relate this directly to the threat to person-value that the idea of excess can have for women (Skeggs, 1997). As Bourdieu (1977: 95) asserts, ‘concessions of politeness always contain political concessions’. Whilst the comedy club represents a space where the doxa may be renegotiated, Alexa is not empowered by her social position to force a change in the feeling rules here.

The point of all this is to suggest that when social actors enter the space of the comedy club, they do so with differing predispositions. Particularly here, I have focused on the gendered aspects of the habitus, and how laughter is directly implicated in a long history of joy and shame, which is felt and acknowledged differently by the subjects’ different habitus. The process of privileging - encapsulated by Reece’s forceful laugh, Alexa’s affective disciplining, and the consecration and accommodation of Reece’s laugh by audience members and performers in the ongoing action of the club - relives some of this history. It is in this context where embodied privilege can be seen to turn into the accrual of more value, and further privilege: the liminoid space of the comedy club provides the context in which laughter is renegotiated and restamped with a given value. The next step, therefore, is to explore the ‘invisible knapsack of privilege’ (McIntosh, 1986) that empowers some to take advantage in this field, to the extent that they can change the doxa underlying the field.

‘Clever’ comedy and class

I suggest above that there has been a powerful renegotiation of regimes and rules around laughter, and I have related this so far most forcefully with an analysis of gendered ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 2012). In this section, I turn to the taste discourses of the audience participants drawn upon within the focus group to underline how this process of privileging is not only gendered, but also classed and racialised. This small group of middle-class comedy consumers, who also happen to be involved in comedy improvisation or stand-up on a semi-

professional or amateur basis themselves, have strong ideas on what makes good comedy. It is my contention that these taste values represent at least part of the 'invisible knapsack of privilege' (McIntosh, 1988: np), which contributes to the reproduction of comedy spaces as most befitting white, middle-class men. These embodied resources and their articulation as discourses enable these social subjects to take advantage of liminoid spaces and 'fissures' in the comedy field, employing their cultural capital to take advantage and accrue value. The discussions between these comedy fans in relation to what and why they find certain comedians funny (or otherwise) points towards the way in which this night, regardless of its diverse credentials, still seems to insulate and reward certain forms of comedy. In particular, the way in which this group conceived of what counted as 'clever' comedy seemed to encapsulate what was (un)laughable, and it is this discursive arrangement that is informed by classed racialised and gendered assumptions.

As I stated in my methodology, I started each focus group with the question 'how is comedy important in your lives?'. In this focus group, the question provoked around forty minutes of discussion on why certain comedians might be regarded as funny, and others not –that is, comedy taste. This strikes one immediately obvious contrast between this focus group and that of my Essex participants from the last chapter: these middle-class consumers were much more keen to talk about the comedians they loved and hated. This classed phenomenon has been noted in previous work by Friedman (2011, 2014), and my middle-class participants gave a sense of surety in the cultural objects with which they invest some modicum of passionate connection, whereas with my Essex group the initial discussion on what comedians they liked lasted all of five minutes. A primary observation about how privilege in comedy taste might be established, therefore, is in how comedy as a form of objective cultural capital has grown in legitimacy as something to which the middle class can make apparently valuable claims, as argued by Friedman (2014). It is of course possible that my presence as a white, male academic in these focus groups may have 'put off' my Essex participants from revealing more of their tastes, fearing embarrassment maybe, and that this middle class group read my 'status' and worked to ingratiate themselves in some way - nevertheless, this would still underline the point that comedy taste represents a field of struggles for value, and engagement in that field can bring

out a number of different strategies from differently situated social actors.

Holding to the overall contention that taste is best understood as ‘embodied cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986:47; see also Friedman, 2014), in the context of the focus group my London participants performed their taste through the use of notions of ‘cleverness’. Again, it serves as an interesting point of comparison to the Essex focus group’s focus on ‘relatability’. It is a discursive oppositional act that more often than not leads to the valorisation of the middle-class position, casting the middle-classes as thinkers and the working classes as being only interested in their concrete surroundings. It is a discursive construction that deserves challenging here, and can be revealed as a problematic performance.

Mrs. Brown’s Boys asserts itself as the first cultural artefact discussed in the focus group, with it being characterised as ‘cliched’, ‘simplistic’, ‘old-fashioned’, ‘mindless’ and ‘backwards’. I mention that it has millions of viewers, which leads to a discussion about who the group thinks is watching the show: ‘people not in our bubble’, ‘older people’, ‘kids’, and ‘the lowest common denominator’. Through their criticism of the show, they are making a claim to value through negatively positioning imagined others. They are claiming they are of an age that is more discerning, and that they can appreciate higher comedic forms. The use of ‘lowest common denominator’ is class-coded (Charlesworth, 2000: 274), and hints at a classed understanding of how some people can and cannot appreciate clever comedy. In discussing the observational, and often-maligned, comedian Michael McIntyre, Alexa states, alongside enthusiastic nodding from Reece and Chris:

“The whole skit with the man-drawer...everyone’s going ‘I do do that!’, that’s why it’s funny, not because what he’s actually saying is funny because he’s just saying words and bouncing along, and everyone goes ‘that’s like me!’”

There is an understanding here, at least, that McIntyre may be funny, but the people who are finding him funny are drawn as not understanding the ‘truth’ - that he is not funny. What they are discursively distancing themselves from is the taste for things that are ‘relatable’. Directly drawn against it is this group’s ability to deal with clever comedy: clever becomes a distinctive quality of people in their

'bubble'.

Having constructed their collective understanding of what does not count as clever comedy, the group move on to consider the features of what they do appreciate. Here, there is ample reference to the 'intelligence' of their preferred comedians, for instance Dara Ó Briain being praised for his physics background and Eddie Izzard for his use of 'all of history, all of time...he stretched everything you learnt in school' (Chris). Comedians who 'layer' ideas (Chris) , 'stack concepts' (Reece) and jump 'back and forth' (Alexa) between reference points were regarded as good, 'clever' and creative comedians. This leads to another attempt at value accrual for this group: that they are able to 'get' and appreciate this intelligence and comedic complexity is used to mark them out as 'better' consumers.

"I prefer the clever, twisty turny kind of....bringing in something you've said which only some people will remember...Oh I like Community, with all of the pop culture referencing and because I'm a film nerd...I like that other's won't get it...with mindless comedy, you don't have to get the references, there are no references." (Alexa)

After watching a video fragment from the night where he laughs louder than the rest of the audience at a joke from Thomas, Reece suggests:

"I feel like I'm the only person appreciating that joke...it is such a clever joke...I get almost every reference he makes".

As Friedman and Kuipers (2013:183) found, this relates to how 'getting it' can be characterised as 'sitting an exam', where some people will inevitably not pass. It is part of the strategies used by the middle classes for 'high cultural capital boundary-drawing'. References are central to this: having the requisite cultural knowledge to fully understand the content of a joke or humorous passage is what sets one apart. Comedy that appeals to the lowest common denominator is 'mindless', and mindless comedy is that which lacks references. In that last quotation from Reece, we also see that his laugh is considered by Reece as a clear signifier of his ability to 'get' clever, high value comedy. It should also be

stated that the centrality of ‘reference points’ as part of clever comedy highlights that, actually, at the centre of this cleverness discourse is the need for material to be *relatable*. What is being elided is that cultural references that appeal to these middle-class consumers are automatically clever. Indeed, in the case of McIntyre’s man drawer material, the concept of the man drawer is in itself a *cultural reference point*. It does not get marked with the moniker of ‘clever’ because its relatability goes beyond the purview of only middle-class cultural capital.

Gendered and Racialised Assumptions

There are also points where the legitimacy of cultural references as ‘clever’ appear to be racialised and gendered, and their definition of clever comedy is positioned alongside whiteness. Whilst discussing Kannan’s comedy performance, Chris muses:

“It’s got some race stuff and some terror stuff, and then suddenly he’s gone into like whimsical affectionate land and weaving ideas back in and I really light up.”

The construction here is revealing – ‘race stuff’ in and of itself cannot be funny. The comedian becomes funny, causing Chris to ‘light up’ emotionally, when he moves far enough away from those traces of his identity being used in the material. Here, Kannan’s ethnicity is discursively opposed to the apparently clever comedy of whimsical weaving; indeed, ‘race stuff’ does not quite register as part of ‘ideas’ here.

This is a notion echoed by Alexa:

“It’s not just women, it’s sort of minorities as well...the only thing you can talk about is the fact that you are that...Which can I suppose be funny if you have a new take on it but why not, you can talk about anything!”

Again, women and minorities drawing on their own cultural reference points as women and as people of colour gets positioned as usually lacking creativity (‘a new take’), and ‘talking about anything’ is being pushed towards anything that is

white and male. Material that is relatable to the privileged and powerful subject positions is 'clever'. It is part of the doxa, and is being re-established in this comedy space through the elevated valuation of such material.

Further to the point regarding the gendering of cleverness, when discussing the late 90's UK sitcom *Coupling*, Reece suggests:

"Coupling was incredibly sexist, but what it did do was explore the medium of sitcom like I've never seen other TV shows do...it had interesting conceits, one time it did the same scene twice but with different perspectives being emphasised...so creative."

In effect, not only is there the reconsecration of 'cleverness' as entwined with cultural reference points that are white, middle class, and male; that very construction of cleverness is then invoked to give a pass to sexist material. These constructions therefore are not just leaving the doxa to be untouched and exert its taken-for-grantedness in the discourse and actions of social subjects - it is also actively defended.

Earlier in this chapter, I remarked that Reece's friends and fellow comedy patrons at this night view his loud laughter as 'helpful' and related to perceptions of how laughter is potentially contagious and feeds a joyful atmosphere. I would also assert, however, that this laughter thunderously punctuates this particular - middle-class - audience's taste values. Reece's laughter is given such a prominent and valued part of the comedy night as it affectively affirms the rest of the audience's valuable comedy taste - his laughter is thoroughly entangled in the expression of taste values. This is part and parcel of the affective politics of the comedy space. The laughter reassures people that they are 'getting it right' in terms of what comedy products they are consuming. He is a white, middle-class man after all, and these social characteristics are discursively connected to the cultural references positioned as valuable. By the same token, perceiving Reece's laughter and not feeling like it matches your tastes may create this space as alien and alienating. His laughter is contributing to this space as upholding tastes that are thoroughly classed, gendered and racialised.

Asserting this finding given the comedy context I am talking about is slightly baffling. There is one further factor in this space that is intended to undermine the privileges and their negotiation that I have described thus far. At the very beginning of this chapter, I outlined the 'no kicking down' policy that forms the guiding ethos of this comedy night. The policy comes out of an awareness on the part of the night's promoter and MC, Thomas, that there is a diversity problem in comedy, and that it has become a domain of, and for, the privileged. His night is therefore a conscious attempt to redress the balance. In the terms of the argument here, his policy represents a clear attempt to challenge the doxa, the unwritten assumptions of the comedy space, and to re-establish an alternative field for the performance and enjoyment of comedy. However, it is clearly a problem that such a space is still apparently re-entrenching divergent privilege along familiar lines: in the affective action of Reece and Alexa, and throughout the negotiation of the laughable informed by problematic assumptions.

Policy and Doxa

To understand why the 'policy' may be insulating - rather than challenging - the established doxa of the comedy field, some pointers from cultural policy studies are useful. Whilst these are usually focused at governmental intervention level, the shadow of their aims, institution and, ultimately, failure, can be instructive in this smaller setting. Oakley and O'Brien (2016: 476) seize on the Higher Education (HE) sector as an example of 'one of the primary domains' that links cultural production and consumption and the accrual of value. With reference to policy, they state that policy-makers in the UK context 'took seriously the utopianism of much cultural and creative industries discourse' (p. 482), a discourse that emphasises access to creative HE courses as 'an equalizing measure..[with] the potential to confer value through the accrual of different forms of capital' (p. 476). These policy desires are not fulfilled because, Oakley and O'Brien argue, they ignore 'the social basis of culture... the who, what and how' (p. 482) of the consumption and production of cultural products.

Thomas - the promoter and one of the performers at the night in question - manages at every single happening of his comedy night to have a gender balanced bill. He also regularly features an array of acts from different ethnic backgrounds, sexualities and social classes - he appears to be mostly successful

in trying to address the 'who' of cultural production. He is also committed to trying to tackle 'what' cultural form the comedy takes in his space through the enforcement of the night's stated non-discriminatory ethos. By his own admission, some material that he would rather not present slips through the net, and his only sanction at this point is to 'not book [an offending comedian] again'. There is also an attempt to intervene in the 'how' of consumption. The night is pay-what-you-like, and is aimed at ensuring access to working-class people - 'you can come along with no money in your hand and have a great night'. His aim with all of this is explicitly political:

"It's about slipping those ideas in, expanding the Overton window...I think comedy is a good way of bridging that gap, people will not go and see political speakers that they don't already agree with but people will go out and see 'the comedy', so yeah, it's a way of getting new ideas in front of people."

There are a few striking points of comparison with the faith in, and failure of, the HE policy mentioned above. Thomas is hoping that open access, his booking policy and the 'no-kicking-down' policy will mean a new set of ideas will be disseminated: in the terms of this chapter, that the taken-for-granted assumptions that form the doxa will be challenged. But as I have already argued, the taken-for-granted appears to be running quite unchallenged.

One reason for this is the way in which Thomas ensures that his comedy night is always sold out. There are a lot of regulars to the night, and this group has effectively been cultivated over a long period of time. There is a Facebook group that regulars are invited to join, and an e-mailing list that punters can join when they go to a show, where the free tickets to upcoming gigs are advertised. However, there is another group that gets access to tickets before anybody else - these are a kind of 'super regular' attendee who, after going to ten or more of the nights, Thomas invites to a WhatsApp group. Therefore, while on the surface the night is free and accessible, what becomes quite useful in getting tickets is social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). What has been set up is something akin to an admissions process that has narrowed the possible consumers in this club down to a certain kind of candidate (Oakley and O'Brien, 2016: 477) - those with the

time and commitment, and those who get to know Thomas well-enough to get on the 'super' list. My focus group, of course, are all part of this inner sanctum. What Thomas has actually achieved is the perfect audience for his own comedy:

"I write with the idea that most people in my audience are going to share roughly my values and prejudices, similar storehouse of references [...] basically that's an audience that shares my point of view and demography. If I'm doing a night that's not similar to my night, then I'll tailor it. If I'm doing like a mainstream gig full of 'normies', I would do as much of my tried and tested stuff as possible, and things that are relatively lowest common denominator [...] what I really need for those sorts of gigs is about ten or twenty minutes worth of one liners, because they're a simple joke with a pretty obvious indication of where to laugh."

Despite all of the work that the policies are set in motion to perform, class-coded assumptions that draw on the discursive opposition between 'clever' and 'simple' are stubbornly apparent. The reappearance of 'lowest common denominator' is depressingly telling: his night is for those who are a cut above, who share similar viewpoints and demography to a white middle-class male Oxbridge graduate. People like Reece.

Another way in which these processes of privileging remain in motion is because Thomas himself sometimes contravenes his own policy. On the night I video observed, there is one part of his comedy set where Thomas compares the extremes of 'posh talk' to the melodic qualities of Mandarin Chinese - material that works on the assumptions that the 'posh' and Mandarin Chinese are laughable - this, I argue, is simultaneously punching up and kicking down. He mimics an exaggerated strain of noises, contorting his face, drawing on well-established stereotypes of Chinese speech patterns reminiscent of 'chinaman' jokes prevalent in US and UK comedy culture (Perez, 2013; Lindner, 2016). The audience apparently enjoys this joke, which meets with laughter, and so it passes. This suggests that racism, at least in certain forms, is still part of the everyday unquestioned assumptions of everyday sociality.

Following Ahmed (2012), I would argue that the stated "no-kicking-down" policy

partially facilitates this ongoing devaluation of particular subject positions, as she argues:

A policy[...]can thus be treated as a stranger, as if it comes from outside the institution...A policy decision made by the right people in the right place using the right words can still not be recognized by those within an institution as a commitment. In such cases, commitments must be understood as non-performatives: as not bringing into effect what they name. The very appearance of bringing something into effect can be a way of conserving the past (p.126)

This is what has occurred at this night. Assuming this comedy night can be regarded as 'an institution' of sorts, Thomas, the performers, and the audience understand the no kicking down policy as a firm commitment - Reece refers to it as 'a deal, a contract'. I do not question the good intentions of Thomas, and it is certainly laudable that he always manages to provide mixed bills at his comedy night. But it has become non-performative particularly in terms of its impact on class and race as I have outlined here. It has put beyond question that the night is a 'good thing' in terms of diversity and the relations it purports to foster between people of different backgrounds. The policy to make the night pay-what-you-like is aimed at bringing into effect a mixed-class audience - but this does not happen because the night is produced for people with taste values that are very close to middle-class conceptions of what makes 'good' comedy. Again, the policy is non-performative in that it seems like the solution to the problem, but actually the problem is left untouched i.e. the privileging processes of cultural and social capital accrual and enactment.

This is even more straight forward with the example of racism - the policy says there will be no racism, then racism occurs, but it passes as the policy says there will be no racism. Particularly because the person who wrote and enforces the policy made the utterance. Paradoxically, the written rules of the comedy club produce a taken-for-granted notion that what happens in this comedy club is unquestionably a 'good' thing, which also leaves unquestioned the processes that reproduce privilege. The policy is part of the problem. Furthermore, it creates an atmosphere where those with already embodied privilege can find space to

renegotiate more privilege for themselves, and do it with little questioning at all that it is a 'good' thing. It is little wonder then that the Reec-ess, the celebrated laughter of the privileged, has found a home, and a home where it can contribute to the ongoing processes of privileging that underline the 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004: 1) of the comedy club being white, male and middle-class.

Conclusion

It is the very interaction between laughter, humour, taste and place that is allowing the reproduction of privilege in this case. Reece's laugh, or laughter like Reece's, is a way for white, middle class, males to assert their taste values, create a territory for themselves and reproduce their privilege. Reece's laughter, his affective practice, is contributing to the social reproduction of differential cultural value, as he is read as someone who has taste, and thus his laughter is associated with valuable forms of comedy. In turn, the things he finds funny are wrapped up in differential cultural valuation processes through discourse - anything outside the cultural reference grasp of his habitus is positioned as being not clever, and therefore, not funny. Additionally, processes of informalization that have relaxed middle-class feeling rules have been negotiated in such a way that middle-class male laughter finds it is now able to 'give no shits' in the comedy club. Further still, the attempts to introduce a policy to tackle this kind of privileging in the context of comedy production appears to entrench privileging all the more, and provide cover for the continued dominance of white, middle-class male interests.

A final observation - I have frequented this comedy night on a few more occasions since I recorded the night. The last time I attended, Reece was absent. To my knowledge, this was the first one he had missed in two years. And yet, sat at the front centre of this night, another white, middle-class male with a huge incongruous laugh had taken his place. I had to double check that it was indeed a different person. This is more than likely be pure coincidence, but seemed so utterly uncanny as to indicate how the field of social relations, with its foundation in a forever renewing doxa, has the power to reproduce itself through the movement of just the right social actors in the field to take up the mantle of the task of reproduction. In the next chapter, I explore further how the privileging of these social actors finds itself into the creative process of comedians, through the

assumptions made by comedians about the meaning of audience laughter, and how this skews the field of comedy products.

Chapter 6: 'You can do comedy!': Comic creativity, the comedy world and differential valuations of audience laughter

In the last two chapters, I have focused largely on the consumptive process in live stand-up comedy. I have argued that in these small-scale settings, it is possible to see the workings and struggles of relations in the field of comedy taste, and how certain groups' tastes constantly emerge as being of value, or of no value. This is established through certain 'affective practices' (Wetherell, 2012) - and meanings attached to those practices - that shield and protect those with more power, allowing them to reproduce their privilege. In both cases, part of the issue concerns how comedians read the audience: there is a stark contrast between how the laughing group of women from Essex in chapter four is read compared to the laughter of a white middle-class man in chapter five, with the former facing censure and the latter being celebrated. The comedians in both cases are very powerful influences in how audiences define their experience of comedy and relate this to their person value (Skeggs, 2011).

Yet what remains unexplored - and is the focus of this chapter - is how comedians themselves come to develop as 'comedians', what goes into the production of their comedy material, and how their experiences in the live stand-up environment feed into their comedic creative process - in a sense, how audiences influence comedians. Just as I have argued that audience experience of the live comedy environment - alongside notions of taste and value - influence their navigation through the field of comedy consumption, I argue that similar processes influence the navigation of performers through the field of comedic production.

In the course of this project, it has become clear that comedians are just as entangled in struggles for value as consumers, and indeed through trying to build a career in comedy may be much more acutely engaged in ongoing struggles. Comedians are having to negotiate their way into being viewed as 'valuable' products, and to creatively produce valuable comedy material. Different comedians face different struggles: this is by no means an 'easy' business to get into, but in common with the analysis presented in the previous chapters, the struggles for white, male middle-class comedians do not seem as acute as those with different identifications. Whilst it would be difficult to say that any of the

performers I interviewed had been positioned as being beyond value (Skeggs, 2004a:87), certainly some of the performers interviewed felt that they were symbolically positioned as having less value than others, and these were related to classed, gendered and racialised value judgements. Besides these valuations, comedians also carry with them their own comedy tastes, which again feed into their views on valuable comedy. In struggling with and against these judgements, using their own tastes and valuations as a guide, the creativity and production of comedians is affected.

These practical and discursive forces that are felt by performers - and that they use to make sense of their place as comedians - also feed into the readings that comedians make of audiences and audience laughter. In the course of comedy performance, many comedians phase between scripted and well-rehearsed 'bits' (a section of a stand-up comedy routine) and 'adlibbing' (making up material whilst performing otherwise scripted material). Comedians make 'on the spot' reflections to judge how and when to move off script. This continual 'reflection-in-action' (Schon, 1987) directly influences the trajectory of comedy material in the flow of its actual performance. These reflections draw on embodied resources, their practical sense of the comedy world, and their valuations of themselves and others. Their previous experiences of stand-up comedy as both audiences and performers, intertwined with their own tastes and values, feed into their in-action reading of audiences, forming and refining their comedy material and their comedic selves. Their creative process is, in this way, skewed by the inequality embedded in taste structures and value struggles. My focus in this chapter is on surveying the embodied and discursive resources comedians use to negotiate this minefield, and to suggest how traces of these power relations are left in comedic material, feeding back into what is deemed laughable/not laughable at a societal level.

To investigate these factors, I focus on the analysis of ten in-depth interviews with stand-up comedians, alongside analysis of the video observations of their performances. Some of the comedians interviewed we have met in previous chapters - Jack and Martin in chapter four and Rebecca, Leah, Kannan and Thomas, briefly, in chapter five. Added to the sample here are four comedians whom I video observed as part of a student comedy night in the furthest reaches

of West London - Amy, Gail, Paul and Viv.¹⁴ As stated in the methodology, but repeated here by way of reminder, the interviews consisted of two phases. The first phase of the interview asked comedians about the importance of comedy in their lives, which aimed to explore the life events and experiences that they felt had influenced their entry into, and continued connection with, stand-up comedy. This phase also served to reveal some of the interpretive repertoires, tastes and discursive assumptions that formed their comedic selves. The second phase of the interviews consisted of the comedian reviewing fragments from the video recordings of their performance. Here, they were asked to reflect on their performance and anything they noticed from the audience behaviour. Again, the aim was to explore the links between the assumptions and understandings of being a comedian with how they read audiences, and which valuations they bring to bear in understanding their live stand-up experiences. Through this, I elucidate the landscape that performers find themselves encountering in trying to create valuable material, to engender laughter and - in some cases - to build a comedy career. Many of the comedians referred to honing and changing their material based on what they were reading from the audience. Central to this honing was how they read different audience reactions in different ways, particularly around the reasons they assumed people were laughing, or not laughing; the data presented below serves to highlight how this process unfolds.

I start by considering how the notion of 'creativity' and the practices of cultural production are susceptible to the vagaries of power relations – how the open potential of the creation of comedy material may be compromised to meet the comic tastes of particular 'valuable' consumers. Drawing most heavily on Howard Becker's (2008) and Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) accounts of creativity and cultural production, I turn to the analysis of the data revealing some of the commonalities and differences in the trajectory of the comedians interviewed, and the accounts

¹⁴ Two of these performers are definitely middle class: Gail and Paul are private school educated; Amy and Viv both identified as middle class, however the evidence of the narratives would suggest these two comedians were of socially mobile since both were the first in their families to go to university, and stated they had come from working-class families, curiously enough both from Essex. Amy and Gail are female, Paul is male, and Viv identifies as genderqueer using the he/him/his pronouns. Amy and Gail are white British, Viv is also white British but mentions Romani Gypsy as part of his background, and Paul is white American.

of value struggles to be positioned as 'comedians'. I then move on to the reflections produced by the comedians, drawing on a number of instances where this crisscrossing of creativity, performance and value judgement appeared during the active experience of stand-up comedy, and further revealing some of the ways in which comic creativity is skewed by wider social power relations. Finally, I offer some instances of hope, whereby the affectively infused stand-up atmosphere appeared to alter, rejig or undermine some of the prosaic assumptions that comedians pulled on in their valuations of audiences – where alternative valuations through powerful 'affective practices', negotiated between audience and performer, did appear to break through and disrupt the differential valuations attributed to audiences by comedians.

Creativity and Value

This chapter enters into debates about the nature of creativity, its relationship to cultural production, and how cultural products come to be perceived as valuable. For creativity to mean anything at all, it must carry a sense of the agential – that in the creation of new things, a new way of being or thinking or doing must be established, hitherto relatively alien to prevailing social structures. There has been a conceptual slippage between the notion of agency, and the assumed sovereignty of individual action. McIntyre (2008) identifies the common-sense myth, at least in the realm of popular music production, that creativity 'resides' in a gifted individual, who is graced with genial skill, prowess or talent 'beyond the grasp of mere mortals' (p. 40).

Common conceptions of creativity find root in 19th-century Romantic thought, often incorporating visions of the tortured genius, out of step with their period, singularly dedicated to their art (Sawyer, 2006:119 see also O'Brien, 2014: 7); to be a creative individual means working outside the bounds of 'the normal'. The trace of this way of thinking is in the descriptor of 'comic genius', ascribed to comedians perceived as unique, one-of-a-kind, special. A couple of examples make clear how, in the realm of comedy, genius is discursively related to inbuilt, individual endowments: de Vries (2017:66) refers to Bob Hope's 'natural comic genius'; Qvortrup (2017) frames the Coen Brother's *Big Lebowski* as being a testament to the 'effortless comic genius' of the directors; and in his tribute to the late Richard Griffiths, Sir Trevor Nunn referred to the 'instinctive comic genius'

(Gray, 2013) of his departed friend. The ability to be outstandingly creative in comedy is (mis)recognised as innate.

Masked through the invocation of 'genius' is the social-embeddedness of creativity and creative work. Even in the broadly more 'individualist'-focused discipline of psychology, most definitions link creativity to the sociocultural context of creative acts. These incorporate the agential notion of novelty/originality and, of interest to this chapter, the judgement that a creative product is an 'appropriate' and 'valuable' contribution to a given field/area (Amabile, 1983; Russ, 1993: 2; Runco, 2014:147; Boden, 2004:1; Fischer et al, 2005: 484). Ideas and products are released into contexts, where they are then evaluated as being sufficiently creative or otherwise. The definition put forward by Vernon (1989: 94) is a useful starting point:

Creativity means a person's capacity to produce new or original ideas, insights, restructuring, inventions, or artistic objects, which are accepted by experts as being of scientific, aesthetic, social, or technological value.

It is not a problem in itself that the evaluation of ideas/products is central to the process of creativity. To do the inverse - to judge all new ideas and things as all uniquely valuable - would lead to ridiculous consequences. What does deserve a critical eye, however, is on which terms a new idea or original thing is being judged: there are a number of ways in which valuations might be skewed by inequality and the relations of power in a society. For instance, in the definition offered, who gets to be designated as an 'expert'? How did they get to that valued position? What criteria do they bring to bear in the judgement of the 'value' of new ideas? As demonstrated in the previous two chapters, judgements on differential valuations tend to smuggle in the stuff of value struggles and value judgements made on the basis of gendered, classed and racialised assumptions (Foka and Lilequist, 2015; Gibson, 2008; Lockyer, 2010; Weaver, 2011b). It raises the question: whose creativity is more likely to be judged as valuable?

On the other end of Vernon's definition, we also have a person with creative capacity who is approaching a given field of creative production. It would seem reasonable to assume that the creative person will attempt to produce ideas to

meet the perceived requirements of experts in that field, through processes of self-evaluation (Szymanski and Harkins, 1992: 264). There are ways that the creative process may be affected by the expectation of judgement, and the anticipated terms of that judgement. The active creator has already gone through a process of crafting ideas, products and material that they believe will pass muster under the scrutiny of evaluation. Experts do not have to judge a scattershot of ideas, letting some pass and others not into the field of legitimate ideas and products. The cultural products that encounter the boundaries of a field have already been self-selected as having the potential to 'make it'. This raises other questions: how do creative cultural producers come to view their own products as worthy of a field? What do they anticipate as being the criteria of judgment?

Returning to the designation of 'comic genius', perhaps unsurprisingly, a cursory search for the term on Amazon.co.uk¹⁵ reveals books dedicated to the comedy of mainly white men, e.g. Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, Ricky Gervais, Steve Martin, Steve Carrell, Charlie Chaplin, *Monty Python*. Bill Cosby and Chris Rock are the only featured black men. Tina Fey, Lucille Ball and Victoria Wood represent white women. No comedians who are women of colour appear to have been anointed with the valuable moniker. Similarly, a photo-book handily entitled *Comic Genius: Portraits of Funny People* (Hoyle, 2013) includes eighty-nine 'comic geniuses', most of whom are white men, and features more frog puppets¹⁶ than it does women of colour - one to zero respectively. Experts of the publishing world and comedy commentators deemed expert enough to pass judgement on the comedy 'greats' could appear to be somewhat compromised – the expert valuation of creative production is not completed through dispassionate objective means. Who or what becomes seen as 'good' comedy is implicated in power inequalities. Again, this can be seen in the mass cultural forms of comedy in the UK, as in those that garner mass audiences through television or major tours of the UK: these are dominated by white men (Lowe, 2017); a look at the tours page of popular comedy guide Chortle (www.chortle.co.uk/shows/all) on any given day bears this out.¹⁷ In both the realm of critical success, as exemplified through the

¹⁵ Last checked on 29th October 2018.

¹⁶ Kermit the Frog.

¹⁷ Last check on 29th October 2018.

anointing of comic geniuses, and commercial success, as demonstrated through the booking of nationwide tours, that which gets regarded as especially funny appears to be skewed by power relations.

There is one further complication with the invocation of creativity in comedy: the very idea that comedy has to be creative appears to be a criterion of the reading of quality, and therefore the reading of value, in a piece of comic material. Lockyer and Myers (2011) highlight how audiences of comedy 'expect the unexpected' and use this as a key criterion in the judgement of whether comedy is good or not, although it must be said this is a far more important criterion for middle-class audiences (Friedman, 2014). Indeed, this relates to what was highlighted in the last chapter - cleverness was sometimes elided with 'creativity' as the hallmark of good comedy. As such, the idea of creativity is wrapped up in issues to do with cultural value, and how we come to define cultural value, or taste - creativity has perhaps become a 'form of capital' (Osborne, 2003:523 in O'Brien, 2014: 6). What must also be kept hold of in this consideration of comic creativity is that it is obviously oriented towards the production of a very particular bodily response: laughter. In sum, the key questions driving this chapter become: how do valuation processes impact the creative process of stand-up comedians and, in turn, how does this creative process impact how laughter is related to the social reproduction of cultural value?

To explore these questions, I turn now to the interviews and reflective data provided by my comedian participants. Howard Becker's (2008; 2017) work on creativity and the notion of 'art worlds' and Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) considerations of the fields of cultural production are particularly useful in picking apart how unequal valuations, power and the social are entangled in the creative process of comedians. By drawing on these sociological sources, I intend to show how cultural value and valuation processes are at the heart of comedic creativity.

Field of Works

Completely unsurprisingly, peppered throughout the transcripts of the interviews are references to a range of comedians and comedic products. These products include stand-ups shows, sitcoms, sketch groups, skits and panel shows. Recollections and stories that incorporated these products were often linked to

growing up, connected to memories of family or friendship. Early on in most of the comedians' narratives, a particular comedy product aligned with a joyful laughter-filled memory that was the 'starting point' of how comedy had become important in their lives. Thomas talked of long holiday car journeys where his dad would play old taped episodes of the long running BBC Radio 4 panel show *I'm Sorry I Haven't A Clue*, the laughter making the trip seem shorter. Amy shared a bond with her brother over *Monty Python*, swapping quotes over the breakfast table. Paul recalls copying a (stereotypical) Russian accent from a skit from science-based entertainment show *Brainiac*, which made his mum double over with laughter. Gail related how she watched so much *Little Britain* as a child, she recently found an early diary entry of hers that stated: 'In the future I would like to be an Olympic swimmer or a comedian on *Little Britain*'. Early engagements with the world of comedy stick with comedians, and comedy products prove to be a valued guide through their own comedic lives.

Other references to the world of comedy and comedic products were similarly in relation to important memories, or as major direct influences or reference points for the creative comedian. Majority white, majority male, and majority middle-class, this set of cultural objects¹⁸ form an important part of the comedian habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). The relation of comedy to their early memories represents how deep the attachment to comedy goes and influences the idealisation of what these comedians consider to be funny. Their comedy taste is built in relation to these memories. More directly, but nonetheless influenced by taste structures, comedy products are a major part of the resources drawn on by comedians in the creation of comic material. What comedians themselves find funny feeds into what comedians will create as funny material. As Friedman (2014) clearly demonstrates, what people find funny is entwined with social class, age and gender - societal power structures find their way in to comic creativity through

¹⁸ A selection of the referents mentioned include: *Little Britain*, *A Bit of Fry and Laurie*, *Blackadder*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Mock the Week*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Baddiel and Newman*, Russell Brand, Michael McIntyre, Eddie Izzard, Jeff Green, Jack Whitehall, John Hegley, Graham Norton, *Friends*, *The Simpsons*, *Home Improvement*, *Rick and Morty*, *Bojack Horseman*, *Arrested Development*, *30 Rock*, *Frasier*, *Reeves and Mortimer*, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, *The Goon Show*, *Summer Heights High*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Daily Show*, Louis CK, Woody Allen, George Carlin, Frankie Boyle, *Goodbear*, *Drake and Josh*, Shappi Khorsandi, Amy Schumer, Jenny Eclair, Miranda Hart and Sara Pascoe.

taste. The creativity of these comedians, therefore, is compromised in its potentiality to puncture structures of power - they are oriented to reinforce them from the start.

For instance, Gail directly states the kind of humour she is aiming for and the direct influences on her stand-up character, a young woman who makes desperate attempts to find a man that ultimately spectacularly fails:

I'm not trying to be deep, I'm trying to be shallow and 'on the face' comedy...I wanted to be like *Miranda*...I wanted to do similar to *Summer Heights High*...and I wanted to be, there's a sketch comedy duo called *Goodbear* who use a soundtrack.

Viv similarly was clear in what his stand-up was attempting to emulate. Early on in the interview he describes how he started watching US satirical news shows *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show*, and how they chimed with him personally:

I'm quite political and quite passionate about the things that I'm interested in, and I have a lot of opinions about things and for me, that kind of platform is ideal because it's a scenario where the...whole show is focused around the individual, and it's a real mechanism to make effect on the outside world, it's funny...you can have any sort of variety, so particularly Stephen Colbert, he would sing, he'd play piano...he'd go out into the real world and wind people up which I really enjoy doing, I get on people's nerves, which I really enjoy doing...I like to dance, I like to sing, I like to play a little tune on an instrument...usually poorly...to bring...a bit of madness and mayhem to the world and get a bit angry and get mad and get listened to and I want to make other people mad as well...and to do it all while having a laugh sounds a lot of fun to me.

The idealisation of what counts as their own comedic behaviour is related to what they have previously found funny, and their creative emulation orients the performers to reproduce laughter along similar lines. Despite there being a taste difference between Gail and Viv, (Gail valuing froth and shallowness, Viv valuing

political carnivalesque comedy), they are still similarly influenced by comedy products from an already structured comedy field. These comedy products acting as creative influences are not free-floating resources - they carry value and values, and to reiterate, they overwhelmingly carry white, male and/or middle-class values. Taste in comedy is necessarily constrained to the products that count as 'comedy', which is structured by power relations. What comes to be seen as funny by comedians, and drawn upon by comedy performers in their becoming as performers, is related to an already constituted field of works - the cultural products previously produced in that field (McIntyre, 2008: 42; Zeuner, 2003:186).

As Bourdieu puts it, 'heritage accumulated by collective work presents itself to each agent as a space for possibles, that is as an ensemble of probable constraints which are the condition and the counterpart of a set of possible uses' (Bourdieu, 1996 cited in McIntyre, 2008: 42). As well as the structuring of taste influenced by the field of works, the possibilities of a given comedian's creative production is influenced and constrained by this field. The works that make up a field delimit the types of work that might legitimately be produced through that field. When a comedian regards this field, they could be forgiven for thinking their products will need to meet middle-class male ideas of what is laughable.

The weight of the impact of these cultural objects on a comedian's creative practice can be shown in the anxiety shown by some of my interviewees that they did not know about the 'right' comedic material. Whilst talking about how her interest in comedy started, Rebecca shared the following:

I wouldn't say I'm up there with the people who sort of know loads about their influences and the history of comedy and things like that, because my parents weren't really big on TV when I was a kid so people talk about, God this is going to be really embarrassing, *The Two Ronnies* and..and er..*Reeves and Mortimer* and people like that sort of classic British comedian, and I don't really know anything about that at all.

She goes on:

I feel sometimes am I qualified enough to be doing this, having not sort

of...had that exposure...it's almost like writing a book that you haven't researched...There is a bit of a cliquy-ness with comedy, and it's like yeah, am I meeting all the admissions criteria?

The 'field of works' here operates as a source of inspiration and as part of the tools for comic creativity, yet it can also act as a barrier to those who do not have knowledge of the comic products that hold high cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990:53). Accessing a field, to contribute works to that field, requires meeting the entry requirements of that field: in Rebecca's example, a knowledge of older, white male comedians appeared to be a requirement. A knowledge and appreciation – i.e. a taste for - the valuable products in a field of works is a factor in gaining entry to that field: being in possession of the right comedy cultural capital to be held in esteem by fellow comics and have your work considered for entry. As it turns out, Rose goes on to mention comedies that other comedians also value: the 'quality sitcoms' (Horn, 2015) *Parks and Recreation* and *30 Rock*. Nevertheless, Rebecca's anxiety around not knowing about the 'right' material reveals how those who do not engage with the right works in the field may have trouble accessing that field and showcasing their comic creativity.

Cultural value, therefore, finds purchase in the creative process of comedians from a very early stage. Contra to the notion of the individual creative genius, interactions with the field of works in early memories, in the development of taste, and the direct use of works for inspiration are all structuring influences that impact and skew comedic creativity. As discussed in previous chapters, for Bourdieu (1990) social practice entails the interaction between an embodied habitus, various accrued capitals and the enactment of these capitals in social relations. The comedy field is more accessible in the first instance for those who have the required 'feel for the (comedy) game' and who are in 'possession' of capitals that are considered valuable by that world. To be able to be comedically creative entails having the right knowledge to be able to successfully occupy a social position, which then enables opportunities to present material to the field of comedy (Bourdieu, 1992: 167).

Learning to be a comedian

All the comedians interviewed have all performed comedy on a stage - they have,

at least to some extent, been successful in accessing the comedy field. They have all utilised their person value (Skeggs, 2011) and their taste to get a spot. This is an important step, but once they have a position in the field, they must work to maintain it. Maintenance of a place needs the ongoing rubber-stamping of experts (Vernon, 1989), to keep the valuation of their comedy afloat, lest they be a 'one-hit wonder' and leave the field again. They must be able to be held in high enough esteem by promoters, fellow comedians and audiences to maintain a spot: promoters offer the spots, comedians offer advice and give recommendations to promoters, audiences laugh and pay to see the acts put on by the promoters. These groups act as primary experts in the comedy field - in the interviews I conducted, these were the groups that the comedians deferred to as legitimate evaluators of their comedy. The judgements of these groups act as 'gatekeepers' as to the continuing presence of the comedian on the field and, crucially, their judgements are used by comedians as valuable feedback to hone and change their comedy act. The world of valuations and judgements has a direct impact on the creative production of comedians. These judgements, I argue again, are skewed to support already embedded power relations, which are classed, gendered and racialised.

There is one group curiously missing from the considerations of the comedians interviewed: comedy critics. Friedman (2014) argues that comedy critics act as cultural intermediaries, taste makers whose valuations of high- and low-value comedy affect whom audiences will go and see, and influence the terms through which audiences - particularly those with high cultural capital - will express their tastes. Most of those whom I interviewed were at a relatively early stage in their comedy lives, which is one possible reason critics did not come up as an expert resource - they simply had not been in the field long enough to have the (mis)fortune of having their work appraised by a critic. It is still curious that three participants who had been in the comedy game for longer than three years (Thomas, Martin and Jack) did not mention critics either, suggesting that the importance of comedy criticism has been overstated.

However, the impact of comedy critics may still be present in the process of comedic production by proxy. They may have had an effect through the audiences who turn up to see a comedy act or attend a particular comedy night. It is also

feasible that critical language employed by critics contributes to the taken-for-granted standards and discursive resources that make up the field. There was indeed some measure of convergence in the standards and terms used by the comedians in their reckoning of good comedy and the process of making good comedy. Critics, whilst not directly deferred to, may be part of the 'producers of meaning' (Regev, 1994: 94 cited in Friedman, 2014) that reinforce the background noise of cultural values, which inflect the creative process.

Those people and groups whom the comedians did refer to as expert in some way were nearly always people they had had direct, face-to-face contact with as part of their navigation through the field. Once gaining admission to the field, the ongoing interactions with other agents who make up the field are of great influence in the ongoing work of comedians. The importance of these interactions as part of a particular cultural sector is perhaps most persuasively illustrated by Becker (2008:34) through the concept of 'art world' as a network consisting 'of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world...define as art' (2008:34); this shows how any cultural product is infused with the meaning-making activities of many people, never of just one 'genius'.

Similarly here, it is useful to invoke the image of 'comedy world', in which the comedic creative is part of a network of interested social actors. It is through the interpretive machinations of those involved in the 'comedy world' that we can explore how the limits of this world is delineated: 'when, where and how participants draw the lines that distinguish what is and isn't their kind of art, and who is and isn't an artist' (Becker, 2008:38) - similar to the field and field of works considered earlier. Not only is the comedy object being judged through these networks, but the creators and their inclusion in such a world is judged. Therefore, in comedy, to reveal the creative process of comic production entails exploring the network of people involved, on what terms these networks judge the suitability of material to be labelled 'comedy', and how this feeds back into the creative process of the comedians themselves. What needs to be considered is how these 'expert' judgements in the comedy world may be drawn into valuation processes influenced by structural inequalities (Becker, 2017: 1582). Zolberg (1990) introduces in stronger terms what this might entail for power relations:

'introducing new ideas in the face of entrenched interests is likely to require complex strategies' (p.132 cited in McIntyre, 2012:54) – a struggle for value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

Comedy classes, workshops and improvisation groups were referred to by many of the comedians, and are a place where comedian colleagues get together, get creative, and get valued. The first example here highlights the legacy effect of cultural capital in the form of taste, and how it acts as a resource for navigation and a sense of belonging in the comedy world. Kannan had found his way into the comedy scene through university connections, joining comedy societies, signing up for arts events and getting spots at local nights through the connections found in those environments; a transaction of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Early on in our discussion, Kannan mentions a few of his influences and identifies *30 Rock* and *Arrested Development* as major influences, what he terms 'competent sitcoms' (read, again, the inference of 'quality' here (Horn, 2015)). Many of the stars and creators of these sitcoms started out on the US improvisation scene. Later in the interview, when the conversation turns to his early days in establishing a foothold in London, he suggests how these cultural referents influence his navigation on the scene:

After I moved back to London, I spent like a year and a half doing courses...with the motive of trying to... well as you've probably noticed all of my influences are American, so I have a lot of respect for that, those kind of American comedy legends, and they all really came from improv as well...so I wanted to emulate that and widen my repertoire...the main consequence of that is you have to sit through a lot of beginners...hack jokes, or people who don't understand fundamentally what a joke is.

The taste resources here give Kannan a sense of how to get ahead in the comedy world: firstly, by following an assumed career path of 'comedy legends'; and secondly, by imbuing him with a sense of authority about the fundamentals of humour construction. There is an assuredness in his meeting with the comedy world that comes from his knowledge that he has what would be considered good comedy taste in 'competent sitcoms' - at one point in the interview he refers to himself positively as a 'comedy snob' (Friedman, 2014: 111). This would suggest

that those who go into comedy classes and workshops have preconceived ideas on comedy, often related to their comedy taste (and thus imbued with cultural valuations), and that they are engaged in a process of valuation of their own and others' comedy on these terms. Comedy snobbery gets placed as a legitimate way in which to read comedy quality, and so creativity therefore becomes focused on meeting the taste of 'snobs'.

Another interviewee who describes the impact comedy classes had had on her time in the comedy world was Leah. Similarly to Kannan, she had joined the 'comedy world' through a connection she had made at university, a connection cemented by mutual comedy taste - they had frequented comedy gigs together throughout their student years. This friend invited Leah to do five minutes of stand-up as part of a comedy night she had set-up in London - the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986) that Leah accumulated at university had afforded her a place in the field. Once here, she sought advice from others to continue her progression in that field. Leah did not seem so assured as Kannan in her comedy tastes, and so for Leah comedy classes were influential in a different way:

That was like a six-week course, every weekend for 6 weeks, it was incredibly intense...that changed my life doing that course... I was very lucky with the group as well because I think...one of the purposes of these kinds of courses that are run to do stand-up is to put you in touch with other people who are sort of in a similar situation...it's very hard to do this on your own, the whole point is that it's a kind of group activity...you're performing in front of other people, and you get inspired by other people, things come out of doing exercises with other people, I think it's very important to be doing it collaboratively.

She goes on to talk about her teacher in particular:

He was very clear in his values - don't kick down, you have to attack up, so he was basically saying don't reproduce the same white middle-class male, even though he himself is...but he's aware of it...I really appreciated it because I felt I could trust the things he was saying...he would really take the effort to find the funny things in what people were doing.

These two excerpts draw focus on how expertise and judgements float around interactionally in the 'comedy world', how they influence the way in which a comedy idea, material or performance becomes structured. It also highlights a couple of potential resources, or indeed barriers, for the neophyte comedian in navigating the comedy world. Leah describes how the group environment with fellow comedians is conducive to creativity, mentioning 'inspiration' and 'things com(ing) out' through such a process, but these things do not carry any comic weight, she does not identify this creativity as funny, until the trusted teacher 'finds the funny things'.

Becker (2017) argues that the 'fact of creativity – of some kind of activity unlike what others have done before' (2017: 1582) is not scarce and suggests that ordinary observation of everyday life would reveal people doing something that we could broadly construe as 'new' happening all the time. What is scarce, he argues, is these new ideas being turned into fully fleshed out plans, schemes or products. In common with the definitions of creativity offered earlier, the key is in how 'the new' bubbles into recognition and receives the label of 'creative' (2017:1580), and is therefore given the social space to become something 'actual' - a 'product'. For Leah, the labelling of what she was doing as funny by a teacher-expert in the field of comedy was what gave her further impetus to produce a comedic product.

Despite Leah's narrative distancing of her teacher from problematic comedic attitudes, she still only read things as funny when he, a white middle-class man, said they were funny. This can briefly be compared to the last chapter, where white, middle-class male Thomas is actively trying to produce a night that undermines his own power, but somehow seems to bolster it. Somehow in the comedy world, whether comedy gets defined as mainstream and 'low', or counter-cultural and 'high', it is still white middle-class men who get to delimit the line, and gatekeep who gets to feel like and become a comedian.

It is also reasonable to assume that through the collaborative processes that Leah mentions, judgement and valuation of her comedic ideas is occurring. Becker goes on to suggest that those with the power to label and influence creativity are 'often critics or customers but also, more pervasively and constantly, colleagues'

(2017:1582). As already stated, critics were not identified as a major source of expertise, and I consider the role of 'customers' - here audiences - later in the chapter. Certainly, colleagues - fellow comedians - were often held up as very influential in the production of comedy of those interviewed. I go on next to briefly explore how colleague judgements and collaborations again seem to bolster the domination of the comedy field by already powerful social groups.

Collaborative creativity and value judgements

The processes I have discussed so far could be read as fairly innocuous ways in which classes and workshops, and the collaborative expertise found therein, can impact the creative process of comedians - the wisdom of a clearly identifiable 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) and the bouncing of ideas around with peers can help the performer to find a voice, to produce ideas, and to maintain a place in the comedy world. Yet it is also through these same mechanisms that more obviously unfair and discriminatory value judgements can find their way into the process of comic creativity.

Paul was certainly one of the more 'close to the bone' acts that I saw in the course of this project, with material that could very easily be seen as sexist and homophobic. During the review of his own performance, he recounts a couple of stories - the first regarding advice he was given from a more knowledgeable comedian:

I watched a lot of specials when I was younger...there was one, he was Mexican and would make a lot of generalisations about being Mexican which wasn't that funny for me because...there was an English comedian I met once...and he talked about racial comedians, comedians who talk a lot about their race and the fact that they're black and he said 'I know you're black, now make me laugh'...or with Jo Brand he said 'I know, I can see that you're ugly, but now make me laugh'

The next story Paul drew on concerned how he utilises collaborative workshops, particularly his university comedy society, to make his act more palatable to a general audience:

The comedy society has benefited me...it basically gives me an opportunity to workshop material, try things out, to play with ideas, to listen to what other people are doing...it benefited me a lot last year because there's been material that I do and I wasn't sure that it was funny...usually the stuff where I delve into darker realms.

[Talking about a time he was practicing material with people from the comedy society] They'd all seen me do my stuff before...so I asked them 'can I just do some horrible jokes?', so I have some horrible stuff, like really bad, that I don't do any more, it will still make me chuckle...so I did a few of them and they were like 'oh this is bad' - the President was just like 'oh get off the stage', and I was like 'come on just let me do my stupid jokes'...and he thought it was unacceptable...I've figured out a better formula now for introducing risky material.

The collective expertise of the comedy workshop is the creative testing ground for Paul to see how 'far' he can take his riskier material, and the place where he figures out ways in which he can get away with material that pulls on discriminatory discourses. Raúl Pérez (2013), through a long-term ethnographic study of training courses for stand-up comedians in the USA, shows the pivotal role that these kinds of workshops have in forming comedic discourses, particularly around 'race' and ethnicity. Crucially, Pérez states that performers learn the 'use of strategies [of talk] that make the performers seem 'not racist' even as they say racist things' (p.479). An insight into the kind of discourse produced through the development of expertise in the field came at the end of the interview with Paul: again, during the reflection on his performance, he uses a discursive strategy around the deployment of irony to explain why his material on homosexuality is permissible:

That bit is purely playing off the stupid stereotypes that exist in society about homosexuals, it's a satirical piece...the bit goes 'if I were gay I'd be gay for two to three months and then I'd just choose to be straight again, because you know it's a choice right?', and that's where I used to end it...but people don't always understand what I'm trying to say...he really thinks it's a choice doesn't he', and people who get the irony go 'he doesn't

think it's a choice, he's making fun of people who do'...so then I say 'you get it, it's a joke, it's not a choice', and people are like 'oh he is joking I get it', and then I say, 'it's a disease'...that really solidified that bit, it's the strongest ending I have to any of my sets and it's because the first bit is setting up a kind of offensive kind of thing, and then I break the relief, and then I double it up and I make it even worse...it's just satire that bit.

Perez (2013: 484) argues that irony is one of the strategies used by comedians who utilise racist and sexist (and here I would add homophobic) discourse in order to create 'distance and detachment between the author and what is said'. This kind of device is learnt by comedians in order to allow them to state overtly devaluing expressions publicly - to accomplish this, the comedian must preserve a veil of 'authentic inauthenticity' (p.483), which allows the comedian to engage in discriminatory public discourse whilst simultaneously denying any discriminatory intent.

To 'get away' with this bit, Paul attempts to make it as clear as possible that he is 'playing' with homophobia, not being homophobic himself. He also positions those who would find this offensive as people who just 'don't get it'. Humorous constructions, therefore, hold material that is discriminatory and othering, but through the process of acculturating to the comedy world, strategies are picked up through which this homophobia can be given a pass; those who do not give it a pass because of the 'clever' construction are somehow comedy dunces.

I argue that it is possible to understand how a humorous construction works whilst still identifying that such a construction works to of (re)create difference and bolstering unfair valuation processes. These types of joke constructions still rest on certain subjects being perceived as laughable in the first place for the then 'progressive' comedian to play with that subject position being laughable. He is making a claim to value, a claim to being a respectable comedian, because he has developed a way of making gay jokes whilst denying they are homophobic. These strategies are developed by sharing material with other comedians and getting hints on how to make such material palatable. Jokes about gay people, or jokes that play with the idea that being gay is funny, are still being told by white, middle-class, straight males. These jokes are being defined as valuable, and

therefore defining the field of works in ways that bolster particular subject positions - which then get passed on as valuable creative comedic practices in the development of material. The effort of the comedian is not simply on creating humorous products, but on finding creative ways to allow suspect material to pass. It is another example of how the evaluative processes that square the circle of creative production skew the process of comic creation.

The 'audience' as expert - gendered readings of laughter

I turn now to one other 'expert' group who comedians rely on to indicate that their material belongs in the comedy world - audiences. All of those interviewed held up the comedy audience as key to how good they were as comedians: audiences came through in the interviews as a decisive judge of material created by comedians, and laughter the supreme arbiter of comedic expertise. The 'expertise' of the audience is expressed affectively, through the forceful bodily disruption of laughter. It may seem odd to give laughter, a sound, the mantle of 'expert'. Yet in the comedy world it makes complete sense - a comedian by definition must elicit the laughter response if they want to be defined as comedians. As Viv states, 'comedians cannot be comedians without laughter'. It may be why the impact of comedy critics apparently marginal as a concern, at least for the comedians I interviewed. A critic may give a bad review of a particular performance but as long as the performing comedian made the audience laugh, they can still quite legitimately claim a place in the comedy world. Laughter, however it is produced, is valuable currency in the field of comedy.

Through the performance reflection section of the interviews, laughter indeed came through as the major evaluative tool for judging how well a performance was going, unanimously stated as the key indicator by the interviewees. Yet it became clear very quickly that the performer's readings of audiences and the laughter of particular audience members is influenced by gender and class. Not all audiences, audience members, or audience laughter is considered equal. Performers only consider the laughter of certain kinds of people as forms of 'expertise', which legitimate their comedy and lead performers to produce material to meet the tastes of that narrower group. Whilst eliciting laughter was the aim of the game for all comedians, in order to ascertain how well you will navigate the comedy field and make it in the comedy world, some people's

laughter proved more valuable than others’.

Most of the comedians during their reflections suggested that during their performance, they come to focus on particular audience members. As might be expected, efforts are made by comedians to ensure all of the audience is laughing. In this attempt to please all, the comedian is engaged in an active process of reading the audience - they have their own perceptions of audience reactions and engage their performative and creative resources to ‘reach out’ to more audience members based on those perceptions. It is through this reading and judging process of the audience that differential valuations of audience laughter come to the fore. Creative efforts, even mid-performance, get skewed in order to centre a certain ‘valuable’ consumer’s laughter.

This has been seen already in the previous two chapters. The ‘Reec-ess’ - the elongated laughter of a straight white middle-class male - was not only tolerated and sought after, but became an established and celebrated part of a comedy night. The ‘Essex girls’ faced attempts at control and curtailment, their laughter being read as threatening and out of place: the value of their laughter was not related to funniness. The ‘Essex girl’ case in particular could be analysed as being a more straight-forward conflict between the group of working-class women in the audience and the two middle-class male comedians on stage. But it is not only middle-class male comics who seem to value male laughter more: the issue is more endemic to the broader construction of the comic in the comedy world. Amy and Viv, female and genderqueer performers, both come to centre the white, straight male laugh in their acts.

Amy was filmed as part of a student comedy night and knew some of the crowd as either friends or acquaintances. During her re-watching of the fragments, she expressed some incredulity at how she could hear the laughter, but not see people laughing. This was not in fact true: there were a number of people laughing in the frame of the fragment, but two men near the front are not being as exuberant in their display as others. These males present as more typically hegemonic masculine men (Connell, 2005).



Fig 1: The two men to the right of the picture become Amy's and Viv's reflective focus.

During the reflection, I point out to her some of the laughing people – particularly a white male, who does not quite fit the hegemonic masculine 'look', on the front row, and two white women in the second row. She reads, and explains away, their laughter - "this guy at the front, Gary, he laughs quite a lot, but Gary's just a lovely soul, he's just really nice, so he'll laugh at anybody to make them feel better...yeah, again, Janice is just lovely, and Cat's a good friend". There is a certain set of values expressed in their laughter: generosity, kindness, friendship but, tellingly, not a reflection of the measure of her funniness. In effect, their laughter is given no weight: it is assumed to be of no value in terms of its meaning for her comic prowess. This contrasts quite starkly with how she reads - and values - the laughter of a straight white male.

Amy notices in the reflection that Ben (second from the right in Fig.1) is rolling his eyes a lot during her performance. She reveals how this perception of this audience member changed her performance: "I remember seeing him rolling his eyes...I sort of direct myself at him, find me funny!" Amy does actually physically turn and, for a good portion of the performance, aim her utterances pointedly at Ben. It works. There is a moment in the performance where Ben cracks – he laughs and chokes on his drink, losing control: "I remember Ben spitting out his drink...and I remember thinking, 'I've got that one!' I remember that, it's like a mental bank of 'You can do comedy!' images that you kind of keep in your head". Sara Ahmed's (2004) conceptualisation of 'affective economies' is indispensable in examining how Amy comes to value these laughs differently. Emotion, Ahmed posits, circulates between bodies to create 'difference and displacement'

(p.121) – to bind certain groups together, and to create otherness between groups and individuals. Laughter in the space of the comedy club here is structured by, and structuring of, a gendered order. As already discussed, the field itself is structured to valorise comedy material (the ‘field of works’) that is produced by men. Laughter circulated in the context of these constructed taste values, often negotiated between comedians themselves informally, is therefore imbued with valuations. The laughter of groups who have not hitherto dominated the field do not carry the valuable expertise to judge comedic worth. The established affective economy of the comedy world infers that men are the funny ones, and therefore have the ability to expertly value comedy. The established affective economy of the comedy world infers that feminine laughter (and here, non-hegemonic masculine laughter) is helpful and kind (Gray, 1994). Gary’s, Cat’s and Janice’s laughter sticks them together as a particular group (Ahmed, 2004: 119) - it is not that being helpful and kind are valueless, but that in the cut and thrust of the competitive world of comedy, these are not part of an expert valuation. There is an implicit sense here that the laughter of (straight) men is considered more objective and rational, not affected by the silly irrationality of being a nice human being - it aligns with a disinterested taste aesthetic (Bourdieu, 1984; Friedman, 2014). There is a gendered element to who gets positioned as expert enough to have their laughter read as an indicator of comedy: male laughter is valued more highly than female laughter.

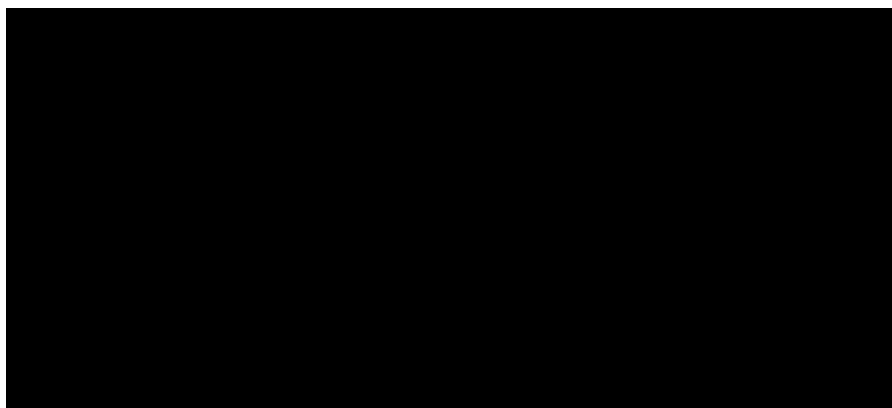


Fig 2: Laughing and choking

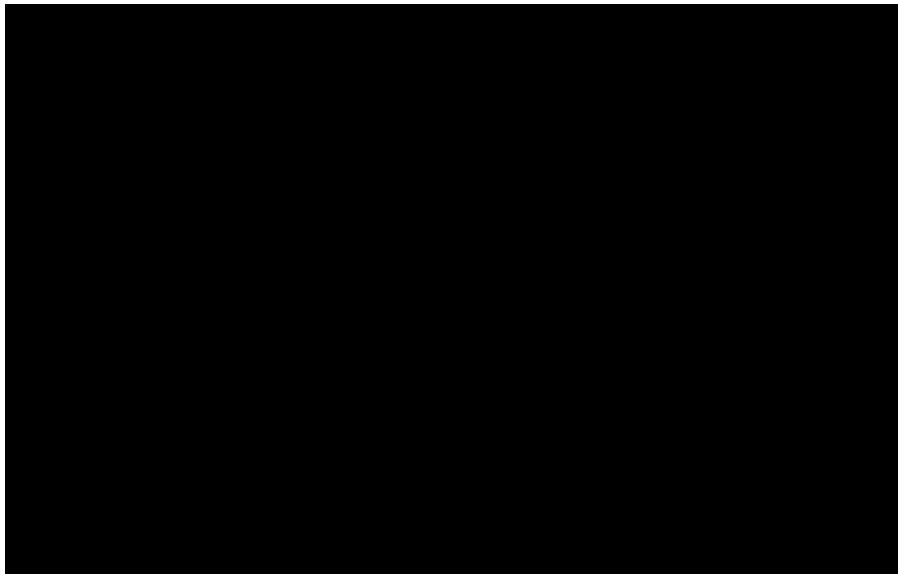


Fig 3: Muted reaction

To underline this point, when Ben does laugh, those who have been laughing most fulsomely at previous points in the set become muted in their reaction. During the process of performance, Amy changes her act based on the assumption that she cannot do comedy if there is a straight white male not laughing. That she loses the laughter of the others here does not draw comment - she cracked the valuable prize. Furthermore, the material that clearly gets a big reaction from Ben is then stamped by Amy as having value, which then has the potential to impact her future creativity to produce similarly aimed material.

Viv, who's performance was recorded as part of the same event as Amy, is also referring to his efforts to get Ben to laugh when stating in his interview: "I want them to crack a smile, I want one of my jokes to hit with them, so that I can say I got a laugh, that I forced that laugh out of them." In both cases, there is a sense of the combative and competitive 'nature' of comedy, 'getting' someone, or 'forcing' someone to laugh. This again can be characterised as a value struggle (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). Both cases also highlight how these in-performance interactions are entangled with value accrual: Viv's 'so that I can say' and Amy's 'you can do comedy' are both about being able to give yourself value, and sell yourself as a comedian after the event. Here, that value is based on getting the right kind of audience member to laugh - the straight white male.

Viv goes on to state:

I want people to see that we have a sense of humour...when I'm talking about my rubber genitals on stage I want to open up a conversation with men about their genitalia. I had a couple of guys come up and ask me afterwards...they felt they could come and learn and share and speak with confidence.

The 'couple of guys', perhaps all too predictably, were Ben and his friend (Fig. 1). To be seen as someone with a sense of humour, commensurate with being able to use that humour to garner value in the comedy world, is to centre the humour and interests of straight men. From the standpoint of both Amy and Viv, this makes absolute sense. As female and genderqueer respectively, having made it onto the field of play, in order to struggle for value in that field means gaining the esteem and expert valuation of those with high power in that field. Their tastes and previous understandings of the comedy field have been formed by their appreciation of the field of works and through their interactions in comedy workshops (the same workshops where Paul formed his act). Their habitus, their sense of the field of play, would indicate that to make it is to appeal to straight male comedic sensibilities and accommodate their whims - even, as ridiculous as this sounds, to centre male genitalia as in need of comic emancipation.

Classed readings of valuable audience laughter

Social class also came through as a factor in the reflections of the performers, suggesting that the affective economy of the comedy world gives more weight to middle class valuations of comedy. The first example here comes from Rebecca's reflections - she performed at the night discussed in detail in the last chapter, and compares her experiences at that night with her other experiences performing stand-up around London.

Because of the level that I'm at, sort of upper end of open-mic would be how I'd describe myself, there's a lot of 'mixed bag' in there...it can be like 'I just want to get in and do my ten minutes and get out' whereas at [this comedy night] you want to stay and you want to enjoy it...I wish more gigs in London were like that...there's another one I've done which is similar in

that it attracts more middle class audience, more educated...there's not many gigs like it and there should be more.

She goes on to say that performing at this night was “an honour” and that she “got a sense that [doing comedy] is worthwhile and I’m not deluded“. Firstly, in common with gendered valuations discussed earlier, spaces where the middle-class audience congregate for comedy consumption holds ‘expert’ value. Rebecca’s sense of her place on the comedy field is reassured by the stamping of value from middle class audiences. It is clear that she does not garner the same sense of value from her interactions elsewhere in the comedy field, with ‘mixed-bag’ venues almost appearing as threatening or repellent such that she cannot stand to be there for longer than needs-be. Her reflections are as much to do with the ongoing construction of class relations, and bolstering her sense of self as a middle class woman, as they are with the realities of negotiating the comedy world. Lawler (2005) draws attention to the long history of disgust at the working classes, and this appears to extend into the (not-so) topsy-turvy carnivalesque world of comedy - here Rebecca’s creative production is not only concerned with the production of funny products, but with establishing a firm spot in the finer, educated ‘worthwhile’ gigs. Her creativity becomes driven by meeting middle class tastes.

There is a similar sense of how the working-class audience becomes a silo for the ‘bad’ performance experience in Kannan’s narrative. He reflects on why his performance, again at the comedy club discussed in the last chapter, went so well - “that was audience based I think...I guess they were quite a strong liberal crowd, the dream crowd” - and then compares this to a tough gig he had in Glasgow where he suspects what went wrong is that he used niche material with “a mainstream crowd...I’ve got better at material I can use in different scenarios”. He also states that there is no material he would not do for a liberal audience, but he would not do all of his material to a mainstream crowd. Again, Lawler (2005) points out how ideals of progressiveness have become discursively associated with the middle-class - in Kannan’s reflection, the term ‘liberal’ appears as euphemism for middle class, and ‘mainstream’ for everybody else.

In terms of how this impacts his creative production, at first sight it could seem as

though Kannan is aware of different taste cultures, and puts his creative efforts into achieving valuations from both 'types' of crowd. However, this is not the case as what he actually does is create material for the liberal dream crowd (a group he later states that includes him - "I'm that audience as well") and then subtracts the bits deemed not suitable for mainstream consumption. There is a latent assumption here that mainstream audiences are lacking some ability to appreciate his niche material - again related to broader discursive structures around the problem of working class 'intellectual inferiority'. Kannan aims his creativity at the middle-class constituent of the comedy world - his creativity is driven to meet middle class tastes.

Lastly, Amy reflects on class. In contrast to Rebecca and Kannan, both from middle class background, Amy has a working-class Essex background and at the time of the interview was completing her Masters in a well-regarded university. Her relationship to class and the audience is, for this reason, slightly more convoluted. Early on in the interview, she confidently declares that she is a Marxist Feminist - her awareness of class and gender issues influences her act. Indeed, at the performance I witnessed, a great portion of her material explicitly states critical positions against patriarchy and capitalism, for instance a consideration of the leg-shaving industry and its pushing of pink products for the feminine consumer. However, there is also an extended piece of material in her act that pulls on a cultural cipher that forms a classed judgement - the chav (Tyler 2008a). During her reflection on her performance, the contradiction hits her, and Amy declares herself 'a massive hypocrite' and then attempts a rationalisation of her 'chav' material:

There are realities of just certain types of jokes that we use in comedy...which means in an ideal world, I would be a perfect Marxist Feminist, who is just completely egalitarian to everybody without any prejudice...but unfortunately people find chavvy jokes funny particularly in posh places where there's a culture clash...It's like selling your soul, but you know it will get a laugh.

The first argument is that this is just the 'reality' of comedy, a reality that she cannot help but give in to - this bears relation to the notion of doxa discussed in

the last chapter, the comedy world having established 'the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness' producing the 'sense of reality' (Bourdieu, 1977: 164) for social agents operating within that world. The next part of her argument refers explicitly to what people find funny 'in posh places'. Her material has been changed and affected by the immediate relationships and mundane interactions in the context of the university comedy world- and the perceived expert valuations of these majority middle class people have shaped her creative production. This is a reminder of Becker's assertion that customers (here audience) have an immediate impact on creativity (2017: 1582). Finally, there is her own discomfort with yielding to this doxa, and meeting the taste of those in 'posh places' - she has sold out, betrayed (part of) her habitus. In order to struggle for value in the comedy world, Amy yields not only to the tastes of the straight male, but also finds herself compromising on her political views for the sake of that all valuable middle-class laughter. It is admirable how much of her act does smuggle in progressive values and critical viewpoints, but to allow her to do this she must sell her soul in order to maintain her position in the field whilst receiving the expert positive valuation of middle-class comedy consumers.

One element that unites Kannan's and Amy's account is how they have certain expectations of an audience, that impacts the shape of their comedy. Becker suggests that any given creative person will keep certain ideas to themselves for fear that they will be seen by others as too 'out there', or as doomed to fail because of assumptions about the world into which those ideas enter - this Becker terms 'self-censorship' (2017:1586). Whilst there is evidence here about how the experiences of performance influence the creative process, just as potent in the creative process of stand-up comedy is the 'imagined audience' (Litt, 2012) acting as an internalised judge made up of previous experiences of navigating judgements, and imagined encounters with interested agents. Indeed, here we have a case of imagined audiences; a working-class audience that has to be traversed and managed but not ultimately respected, and a middle-class audience who will have their tastes met and validation sought. This is also gendered - the masculine audience being the holder of expertise, the feminine being merely helpful. These valuations and interactions influenced by a symbolic economy that valorises the male and the middle class inevitably impacts the future creative process of comedians and the trajectory of their material. Different

laughters are assumed to have different expertise, and to maintain your position on the field, it is not enough to be funny - you have to make the right kind of people laugh.

This is, of course, overly deterministic. As is most obvious in the accounts presented about Amy and Viv, there is a struggle going on where alternative valuations are being lived and are able to give a space for hope in the comedy world. There are also disruptions in the flow of performance, some captured in the course of this project, that open up the space for alternative valuations to be lived and sustained - even with those comedians seemingly most committed to garnering value from the 'right' people. These affective challenges to the prosaic assumptions of comedians deserve a hearing.

Breach and affective disruption

I have sought so far to demonstrate how discriminatory valuation processes infect the inspirations that comedians draw on, influence the interactions of creatives in the comedy world, and skew the practical in-performance actions of comedians. They inhabit and inhibit comedians' reflective processes, and ensure that material feeding back into the 'field of works' bears the hallmarks of good comedy: white, male and middle class. Yet this does not tell the whole story - another discourse developed through some of the interviews, and this was related, again, to the value attributed to laughter.

It should be noted that the potential for these disruptions is embedded in any field of cultural production. Hesmondhalgh (2006) hails how Bourdieu theorises fields of cultural production as being simultaneously spaces for hope and resistance, as well as replete with 'taken-for-granted social practices tend ultimately to serve the interests of the dominant class' (p.216). Thus far I have provided ample examples of how everyday practices surrounding comic productivity have served to entrench interests. The space for hope comes from the maintenance of the 'idea of autonomy from the field of power in Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production' (p. 214). Bourdieu subdivides the field of cultural production into 'large scale' and 'small scale', and these are defined by their degree of autonomy from the field of power. Large scale, or mass, production is less autonomous, more subject to outside rule and economic interest (but never fully submitted to it) and

oriented towards the production of commercial goods. This relates to the mass comedy tours highlighted earlier. Small scale production, by contrast, has high autonomy (although never complete freedom) from economic interests, and is focused on producing 'artistic' products (Bourdieu, 1996/92 in Hesmondhalgh, 2006: 214). From this view, you may have well-intentioned cultural producers unwittingly producing cultural goods in such ways that reproduce class structures and hierarchies of power. Conversely, and crucially, it also means you may have moments where comedians, hitherto focused on increasing their commercial viability in the comedy world, are affected by alternative values.

I draw now on two instances where alternative valuations appear to influence the comedic trajectory of the creative production of comedians. These are drawn from Paul and Kannan's narratives, two comedians who seem very set on achieving a permanent place in the comedy world and making a living from it. Neither story recounts a Damascene conversion, but what I argue they highlight is a different valuation of laughter, outside of the valuation processes elucidated so far, one worth struggling for.

Starting with Paul, much of his narrative highlights the combative, competitive understanding of the stand-up comedy world. As discussed earlier, his framing of 'offensive' material suggests a certain combative attitude towards the audience. Indeed, he relates a story where he had an argument with an audience member over the perceived offensiveness of doing an Indian accent as part of his act. The audience through so much of his narrative is presented as either ruining his act, or not getting his material; always revealing a lack of connection with the audience, stand-up so often appears as a way to prove his worth.

There was, however, the story of an affectively infused encounter that challenged the overall shape of this narrative - the whole tone of his account changes when recounting this tale:

It was the best performance I'd ever done...I was alone, it was me, and they [the audience] were all there ready to hear me - I had instant respect for it when I walked in because they were all there waiting...I remember I started the set...there was a group of lads or whatever and he [one of the

lads] couldn't swear - if they swore they got a slap. So I joined in and I slapped this guy and that was cool and they were all laughing...and then I realised, oh shit, they're on my side, this is great, this is such a great feeling...I'd never really had the audience be on my side before like that.

Paul is describing a moment where he is quite actively re-evaluating what comedy can be. In this moment, the laughter of togetherness breaks through to force a re-evaluation of his comic process - instead of arguing with his audience, he joins in, wins them over and is rewarded with acceptance and respect. In the very least his prosaic assumptions about the meaning and function of comedy are punctured by the infectious energy of laughter and the alternative value it carries of 'being on the same side'. This form of encounter can usefully be related to Akram and Hogan's (2016:614) concept of 'the breach of the taken-for-granted' - in Paul's account, laughter is an affective catalyst that interrupts the normal proceedings of his comedy. Relating the idea of breach to C. Wright Mills' notion of 'troubles' and Bourdieu's concept of habitus, Akram and Hogan (2016:614) suggest there are moments and periods whereby a given agent's:

...feel for the game fails to work for them perhaps in small ways in some instances and in turn significant ways in others, such that one cannot continue to function in a taken-for-granted manner...events unfold in such a fashion that a discontinuity arises in awareness between how one saw the world then, versus now...A person can recoil from such moments to maintain daily practice; but the solution to anomie has to be found in a reflexive process

The impact of the breach on Paul's creative process is somewhere between the two, folding the lesson from this event to maintain some of his daily practice. What can be said of Paul's process is that he has moved away from getting a laugh at any cost, in the flagrant, combative use of offensiveness, and does engage in reflecting on how his comedy might be discriminatory – even if that is only to the extent of working harder to coat his humour in discursive tricks (Perez, 2013). The hope contained here can only take use so far however – Paul did slap an audience member in the process of reaching this small reflective break.

Another way I argue these breaches can occur is in creating a space, a moment, where a latent part of the habitus can be jolted and re-lived, even momentarily, keeping a space in the habitus that does not completely give way to the value accrual demands of the field. Kannan in most of his narrative hits all of the notes required for someone to position themselves as a comedian. His identification as someone from a British Sri Lankan family is kept very separate from the story of his life as a comedian - indeed, he was the only comedian interviewed who did not start his narrative of how comedy was important in his life with an early childhood anecdote. There was a professional, calculated veneer to Kannan's story - his ambition was geared towards achieving a firm base in the comedy field. At one point in the review of the material, however, Kannan takes note of a particular audience member laughing and nodding at a part of his act and he expresses joy at this audience member's apparent recognition and enjoyment. His utterance is 'I'm nervous about looking too terrorist-y', a reference to his Sri Lankan heritage and the absurdity of the current political climate. The audience member is also read as of having South Asian heritage, and Kannan says he recognises in his enjoyment "the way my cousin enjoys things". It was the only time in his interview where Kannan had related the value of what he does in the comedy world to anything other than its contribution to his career.

This particular 'breach' brings to the fore a couple of important issues in trying to develop alternative valuation processes as part of the comedy world. Firstly, comedians, particularly those who come from devalued identity positions, hold potentials in their habitus that can be given space to surface, produce laughter, and impact the affective economy of comedy spaces. These producers are in a value struggle, balancing the demands of the field with their own unique feel for the game. These breaches are absolutely essential if the field is going to yield more fully to alternative valuations.

This breach also suggests the importance of having representation from a range of different backgrounds in the field of works offered by the comedy world, but also how the representativeness of the audience matters. The video fragment I showed to Kannan that prompted this reflection was the same one I showed to the focus group in the last chapter, which prompted Chris to split "race stuff and terrorist stuff" from that which he considered to be funny. A room full of people like

Chris may have given a muted appreciation of this material and may have influenced Kannan to expunge it from his act. His recognition that it is appreciated, and appreciated by someone like his cousin, means it keeps its place. What this instance suggests is that when it comes to a performer coming to value material that they have created, and ensures particular stories and experiences related to a given identity (here, British South Asian ethnicities) are given life in the comedy world, the ability to see that people of that 'type' recognise the humour of the situation comes to influence how valuable that material is seen to be. Just as important as efforts to create representative comedy bills are efforts to bring comedy to a wider range of audience members. The hope of changing the terms of the evaluation of comedy, and therefore the process of comic creativity, rests on material being aired in social arenas where many people of different identities are present, and where in that environment, no voice (or laugh) dominates.

Conclusion - struggles for valuable laughter

The overall picture I have given here of the creative, productive process of comedians is pessimistic. There appear to be multiple ways in which powerful subject positions and groups can reproduce their domination in relation to laughter: through a canon of comedy products that over-represent white middle-class males, by gate-keeping the field of works and the comedy world, and by influencing discourses that centre their own tastes. Again, the doxa of the comedy field, the taken-for-granted notions that underpin its functioning, appears to be stubborn and unyielding.

While I maintain that affective breaches in the comedy club are a source of optimism, it would appear that these do not happen often enough for some social actors to maintain hope of continuing to compete in the comedy circuit. Those comedians who can maintain a space have to show themselves as valuable in a fiercely competitive comedy market (particularly in London). To do this, comedians are almost forced to marshal those parts of their comedic habitus that ensures they will draw in a valuable audience - relying on particular comedic influences, focus on pleasing particular consumers, listen to other comedians to learn the ropes of bringing in these audiences. I argue that it is this market context particularly that orients comedic creativity in ways that reproduce prevailing

power relations, by valuing the laughter of particular consumers more than others.

The alternative values that did break through, briefly, do at least show that there are 'values beyond value' (Skeggs, 2014) that are still at least latently operating in the creative practice of comedians. The 'dominant' value of laughter submits to entrenched interests and is focused on the building of value convertible to a more successful billing, and for the profitable running of a comedy club. It is an understandable value given the economic context of London, and the expenses related to keeping cultural spaces open (Tapper, 2018). The other maintains the relational and communitarian instincts at base in laughter, the breaking of boundaries and the enjoyment of *communitas* (Turner, 1967). It is the interplay of these value structures that I go on to explore in the next chapter, re-focusing on the live comedy environment as a ritual environment where value struggles are played out.

Chapter 7: 'Is this play?': Communitas, schismogenesis and value in the live comedy experience

Throughout this thesis, I have been making the claim that laughter associated with live stand-up comedy is thoroughly entangled in value struggles. In Chapters 4 and 5, I focused primarily on the consumptive side of the cultural process. I first drew on the experiences and narratives of audience members to show the trace of value struggles in how an Essex hen party enjoyed a night at the comedy club. I then highlighted how favourable valuations of white male laughter could lead to the affective domination of a comedy room by privileged social actors. In Chapter 6, I focused more on the production of comedy. Comedians' creative practice was shown to be influenced by cultural valuation processes - what they produced, tried and took forward to future performances was influenced by their reading of laughter in the process of live stand-up comedy, which tended to put a higher value on laughter from privileged audience members. Yet in each of these cases, there were slithers of hope usually found around instances of laughter, which seemed to articulate a world beyond prevailing valuation regimes. There is an ambiguity in how value is processed in the comedy club; there is something about this sphere of activity that appears to facilitate both the enabling of social reproduction, and resistance to it - at least potentially (Thomassen, 2014).

The evidence of the previous chapters would also suggest the experiences of the comedy club are carried outside of the confines of the comedy club – these experiences inscribe themselves into the habitus (Bourdieu, 1990: 53-56). In the interviews and focus groups, it has been rather surprising to me quite how much the participants remember of the nights recorded. This chapter attempts to account for how the live experience of the comedy club accomplishes this – both the Janus-faced ambivalence towards value and social reproduction, and the marking of social agents. Here, I argue that there is something in the ritualistic structure and patterning of live comedy performances that gives clues as to how these processes are realised. After many years of attendance at live comedy events, it has become abundantly evident that there are similarities in the structuring of all comedy club nights (Rutter, 2000). It is through taking seriously these ritual elements of live stand-up comedy that I make the case for how comedy maintains influence outside of the initial confines of the comedy space.

Primarily through analysis of the video observations conducted as part of this project and drawing on material from the interviews and focus groups where necessary to augment this, I make the comparison between live stand-up gigs and 'rites of passage', a category of ritual that is concerned with the transition of a subject from one status position to another (Van Gennep, 1960[1906]), as noted in Chapter 2. To successfully do this, a given 'neophyte' must make it through a liminal phase where they are betwixt and between, at or on the threshold between two positions. This liminal phase is also characterised by a suspension of normality, stability and identity (Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel, 2013). With this lens, the comedy gig takes on the character of a ritual test through which performers and audience members are involved in a form of trial, to be imbued or stamped with status and value. Crucially, the liminal phase has more recently been understood as having a clear relationship to affectivity (Stenner and Moreno-Gabriel, 2013; Stenner, 2017) - important for the comparison here due to this comedic liminality being infiltrated by the affectivity of laughter. Comedians and audiences bring themselves into this 'ritual process' (Turner, 1969) to 'self-generate' certain feelings (usually related to joy) and draw themselves into close contact with the affective burst of laughter. Additionally, the generation of these feelings and the successful passage through the ritual relies on a carefully managed interrelationship between comedian and audience. In relating some of the commonalities between the comedy experience and 'rites of passage', and establishing how this experience is managed, I intend to show how an arena so often characterised as trivial or mundane is potentially central to explaining societal trajectories.

In the next section, I establish how live stand-up can at least theoretically be said to be ritualistic and potentially transformative. I then move on to the comparison between rites of passage and the structure of a live comedy event, focusing primarily on the powerful role of the master of ceremony. I then suggest the types of test that need to be passed by the performers and audiences and what kinds of status change might occur as a result of this. Through these rites, the power to affect that emerges from these liminal happenings falls to the comedian, who is given license to mould and manipulate audiences as they wish. This is then related to processes of 'communitas' (Turner, 1969) and 'schismogenesis' (Bateson, 1935), as audiences fluctuate between being brought together and

separated. Finally, I suggest that these experiences cut deep, inscribing value into different subject positions and that in current neoliberal conditions - themselves related to a kind of 'permanent liminality' (Szokolczai, 2017) - the live comedy experience is intimately tied to broader power vectors of valuation, competition and the market imperative.

'Sacred' doxa and the transformative potential(s) of live comedy

Here I want to establish the theoretical and conceptual space to posit that live stand-up is: 1) a ritual; 2) that this ritual has the potential to transform people; and 3) that this ritual has the potential to transform people in ways that uphold and/or challenge prevailing cultural value relations. The notion of ritual I wish to invoke is decidedly divorced from an easy connection to religiosity. However, I do wish to retain the idea that secular activities can be considered as 'ritualistic', as such activities are related to notions of the 'sacred'. The idea of the sacred I draw on is therefore necessarily broad, referring to 'what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities which present normative claims over the meaning and conduct of social life' (Lynch, 2012: 29). This definition is similar to that of the Bourdieusian concept of doxa seen in Chapter 5. Indeed, where Bourdieu expands on the concept of doxa in *The Logic of Practice* (1990:68), he writes:

Practical faith is the condition of entry that every field tacitly imposes, not only by sanctioning and debarring those who would destroy the game, but by so arranging things, in practice, that the operations of selecting and shaping new entrants (rites of passage, examinations, etc.) are such as to obtain from them that undisputed, pre-reflexive, naive, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field which is the very definition of doxa.

Tying this back to the sacred, in these terms it is a matter of 'practical faith' - itself a quasi-religious term - that social bodies accept these 'non-contingent realities' as being beyond question. Practical faith is ensured through rituals that imbue ('shape') bodies with the right qualities, or exclude some bodies, to ensure the survival of the sacred. Rites of passage are therefore a means of transforming the habitus - or excluding those who do not have the right habitus - in defence of

the sacred. Following this line of thinking, any secular activity that is implicated in the moulding of the habitus of social subjects, in maintenance of the 'sacred' doxa, can be considered ritualistic. I am therefore interested in how the live stand-up comedy experience as a kind of ritual might carry out this role of transforming the habitus to meet the demands of the field.

However, this leaves us with a somewhat deterministic, almost structural functionalist conception of ritual¹⁹. This is further underlined by Bourdieu's absolute neglect of the concept of liminality - surprising given his anthropological training (Thomassen, 2014: 27). While he does consider rites of passage (as indicated in the quotation above), the features of the central phase - the liminal phase - are unremarked upon. Another essay where Bourdieu does briefly consider rites of passage is entitled 'Rites of Institution' - the very title of the chapter pointing to where the analysis ends up. For Bourdieu, ritual practices have a rather specific 'social function' (Bourdieu, 1991: 117) - the consecration and maintenance of the various capitals, and the legitimation of difference. Any 'liminality' here is a thoroughly predictable liminality. Rituals are part of the cycle of social relations through which certain social subjects become (mis)recognised as legitimately valuable, and others become (mis)recognised as legitimately valueless. Again, this may well be the outcome of most rites and rituals, however the disregard for liminality - that indeterminate space between what was and what will be - also disregards the potential of social actors to remould themselves in ways that do not readily fit the demands of doxa - i.e. to take part in value struggles (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

Yet even if we hold onto the idea that ritual and liminality have the power to remould the habitus, and do so in ways that might be unpredictable, can these really be appropriately attached to the realm of live stand-up comedy? Through Victor Turner, liminality certainly can be. As explored in the literature review (Chapter 2), Turner (1974a) argued that forms of entertainment hold transformative potentials. The powers of the liminal phase have been disembedded from their ritual beginnings and re-embedded in modern/postmodern cultural forms. These entertainment and leisure pursuits

¹⁹ This impulse in some of Bourdieu's work has been criticised more extensively by Richard Jenkins (1992).

contain moments where potentiality - creativity, uncertainty and playfulness - are given full reign. His conceptualisation of the 'liminoid' in arts, leisure and cultural pursuits - termed liminoid to distinguish from liminality found in traditional ritual – posits that these activities have 'potential for changing the ways men [sic] relate to one another and the content of their relationships' (p.16). This lies in the idea that arts and culture, after the industrial revolution, are a sphere of activity outside of work. Whereas liminal ritual in the past would have been enacted to provide neophytes with a solid role and status in the social structure, within political and economic strictures liminoid activity does not (Turner, 1974b: 85). Liminoid forms 'are not integrated into the broad weave of a cohesive social tapestry, nor do they blend into a single context a wider range of available performative and expressive media' (Rowe, 2008: 129).

Turner was generally celebratory of these liminoid forms, suggesting they are a hotbed of 'social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes [...] exposing the injustices, inefficiencies and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures' (p.86). This relates to 'communitas' (Turner, 1969): exposure to the liminoid in contemporary culture can lead to feelings of togetherness that come about when structure – the 'arrangement of positions or statuses' (Deflem, 1991:14) – is lifted. For the purposes of this chapter, liminoid potential can therefore be attached to live stand-up comedy, theoretically allowing the habitus of those involved in live comedy to go through a transformation.

However, the use of Turner here does not so readily allow for live comedy to be considered as ritual in any way. Turner divorced the liminoid from rituals – one of the key differences between 'liminality' and 'liminoid' is the lack of ritual structure around liminoid arrangements. For Turner (1974b), rituals are collective and often follow a biological or calendar-based pattern. Liminoid experiences are 'products of individual or particular group efforts and are generated continuously' (Deflem, 1991:16). There are a couple of points of criticism that can perhaps save us from discarding a ritualistic eye on comic proceedings. Firstly, Sharon Rowe (2008) shows how modern sports events, which would be designated liminoid, are highly ritualised and fundamentally collective and what is more, sports tie themselves to 'seasons' (p.135-136). Thomassen (2014) also suggests that the designation of the liminoid as necessarily more individualistic may be overdrawn: 'they are

clearly still social phenomena' (p.187), often embedded in peer or familial groups that are about tying the individual to the collectivity – akin to 'genuine' ritual.

While I go into more detail below on the precise comparison between rites of passage and the live comedy experience, I underline briefly here how live comedy can be considered ritualistic in Turner's own sense. It is of course collective in nature – live stand-up requires that a group of people get together and collude in an action that produces collective laughter. Quite apart from this small scale collectivity, as suggested in the Ticketmaster (2014) survey referred to in Chapter 4, a large proportion of the population have been to a live comedy show. There has also developed the semblance of comedy season in live stand-up, certainly in London. August is the month of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, an important time for established and burgeoning comedians to try new material or build a profile respectively. While London does not become completely silent on the comedy front in August, many club nights take a hiatus as comedians migrate north of the border for late Summer.

I therefore take forward the argument that live stand-up comedy can be viewed as a form of ritual that has the potential to change and reformulate the habitus of those who take part in it. There is liminal/liminoid potential, which may be realised in the re-establishment of value positions, or in the challenging and reformulation of hierarchies based on valuation processes. In the sections below, I mark out more similarities between rites of passage specifically and the events of the comedy nights I observed, and I try to draw out how these events simultaneously reproduce and rejig prevailing value relations.

Masters of ceremony: the warm-up as preliminal rite

The first and most obvious point of comparison to make between rites of passage and the contemporary live stand-up night is the figure of the 'master of ceremony'. The comedy club night always has a master of ceremony²⁰ - colloquially referred to in the comedy world as an 'MC' (emcee). Every club night I have ever been to has had an MC.²¹ Masters of ceremony are often central in anthropological

²⁰ Can also be referred to as a host or compere, although MC (emcee) is most often used.

²¹ This is distinct from a comedy performance or show where there is one well-

accounts of the ritual process generally (Van Gennep, 1960[1906]; Turner, 1969). Another point of comparison with these rites is the general structure of the event and the master of ceremonies role within it - with definite beginning, middle and end phases (Rutter, 2000). The three phases in rites of passage are those of preliminal/separation phase, liminal/transitional phase, and postliminal/incorporation phase (Van Gennep, 1960: 27) – the master of ceremony leads in, leads through (liminal phase) and leads out initiates, guiding them to the other side of an unstable ceremony. In this comparative account between live stand-up and ritual passages, I attempt as far as possible to follow this logical structure.

Neophytes - those going through initiation or passage in a ritual - are expected to go through some fundamental change by having made it from start to finish, and through the all-important liminal phase. Thomassen (2014) highlights the way that events might unfold in such a passage:

A successful passage also assumes a particular ordering in which somebody goes ahead, showing the way or blazing the trail so that others can follow, 'imitating' him, which corresponds to the need for masters of ceremonies in rites of passage or formative experiences (pp. 86-87)

The master of ceremony in one sense acts as a kind of role model. They have been through the ritual trial before, have succeeded in taking on a status, and so neophytes would do well to replicate the prowess of the master. The master of ceremony has the authority to lay out these tests as they have successfully travelled the same path before. They create the conditions required for the test and they are responsible for trying to ensure people make it through to the other side relatively unscathed. They lead neophytes 'into the wilderness' (Thomassen, 2014:4), subject neophytes to 'a series of tests and personality forming ordeals', taking neophytes to the edge and getting in touch with indeterminate liminality. The master of ceremony must also stay in control in case something gets out of

established act who performs an hour or so of their material, for instance Greg Davies' 'You Magnificent Beast' or Andi Osho's 'AfroBlighty'. Here, the set-up is more often a 'warm-up act' performing a 20-minute set, with a short interval before the main attraction comes on. There is still the act of managing the liminal, affective relations, but it is qualitatively different to a comedy club night.

hand whilst in touch with this dangerous force.

This 'into the wilderness' aspect of liminal rites is literally translated into some of the physical factors that characterise comedy spaces. The comedy space is regarded as separate from the 'real' world and has literally different features to 'normality'. This is remarked upon by comedians and audience alike. During one of the focus groups, Chris - one of the audience members from the East London comedy club - describes the features of the comedy space in question. As I start to playback one of the video clips, he remarks - 'What could be more glamorous?!...the plaster coming off the walls, bunting hanging limply...like Spongebob SquarePants' honeymoon suite'. Jack - one of the performers from the Central London club - suggests that the ideal spaces for comedy are 'basements, any basements, basements are important, I don't like this going upstairs for comedy nonsense...I don't know, it's just better...you just know you've got to walk down, it makes it feel illegal'. Esther - an audience member in the Central London club - makes a special mention of the space in Central London and how it had enlivened her enjoyment of the show: 'it was quite dirty and dark and dingy...I liked that...you felt quite closed in'. The physical environment here appears to help the inversions that are to take place – the reality they are entering into is cartoonish, strange, dilapidated, 'illegal', perhaps filthy and hidden away from the 'real' world.

Once in this 'not quite right' space of the comedy club, the MC then has reign to take neophytes to the edge, affectively speaking. There are many ways in which the MC of a night 'sets the test' and 'leads the way' for both the performers and the audience. The opening gambits at the start of the comedy night are related to the MC ritual role of opening up paths of potentiality and becoming. The building of excitement, cheering, clapping and laughter is to invite 'wild' behaviour into the space. In comedy and entertainment parlance, this is 'warming up' the audience. The MC is responsible for getting the audience ready for what is to come and laying out the terms of the interaction (in a sense the terms of the trial) for the later performers to follow. This is accomplished through affective utterances, employed by MCs to build the affectivity in the club - some as commands, such as 'give me a cheer' and the much more economical imperative 'CLAP!', and some as questions inviting a response, for example: 'who's ready for some

comedy?', or 'are you excited?'. The warm-up function becomes clear in an example from Martin's MC practice, where initially the excitement does not seem to build. The club Martin runs and owns has an audio-visual set-up, a booming sound system and light rig, which he uses to build excitement. Before he comes onto the stage, he announces himself over the speakers, but as he runs towards the stage, he realises the cheering and applause is somewhat muted. From the video observation, it appears a good portion of the audience are not sure what is said over the speaker system, with some patrons seen to be mouthing 'what?' and 'who?' to each other, rather than cheering and clapping. This affective lack is promptly worked upon by Martin who engages in frantic arm waving, but also clear affective commands - 'let's get more excited!' and 'get even more excited! Why not? It's Saturday night!' - the audience enthusiastically responding. This emphasises the importance of the bringing in of affect, a kind of wild feeling, but also the framing of the space in opposition to normality, a sort of 'anti-structure' (Turner, 1969) – Saturday night, the night for partying, the night where the world of work and responsibility should be furthest from your mind. It is an invocation to give in and abandon oneself to a different reality.

Much of what the MCs do and say is intermingled with vigorous gesturing - all of the MCs employing bodily movement to physically pass on energy, so it appears, from themselves to the audience. Thomas (the MC from the club of interest in Chapter 5) runs from one end of the stage to the other, waving his arms upwards to cajole the crowd into ever louder cheers and applause. Martin (the MC from the club featured in Chapter 4) similarly employs a frantic upward arm gesture, slightly jumping up and down as he does it. Amy (the MC of the student comedy night), while being slightly less physically exuberant than either Thomas or Martin,²² still employs her physicality to build audience enthusiasm, punctuating utterances with the same upward arm raise that most often renders a 'woo!' from the audience. What becomes obvious here is that the attempts to move a comedy space into one that is liminal are related to a freedom of bodily movement. A disregard for normal social restraints and splitting neophytes from their normal statuses is partly accomplished through the display of bodily freedom. This is

²² Amy's relative lack of exuberance may be from her having less experience than the others in the role of MC, or perhaps to the gendered expectations of female expressiveness in the comedy club, as explored in Chapter 5.

most crucially related here to the essential ingredient of *laughter*, which is itself so deeply visceral an act, drawing forcefully on the lungs and throat, convulsing the body (Scott, 2014). Loosening the social interrelates with a loosening of the body, which allows for bursts of laughter.

The movement into an otherly space, the affective commands and the loosening of the body are all employed in service to laughter – this is what draws people to a comedy night, and all of these ritual techniques are designed specifically for bringing it forth. Paul Stenner (2017) helpfully ties contemporary forms of arts and entertainment, and the consumption and production of such things, to the notion of ritual through the concept of ‘liminal affective technologies’ or LATs (Stenner and Moreno, 2013; Stenner, 2017). Through these LATs, liminal affectivity can be self-generated, navigated and enjoyed. Each LAT is different - ritual is focused on turning affectivity into sacred experience whereas, for example, theatre, music, painting or dance turns affectivity into an aesthetic experience, and sports or games turn affectivity into a ludic experience. Stenner makes the point, however, that aesthetic and ludic pursuits developed from the structures of sacred rituals, therefore still bear the hint of sacred significance. The performance of ritual is accomplished in the belief that something good, something of value, will come out of the engagement with them. The point of similarity to be emphasised is that these devices generate affectivity to produce experiences that are felt as utterly, fundamentally, important.

We can then conceive here of these pre-liminal efforts of the MC as ‘practices in which a carefully designed product of prior feelings is self-consciously used to occasion comparable feelings amongst those participating’ (Stenner, 2017: 233). These are practiced to ‘formulate and express valued feelings and emotions’ (p. 234) and to pronounce something’s importance. People attend live stand-up comedy gigs or perform as stand-up comedians to self-generate emotional effects, with the aim of producing moving experiences that are somewhat out of the ordinary, and that potentially induce psychosocial transformation. Comedy is referred to explicitly by Stenner as a LAT which has ‘a deep relationship with the ritual practices traditionally involved in the transformation of subjectivity at play during passage between worlds’ (2017: 160). He further suggests that the cultivation of the liminal experience and expression of comedy, related to the

visceral affectivity of laughter, has the potential to deeply affect us, to change our status, to change our 'selves'. Laughter and liminality are intimately connected, and these 'liminal occasions generate an indeterminacy of status [...] this indeterminacy carries both negative and positive (and indeed neutral) potentials' (p.185). Stand-up is conducted and attended in the belief that comedy has the ability to evoke affectivity that will have value - it feels important somehow. In drawing ourselves close to this powerful indeterminacy, we open ourselves up to a range of status potentials and struggles for value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

Tightrope walk of comedy affect

Cecile B. Vigouroux (2015) similarly analyses the start of a stand-up performance in France and notes the MC's role in warming up the audience, suggesting its function as 'preparing the audience to welcome the performers he will later call on stage' (p.256). This does appear to be part of the point - in the above example of Martin's muted entrance, he is re-setting the expectation of what the audience should be doing when an act arrives. The MCs also use the energy built up in these early exchanges to hype the coming performers. All of the MCs state who will be appearing on stage later, to which the audience automatically cheer regardless of whether they have heard of the acts or not. Therefore, the MC is engaged in whipping up affectivity, but perhaps this is not completely 'wild' - there is a certain direction or imperative to this. At the same time as leading the event 'into the wilderness', the MC is controlling and manipulating that affective potential (Kyrölä, 2010: 76; Ahmed, 2004: 146).

This points to another essential part of the MC's role and its relation to ritual. While the MC is engaged in the warm up, they simultaneously - and paradoxically - assert their control over it. Vigouroux (2015:256) suggests how in the opening section of the stand-up show he analysed, an MC is also setting up 'interactional roles' through playful acts with the audience - setting the terms of engagement and behavioural codes. Transgression of these roles meets with sanction from the MC - in Vigouroux's example, an audience member is told to 'shut the fuck up' when they speak out of turn, their excitement boiling over and requiring redress. Similarly, in Martin's exchanges with the Essex hen-do recounted in Chapter 4, when they laugh out of turn and appear to start ignoring him, he pointedly tells them to 'shut the fuck up' - to which most members of the group

react by casting their eyes down like naughty schoolchildren. The overall point is that 'warming up' the audience is about achieving a balance between the potential of affect and making sure that this does not go too far. This, again, is related to the function of masters of ceremony in ritual. They not only invite unruly forces in, bringing participants to the edge of chaotic affectivity, but they are also tasked with guiding neophytes safely through the uncertainty of this induced liminal phase (Thomassen, 2014:103). MCs have to ensure they are ultimately in control in case proceedings take an unexpected turn.

The control over affectivity displayed by MCs is not always antagonistic or so barefacedly disciplinary. Amy's warm-up routine exerts a softer form of control by drawing on the fact that her comedy night is aimed at raising money for charity - a way of setting the expectation that the night is for laughs, but that there is no need for nastiness. Emphasising this, however, presents the possibility of over-dampening affective proceedings, leading Amy to switch tone again turning the expectation back towards laughter and a measure of abandon by saying: 'but enough of that, let's get this thing started with me! Because I'm an egotistical bastard'. She reintroduces an edge to the event, prompting a loud laugh and cheer. The MC is walking a tightrope between 'dangerous' affectivity and control.

In Chapter 6, I described how Reece - the particularly loud audience member - continues his whooping longer than the rest of the audience when Thomas arrives on stage. This initiated an interaction between the two, where the whoop becomes a toy: Thomas gestures up, Reece whoops louder; Thomas gestures downwards, and the whoop diminishes. In this interaction, Thomas takes up the role of affective conductor. Later in his opening gambit, Thomas exhibits his control of the laughter and applause of the audience through a kind of game. He asks the audience to hold their hands in front of them a couple of inches apart - which he then jokingly refers to as 'tantric applause' - and then talks through his introduction of the first act, all the while the audience's desire to bring their hands together in applause building, until finally, he permits applause. Martin, by the end of his warm-up section, ensures he has control by telling the audience to do a 'practice round of applause', then tells them to do 'double speed applause' and then an 'animal noise of your choosing' - which most of the audience do before breaking into laughter at their ridiculous selves. By the end of their opening

gambits, the MCs have displayed that they have the audience right where they required them to be - ready to laugh, but ready to be controlled if required.

Liminal phase - between play and threat

Taking the connection to 'traditional' masters of ceremony seriously, the opening gambits of an MC involve setting up testing conditions through a reframing of the space. The 'warming up' of an audience in the comedy club is not simply ensuring that comedians receive a warm welcome, but to ensure that the audience is open to forms of manipulation (Quirk, 2010) and full of dangerous energy - audience interaction, including teasing and disciplining, ensures that the fragile 'rules' of the space are established. Returning to the central tenet that a rite of passage sets up a test, the test appears to be that the comedian must successfully walk this affective tightrope – maintaining the energy, but not letting it boil over and out of control – so that the performance is in good shape to pass back to the MC at the end of their bit. The MC has made the audience laugh, cheer, make animal noises on command; now it is over to the performers to similarly control this energy. Successfully making it through this passage means they get stamped, or restamped, with a valuable status: that of comedian.

The test for the audience seems altogether less clear. For a given audience member to have successfully made it to the end of the night - having not been thrown out of the comedy establishment or singled out as being a 'bad' audience member - they would have to successfully accomplish a few things: firstly, they should be ready to laugh, eased up enough to let their bodies go with the flow; secondly, they should laugh in the right places; finally, they should not be so out of control that they disrupt the event. All of these tests for the audience appear to be immanent to the efforts of the MC detailed above.

This chimes with what audiences and comedy consumers expect to get out of their contact with live comedy. In both focus groups, and in the testimonies of the comedians when considering the importance of comedy, there was an underlying yearning for social connection, and togetherness. My Essex participants wanted to feel part of something - they wanted this comedy night to turn the anxieties related to upcoming nuptials into a memorable get-together. With my East London focus group, when considering the importance of comedy, they firstly

drew on notions of strong friendships and successful relationships, a sense that laughter through comedy can bring people together. As I mentioned in Chapter 6, nearly all of the comedians primarily connected their comedy and memories of laughter to families and close relationships. This is the 'use-value' (Marx in Varul, 2011), the value beyond economic calculations of valuation, that people are looking for in their consumption, and people believe they can get to it by exposing themselves to collective laughter, perhaps best achieved in contemporary society through a comedy experience. Based on this, the test for the comedian is to encourage feelings of togetherness and a shared experience in the comedy room - turning the use-values of the audience into future exchange-value (Marx in Varul, 2011) for themselves in the comedy market.

For the comedy audience, there appears to be a desire to establish social connections and access feelings of togetherness through comedy, and so one of the changes of status being fought for is to move from feeling individual to being part of a group. But again, this may be compromised by value games in the field of comedy consumption – what groups might it be perceived as valuable to be connected to? Who is allowed to join particular groups – how are people read and inscribed with value? (Skeggs, 2004:2). If the audience plays its part as a 'great crowd', then the comedian will pass their test; conversely, an unruly crowd, or a silent crowd, can affect the successful passage of a comedian – they may 'die' up there.²³ If the comedian plays their part in arousing collective affectivity and making the audience feel together, then the audience will pass their test. There is an intricate balancing act being attempted by all participants, based on a conflict between exchange-value and use-value, and indeed entanglements between the two in the form of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

What allows this balancing act to take place is the nature of frame that has been established by the MC, which primes reactions and sets expectations and limits

²³ Allusions to 'death' on stage were common in the comedian interviews - Martin put it most starkly - 'when I started doing stand-up...doing open mics, I was really, really bad, I knew I had to do it, I knew I had to die...so I went out and died, and eventually I started getting better...I just died every night...all my friends were saying 'just fucking give it up'...and I was like 'no, no, that's the whole point, I want to learn how to do it'. This is another relation between comedy and ritual - a noted part of ritual initiations are 'rites of separation' (van Genneep, 1960:184), related to 'symbolic death'.

in this comic, liminal space. It has been argued by various authors (Coates, 2007; Fry, 2011[1963]; Norrick, 2004) that the space of comic discourse takes place in something akin to that of the play frame as specified by Gregory Bateson (1987). Bateson describes the moment he becomes aware of play as a specific form of meta-communication that frames an act. On taking a research trip to the Fleishhacker Zoo, Bateson watches two monkeys playing, 'engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to, but not the same as those of combat' (1987: 185). The monkeys had somehow communicated to each other the message 'this is play' and exhibited the ability to frame their actions in ways that muddle the logic of straightforward denotive messages: 'the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite' (p.189). The general comparability to stand-up comedy is reasonably clear: that which is said and done in a comic space operates under the general rule that nothing is to be taken seriously. Comic and audience engage in an interactive sequence that may contain things that look serious but are not to be treated as so.

The meta-communicative actions of the MC at the beginning of the night underline how messages in this space are not to be received in the same way as those in 'serious' spaces. The exaggerated actions, the energetic gesture and the playful intonations of the MC described earlier set up a world that is distinct from the world of seriousness, the world of proper rules - to appreciate the comic demands stepping out of real life. Martin describes his approach to MC-ing as 'rude, but tongue-in-cheek', and there are ways he attempts to ensure his words are read as such: his command that the front row hen party 'shut the fuck up' is preceded by a small giggle that leads into the word 'shut', and he smiles as he says it. It is remarkably close to a 'baring teeth' behaviour, and it should be noted that Bateson makes a comparison to the way in which the act of making a threat is similar to that of play (Bateson, 1987: 187). A threat, again, denotes that an action is not taking place, but possibly will take place - it denotes the act without the act taking place. Similarly, Thomas warns the crowd against heckling by playfully threatening a violent act, using archaic and ludicrous language as to coat the threat in just enough absurdity to assure the 'unserious' nature of the utterance. The words he uses - 'I will gore your face concave' - are met with a smattering of - slightly uneasy - laughter.

The 'Is this play?' frame

Both of these examples hint towards a problem with characterising the liminal phase as one of clear playful abandon. It must be stated that for the most part, comedians maintain a playful atmosphere. There is a substantial amount of discourse in the comedian interviews that refers to bad gigs and the problem of heckling, yet in the gigs I observed, and in the vast majority of the gigs I have attended, this ritual passes off without catastrophic incident. That said, there were instances on the nights I observed where the fragility of the frame became more marked. Indeed, it is a point that Bateson elaborates on in passing in his work - because play often deals with dangerous behaviours, a line, or the outline of the frame, can often be unwittingly crossed. The classic example Bateson draws on is a peace ritual from the Andaman Islands, whereby each side strikes the other in 'ritual blows of peacemaking' - however these blows are liable to be mistaken for the "real" blows of combat' (1987: 187). The potential for misunderstanding in playful encounters makes the line between conflict and reconciliation brittle, especially when dealing with potentially dangerous behaviours. In this instance, what both sides of this ritual action are doing is something slightly different than 'playing' - they are continuously working out whether what they are doing is still play at all. Bateson (1987: 188) suggests that this is 'a more complex form of play; the game which is constructed not upon the premise 'This is play' but rather around the question 'Is this play?'. Suggestively, he offers the example of hazing initiations as an example of an 'is this play?' ritual.

Live stand-up comedy operates in this ritual frame. It is a ritual in which comedians put forward propositions that they are suggesting are playful - humorous, jokey, laughter-competent. It is a ritual where comedians are tested on their ability to get performances and utterances playfully past an audience, where they are tested as being valued through laughter. However, humour harbours serious potential (Billig, 2005). While considerable effort is exerted by MCs and comedians alike in performing play, there are occasions when this is threatened - they are playing with volatile materials.

One instance where the negotiation of humour becomes apparent comes from the experience of the women from Essex. In his act, Jack starts to joke about the

Brexit vote. When I was carrying out this video observation, the vote had occurred two weeks prior - it was fresh and highly contentious, a feeling that has barely disassembled now three years on. At the very mention of the word Brexit, the behaviour of the group as a whole takes a decidedly odd turn: Esther takes on a stiff grimace, looking straight up at the comedian; to my eye the expression conveys a 'please don't hurt us' signal to the comedian,²⁴ and represents an effort to 'keep herself together'. In Fig.1, you can see how fixed this gaze is - everyone else moves from frame to frame, Esther is still. Around the same time, Meg takes to staring quite avidly at her phone, disengaging from the scene altogether, engaging with the technology at hand to fleetingly escape. Understanding live stand-up as an 'is this play?' frame highlights the constant negotiation taking place between what is and what is not serious.

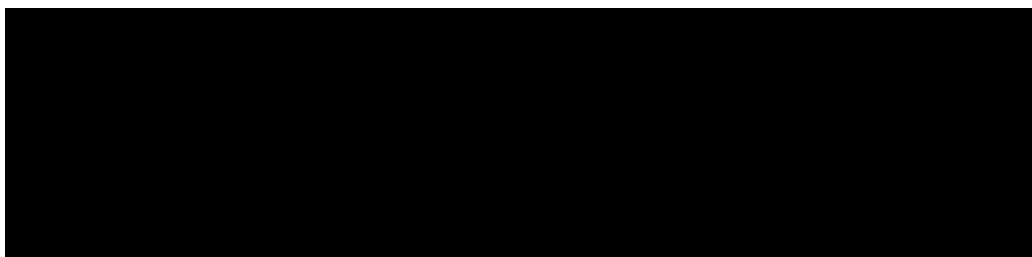


Fig.1 Esther's grimace (second from right) and Meg's wilful distraction (first on right)

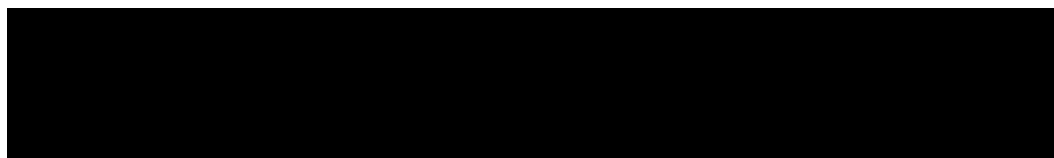


Fig.2 Before and after joke about evangelical Christians.

Similarly, in the East London comedy night, there is an occasion when audience action is markedly muted. One of the performers, Rebecca - after introducing herself as a Christian - uses the line 'Are there any evangelical Christians in? [audience silence] Ah good, because they're cunts.' The usually effusive Reece grins, but no laughter; Alexa drops her eyes and moves her mouth sideways; and Chris slightly furrows his brow as if confused somehow. More generally, the utterance meets with a half laugh, before deadening to a very noticeable stop. A

²⁴ This impression was corroborated by Jan in the 'Essex' focus group, who said she recognised Esther's grimace from when they were at school and trying to avoid being in trouble with a teacher – it has a relation to being disciplined.

further example from this night concerns a joke from the MC about Boris Johnson. The MC often uses a list form to his comedy and has humorously compared Johnson to a range of things including a mop made of meat, and so on. Halfway through the bit, Thomas drops in the line: 'Boris Johnson - who is a quarter Turkish'. The attempt here, I think, is to outline the absurdity of Boris Johnson heading up a Brexit campaign that at one point played on the fear of a Turkish immigrant 'invasion' as a reason to leave Europe. However, in the context of the night, the utterance falls flat. It so noticeably falls flat that it draws comment from Thomas himself - 'yeah, I wasn't sure about that one either'. In both instances, it appears that the jokes are in possible contravention of the stated 'no kicking down' policy of this night - the utterances fail the 'is this play?' test. What needs emphasising here is that these are not a priori 'bad jokes' - it is more that they find their value as jokes through exploring the line between comedy and seriousness in an active negotiation, which is based on the values both comedian and audience bring to the ongoing interaction.

Indeed, this is the essence of liminality, or more precisely a liminal passage. Kofoed and Stenner (2017:178) highlight a particular aspect of the liminal rite: that a 'both/and' ambivalence is tolerated – liminality is not a simple inversion. For example, in a rite of passage where a boy 'becomes' a man, in the preliminal phase he is a boy, in the postliminal phase he is a man, but in the space in between - the liminal - he is *both* boy *and* man. Reminding ourselves of this and looking again at the preliminary work of the master of ceremony, the space of performance in the comedy club is not purely non-serious, and not purely playful: there are still 'rules'. The comedy space is *both* serious *and* non-serious, leading to the question, 'Is this play?'. We can apply this idea to the tests that are faced by performers and audiences. The performers are *both* comedians *and* non-comedians – the question being 'am I a comedian?'. It does not seem so clear cut when applying this to the audience. Certainly, they enter the comedy space as an assortment of individuals, or small groups, and the efforts of the MC are to 'melt them down' somewhat to create a whole group, an audience. Therefore, in the liminal phase, they are *both* an assortment of individuals *and* an audience - the question being asked is 'are we together?'. The comedy club experience is one where social groups bringing their differential values are either brought together or split apart - the laughter filled space of the comedy club is an arena

for the social reproduction of cultural value, as it is performed through an 'is this play?' ritual.

Between schismogenesis and communitas

There are two further concepts that help to give purchase on how value games are precipitated through laughter in the 'is this play?' ritual of the comedy club - 'communitas' and 'schismogenesis'. First to communitas: 'the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind [sic] as a homogenous, unstructured and free community' (Turner, 1974:169) - as described in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter briefly. If the ritual is completed successfully, with everyone making it over the threshold and everyone playing their role and fulfilling the requirements of their status change, then we might see a non-comedian become a comedian (or a less experienced comedian become a more experienced comedian, stamped with more authority) and a mass of individuals become an audience. For the audience, this might look something akin to communitas. In relation to laughter, these would be the moments in a comedy club when people get taken over by laughter. These are also moments when collective non-laughter may be felt, the 'homogenous' feeling that something should not be laughable, or a subject of play. There is an exhilaration in a non-laugh, producing a collective full-stop to proceedings, a kind of power in collective joy-killing - 'a bracing contraction of relation' (Berlant, 2017: 308). While this may threaten the comedian's passage through the ritual, it does not necessarily lead to 'dying' on stage - it can be seen as being all part of the passage to learning to be a comedian; they have, in this instance, fulfilled the function of engendering togetherness in the audience.

There is evidence of these kinds of affective convergence in Fig. 2, in both laughter and non-laughter. The collective laughter of Alexa, Chris and Reece was at a joke by Rebecca regarding her being given a guide to being a good woman by her mother - 'which includes a section called "Romancing with Food", or as I like to call it "Fifty Shades of Gravy"'. This joke is met with a huge laugh in the comedy club, and again when being re-watched in the focus group. Discussing this clip, the focus group suggest their laughter is to do with convergence around the value of feminism, recognising that the bit was poking fun at the absurdity of gender norms. Collective, effervescent laughter can bring people together around

progressive values. Similarly, the non-laugh at the poking of fun at Christians could be interpreted as showing disapproval at the unfair victimisation of a religious group. However, in the focus group discussion, a different framing for non-laughter is drawn upon. As Chris explains: 'It feels like a bit of comedy that's in there for another night, for a room full of angry hostile people. It isn't necessary or appreciated in this room'. The *communitas* of this group is apparently dependent on othering - they do not suggest that the comedian is 'bad' in any way, it is that another imagined audience would demand that kind of material. What at first glance looks like the positive, world-affirming experience of *communitas* is actually based on the very different process of 'schismogenesis' - a concept formed by Bateson (1935) when he became interested in what can occur when two distinct cultural groups come together or make contact.

In line with Turner's views on *communitas*, Bateson was aware of the possibility of 'acceptance and adaptation' in this cultural contact, a mixing of groups, leading to something of an 'approximate equilibrium' (p.179); however, he had also noted that in some instances of culture contact, the direct opposite can occur. The differences between cultural groups can become exacerbated, exaggerated, leading to further processes of differentiation. More precisely, what is seen through the example of Fig. 2 is 'complementary schismogenesis', which exaggerates cultural difference between groups. Bateson's example is that if one group is culturally regarded as assertive, and another as culturally submissive, it may be that the behaviour of submissiveness accentuates the behaviour of assertiveness in the other group and vice versa, leading to 'a progressive unilateral distortion of the personalities of the members of both groups, which results in mutual hostility between them' (p.199). In this example, the group in the room is culturally regarded as having better, more progressive, more enlightened taste - higher cultural capital (Friedman, 2014). The collective experience of laughter and non-laughter affirms a set of values that builds up their side of the schism, and imaginatively diminishes the other side, reproducing their feeling of dominance.

This schismogenesis can be seen more clearly in the example of Fig.1: while Jack brings up Brexit, the fault-lines between groups become very apparent. The Remainers are energised, the Leaver - Meg - disconnects and stares at her

phone. The affective practice of Esther's grimace is instructive: she is forcefully living a value of togetherness and sociality - she voted Remain, but was aware of Meg's choice, and as she is sat between Meg and the rest of the group, she is affectively trying to bridge the difference between them. This being so, the collective laughter of the Remainers, supported by the power of the comedian through his joking, forcefully brings that group together whilst affectively diminishing the other - values can be forcefully celebrated through laughter, but this serves to exacerbate cultural differences and 'mutual hostility' (Bateson, 1935: 199).

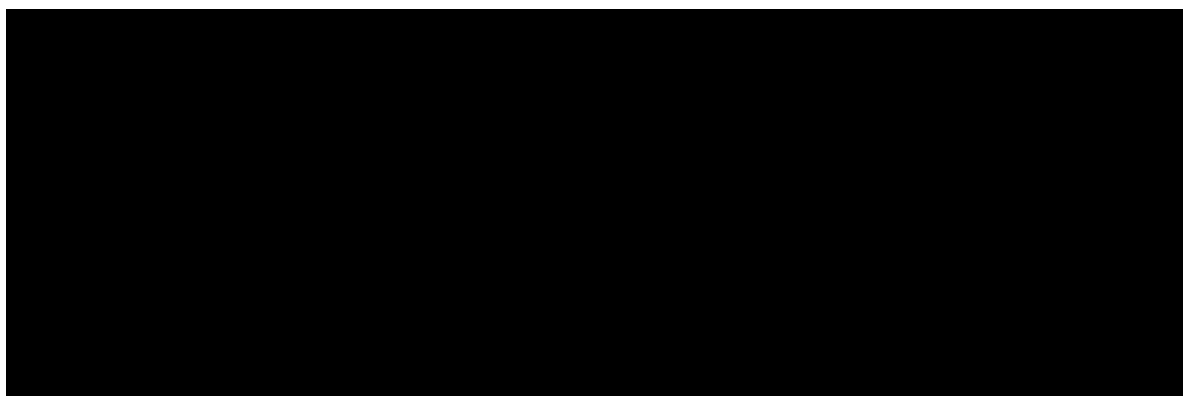


Fig 3. Communitas through laughter?

Fig. 3 is a still taken from the West London student comedy night, and this represented the point in the night that got the biggest laugh. Here you see people doubled over, mouths wide open, convulsing. This was a sustained laugh that eventually moved into clapping, with some audience members having to catch their breath. Laughter of this type is frankly intoxicating, viscerally exciting and deeply affecting. It affirms a togetherness: everybody feeling together in unison, laughter breaking down barriers. The comedian here has asked 'is this play?', and the audience have forcefully and collectively let it pass, a collective affirmation. It looks joyful, and compared to the action of this audience mentioned in Chapter 6,²⁵ it seems to represent a breaking of barriers, an experience of free community.

And yet, the joke that provoked this huge laugh is Paul's joke, also from Chapter

²⁵ Fig.1 and Fig.3 in Chapter 6 show how uneven the 'affective practice' of this group was at stages in this event, particularly in terms of a gendered divide in action between the two men on the right, and the two women on the left.

6 - his 'satirical' take on homosexuality as choice and disease. It is perhaps too easy to read effervescent, collective laughter that overtakes the body as simply breaking through convention - affective potential melting structure (Carty and Musharbash, 2006:222). Here, it may well have broken through a convention of basic respect towards different sexualities, affirming to this group the category of 'gay' as fair game for comedic play: the comedian asked 'is this play?', and the audience viscerally agreeing - from this a comedian takes themselves more seriously as a comedian carrying this comedy material. Moreover, the audience appear to have been stamped quite firmly with the status of 'audience' based on a collective value of heteronormativity. Further still, this could be conceptualised as the ritualistic reconsecration of heteronormative doxa - the comedy environment as a 'rite of institution' (Bourdieu, 1991). Bringing back the concept of LATs here, it is useful to remember that 'liminal occasions generate an indeterminacy of status [...] this indeterminacy carries both negative and positive (and indeed neutral) potentials' (Stenner, 2017:185). I argue here that indeterminacy has led to a negative potential – laughter reproducing cultural valuations of sexualities, and deeply inscribing this experience into social actors.

I do not want to deny that there is an immense power in potentially progressive *communitas*, which can be generated through comedy and laughter. It seems conceivable that alternative valuations can be kindled and made to live through laughter (see Brassett, 2016). It is simply that, in contemporary social conditions, it does not seem to happen often. It is, of course, possible that I was unlucky with the nights I observed, and that the majority of comedy spaces do contain liberatory laughter. But given the cultural economy context examined throughout this thesis - dominated by straight, white, middle-class males (Brook, O'Brien and Taylor, 2018) - I would assume these are rare spaces indeed. Laughter and affect with any hope of liberatory change is struggling to find a space - and this also relates to how these ritual events are brought to a close.

Rites of incorporation and the looming market

The end of the club nights all feature a set of closing remarks from the MC. Again, this can be fruitfully compared to the last stage in a rite of passage: the rites of incorporation or re-aggregation (Van Gennep, 1960:27). After the phase of liminal affectivity, this part of the ritual is to establish 'what is here' - who or what made it

over the threshold, facilitating a return to the (possibly new) 'real' and the (possibly new) 'normal'. It is also an occasion where the new identities, statuses or positions are established and recognised (Stenner, 2017:62). In closing the events, again, all of the MCs had similar gambits. They start by thanking the audience - none of the events I observed had any catastrophic disturbance and so are congratulated for having acted as suitably good audience members; however, Martin in the Central London comedy club does reserve a special mention for my Essex participants - a marking out of their different status.

All of the MCs then go on to thank each of the performers in turn, encouraging rounds of applause and whooping and cheering for each of the acts. Again, in the events I observed, none of the comics 'died' on stage and so all get an appreciative whoop and clap from the audience. There is a little hint of competition in here - some of the comedians getting recognisably louder or more concerted cheers than others. Every comedian has made it through the ritual to become a comedian, or to maintain their status as comedian - but some have been affectively imbued with more (or comparatively less) value through this ceremony, a part of the 'affective economy' of the comedy environment (Ahmed, 2004). This element of competition is more pronounced still in Thomas's closing - as part of his comedy night, there is an open mic competition where four new comedians are given five minutes each. The audience votes for their favourite act, and the winning act is invited back to the next club night to do a ten-minute set. It is in Thomas's closing that this winner is revealed - audience affection for an act is more directly funnelled into the exchange value of a particular comic. As I suggested earlier however, affection is entangled with cultural capital in the processes of affective practice.

Finally, and crucially, every MC turns to talk about money or the selling of future products. Martin goes into a sales pitch - there is a show on soon after the one I observed, which he pushes to potential punters and suggests they can buy tickets and spend time at one of his two bars, resident in the same building; he then promotes the website and runs through what other nights are on offer at his club in the week. It is perhaps the most bare-faced of the MC closings that directly tries to machinate the goodwill of the audience into future economic accrual.

Thomas brings up money in a slightly different way - as touched upon in Chapter 5, his is a 'pay what you can' night, and so encourages donations. He states that he is 'forced to raise the grubby subject of money' and compares his night favourably with other nights in London for which you would pay up front. He suggests, humorously of course, that other nights are run 'by bellends for bellends', characterises audiences at these events as 'a congregation of arsewipes', and then asks the audience to pay what they can as this night is 'lovely and inclusive'. Again, the issue with this night, as I addressed earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 5, is not only that in order to survive it must find ways of making money, but that the way in which it does ensure its survival is by creating a self-congratulatory vibe that casts anybody who goes to other comedy nights as dullards, less-than, and culturally inept. It is competing for its space in the marketplace by appealing, apparently successfully, to a middle-class liberal constituency. Thomas is mobilising differences in cultural capital to profitable effect. Through this, Thomas has perhaps unwittingly produced a space that would feel quite alien and unwelcoming to many working-class comedy consumers who might otherwise be attracted by the low cost.

Finally, Amy and the West London student comedy night are different again - this was a charity event. Amy sells the fact that there is a tombola raffle to be completed and that the audience could still buy tickets. She also urges the audience to sponsor her and some of the other performers who are to take part in a charity run the following weekend. Yet the point still stands that, even though this is for charitable reasons, the imperative behind the enterprise was to make money. Whatever the use-value of comedy, exchange-value still bites. In sum, the incorporation of these ritual events into the 'go home' message of the MC entangles the effervescent joy of laughter with the formation of cultural value differences, the winning of competitions, and money. I argue that the functioning of the MCs' closing statement as a rite of incorporation contributes to establishing a thoroughly 'market-oriented mentality' (McGuigan, 2005: 231).

Conclusion

Understanding the live stand-up comedy experience as related to ritual, as a liminal affective technology, underlines its importance as a part of the reconsecration and renewal of cultural values. Recognising its ritualistic framing

as close to an 'is this play?' frame rather than a 'play frame' is vitally important. Oftentimes, the 'play frame' - the 'it's just a joke' discourse - is invoked to allow certain people to get away with certain things as it positions the utterances and occurrences of stand-up comedy as non-serious, as trivial, as nothing much to worry about. What the invocation of this argument ignores is the necessity of the non-serious in setting the boundaries of the serious, of the importance of the trivial in every day relations, and of the centrality of play in fundamental social processes. Indeed, the figure of the 'feminist killjoy' is invoked by Ahmed (2010: 50-87) to explicitly challenge the idea that joking and laughter has no societal impact. As I have demonstrated, live stand-up comedy brings both comedians and audiences into contact with liminal affectivity - an enormously powerful space of potentiality - and so it cannot be emphasised enough that these spaces need very careful consideration.

Characterising this space as ritualistic and liminal also highlights the latent potentials of comedy as transformative and liberatory, as a challenge to prevailing conditions (Weaver, 2010; Brassett 2016). There are indeed cramped spaces where affective practices (Wetherell, 2012) coalesce around progressive ideas, a glimmer of hope where collective effervescence seems a driving factor in people's actions rather than calculations on the basis of value. Perhaps if the structures of the ritual itself were disrupted the comedy club might lay the groundwork for the reformulation of the taken-for-granted. However, what I found most forcefully in the analysis of my empirical material here is that all of this manipulation and affectivity was funnelled into the production of social difference through unequal valuations, a competition between comedians on who could garner the biggest cheers or literally the most votes, and an invocation to spend money. It is the reproduction and reinstitution of doxa (Bourdieu, 1990), and the prevailing neoliberal doxa at that. Will Davies (2014: np) offers a range of definitions of how neoliberalism is manifested in different contexts - the most pertinent for this thesis being:

the ethical and political vision [of neoliberalism] is dominated by an idea of competitive activity, that is, the production of inequality. Competition and inequality are valued positively under neoliberalism, as a non-socialist principle for society in general, through which value [...] can best be

pursued.

The ritual experience of the comedy club - as a status-stamping event, a generator of *communitas* around certain values, a schismogenic producer of subject positions - gets incorporated, in the final analysis here, into the neoliberal precepts – of valuation, competition and the market. The master narrative of economic value in cultural life looms large (O'Brien, 2014: 43). This introduces a final problem that I will consider in the concluding chapter: that neoliberalism itself can be understood as a form of 'permanent liminality' (Szokolczai, 2017). This liminal affective technology, as ritual, essentially reincorporates the body to be ready for further experiences of liminality, to be continually stamped, valued, measured, differentiated: it trains us, both comedians and audiences, for neoliberal manipulation. Let us not underestimate how powerful these comedic manipulations have the potential to be: the MCs I observed proved remarkably adept at getting their audiences into a position of being in and out of control, simultaneously affectively open but receptive to discipline; it is a vulnerable position for audiences to be in. This is how the liminal affective machinations of the live comedy environment, through the 'affective practice' of laughter, are able to cut deep - inscribing themselves in social subjects, and perpetuating social formations of cultural value.

Chapter 8: Laughter's Entanglement in Struggles for Value

This thesis started with a key central question: how does the practice of laughter relate to the social reproduction of cultural value? My primary focus throughout has been laughter found in the space of the live comedy club, where it is purposely being brought to life by comedians, and where it is being expressed most heartily by comedy audiences. Throughout, I have found that laughter is thoroughly entangled in the machinations of valuation processes. The comic space, so often held up as an arena where social order is lifted or turned upside-down, is suffused with value games that find their way into the interactions of the comedy club and support prevailing power relations. There are hints of value struggles (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), and 'values beyond value' (Skeggs, 2014), moments where collective laughter appears to offer forceful potentials to escape or challenge valuation, but these are so often quickly closed down.

Laughter more generally emerges as a powerful tool for domination, establishing comedy spaces as territories for particular types of body - white, male, middle-class and heteronormative. The establishment of this somatic norm of the comedy club, through laughter, feeds into how certain laughter, from certain subjects, becomes imbued with more value by those producing comedy. White, middle-class male laughter is (mis)recognised (Bourdieu, 1986) as the evaluative checkmark for creative, and therefore valuable, comedy. Finally, the experiences of the live comedy space - where these processes of production, consumption, affect, discourse, valuation and struggle forcefully come together through laughter - cut deep. The ritual process through which comedians present and produce their work appears to ensure that what happens in these spaces lingers in the habitus. It is potentially transformational, but not necessarily in the direction of freedom from, or the potential to challenge, value games. Indeed, the transformations of the comedy space appear to be oriented towards the production of habitus ready to be tested and exploited all the more. Yet, this does at least show that the comedy club is a worthwhile battleground for perhaps more progressive transformations to be fought for.

In this final chapter, I further summarise the findings of this research by revisiting the key themes outlined in the introduction in order to highlight the broader

implications of this thesis. I examine how the overall analysis in my project has worked with and against those ideas: how my project contributes to understanding the complicated inter-relation between comedy consumption and production, and its relation to inequality; how concepts of taste and embodiment have been addressed; and how laughter and comedy contribute to value games and classificatory practices. I then move on to consider the issue of 'permanent liminality' mentioned at the end of Chapter 7, and how the 'affective practice' (Wetherell, 2012) of laughter found in the comedy club feeds into this characterisation of late modernity. Finally, I tentatively offer a way out of this particular bind for laughter, suggesting a sociological intervention that might reengineer the comedy environment, taking advantage of its transformational properties.

Laughter's entanglement in comedy consumption and production

The findings of this thesis underline how important comedy feels to both comedy producers and consumers. Throughout, whether my participants were talking about their experiences of the live environment and sharing their joy or disgust at comedy products, revealing memories related to a lifetime of consuming comedy, or sharing the trials and delights of being a comedian - this was no trivial matter, and never simply about laughter. Quite why comedy comes to matter in the life of my participants relates most strongly to values - the ideas attached to laughter, comedy and humour.

It is these differential values that underline how comedy consumption and production come to reproduce inequality. In Chapter 4, laughter mattered in the life of my Essex participants because it was involved in the making of memorable moments, and the affirmation of their friendship group - but their raucous behaviour was also related to shame and disidentification from a devalued subject position. In Chapter 5, my middle-class participants also related laughter to notions of friendship, but their investment in comedy consumption very much related to it as a form of cultural capital, and they made sense of their laughter as a signal of their good taste in comedy. It is also in Chapter 5 where the idea of comedy as having value in presenting new ideas to people is considered, although this also appears to be about presenting middle-class ideas to 'normies' in the hope that normies will improve. In Chapter 6, again, early memories of

laughter and comedy as a resource for togetherness abounded, but then also notions as to the 'right' comedy to know were imagined as keys to the field of comedy production. Finally, a notion of why this might matter so deeply is developed in Chapter 7 - that ritualistic consumption and the affective power of comedy purposefully produced by comedians ensures that these experiences of comedy are foundational to, and transformative of, the habitus. Comedy consumption and production matters deeply, but it matters deeply to different groups in different ways and contributes to the ongoing social reproduction of difference.

Another finding that must be emphasised in relation to comedy production and comedy consumption is quite how intertwined the two are. Comedians are also part of the audience - as already mentioned, they attached value to comedy not only as producers, but also as consumers who create a sense of their comedic self using the products they have previously consumed. Many of my comedian participants held tastes that would be characterised as typical of those with 'high cultural capital' (Friedman, 2014) - i.e. middle class. Indeed, Kannan referred to himself quite proudly as a 'comedy snob' (see also Friedman, 2014). Therefore, their taste values find their way into the production of their comedy. They also build important social relations - social capital - through their engagement with the comedy world, and relate to others in that world through their taste. Given that this is a realm of production apparently dominated by white, middle-class men, the tastes that come to be valued, and the comedy produced, seem geared for those tastes. In the comedy club, it is also these white male laughers who seem to get noticed and have their tastes put centre stage. The conditions of production and consumption in live comedy, then, seem to be stuck in a circular process of privileging those who are already privileged.

Also emerging from the findings is how the cultural industries are not only interested in producing cultural artefacts of some description, or cultural 'objects': they are also entangled in the production of affect, which I have shown here is related to the production of subject positions - cultural 'subjects'. Comedy production produces consumers of particular types, and sidelines others. This is to re-emphasise the potential importance of the representation of different social groups at different levels of the culture industry, although this may be limited in

its impact (Saha, 2018). Given the intertwinement of producing and consuming, particularly in the comedy world, paying attention to representational diversity *in the audience* may be a way forward in breaking the cycle - for instance, in Chapter 5 when Kannan noticed another British South Asian in the audience, he found validation for some of his material based on the British South Asian experience, and decided to keep it in his act. This would take a lot of outreach work - mainstream live comedy spaces have come to be dominated by the rather solid somatic norm of the straight white and increasingly middle-class male, and these kinds of somatic histories are not easy to overcome (Puwar, 2004). But this does at least indicate that the live comedy space does not necessarily doom consumers to be produced in particular ways - it is fundamentally a ground for negotiation, as highlighted in Chapter 7. In the live space of the comedy club, consumers as audiences could leverage their power to change the productive process of comedy - consumers producing producers. Given the methodological limits of this thesis, focusing on the live environment, the exploration of the broader comedic creative industry is lacking. However, the exploration of the creative process of comedians did show how fundamental affects, and readings of affects through discourse, are to the process of cultural production. From this, I would like to suggest that approaching the world of cultural production as a set of 'affective practices' (Wetherell, 2012), or as 'liminal affective technologies' (Stenner, 2017), holds much potential for exploring how the 'higher echelons' of cultural productivity may be reproducing inequalities.

Laughter's entanglement in taste and embodiment

This thesis from the outset has attempted to work with and beyond the Bourdieusian conceptualisations of taste and embodiment to suggest that while laughter is largely bound up as an embodied expression of taste values and histories, it is not inevitably bound by these factors. Through the use of video reflections, particularly with the audience focus groups, I gained insight into how participants read their own behaviour: they were very rarely surprised by what they saw themselves laughing at in the comedy club; what they saw themselves laughing at fitted fairly coherently with their sense of themselves, their values, and their comedy tastes. Laughter, for much of the time, was acting as the expression of the moment when embodied taste unlocked the 'funny' in a particular comedic utterance or performance. Cultural capital finds effervescent

release, and celebration, through the burst of laughter. More than that however, this kind of burst of laughter is also argued to have the function of telling others in the comedy room about taste (as seen in Chapter 5), of cultural capital, embodied resources viscerally negotiating with other bodies about what is laughable/non-laughable; it can act as a very middle-class signalling system.

However, there were occasions when laughter seemed to escape, or at least trouble, signification and structuring processes. Firstly, my Essex participants in Chapter 4 troubled the notion that people will always give in to the 'demands of the field' (Skeggs, 2004:29). At least fleetingly, and within the confines of the comedy club, these participants were giving a 'f*** off' to any sense of genteel feeling rules in comedy consumption. There were a couple of examples in Chapter 6 where the laughter of the audience appeared to reconfigure, if only in small ways, the prosaic assumptions that comedians brought to the creation of their comedy. This seems like a way in which affect, or 'affective practice' (Wetherell, 2014) can be held up as revealing the cracks between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1990) - other people's laughter can forcefully jolt the habitus into reconsidering a person's sense of the field, reorienting their taken-for-granted notions of practical action. This, of course, has positive and negative potentials - the laughter of mockery can be similarly viewed as an affective practice that jolts the habitus of the mocked into reconsidering their sense of the field, indeed their very sense of self. Either way, affective practice is involved in the possible production of breaches in the habitus (Akram and Hogan, 2015), or between habitus and field. By focusing on the body as uncertain, especially in social spaces that might be considered liminal, we can start to identify and give life to values that escape easy signification.

Then again, the reflections of the participants in the focus groups and interviews revealed discourses that quickly closed down any progressive potential in these affective disturbances. My Essex participants disidentified (Skeggs, 1997) from their joyful, exuberant laughter in the comedy club, drawing on classed discourses to distance themselves from another form of themselves. Shame came to frame their experiences (Loveday, 2016). For Alexa in Chapter 5, from the east London comedy club, seeing herself laugh, even briefly, at a piece of feminist comedy material was again met similarly with a discourse of self-

deprecation, suggesting her laugh was too loud and should just be 'helpful'. This thesis has found the gendered and classed discourses that are used to contain affective breaches, to diminish their reflective potential, are particularly strong. It is a reminder that, even though there do seem to be ways in which affect can surprise and rejig the world, a focus on the power of discourse and how it interpellates bodies with, through, and against affect, is absolutely vital work.

With regard to taste in particular, there did appear to be a classed basis throughout for the discourses espoused by different groups: for instance, the way in which my Essex participants in Chapter 4 emphasised relevance and ridicule (in the pursuance of a kind of togetherness) as foundational to their comedy taste contrasted with that of my middle-class participants in Chapter 5, elevating ideas of cleverness, creativity and 'the new'. This confirms previous findings that the middle classes have 'invested' in comedy consumption as a potential way to accrue further value, as suggested by Friedman (2014). Yet I want to emphasise that this was not the whole story. All of my participants drew on the notion that laughter is fundamentally about a shared experience, a value of sociality, and it would be wrong to close off the possibility that this is a reading of laughter, and interpretation of laughter, that could potentially have power beyond the neo-liberal impulse for capital accrual (Skeggs, 2011).

Laughter's entanglement in comedy valuations

Following on from this idea that laughter carries different values, that there are values of sociality that might be latent in the 'affective practice' of laughter, Chapter 7 highlighted how these values may be a part of the negotiation taking place in comic spaces. This involves negotiations over what is and is not laughable – what, or who, are the objects of laughter. In this thesis, straight male comedians positioned working-class women ('Essex girls') and gay people as legitimate targets for comic play. There are also negotiations over what counts as valuable fodder for creative comic utterances, and what was seen as having no creative potential. Here, the experiences and cultural referents that fit white, male, middle-class tastes were valued over the stories and experiences of ethnic minorities and women. It also revolves around embodied dispositions: who can laugh fully, and what laughter behaviours are legitimate (or otherwise). Female laughter finds itself pruned, as was the case in Chapter 5, or facing censure and

ridicule, as seen in Chapter 4. Reece's incredible burst of laughter becomes celebrated, again in Chapter 5. These objectified and embodied forms come together as ways in which comedians read audiences in Chapter 6 - those who exhibited the 'right' laughing characteristics, and were not part of laughter object groups, were somehow seen as having 'valuable laughter'. What this seems to emphasise is that there is an ongoing process of producing hierarchical classificatory systems related to laughter, and the hope of a laughter of sociality in the spaces I surveyed seemed to have little possibility of creating lasting change.

Indeed, Chapter 7 seemed to highlight quite how 'affective' laughter is in producing in-groups and out-groups - those who get inscribed, passionately, with value, and those who do not. In the liminal conditions of the comedy club, infused with affectivity, changes or reaffirmations of status positions are taking place. As highlighted in Stenner and Moreno (2013), affect is an important part of this - intense feelings accompany the travelling subject from there (their previous status) to here (their new status). The burst of laughter and its very viscerally disruptive qualities are the most obvious signifier of this tumult in the ongoing social processes of the comedy club.

Whilst laughter may be a potentially powerful way to readjust the field of valuations, the evidence presented in this thesis suggests laughter is often the reason for such entrenched cultural positions in comedy consumption (Friedman, 2014). Taste, 'cultural value', or 'cultural capital' are part of an embodied 'status position'. They are part of the taken-for-granted 'feel for the game' - the habitus - which guides the subject through everyday action (Akram and Hogan, 2015: 609). Comedy consumption accompanied by puncturing laughter sometimes represents a break from this embodiment; moments when the habitus does not, or is unable to, guide the subject through taken-for-granted actions - where, in Turner's terms, the subject momentarily becomes liminoid. At this breach, the subject is 'in between' and negotiates their way through a confusing maelstrom to move to another status, or indeed maintain a particular status. Bodies in the live environment find themselves betwixt and between the intense affective registers, which are then negotiated through the interruptions and influences of embodied dispositions. Those with 'weightier' embodied dispositions, that is

habitus laden with already consecrated value, are able to take advantage of these tumultuous times more than others. The processes of comedy consumption and production, spurred on by the visceral confusion caused by the break of laughter, are devices that potentially exacerbate the schismogenic processes of valuation, distancing and distinction (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012).

Taking this further, in the contemporary cultural climate of neoliberalism, every single individual is assigned sovereign responsibility for everything about themselves, including their own happiness (Greco and Stenner, 2013), and imbued with particular person-values (Skeggs, 2011). In this context, every single subject in the comedy event is potentially placed in a value contest with others. Recalling that the liminoid represents a form of cultural consumptive test, as discussed briefly in Chapter 2, it is more than likely that some will pass and some will fail. This has been shown in this thesis: some of the audience in the comedy clubs were read as having consumed comedy inappropriately; some were seen as exhibiting bad taste; some were assumed to be feeling inappropriately or laughing at the wrong times. Even when laughing in the right places, at the right things, some audience members laughter was read as 'nice' rather than valuable, as seen in Chapter 6. The neoliberal playing field is uneven.

Laughter's entanglement and 'permanent liminality'

I ended Chapter 7 by suggesting that the ritual closure of comedy nights focused much of the affective potential of laughter into valuation processes, competition and the market – an emphasis on some of the precepts of neoliberalism (Davies, 2014). This I suggested could be understood as 'permanent liminality' (Szokolczai, 2017), and highlights a further problem with characterising comedy spaces as positively transformational. Arpad Szokolczai (2017:233) suggests that 'permanent liminality' occurs:

when a temporary suspension of the normal, everyday, taken for granted state of affairs becomes permanent, generating a loss of reality, even a sense of unreality in daily existence. The problem is not deviating from "the" norm, as understood in a universalistic sense, but from whatever people living at a given time and place were taking for granted as normal and ordinary in their lives.

Elsewhere, Szokolczai (2014: 44) ties this sense of permanent liminality to neoliberal policy, specifically the 'deregulating [of] financial markets', and suggests that this ushers in a 'permanent state of transitionality' (p. 33). Stenner (2017) similarly draws the concept of permanent liminality into contact with a characterisation of contemporary society as one of permanent change, and that:

we are increasingly called—whether as citizens, employees, learners, parents, patients, customers or clients—to expect and be prepared for permanent change without resolution. We must shape-shift and be ever attentive to the need to adapt to new challenges under new conditions. We can't rely, we are told, on what we have inherited from the past, or on what happened yesterday, but must 'push the limits' [...] We must morph and change ourselves, regularly casting aside the character armour that protected us last week but that weighed us down yesterday. We must actively involve ourselves in ever-renewed innovations in the face of an unpredictable future whose form, we are told, will depend on our resourcefulness and adaptability. (Stenner, 2017: 281)

Tyler (2015) evokes a similar idea of never-ending change when considering contemporary class relations as 'struggles against' classification:

in the same movement through which neoliberalism decomposes class relations, new class relations are composed, not least in struggles against the inequalities that neoliberalism effects. *This is why class struggle remains an essential point of orientation for sociology, if it is to grasp the problems of inequality today.* (Tyler, 2015: 498, emphasis in original.)

Here then, neoliberal conditions overall can be seen as suspending normality, for tests and transitions to take place, which engender bodies to act in particular ways in order to be seen as valuable, and to change our ways if they are not producing value. Additionally, and crucially, neoliberal conditions attempt to continually classify, evaluate and inscribe value.

This is indeed similar to the portrayal of the comedy club from Chapter 7 - the

testing environment within the ritual process of comedy consumption. A manufactured pulling apart and reassembling of groups of people around tastes, embodied dispositions and laughter, leading to individuals being stamped with differential statuses, or - as more precisely explored in this thesis- with different levels of cultural value. These differential valuations impact how people view themselves, as less or more, and lead people to position others as less or more - as seen through the discourses of taste found in this research. The live comedy club becomes a 'liminal affective technology' (Stenner, 2017) that encourages affective practices aimed at ensuring we are ready to be judged constantly in neoliberal conditions. We go through consumptive, productive, leisure and labour experiences, stamped endlessly with lesser or greater value (and the odds of either valuation or devaluation occurring relate to your subject position), and before this can be adequately reflected upon, social subjects are moved on to the next testing episode.

This draws us back to the Adorno and Horkheimer (2002 [1944]: 112) quote 'fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe. It makes laughter the instrument for cheating happiness'. Laughter, the burst that promises so much life, sociality and connection, is once again drawn here as dragging us ever more into the vicious circle of valuation processes and the maintenance and production of inequality. Much of the analysis presented in this thesis presents the problem more pessimistically than this: the comedy club is not even a medicinal bath - it offers no sanctuary from being tested; it is saturated with value games, which influence practices and discourses, and which passionately and deeply reinscribe cultural valuations in the liminal, affective space.

One example in this thesis I think partially challenges this analytical pessimism, and indeed earlier in this conclusion I suggested that it may hold out a glimmer of hope in challenging neo-liberal valuation schemes. In the example of my Essex participants in chapter four, in the struggle against direct devaluation, there were moments where collective female laughter galvanised a fleeting resistance, around a form of recalcitrance, against middle class feeling rules. The work of Ben Anderson (2014: 749) on the very idea of 'neoliberal affects' serves as a reminder that in current social conditions, 'affects do not add up to a single dominant mood',

that 'multiplicity' and 'ambivalences' remain in affective life. It is worth remembering, too, that Adorno and Horkheimer (2002 [1944]:60) also suggested 'laughter [...] promises a passage to the homeland'. The invocation of 'home' is particularly salient. The comedy experience, with its 'rite of reincorporation' that simply emphasises the reestablishment of more testing conditions to come in neoliberal modernity, - the continuous struggles for value (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012), the continuous struggles against classification (Tyler, 2015) - means that a sense of stability never comes. Szokolczai (2009: 195) suggests that to find our way out of permanent liminality is to connect with an 'experience of home', which he relates to the idea of 'participation' and 'fraternity'. It is worth saying again that there were some brief moments of disruption through affect, and the ongoing construction of alternative values based on connection (or participation), which appeared fleetingly (as with my Essex participants). It is vitally important, in the interests of positive potential social change, to consider how these momentary breaches could be given more life, and more potential to challenge prevailing conditions.

Leveraging audience power for 'joyful laughter'

I finish this thesis with a suggested positive intervention, as I do not want to deny the positive potentials of the liminoid as potential escape, and I speculate briefly on how this might occur. I recently attended a conference entitled 'Comedy and Power', hosted by the 'Mixed Bill' research network, dedicated to exploring the topic of women and comedy (Mixed Bill, 2018). One of the presentations, from Natalie Diddams (2018), looked at the topic of laughter engendered through a women's comedy workshop run by Diddams and facilitated by a range of female comedians, including Dr Kate Fox (The Women's Comedy Workshop, 2018). The workshop is attended by a diverse range of women, in terms of age, class and ethnicity, and the conference presentation suggested that these workshops were constantly laughter-filled, and that the participants considered this laughter joyful and caring. In Chapter 4, I suggested that if the women from Essex had been at a comedy night with working-class female performers, they may have seen their Essex-ness as a source of value, rather than a reason to disidentify; I still think this could have been the case, especially given the power of comedians and MCs considered in Chapter 7.

However, it struck me in the course of the presentation I saw: what if this diverse group of women, with their bonds constructed around togetherness and expressed through joyful, caring laughter, were to 'invade' (Puwar, 2004) the white, male, middle-class dominated comedy spaces I have encountered in this project? How might processes of schismogenesis and *communitas* play out? How might the creative process of comedians change? How might the dominance of white, male middle-class laughter be challenged? How might 'struggles for value' (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) in the comedy club be transformed by such a move?

My suggestion is based on the idea of leveraging the power of the audience in the midst of the 'is this play?' ritual of the comedy club - to place joyful and caring laughter in a stronger position in this negotiation process. My suggestion is based on the idea that a different set of audience characteristics may reengineer the comedic creative process in such ways as it might engender joyful, caring laughter rather than centring white male straight laughter. My suggestion is based on the idea that the 'acoustic man-spreading' of the Reec-ess and the processes of privileging it perpetuates might be challenged and re-territorialised by joyful, caring laughter. Finally, my suggestion is based on the idea that my Essex girl participants may have positively identified with their Essex-ness, taken it as a source of value, if surrounded by others interested in joyful, caring laughter. Carefully throwing a joyful spanner into the processes of the social reproduction of cultural value could give vital space to the values of sociality and togetherness against the impulses of value accrual and individualism. This, no doubt, is no quick solution - indeed in Chapter 5, I suggested that the changing of feeling rules that has allowed white, male, middle-class laughter to take part in privileging is part of a long historical process of negotiation. The struggle in contemporary neoliberal conditions is inevitably tough, and compromises might be made. Yet this affective potential is out there, alongside a strong ritual structure embedded in the consumption and production of comedy that can deeply affect the habitus of those who take part in it. Perhaps a direct sociological intervention could reengineer the ritual and engage this powerful laughter - a visceral expression of 'values beyond value'.

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Appendix 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Event	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	From	Aud/Com	FG/I
Amy	West London	F	White British	20-29	Essex	C	I
Paul	West London	M	White American	20-29	New York, USA	C	I
Gail	West London	F	White British	20-29	Hampshire	C	I
Viv	West London	Gender-queer M pronoun	White British/Romani	20-29	Essex	C	I
Jack	Central London	M	White Canadian	30-39	Montreal, Canada	C	I
Martin	Central London	M	White British	40-49	Yorkshire	C	I
Esther	Central London	F	White British	30-39	Essex	A	FG
Jan	Central London	F	White British	30-39	Essex	A	FG
Chloe	Central London	F	White British	30-39	Essex	A	FG
Megan	Central London	F	White British	30-39	Essex	A	FG
Thomas	East London	M	White British	30-39	Cheshire	C	I
Rebecca	East London	F	White British	20-29	Oxford	C	I
Leah	East London	F	White British Jewish	30-39	Manchester	C	I
Kannan	East London	M	British South Asian	30-39	Edinburgh	C	I
Reece	East London	M	White British	30-39	Cheshire	A	FG
Alexa	East London	F	White British	30-39	Surrey	A	FG
Chris	East London	M	White New Zealand	30-39	Auckland, NZ	A	FG